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One in Eight: Deciding to Pursue a College-Going Possible Self in a High-Poverty High School

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Possible Self in a High-Poverty High School

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Dedicated to Traci
It turns out, with you, anything is possible.

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Abstract

ONE IN EIGHT: DECIDING TO PRUSUE A COLLEGE-GOING POSSIBLE SELF IN A HIGH POVERTY HIGH SCHOOL

By David B. Naff

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There is considerable research evidence suggesting that low-income, racial minority students value education and aspire for postsecondary educational attainment (Bloom, 2007; Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). However, their performance in school often does not align with those values and ambitions, as these students tend to underachieve in comparison with their higher-income, non-minority peers (Reardon, 2011), with particular gaps found in those attending schools of concentrated poverty (Rowan, 2011). This gap between educational ambition and attainment suggests that the experience of living and going to school in a high-poverty context could be related to the motivational processes driving these students to pursue college. Using a conceptual framework overlapping expectancy-value theory and possible selves, the present multiple case study of six Urban Public High School (UPHS) students aspiring to four-year college explored how they made decisions about pursuing their

postsecondary ambitions. Participants' descriptions of their pursuit of college revealed themes related to who they did and did not want to become in the future, and outlined their expectancies, values, and perceptions of costs associated with becoming a first-generation college student. Socializers in and out of school influenced students' perceptions of possible selves and decision-making processes. Results revealed how avoidance possible selves motivated students' pursuit of college, how social incongruence among peers at UPHS made the pursuit more challenging, and how students with high expectancies and values for going to college still sometimes doubted whether they would ultimately go. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations of the study, are discussed.

Chapter 1

        One in eight, those are the odds of a student at Urban Public High School (UPHS-pseudonym) going straight to a four-year college after graduation according to state Department of Education data. More specifically, the odds are one in 7.57 (13.2%). That figure is based the total number of seniors who attended UPHS from 2011-2015 (1,486) and how many of those students enrolled in a four-year college within 16 months of completing high school (196). The highest percentage of any senior class enrolling in four-year college during that time span was 16.5% (2015), and the lowest was 11% (2009). Of the students who made it to four-year college between 2011 and 2013, less than half (43.1%) earned enough credits to be considered sophomore level at their various institutions. Overall, this meant that the odds of a UPHS student graduating between 2011 and 2013 being promoted to sophomore status in college after one year of enrollment was around one in 19 (5.39%). This means that a student who attends UPHS who wants to go to a four-year college finds him or herself as a member of a cohort where approximately seven out of eight of his or her peers do not accomplish this ambition. What makes these students think that they could be different? What consequences do these odds have for their postsecondary ambitions and how they go about pursuing them? How much do they perceive the rarity of this accomplishment? What makes them believe that they will be the one in eight?

Although national academic achievement data shows that low-income, racial minority students often perform below their higher-income, non-minority peers in school, there is little evidence suggesting that those gaps are attributable to lower educational aspirations (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Prominent motivation researchers have emphasized that low-income students and their families, particularly those in African-American communities, place a high value on education and profess a desire for their children to go to college (e.g. Bloom, 2007; Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003; Destin & Oyserman, 2010; Harding, Gennetian, Winship, Sanbonmatsu, & Kling, 2011; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, and Carver (2006) described this gap between the professed high value placed on education and corresponding low achievement in low-income, predominantly African-American youth across several academic metrics as "puzzling" (p. 189).

The present multiple case study of students attending Urban Public High School (UPHS) (pseudonym), explored this gap between educational aspirations and attainment from the perspective of six students attending a school of concentrated poverty. If the research on postsecondary educational ambitions holds true for UPHS students, then many more have aspirations for college than actually attend or complete. The experience of a UPHS student who aspires to go to college is emblematic of similarly aspirational students attending other high schools of concentrated poverty in urban centers of America. High-poverty schools (where more than 75% of students receive federal free or reduced lunch subsidies) (Palardy, 2015) tend to exist in high-poverty neighborhoods (where more than 40% of the citizens live below the federal poverty threshold) (US Census Bureau, 2016). In these contexts, there are often low levels of social and economic resources (Delany-Brumsey, Mays, & Cochran, 2014), youth tend to be more

isolated from outside opportunities and influences (Harding et al., 2011), and there are few examples of educational attainment (Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011). It is a reasonable assumption that the psychological processes and corresponding behaviors of low-income, racial minority youth are highly-contextualized by a high-poverty environment, in and out of school. The present study sought to better understand the connection between that context and the pursuit of college through a multiple case study of students at UPHS who aspired to become the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college. Centrally, it asked, "What are the decision-making processes students use to pursue a college-going possible self in a high-poverty school?" As this chapter will later discuss, a "possible self" is a perception of a potential future identity (Oyserman, 2013).

Becoming the first in one's family to attend or graduate from college (a "first-generation college student") has proven to be a difficult task, as evidenced in national data on college retention rates among these students and empirical research on the challenges they face both before and after enrolling in college. First-generation college students often come from low-income backgrounds (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005) and are a racial minority (Atherton, 2014). The literature frequently refers to them as "educational pioneers," suggesting that they are embarking on a postsecondary journey previously unexperienced in their immediate families (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Wang, 2012). They are less likely to have completed an academically rigorous curriculum prior to coming to college (Reid & Moore, 2008) and often come into school less academically prepared than their continuing generation (CGS) peers (Byrd, & Macdonald, 2005), even by their own report (Coffman, 2011). Once they make it to college, these students often report lower feelings of belonging than CGS (Jehangir,

2010), perhaps attributable to FGS often coming from more collectivistic cultures and entering an environment that is largely individualistic (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). Ultimately, these students are more likely to drop out of school prior to graduation (Hudley, Moschetti, Gonzalez, Cho, Barry, & Kelly, 2009), with the highest frequency of attrition occurring prior to the beginning of their sophomore year (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). In an economy that increasingly requires postsecondary education for sustainable employment (Reardon, 2011), the consequences of not earning some sort of college degree could include generational poverty. These numbers largely reflect the experience of UPHS students who make it to college, and the present study sought to better understand how students who wish to become FGS make decisions about pursuing that potential future.

There were three overarching research questions that guided this study, each with sub questions that align with theory. This study maintained a working hypothesis that students' perceptions of their possible selves and their decision-making processes that they employed to pursue or avoid them are inextricable from their context. Because of this, the inclusion of a separate research question on students' contexts was not intended as a precursor to questions about their perceptions of a college-going possible self or their decision-making processes to pursue it. Instead, it was an element in all research questions and accompanying methods to explore them, as outlined in the conceptual model of this study presented in Chapter Two. The three overarching research questions for this study were: 1) What are the contexts in which UPHS students make decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self? 2) How do UPHS students perceive their college-going possible selves? and 3) How do UPHS students describe their decision-making processes in pursuit of a college-going possible self? Specific sub questions

intended to address these three overarching research questions and address gaps in the existing literature will receive coverage later in this chapter.

The remainder of this chapter will be organized into three sections. First, I will offer a brief description of the three conceptual frameworks employed in the study: poverty and education, possible selves, and expectancy value theory, as well as definitions of relevant terminology. While Chapter Two will offer more detailed descriptions of each framework and its corresponding terminology, coverage in this chapter will orient the reader to their relevance to the present study. Second, I will discuss some of the apparent opportunities to contribute to the existing literature as they relate to the specific research questions in this study. Third, I will offer a brief methodological overview as well as rationale for qualitatively studying the decision-making processes of students pursuing a college-going possible self in a high poverty school. While Chapter Three will describe the methods of this study in much greater detail, this section of Chapter One will illuminate the general approach to studying the research questions as well as the rationale for doing so qualitatively. Finally, I will describe, in detail, the personal, practical, and intellectual goals that I had for conducting this study. These will offer an orientation to the reader for the original intentions for conceptualizing this study, as well as the potential implications for the results.

Conceptual Framework and Terminology

While expectancy value theory (EVT) and possible selves are firmly established in the field of educational psychology, capturing the relationship between living in poverty and the educational experience of students requires a multidisciplinary approach (Ladd, 2012). Therefore, this literature pulls from multiple disciplines in addition to educational psychology, including sociology, economics, public policy, and health

sciences. This research utilizes varying terminology to describe its student population and this study reflected some of that variability in the way it attended to the students at UPHS as well as the experience of those studied in the literature. When addressing the socioeconomic level of these students, I primarily use the term "low-income" because it is the more precise reflection of their actual experience. "Low-SES" is a somewhat ambiguous term as one's socioeconomic status is reflective of more than income, and the variables to include within its definition (e.g. parent education level, parent occupation, neighborhood poverty level, family structure, etc.) are measurable, but not included as often in educational research. Qualification for meal subsidies in school, which is based on family income level in relation to the federal poverty threshold, is the most common metric used in educational research to assess socioeconomic status. This data was not gathered on individual students in this study, but they attended a school where everyone received free lunch due to the high level of poverty in the district.

As racial minority status is highly correlated with income level (Tatum, 2003), there is also some terminology regarding race that is prevalent in this study. Most specifically, this study focuses on African-American students, who made up nearly the entire population of UPHS. The literature on the motivation and achievement of low-income, African-American students tends to use varying terminology to describe this population. Many authors use the term "Black" to describe students' race (e.g. Curto, Fryer, & Howard, 2011; Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002; Harding et al., 2011; Iceland, 2006) whereas other authors use the terms "African-American" (e.g. Bloom, 2007; Crosnoe, 2009; Grant, 2004). This study uses these two terms interchangeably, depending on the context and research cited. Similarly, I use the terms "White" and "Caucasian" depending on how they are used in the literature.

Finally, I often employ the term "urban" to describe the specific type of poverty experienced by students at UPHS. While there are challenges experienced by children living in both urban and rural poverty, this study focuses predominantly on urban poverty in its literature review and exclusively so in its methods, data analysis, and discussion of findings. The reason for this is two-fold. The first is that UPHS students predominantly resided in neighborhoods in the urban center of Mid Atlantic City, which is decidedly non-rural with a population of a little over 200,000 people inside the city. Second, the experience of living in urban poverty largely differs from rural poverty, as students are more likely to be exposed to severe chronic stress (Grant, 2004), have teratogenic toxins such as lead in their environment (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002), be exposed to excessive noise pollution (Tine, 2014), and attend schools of concentrated poverty (Crosnoe, 2009). In pop-culture, it is not uncommon to hear the word "urban" as a proxy for referring to African-American students. Considering this, I use particular caution in this study to only use the term "urban" to refer specifically to youth living in poverty within a city environment, as is the case with students at UPHS.

Poverty and Education

Family SES tends to be largely predictive of school performance in various domains, and achievement gaps between students of discrepant socioeconomic backgrounds have been growing over the past half century (Ladd, 2012; Reardon, 2011). While these gaps are perhaps most commonly cited using standardized test scores, they also exist in related performance discrepancies across other cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002). Exacerbating the gaps seen in student achievement based on family SES is the level of concentrated school poverty, as

measured by the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch subsidies (Palardy, 2015).

Although there is some variability depending on the makeup of students' families, a high-poverty school is one where at least 76% of the student body comes from families making around $43,000 or less annually (NCES). These schools tend to produce particularly low academic performance outcomes (Rowan, 2011), and face unique behavioral and structural challenges (Reeves, 2003). Perhaps most disconcertingly, the number of high-poverty schools is growing, according to recent reports from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). As Chapter Two will describe in greater detail, family SES tends to be correlated with student educational outcomes and the level of concentrated poverty in a school tends to further mediate that relationship, exacerbating the lower performance seen in lower-income students. This literature will inform the context explored in this study.

Possible Selves

Stemming from origins in the tradition of identity development research, Markus, Nurius, & Goodstein (1986) proposed the concept of "possible selves" as perceptions of potential future identities that have motivational effects on present behavior. According to the authors, these possible selves could be positive concepts of the self that one wishes to approach (a "positive possible self") or negative concepts that one wishes to avoid (a "negative possible self.") In consideration of one's present ability to approach or avoid these potential futures, perception of possible selves activates present action while incorporating an evaluation of past behavior, thus offering a multidimensional conceptualization of identity that encompasses the past, present, and future.

Possible selves researchers have persistently found that students and families from low-income backgrounds tend to profess a high value for education, even when their academic performance does not always reflect it (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Those who have utilized this theory to explore the educational aspirations and corresponding struggle in performance of low-income students have found that they tend to describe at least one education-dependent possible self, such as wanting to go to college or otherwise pursuing a career that requires a college degree (e.g. Destin, 2010; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Carver, 2006). The most prominent current intervening application of this theory with low-income, racial minority students is the Identity Based Motivation framework (IBM), which conceptualizes identity as multidimensional, socially-constructed, and a potential motivator for pursuing education-dependent possible selves (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). IBM researchers believe that people prefer to act in identity congruent ways, and that important socializers (e.g. parents, peers, and adult role models) model what is considered identity congruent for "people like me" (Oyserman, 2013). Additionally, possible selves researchers have found that when possible selves feel like they are going to happen soon ("proximal") rather than later in the future ("distal"), they tend to be more motivational for present behavior (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Chapter Two describes possible selves, its roots in identity development research, its current application with low-income student populations, and its relevance for the present study in greater detail.

Expectancy Value Theory

Expectancy value theory (EVT) postulates that people make decisions to engage in tasks based on their level of value for it, their expectancies for being successful, and their perceptions of the costs associated with task engagement (Tollefson, 2000). According to EVT, there are three types of values: attainment, intrinsic, and utility

(Eccles, 2009). Expectancies refer to both present beliefs in one's abilities as well as how successful one anticipates performing in a task in the future (Wigfield, 1994). Additionally, the most modern models of EVT explore a multidimensional conceptualization of cost, which was originally considered to be a part of the value structure of EVT (Flake, Barron, Hulleman, McCoach, & Welsh, 2015). Specific definitions for each of these elements as well as measurement of their interaction informing the structure of the EVT model, will receive further coverage in Chapter Two.

Modern EVT is sociocultural in its approach which is a primary departure from its original conceptualization that largely explored choice without considering contextual influences (Eccles, 2007). However, as this study illustrates, even modern EVT tends to depict this context as a precursor to values, expectancies, and perceptions of cost, rather than exploring these elements as situated within one's socioeconomic and cultural experience. It is an assumption of the present study that students always make decisions in context, meaning their environment serves as a foundation for components of task choice as well as a situational influence over their activation at any given time. Beliefs about the nature of the interaction between expectancies, values, and cost perceptions has undergone considerable evolution throughout the long history of the theory, with movement towards conceptualizing it as a multiplicative, synergistic model (Guo, Nagengast, Marsh, Kelava, Gaspard, Brandt, . . . Trautwein, 2016). As Chapter Two discusses in greater detail, EVT offers a robust approach for exploring the decision-making processes of UPHS students in the present study. Specifically, it provides the framework for exploring how these students value going to college, how successful they expect to be in that pursuit, and their perceptions of barriers or costs that they may encounter along the way.

Research Contributions

This study seeks to contribute to these literature bases in several ways. First, while there is a tremendous amount of research on low-income, minority students exploring their academic motivation and performance, this work rarely captures their perspectives qualitatively. To account for this, the primary source of data for this study will be student voices captured in individual interviews. Similarly, although there has been increasing research attention exploring how the socioeconomic composition of a school is related to student outcomes, nearly all of it quantitative, there has been little to no attention in educational psychology afforded to the processes by which high poverty schools actually exert their apparent influence over the students who attend them (Palardy, 2015). Qualitative research is well suited for exploring both context and process (Maxwell, 2013), and therefore this methodological approach makes sense for investigating how the context of living and attending school in a high-poverty environment is related to students' decision-making processes to pursue postsecondary ambitions.

Expectancy value theory is a popular approach to motivation and therefore has found application in several different contexts and populations of students. Still, there are some opportunities for the present study to contribute to this literature. First, although EVT purports to account for contextual elements such as "cultural millieu" (Masson, Klop, & Osseweijer, 2016), parent beliefs and behaviors (Simpkins, Fredricks, & Eccles., 2012), and school/classroom, family, and peer influence (Wang & Degol, 2013), nearly every model presents these elements at the beginning as precursors to decision-making processes. This implies that contextual influences precede decision-making processes, rather than continuously informing them. The conceptual model for this study presented

at the end of Chapter Two marks a departure from this approach by situating all decision-making processes within context. While EVT is designed to account for context, the approach of the present research will be more immersed in it than typical EVT studies. Additionally, EVT research is rarely qualitative, and the examples of studies that do take such an approach do so with populations that are quite dissimilar from the one in this study. For example, Watkinson, Dwyer, and Nielsen (2005) asked third grade children about their reasons for engaging in recess activities. Pang (2014) asked middle school students in Hong Kong about their decisions surrounding participation in physical education in school. Peters and Daly (2013) asked graduate students about their reasons for deciding to return to school. Matusovich, Streveler, and Miller (2010) asked college students about their reasons for pursuing engineering majors. While these studies reveal the potential value of exploring EVT qualitatively, as participants offered rich descriptions of their expectancies, values, and cost perceptions, their results are difficult to compare directly with those from the population in this study whose context is very different. This also illustrates the final EVT gap that this study sought to address, that there has been little to no attention on low-income students as the primary focus in this research. As Destin observed in a 2013 study about the connections between financial resources and school achievement, EVT models are currently unlikely to account for how family wealth shapes students' decision-making processes. Thus, this study offers a useful extension of EVT to explore this connection with rich, qualitative data.

The literature on possible selves has offered one of the most promising and targeted lines of research for working with low-income, minority youth. Perhaps its most prolific current application is in its testing of the Identity Based Motivation (IBM) intervention with students from impoverished backgrounds in both rural and urban parts

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of the country (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Possible selves studies use elements of future

identity development (e.g. social congruence) to predict various outcomes like the

number of education-dependent potential careers described by students (Oyserman,

2013), positive affect toward school (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004),

and academic performance indicators like grades and attendance (Oyserman, Johnson, &

James, 2011), among others. When possible-selves are measured as an outcome, they are

typically captured in a closed-ended format (e.g. Dunkel, 2000) such as reporting the

frequency of education-dependent possible selves that students generate (e.g. Oyserman,

2013). These studies typically do not offer any in-depth descriptions of how these

students perceive their education-dependent possible selves or how they relate to their

present beliefs about their identity, context, and behavior. This study seeks to provide

rich data on low-income students' perceptions of their college-going possible selves as

well as the decision-making processes that they employ to pursue them by asking them to

describe them in detail through a series of interviews over the course of one semester.

Further, it explores students' perceptions of a college-going possible self as having

potential value rather than just the utility of getting a degree en route to employment.

According to EVT, other values might include intrinsic (e.g. being personally interested

in going to college) or attainment (e.g. deriving identity-confirming meaning from

becoming the first in one's family to go to college).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study seeks to address a practical gap

identified by Oyserman et al. (2006) between the professed education-dependent possible

selves (e.g. careers that require a four-year college degree) and actual academic

attainment of low-SES students. If it is indeed common for these students and their

families to place high value on their education and to aspire for upward socioeconomic

mobility through postsecondary education, then the epidemic of academic underachievement in schools of concentrated poverty presents an urgent problem. There appear to be contextual and psychological processes in play that undermine the aspirations of low-income students and a lack of attention to understanding this problem from their perspective. While the purpose of the present study is not to offer generalizable findings for broader student populations, it does seek to produce rich cases that offer potentially transferable accounts of the experiences of these students in this specific setting. Thus, the present study explored how the experience of attending this high-poverty high school (UPHS) related to the decision-making processes of a selection of students pursuing a college-going possible self. It asked the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the contexts in which UPHS students make decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self?

>*RQ1a:* What examples of a college-going possible self are present for students? What alternative examples of possible selves are present?

>*RQ1b:* How do socializers influence students' sense of value for a college degree? Expectancies for success in college? Perceived costs of attending college?

>*RQ1c:* How do socializers influence students' perception of a college-going possible self?

>*RQ1d:* How does the school environment at UPHS influence students' pursuit of a college-going possible self?

RQ2: How do UPHS students perceive their college-going possible selves?

>*RQ2a:* How proximal do they consider their college-going possible selves to be?

RQ2b: How balanced are their college-going possible selves with negative possible selves they wish to avoid?

RQ2c: What proximal possible selves relate to their more distal, college-going possible self?

RQ2d: To what extent do they consider proximal behavior that supports a college-going possible self to be identity congruent?

RQ3: How do UPHS students describe their decision-making processes in pursuit of a college-going possible self?

RQ3a: How do students perceive the value of going to college?

RQ3b: How successful do students expect to be in college?

RQ3c: How confident are students in their ability to do college preparatory work?

RQ3d: How do students perceive the costs of going to college?

To address these research questions, the present study employed a qualitative approach because it is my belief that the experience of low-income students attending high-poverty schools presents a complicated context, largely unexplained by more positivistic methods. Qualitative research offers the opportunity to explore both context and process through rich description (Maxwell, 2013), thus making it well suited for capturing how the experience of living in poverty and attending a high-poverty school is related to the processes by which students decide to pursue a college-going possible self. The following section offers a brief overview of the methodology of this study, with a more detailed description offered in Chapter Three.

Methodological Overview

Because this study utilizes two existing theoretical frameworks with established terminology and a long-history of application with a variety of student populations (EVT

and possible selves), there are deductive elements. Within the structure of exploring decision-making processes in EVT there are previously-established themes of expectancies, values, and cost perceptions (RQ3). Similarly, the literature on possible selves explores the importance of having a balance between positive possible selves to approach as well as negative possible selves to avoid. It also investigates the importance of how proximal a possible self feels to a student on his or her corresponding motivation. This study deductively explores these questions and their applicability within this cross section of students at UPHS (RQ2). Additionally, because this study attends to the context of low-income students navigating high-poverty school and neighborhood settings, it also takes an inductive approach to better understanding their unique experiences of pursuing a college-going possible self in such an environment. It is a central assumption of this study that low-income students' context influences their decision-making processes in pursuit of a future that requires postsecondary education, and that the theories utilized in this study cannot comprehensively account for that influence. Taking these deductive and inductive elements together, this study serves as a test of existing theory by highlighting the unique experiences of six participating UPHS students as they decided to pursue college in an environment that was largely unconducive of that pursuit.

For this project, I conducted a multiple case study of six UPHS students as they pursued a college-going possible self over the course of one semester. Case studies offer real-world examples of different phenomena that can contribute to the development of theory or expertise on a subject (Flybberg, 2006). By interviewing UPHS students to capture their experiences, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how students in a high poverty-context make decisions about potentially becoming the first in

their families to graduate from a four-year college. Its primary method of data collection was two individual interviews with participating students throughout the spring semester of 2017 to explore their contexts, perceptions of a college-going possible self, and decision-making processes to pursue it. Additionally, I interviewed students' parents/guardians to offer triangulating perspective as well as additional context. I also interviewed school counselors and college advisors at UPHS in addition to conducting a single observation of a school day there to gain a deeper understanding of the college-going culture at the school. Additionally, I conducted a brief observation in students' neighborhoods. Throughout data collection and reporting I was careful to not include any identifiable information on any participating student, family member, or other stakeholder by only using pseudonyms. Finally, I included data about UPHS and its surrounding neighborhoods using publicly-accessible information, including US Census, NCES, and state DOE data. Using multiple sources of data allows for the triangulation of claims as well as richer description of the experience of participating students. This also enhances the credibility of the study.

<center>**Goals of the Study**</center>

Maxwell (2013) emphasized the importance of establishing one's goals at the onset of qualitative research at the personal, practical, and intellectual level. Personal goals are those which make the study intrinsically motivating. These offer sustenance for prolonged engagement in the study. Practical goals focus on accomplishing something specific, an objective that a study seeks to address. These offer clear and potentially measurable outcomes for the study. Finally, intellectual goals focus on gaining a better understanding of some phenomenon. These offer insight into why something happens and

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can address theoretical gaps in existing research. My personal, practical, and intellectual goals for this study are as follows.

Intellectual Goals

The conceptual frameworks that I employ in this study, EVT and possible selves, emphasize the importance of context as the foundation for motivational processes. However, EVT models tend to present it as a somewhat unidirectional precursor to the expectancies, values, and cost perceptions of students. Additionally, EVT researchers rarely, if ever, focus exclusively on low-income students as the subject of their work. While possible selves scholars frequently focus on this population as the target of their interventions, their attention to their context is often positivistic and somewhat truncated, prioritizing closed-ended measures of identity over rich description. This study tests these theories in their potential application to students navigating high-poverty environments at home and at school. Additionally, as research on poverty and education tends to lack the voices of low-income students, this study prioritizes this perspective as its primary data source. I believe that gaining a more in-depth intellectual understanding of the experience of these students requires first-person accounts, as these students are experts on pursuing college in a high-poverty context. It is my goal that the results of this study will better illuminate their experience for scholars interested in studying it.

Practical Goals

The gap between the apparent educational values and aspirations of low-income students and their corresponding underperformance in school is a central focus in this study. While it is unreasonable to expect that the outcomes of the present research will do much to close this gap, it is a practical objective to expect that it can contribute to the conversation about how to improve the educational outcomes of low-income students

attending high poverty schools by richly exploring their decisions to pursue a college-going possible self within that context. While generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research (Canella, 2015), transferability presents the opportunity to offer results that a reader might find relatable to other, similar cases (Guba, 1981). It is my goal that the results of this study will prove transferrable for students, families, and educational practitioners who might work with this student population. Additionally, it is my goal that the staff at UPHS and other high-poverty schools are able to take the findings of this study and apply it to the work that they do with this traditionally marginalized and vulnerable population of students. Finally, it is also a practical goal that policymakers reading the results of this study will gain a richer understanding of the experience of students attending schools like UPHS and consider how they might craft legislation that effectively attends to their contexts, cultures, and ambitions.

Personal Goals

This study represents both the culmination of my PhD studies as well as the official foundation of my upcoming research profile focused on low-income student motivation. My primary reason for leaving my previous position as a school counselor was because I believed that there were psychological processes rooted in the context of living in poverty that undermined the academic performance and corresponding opportunities for my low-income students. Leaving them was the most difficult professional decision I have ever had to make, and I would not have made it had I not believed that research had the ability to influence systemic change that could potentially improve their circumstances. Working with UPHS these last two years has been reminiscent of my experience as a counselor and I have seen both the challenges associated with working in a high-poverty school context as well as the determination,

grace, and grit with which UPHS staff do it every day. It is my personal goal that this case study of their school and their students is authentic to their story. In the conceptualization of this study I considered multiple approaches to studying the context and motivation of low-income students. Ultimately, I decided that a multiple case study would be the most appropriate way of capturing their experience because it would situate their perspectives in context. This, I believe, is the best way to honor the commitment I made to my former students to better understand their experiences.

CHAPTER 2

This review of the literature will proceed as follows: First, it will outline the

search procedures used to compile the research presented in this chapter. Second, it will

discuss the connection between poverty and education, establishing the context explored

in this study. This will provide an overview of the relationship between socioeconomic

status, development, and educational outcomes, as well as the particular challenges facing

students attending schools of concentrated poverty. Third, it will cover the possible selves

literature, with a brief attention to its history grounded in research on identity

development, followed by current explorations of the theory with low-income, urban,

racial minority students. This literature explores how students' concepts of who they

could become in the future are related to the identities they foreclose in the present, as

possible selves researchers believe that future selves motivate present behavior

(Oyserman, Gant, Ager, & Geen, 1995). The present study is particularly interested in

students' pursuit of a college-going possible self. It will then discuss exemplary studies in

the possible selves literature focused on low-income students' pursuit of an education-

dependent possible self involving college, and identify opportunities for contributions to

the research that this study will address. Fourth, it will discuss expectancy value theory

(EVT), its history, key terms, and rationale for why this theory offers a practical

application for studying the decision-making processes of low-income students pursuing

college in a high-poverty environment. It will conclude by presenting the conceptual

model for this study as it aligns with its research questions, illustrating the theoretical overlap between these literature bases and justifying the rationale for studying this topic qualitatively.

<center>**Literature Search Method**</center>

For each of these literature bases, I searched ERIC Proquest, PsychInfo, and Education Research Complete online databases using key terms and pulled from the reference lists of relevant studies within each topic. The resulting collection of literature contains both current and seminal pieces, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters. It pulls literature from education as well as from related fields like sociology, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and public policy. This section will describe the literature search methods used for each topic, each using the VCU Library online search engine to access research databases.

Poverty and Education

Searching only peer reviewed articles, I used search terms "poverty and education," "low-income students," "socioeconomic status and education," "low-income students and motivation," and "high-poverty schools" to find literature relevant to this study that would describe how the experience of living in poverty was related to educational outcomes. There are thousands of articles on low-income students, poverty and education, and high-poverty schools, and I therefore began by looking at the most recent studies (those after 2010) to have the most updated data available. From those articles, I looked through the reference lists to find authors and related studies to search separately, with particular attention to seminal pieces referenced in multiple studies. The resultant list included articles and books with dates ranging between 1966 and 2016. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to conduct a comprehensive literature

review of all research related to the experience of low-income students, I determined I had sufficient literature on the subject when I began to find repeated information across studies, often evidenced by authors continuing to cite each other. I also included statistics and annual reports from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and the US Census Bureau.

Possible Selves

I discovered the possible selves literature by initially searching the terms "identity" and "low-income students" and limiting the search to only peer reviewed work. That search revealed extensive literature on Identity Based Motivation, an intervention designed by Oyserman and her colleagues exploring the possible selves of low-income students, and how these future identities motivate present behavior. I then searched for research by Oyserman and found peer reviewed articles dating back to 1990 focusing on low-income, racial minority students in urban settings. In her discussions of the possible selves literature she cited seminal pieces and described its evolution. The exemplary pieces presented in this chapter that are particularly relevant to this study were those exploring the possible selves of low-income students as they related to their perceptions of college as a potential future option. The dates of possible selves literature included in this review range from 1966 to 2016.

Expectancy Value Theory

Expectancy value theory has a massive literature base spanning decades with applications in a variety of settings and attending to multiple contexts. However, after using the ERIC Proquest, PsychInfo, and Education Research Complete online databases and searching "expectancy value theory" with terms like "poverty," "low-income students," and "high-poverty schools," it quickly became clear that while this theoretical

lens is one of the most prominent approaches to studying student motivation, there were little to no studies using this theory to specifically explore the experience of low-income students attending schools of concentrated poverty. Therefore, I limited my subsequent searches to include seminal pieces of literature in EVT that described its history, structure, key definitions, and measurement. This search produced a collection of literature dating from 1964 to 2016 that described its history, evolution, and current research trends.

Poverty and Education

Youth who grow up in families living below the poverty line experience economic, physiological, and psychological hardships not often endured by their higher SES counterparts (Bloom, 2007; Bratlinger, 1992). One of the most prominent ways these differences manifest is in school outcomes, with low-income students tending to perform drastically below students of families with higher financial capital (Ladd, 2012). The tendency for those living in poverty to underperform in schools, live in neighborhoods with high crime and low educational attainment, and remain comparatively disengaged from the political process has contributed to a narrative that the economic circumstances of the poor are the product of agency rather than systematic subjugation, arguing that if they just put forth greater effort they would see their quality of life increase (Radmacher & Azmita, 2013). McKinney (2014) describes this attribution as "othering" the poor. However, as this literature review will demonstrate, the influence that living in poverty has on human development is multifaceted and often systemically sustained through housing and educational practices that perpetuate inequity (Bloom, 2007). To effectively intervene with low-income students, one must attend to their experience both in and out of school (Ladd, 2012).

Background

According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty threshold is set at the federal level by measuring the total amount of income available to a family compared to the total number of people living in the household, and specifically those under the age of 18. In 2015, the poverty threshold for a family of four with two children was $24,036 (Poverty Status in 2015, 2016). This implies the presence of two adults, however families living in poverty often include a single parent (typically a mother) and multiple children (Anton, Jones, & Youngstrom, 2015). Because of this trend, childhood poverty is closely related to women's poverty (McKinney, 2014). The 2015 poverty threshold for a family of three with two children was $19,096.

In the half century following the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, the earnings gap between high and low-income families has increased profoundly (Palardy, 2013). As Reardon (2013) explained, a family with school-aged children at the 90th income percentile earned five times the amount of money as families at the 10th income percentile in 1970. They now earn eleven times as much, meaning the gap has more than doubled. With this growing wealth discrepancy, poorer families are increasingly less able to invest economic capital into the education of their children compared to higher wealth families. As the wealth distribution in America continues to bifurcate, the economy increasingly separates into higher-paying jobs that require higher levels of education and low-skill/low-pay work. This further enmeshes the relationship between education, occupation, and income. Today, family background is more predictive of future achievement than it has been for the past several decades (Putnam, Frederick, & Snellman, 2012).

Components of Poverty

Although the measurement of socioeconomic status (SES) in educational research is an imperfect process, there are some common variables associated with it, including family income, parent education, and occupation, (Hackman & Farah, 2009), as well as neighborhood and school composition. All of these elements contribute to the experience of "poverty," thus indicating that being "poor" is more complicated than simply not having sufficient economic resources (Ardila, Rosselli, Matute, & Guajardo, 2005). As this section will illustrate, different socioeconomic variables contribute to the educational experience of students in many ways.

Family income. As gaps in the attainment of wealth have grown between the highest and lowest income levels in America, the relationship between parental income and the academic performance of their children has intensified (Reardon, 2013). Parents in poorer families often work more hours at lower-wage jobs to have sufficient resources to support the needs of their children (Wang & Degol, 2013). Perhaps because a greater percentage of available funds must be allocated to necessities, low-income parents tend to invest less economic capital in the educational enrichment of their children (Kaushal, Magnuson, & Waldfogel, 2011). The apparent benefits of such financial investments may be more reflective of children believing that education is an important aspect for their present and future life because of how their parents prioritize it (Destin, 2013). Thus, academic benefits apparently attributable to financial wealth may actually be more emblematic of related variables like parental education and amount of time spent with children in educational activities like reading, which tend to be positively correlated with income (Bassok, Lee, Reardon, S., & Waldfogel, 2016).

Free or reduced lunch. Student qualification for federal free or reduced lunch

(FRL) subsidies tends to serve as a primary proxy for socioeconomic status (Harwell &

LeBeau, 2010). Today, a student whose family makes up to 135% ($32,449) of the

federal threshold for poverty ($24,036) qualifies for free meals, while those who make up

to 180% ($43,265) qualify for reduced meals (USDA, 2016). FRL qualification is the

criteria by which schools are labeled as "high-poverty" (greater than 75%) or "low-

poverty" (less than 25%) (Condition of Education, 2010). Because UPHS is in a school

district with high concentrations of high-poverty schools, all students automatically

qualify for free lunch under the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the Healthy,

Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (School Meals, 2017). Many of the families at UPHS are

led by a single mother (2010 Census Maps, 2010), with a free lunch qualification

threshold of $25,779 for two children and $21,971 for one child, ($34,398 and $29,294

for reduced lunch) (USDA, 2016). For UPHS families who have two parents in the home,

those respective qualification thresholds are $32,448 and $25,775 for free lunch, and

$45,864 and $34,367 for reduced lunch. There is considerable variability in this measure

as a student from a family of four with two parents who qualifies for FRL subsidies could

come from a household making $0 or $45,864 per year.

Parent education. This study specifically explores the decision-making processes

of students pursuing four-year college whose parents did not previously graduate from a

one. According to Palardy (2013), one's level of educational attainment is arguably the

most robust predictor of lifelong economic, physiological, and emotional well-being. The

attainment of postsecondary education is perhaps the central force in the building of

human capital (Colclough, 2012). In studies that measure the relationship between

multiple variables associated with SES, parent education is often one of the more stable

and significant indicators, even after controlling for income level (Ardila et al., 2005; Kishiyama, Boyce, Jimenez, Perry, & Knight, 2009). Lower-educated parents are more likely to live in areas with other families with low-educated parents, raising children in an environment with few examples of postsecondary attainment (Colcough, 2012). Most recent national Census data showed that those without a high school diploma had a poverty rate of 28.9% in 2014, compared to 14.2% of those with a diploma but no college degree, and 5% of those with at least a bachelor's degree.

Family structure. Children who live in poverty very often live in families with single mothers (Anton et al., 2015). The national percentage of students qualifying for lunch subsidies living with a single parent has increased from 20% in 1990 to 35% in 2009, while the rate of single parents for non-qualifying students has remained relatively stable at 5% (Putnam et al., 2012). Families led by single parents are less likely to have postsecondary educational attainment than those with two parents (Reardon, 2013). The 2014 US Census data indicated that 6.2% of families with two parents lived in poverty, compared with 15.6% of families led by a father only and 30.6% of families led by a mother only.

Race/ethnicity and culture. It is challenging in researching the connection between poverty and education to isolate socioeconomic variables from race or ethnicity, as minority status tends to be associated with lower income and parent education, leading to a persistent conflation of race and SES in the literature (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002). This is problematic because both SES and race tend to uniquely and significantly predict educational outcomes without being collinear, indicating that they each have a meaningful relationship with academic performance (Reardon, 2013). Still, race and income are highly correlated. According to the most current US Census figures, the US

poverty rate in 2015 was 13.5% (Poverty Status in 2015, 2016). While 9.1% of the White

population lived below the poverty line, 23.9% of the Black population and 21.4% of the

Hispanic population did. In 2014 64% of Asian children in two parent households had

parents with at least a bachelor's degree nationwide, compared to 49% of White children,

24% of Black children, 22% of American Indian children, and 17% of Hispanic children.

That same year, 29% of Hispanic children had mothers without at least a high school

diploma, compared to 4% of White children, 10% of Black children, 8% of Asian

children, and 10% of American Indian children (The Condition of Education, 2016).

While about one in five Black people lived in poor neighborhoods in 2000, that

number increased to one in four by 2007-2011, with 67% of Black people who were born

into ghetto (isolated) neighborhoods continuing to live there a generation later (Sharkey,

2013). Today, Black families are three times more likely to live in poor neighborhoods

than White families (Siegel-Hawley, 2016). While it tends to be true that people are poor

for only a short period of time, this is often less true for African-American children and

adolescents (Grant, 2004).

Neighborhood and environment. The US Census defines a high-poverty

neighborhood as one where more than 40% of the residents live below the poverty line.

Children who grow up in these neighborhoods are more likely to live in areas that are

unsafe, and have less access to economic and community resources like high quality

schools than their higher income peers (Putnam et al., 2012). These neighborhoods often

have higher incidence rates of crime, violence, drug use, and other stressful or traumatic

events than those with lower concentrations of poverty (Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis, &

Holloway, 2011; Nelson & Sheridan, 2011). People in high-poverty neighborhoods are

more than three times as likely to live in substandard housing (22%) than residents of

lower-poverty neighborhoods (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002). Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty also tend to promote higher rates of residential movement due to eviction or housing condemnation, leading to an increased likelihood of students having to continuously withdraw and re-enroll in different schools (Ladd, 2012). Families living below the poverty line are five times as likely to be evicted from their homes than their non-poor counterparts (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002). Those who work to provide interventions in high-poverty schools often find that their efforts are undermined by the physiological and psychological health impacts generated in the neighborhood environments on the students they seek to serve (Palardy, 2015).

Harding et al., (2011) discussed the relationship between poor neighborhoods and the school performance of the children who live in them. They describe the experience of the urban poor through the lens of Social Isolation Theory, which posits that children living in poor ghetto neighborhoods often feel separated from mainstream culture, leading them to reject some of its key pillars, like school. While the authors point out that children tend to get different doses of their neighborhoods depending on the degree to which they interact with it (either by parental protection or their own agency), living and attending school in an environment with few examples of educational attainment can still create a culture of academic underachievement. For example, there may be less of a stigma for dropping out of school when living in a community where there are a high number of dropouts.

Poverty and Educational Outcomes

The 1966 Coleman Report commissioned by the federal government has become a seminal work illuminating the connection between poverty and educational outcomes, buttressing decades of subsequent research in the field. In it, Coleman argued that the

purpose of schools was to ensure students graduated "equipped as to insure their full participation in this society" (p. 72). He discussed the conditions, such as living in poverty, that tend to predict future achievement in life and advocated that schools must work to make such experiences less predictive, thus presenting schools as vehicles of social equity rather than just institutions of learning. Two things were clear: that low-income minority children tended to enter school at a deficit to their counterparts on average, and more disconcertingly, many were leaving school with even greater discrepancies in achievement with school poverty concentration perhaps having an even stronger influence than individual SES. As this section will demonstrate, not only have these trends persisted, but Coleman's vision of schools as instruments of upward mobility has largely gone unrealized.

According to Bassok et al. (2016), less than 50% of children living below the federal poverty threshold came into kindergarten "school ready" based on reading and math ability compared to 75% of their higher income peers in 2006. The academic performance deficiencies that become apparent when children begin formal schooling is emblematic of the cognitive functioning they have developed prior to coming to kindergarten, with low-income children tending to show deficits in verbal ability, executive functioning, working memory, and inhibitory control (Hackman & Farah, 2009). Children who are in the bottom income quintile are more likely to struggle at the beginning of school and twice as likely to drop out by the end of it (Oyserman, 2013).

Reardon (2011) offered the results of a meta-analysis of effect sizes in studies exploring standardized test performance differences between children from the 90th and 10th income percentiles. He found that from 1943 to 2001 the average difference in standardized test scores between Black and White students shrank from 1.24 to .7

standard deviations, the gap between students from the bottom and top income deciles grew in a nearly opposite trajectory, from .6 to 1.25 standard deviations. Thus, the income achievement gap is now nearly twice as large as the Black-White achievement gap, yet the latter tends to receive much more attention in educational research (Ladd, 2012; Reardon 2011; 2013).

Although estimates tend to vary depending on whether states report event graduation rates (the percentage of seniors who graduate each year) or cohort graduation rates (the percentage of freshmen who graduate four years later), close to half of racial minority, low-income students do not graduate from high school on time (Oyserman, 2013). According to Palardy (2013), research in this area commonly attributes the dropout epidemic to the low levels of engagement and achievement at schools of concentrated poverty. En route to dropping out, low-income children are more likely to miss school, face suspension, be retained a grade, and follow lower academic tracks or participate in special education, all of which tend to be predictors of school dropout (Bempechat et al., 2011)

Over the past few decades, the college-going rate for students from higher-income families has risen precipitously while remaining relatively stagnant for low-income families (Reardon, 2013). Much of this gap is explainable by the high school graduation gaps between low and high-income students (Bailey, & Dynarski, 2011). According to Palardy (2015), these discrepancies are most prominent in schools of concentrated poverty, as the socioeconomic composition (SEC) of a student's school tends to be predictive of future college outcomes, even after controlling for family-level socioeconomic predictors. Unsurprisingly, young adults from higher income families

have been making up increasingly large portions of the student population at selective universities (Reardon, 2013).

According to school report cards from the state Department of Education, in 2015 a little more than half of the students at UPHS passed their standardized end of year tests in English, less than half in math, about 70% in writing, less than half in history, and around 60% in science. In each of these subjects, UPHS students performed below district averages, which were below state averages. They missed roughly two out of every ten days of school, compared to division and state average attendance rates between 90 and 100%. Their four-year on time cohort graduation rate was about 75%, which was about 5 points below the district and 15 points below the state average.

High Poverty Schools

Among the meaningful contributions of the 1966 Coleman Report was its pioneering attention to the socioeconomic composition (SEC) of schools as a potentially influential factor in the educational outcomes of students who attend them (Palardy, 2015). According to NCES, a school that is "high poverty" is one where 76% or more students receive FRL subsidies, and a "low-poverty" school is one where 24% or fewer students do (2016). The 2007-2008 event graduation rate at high-poverty schools was 68%, reflecting a drop of 18 percentage points since the year 2000 (86%) while the graduation rates at low-poverty schools has remained relatively unchanged (around 91%). SEC, the school equivalent of SES, is a roughly inverse metric compared to the FRL percentage in a school, meaning a school with high-FRL would be considered to be low-SEC, and vice versa (Palardy, 2013).

Although the 1954 decision in *Brown v Board of Education* made intentional school segregation illegal, it did not require the intentional integration of schools, and

school segregation in America has persisted along both racial and socioeconomic lines (Palardy, 2013). The educational gerrymandering of school districts and zones based on neighborhood boundaries (Siegel-Hawley, 2013) and residential movement of higher-income, primarily white families to suburbs (often-termed "White flight") (Ryan, 2010) contribute to this enduring segregation. This produces a persistently high number of schools in urban areas with high concentrations of low-income and racial minority students (Siegel-Hawley, 2016). In addition to qualifying for the CEP lunch provision due to the high concentration of low-income students in the district, nearly 100% of the students attending UPHS are African-American (VDOE Fall Membership Data, 2016). It is a socioeconomically and racially segregated school.

High poverty schools tend to be more crowded, have more noise pollution and less natural light, fewer or lower-quality educational resources like books and technology, and insufficient classroom space (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002). Recent events like the "Detroit Sick Out" in the spring of 2016 have brought these issues to the surface, as teachers went on strike citing "crumbling, vermin-infested and inadequately staffed buildings" (Pérez-Peña, 2016, p. 1). With such stubborn gaps in school quality, educational research attending to the experience of low-income students must be mindful of the SEC of their schools and consider the potentially detrimental effects that attending a high-poverty school can have.

According to Rowan (2011), only about 55% of students perform at grade level on standardized tests in high-poverty elementary schools. By the time those students reach the ninth grade, about 80% are either over age for their grade or have reading and math skills below a 7th grade level. About 20-40% of those ninth grade students fail enough classes in their first year of high school to have to repeat the grade and ultimately,

an estimated 40-60% will drop out of school, indicating that the aforementioned 68% event graduation rate underrepresents the actual number of total dropouts in high poverty schools. UPHS outperforms each of these national metrics on high poverty schools, but their students still tend to perform below their peers at other schools in the district, which tends to perform below surrounding suburban districts with lower concentrations of low-income and minority students (School Report Cards, 2016).

According to the annual "Condition of Education" report by NCES in 2016, there were 98,270 American public schools during the 2013-2014 school year, and roughly 25% of them (around 24,568) were high-poverty (up from 17% in 2007-2008 and 12% in 1999-2000). Nationally, 20% of elementary schools and 6% of secondary schools met this designation. They tended to contain a higher percentage of racial minority than White students, as well as higher percentages of limited-English speaking students. They also had, on average, the same number of support personnel like counselors, social workers, and administrators as low-poverty schools, despite demonstrating greater need given the academic and behavioral difficulties facing their students. In 2013, 40% of students in cities attended schools of concentrated poverty, compared to 17% of suburban students, and 14% of rural students, with 24% of all public school students attending a high-poverty school. The 2016 Government Accountability Office report to congress on socioeconomic and racial segregation in schools indicated that approximately 16% of public schools in the 2013-2014 school year had more than 75% FRL and Black or Hispanic student populations, nearly doubling in frequency since 2000-2001 (9%). While these national statistics may illuminate the current landscape of America's public schools, they may not matter much to students attending UPHS, 100% of whom attend a high-poverty, racially segregated school.

The connection between poverty and educational outcomes is clear. As the preceding evidence suggested, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often perform below their higher SES peers by several metrics (Ladd, 2012; Reardon, 2011). Additionally, there tends to be a correlation between SES and racial minority status (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002), and the schools that contain high concentrations of low-income, racial minority students often produce even more discrepant academic outcomes for traditionally underperforming student populations (Palardy, 2015; Rowan, 2011). UPHS hosts a student body that is predominantly low-income and African-American, and their academic performance, by and large, is reflective of outcomes frequently seen in high-poverty school environments. The present study qualitatively explores the stories of UPHS students as potentially transferable examples of how one decides to pursue college in a high-poverty context.

Possible Selves

As discussed in Chapter One, a common finding in educational research is that low-income, racial minority students profess a desire to go to college while their present academic performance is often incongruent with that ambition. As this section will discuss, the possible selves literature offers a robust research base for exploring the pursuit of future identities, and has often been applied directly with low-income, urban, minority students. This section will first briefly discuss research on identity development to ground the possible selves research within a historical research tradition. It will then describe the literature on possible selves, and how it has served as a framework for scholarship and intervention with low-income, minority students. Finally, it will describe exemplary empirical research related to the present study and identify opportunities for

scholarly contribution and practical understanding of the experience of low-income, minority students pursuing an education-dependent future in a high-poverty context.

Identity

More than a half century of research has culminated in a conceptualization of identity as a complicated, deeply personal representation of one's theory of the self (Dunkel, 2000). Two prominent theorists are primarily credited with championing the exploration of identity as a developmental concept. Erikson's (1968) concept of identity presented it as a psychosocial developmental stage concentrated primarily within the adolescent years as youth endeavor to establish who they will become as adults. Marcia (1966) conceptualized identity more systematically, outlining processes of exploration and commitment that spanned beyond adolescence. Since these early explorations of the self, research in this field has expanded its definition to capture how identity is contextualized (Burke, 2003), considerate of future options (Markus, Nurius, & Goodstein, 1986), and a motivator of present behavior (Destin, 2010; Oyserman, 2013; Oyserman, Gant, Ager, & Geen, 1995)

Identity and self-concept are often interchangeable in the literature (Oyserman & Destin, 2010), and this study uses both terms. Identities are "the meanings that people hold for themselves" (Burke, 2003, p. 196) and their development tends to occur in settings where other people aid in the meaning-making processes of creating a sense of self (Burke, 2003). Just as people have their sense of individual identity (who "I" am) shaped by social forces, they also develop a social identity (who "we" are) (Oyserman et al., 2006). Group identities often establish clear boundaries for designating what would be considered in- and out-group behavior (Arroyo, Zigler, and Green, 1995). Abrams (1994) described this as "self-categorization," meaning that for one to be considered a

member of a group, he or she must behave in ways congruent with that group's norms while perhaps also needing to reject the norms of out-groups. Once individuals become established members of a group, they tend to internalize its norms and values, making it a part of their own identities. This might even involve sacrificing personal desires for the benefit of the group when something that "I" want does not align with what "we" typically do.

A common illustration of this tendency, and one that is particularly relevant to the present study, is racial or ethnic identity (Ogbu, 1988). When academic achievement is consistent with one's ethnic identity, group identification can be a very positive influence (Gullan, Hoffman, & Leff, 2011). Conversely, when it is incongruent with an allocentric (social) identity it can have an undermining effect on behavior, such as when low-income, African-American students reject school achievement as "acting White" and therefore intentionally underperform (Carter, 2006, p. 305). Attempts to balance personal and group identities can produce feelings of anxiety, alienation, or identity loss, such as experiencing a feeling of "racelessness" (Arroyo et al., 1995, p. 904). Similar to how present identities tend to be socially constructed, possible selves also represent an evaluation of potential future identities in the context of what options exist for someone like "who I will be" (Oyserman & Destin, 2010, p. 1004).

Identities consist of multiple concepts of the self, not all of which will remain salient at any given time and some of which may conflict with each other (Oyserman, 2008). They also span cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains (Seidman, Lawrence, Allen, & French, 1996). An individual can have multiple identities within a single group (e.g. being a son, father, and brother within a family) a single identity across different groups (e.g. associating with different social circles), or an interaction between the two,

like Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem level of influence (e.g. being a daughter and a student at the same time during a parent-teacher conference) (Burke, 2003). Part of what makes identities multidimensional is their incorporation of past, present, and future concepts of the self (Oyserman & Destin, 2010).

Having a sense of self requires evaluating past events and developing schemas that are aligned with present identity to interpret new information (Oyserman, 2008). This process involves an evaluation of the context in which the exploration occurs as well as consideration of the exploration procedures themselves, often leading to a deeply-integrated, tested belief about the self (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Carver, 2006). Identity researchers today often consider it to be constructed within the context of one's social and/or cultural group (Burke, 2003), as well as multidimensional, by spanning cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains (Seidman, Lawrence, Allen, & French, 1996), being activated differently within different settings (Burke, 2003), and incorporating past, present, and future concepts of the self (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Researchers often refer to concepts of future identities that motivate present behavior as "possible selves" (Oyserman, 2013).

Possible Selves

Prominent scholars of possible selves research credit Markus, Nurius, and Goodstein with first developing the concept in their 1986 seminal piece (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). They defined possible selves as "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (p. 954). This proposed dimension of identity extended the literature at the time by adding temporal element, arguing that perceptions of the future could motivate present behavior. They described these perceptions of future identities as conceptual links between

cognition and motivation, meaning identities were not only a developmental concept, as previously conceptualized, but also a motivational one.

They also described possible selves as being "distinctly social," as evaluation of future possibilities begins with, "what others like me are now, I can become" (p. 954). Additionally, they believed they were constructed based on feedback from previous experiences that contextualized present behavior in pursuit of future identity goals. For example, someone who has a future self based on an education-dependent career will likely ensure that they presently perform well in school, building from similar performance in the past. Even though possible selves tend to be highly contextualized by social influence and perception of feedback on previous performance, Markus et al. emphasized that people still have agency over which elements of their identity they wish to attend to at any given time. Research on possible selves over the following three decades has built on this framework.

Social construction of possible selves. Just as identity development research has been moving towards conceptualizing it as both idiocentric and allocentric, possible selves are also considered to be socially constructed. Youth tend look to examples of influential adults in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods and begin to make sense of what options exist for them (Destin, 2013). For example, having high numbers of school dropouts in a neighborhood can make a student feel like quitting school is a feasible option for them rather than having negative stigma attached to it (Harding et al., 2011). Conversely, coming from a family where educational attainment is the norm can lead youth to assume that a similar future awaits them (Destin, 2013). The social construction of possible selves is a critical consideration for low-income students living in urban areas, and has been a primary focus for Oyserman and her colleagues in their Identity Based

Motivation (IBM) intervention based on this literature, described later in this section. Research suggests that students tend to develop possible selves through examples that they see in their world (Dunkel, 2000), while still engaging in identity exploration as they decide whether that type of future is truly for them (Oyserman et al., 1993). RQ1a in the present study asks what examples of a college-going possible self are present for UPHS students, as well as examples of alternative, education-independent possible selves.

        Positive (hoped for) and negative (feared) possible selves. From its initial conceptualization, possible selves researchers have categorized potential future identities as either being those that are positive (hoped for) or negative (feared) (Meek, 2011). The present study is primarily interested in understanding low-income, minority students' perception of a specific type of positive possible self: going to college. Having a perception of positive possible selves to approach can provide evidence that the future is mutable, which can offer a hopeful, optimistic feeling (Markus et al., 1986). These tend to be particularly motivational when they are generated by the individual (e.g. I want to be a good student), rather than dictated (e.g. you should care more about school) (Burke, 2003). Hoped for possible selves do not always align with traditional concepts of success. For example, Oyserman et al. (1993) explored how juveniles engaging in delinquent behavior felt as though they were fulfilling positive identities for themselves (e.g. being "daring," "adventurous," and even "competent") (p. 360). The social reinforcement of these possible selves came from students' peer groups, who counteracted more obligatory possible selves imparted on them by parents and teachers like needing to be a good student. RQ2d in the present study explores the extent to which UPHS students consider proximal behaviors that support a college-going possible self to be identity congruent.

Negative (feared) possible selves can be motivational when balanced with desirable possible selves to approach, but can also be debilitating if an individual feels that he or she has no power to change them (Markus et al., 1986). While school-based interventions often focus exclusively on emphasizing positive outcomes (e.g. graduating), it is important to not ignore the potentially powerful influence that perception of negative possible selves can have on a student (Oyserman et al, 1995). Imagining oneself fulfilling a feared future identity can inhibit present action, like giving up in school when a student believes that failure is inevitable (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Still, the presence of a negative possible self does not necessarily guarantee a debilitating influence, as it can also be a powerful motivator. Steele described this in a 2007 study in which students went through a process of "disidentification" when they had a strong sense of who they did not want to become, affording them a sense of power over their own future. The motivational nature of a negative possible self tends to be strongest when it is paired with a positive possible self that serves as an alternative to a feared future identity (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). This balance can facilitate positive action, with demonstrated benefits for students from low-income and minority backgrounds (Oyserman et al., 2007).

Motivation for present action tends to amplify when there is a balance between one's hoped for and feared possible selves (Dunkel, 2000). This may reinforce the pursuit of pursuing a positive future identity by contrasting it with the alternative of a negative future identity that one wishes to avoid (Oyserman et al., 1995). When youth only develop positive schema for future identities, they may not be sufficiently considering the potential consequences of their present actions (Oyserman et al., 1993). Oyserman and colleagues' (1990; 1993) exploration of delinquency illustrated the benefits of balance, as they found that students who had a more balanced sense of who they wanted to become

and who they did not want to become were less likely overall to engage in delinquent behavior. Certain possible selves like "getting through school" may have little influence compared to more exciting concepts of the self, particularly if they aren't balanced with vivid understanding of negative possible selves that the student wishes to avoid (Oyserman et al., 1990, p. 114). RQ2b in the present study explores the degree to which students at UPHS balance negative possible selves that they wish to avoid with their pursuit of a college-going possible self.

Proximal and distal possible selves. Research on possible selves has demonstrated that their proximity can moderate their motivational influence on present behavior (Oyserman et al., 2007). Proximal possible selves could include goals in the near future for academic performance (e.g. making the honor roll this semester) while distal possible selves could include long-term goals (e.g. becoming a doctor) (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). While both can be motivational, research evidence suggests that proximal possible selves tend to be particularly influential on present behavior, and that cuing students to believe that their distal selves (e.g. going to college) are closer than they may have anticipated can lead them to pursue them more fervently (Oyserman, 2013). Without feeling this more immediate connection to distal possible selves, students may suppress present efforts related to them (e.g. not caring about building a GPA until later in high school). RQ2a in the present study investigates how proximal UPHS students consider their college-going selves to be and RQ2c explores which proximal possible selves (e.g. doing well in school) are related to the distal possible self of going to college.

Education-dependent possible selves. Interventions based on possible selves research for low-income, minority students tend to focus on promoting education-dependent future identities. Making these possible selves more salient tends to guide

present behavior in school by influencing students' interpretation of difficulty and helping perceive the pathway as more open (Oyserman, 2013). When a student has an education-dependent possible self, such as a career that requires postsecondary education, he or she tends to be more likely to identify presently as a strong student and build an accountability structure for themselves to maintain that identity through effort in the classroom (Steele, 1997). Future identities in adolescence typically focus on careers and wages, which often depend on attainment of higher education, even though students do not always draw the connection between academics and future occupations (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). When researchers work to edify a student's education-dependent future self they do so in hopes that they will develop and maintain a "smart, do well in school" present identity (Oyserman et al., 1993, p. 361).

Having future selves that are education-independent (not requiring any academic success or credentialing) tends to be more prevalent in low-income, minority, K-12 students, which relates to their sphere of social influence containing few examples of adults who hold careers requiring postsecondary attainment (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). They are also more likely to aspire to careers with the potential for high wealth with little or no education, like professional athlete or entertainer (Iceland, 2006), and often navigate settings where identities contingent upon academic success are not made readily salient (Oyserman, 2013). The path between educational ambitions and attainment may be obfuscated by a lack of illuminating examples of academic success and a plethora of reinforcing examples of generational poverty (Oyserman et al., 2007). The present study explores the pursuit of an education-dependent possible self (going to college) in a context where education-independent possible selves are often more salient.

Possible selves and low-income minority youth. Possible selves research, the present study included, often focuses on racial minority youth (typically African-American) from low-income communities as the population for their intervention and inquiry. Considering how construction of present and future identities occurs within one's social context, the relative deprivation experienced by low-income youth often provides them with more examples of negative possible selves than positive ones (Oyserman et al., 2006). Their home and neighborhood environments may contain few opportunities for employment and a lack of adult role models who have attained higher education (Thomas, Townsend, & Belgrave, 2003). Middle and upper class contexts tend to automatically cue pursuit of educational attainment by providing multiple examples of it and emphasizing the importance of schoolwork, extracurricular involvement, and academic enrichment (Oyserman et al., 2006). Conversely, low-income students tend to be immersed in environments where school seems less congruent with the possible selves that they encounter every day, leading them to disconnect from it (Destin, 2010). Further, racial minority youth who achieve in school tend to do so because they consider academic achievement to be a part of their ethnic identity, not counter to it (Nasir, Rowley, & Perez, 2016; Oyserman et al., 1995).

Identity Based Motivation (IBM) is arguably the most prominent current line of research investigating the development of possible selves in low-income, minority student populations. IBM theorists posit that "people prefer to act in identity-congruent ways" (Oyserman, 2013, p. 187), meaning perceptions of both present and future identities can motivate present behavior. There are three central elements to this theory: 1) school-focused possible selves are more salient when they are congruent with other social identities, 2) interpreting task difficulty as evidence of meaning rather than

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impossibility promotes education-dependent possible selves, and 3) pursuit of school-focused possible selves requires the presence of relevant behavioral strategies (Oyserman et al., 2006). The component of IBM most related to the present qualitative study is its focus on the degree to which education-dependent possible selves are congruent with other socially-reinforced present identities.

Identities tend to change based on the contextual influences in which a student finds him or herself (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Therefore, IBM proposes that identities are not only multidimensional, but also socially-constructed (Oyserman, 2013). Based on this, IBM interventions ground their efforts in social congruence by emphasizing how academic achievement is consistent with other important identities for students, like race or ethnicity (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). This helps students perceive a school-focused possible self as being socially relevant. Establishing social congruence may be particularly challenging when a student's ethnic or socioeconomic group stereotypically underachieves (Croizet, & Claire, 1998). These negative stereotypes can have powerful influence over school performance, and simply priming a student to think about his or her race can cue stereotypically maladaptive behaviors, even without mentioning those behaviors to him or her directly (Nasir et al., 2016). In racially heterogeneous schools, low-income, African-American students may align themselves with stereotypical behaviors to delineate themselves from non-minority peers through a phenomenon Crosnoe (2009) describes as a "frog pond effect." Additionally, students who identify with a racial or ethnic group but do not believe they look much like it (e.g. African-American students who have lighter skin tones) will sometimes behave in more stereotypically maladaptive academic behaviors to compensate for it (Oyserman, Brickman, Bybee, and Celious, 2006).

Carter (2006) investigated the social congruence between ethnic identity and academic achievement by studying how low-income African-American students straddle the cultural boundaries between their racial group and a school setting that often felt incongruent with it. She was specifically investigating how these students describe "acting White" as a label for peers who do well in school. Students who were most successful were those who were able to effectively juggle multiple identities attending to both their ethnic group and school success, which they perceived to be mainstream culture. Of the 51 students she interviewed, 37 of them described academic achievement as "acting White." However, students still emphasized that this designator did not apply to valuing education and wanting to do well in life, which they considered to be true across races. Carter's findings reinforced the common research claim about low-income minority students valuing education, even when they underperform. Further, it captured how influential social identities (e.g. ethnic) can be over behavior that facilitates that disconnect between ambition and achievement. In line with these results, RQ1c in the present study explores how UPHS students' socializers (including peers) are influential over their perception of a college-going possible self.

Having a strong sense of racial/ethnic identity can relate positively to academic achievement. Through a process of active socialization, in which parents intentionally teach their children about the history and importance of their racial heritage, children can begin to develop a strong sense of who they are (Murray & Mandara, 2002). This process has been shown to help African-American children develop a concept of their own race that is psychologically adaptive to a multicultural environment, allowing them to successfully maintain an ethnic or racial identity in contexts that may not always be congruent with it (Lesane-Brown, 2006). The formation of a positive ethnic identity has

been shown to be supportive of the cognitive, social, and emotional development of African-American children (Banerjee, Harrell, & Jonson, 2010).

Additionally, African-American children whose parents transmit messages that their racial identity is associated with academic achievement and are proactive towards orienting their children to potential racial barriers (e.g. stereotypes) tend to perform better academically (Bowman & Howard, 1985). Studies of these message transmissions have found that most African-American parents engage in racial/ethnic socialization with their children in order to help them identify with their heritage in a positive way (Thorton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). This socialization, along with support networks within African-American communities, has proven to be positively related to resiliency and academic achievement (Brown, 2008). These elements of racial/ethnic identity and socialization of African-American youth align with the possible selves literature, which emphasizes the critical role that socializers play in identity development and perception of future possibilities (Oyserman, 2013).

While the preceding section has described some elements of ethnic or racial identity, this is not one of the primary conceptual bases for the present study. The reason it instead focuses on possible selves is because this conceptual framework discusses both present and future elements of identity while still attending to how those identities are socially-constructed. In this way, it is able to attend to a student's race or ethnicity while still offering a framework for addressing how these students perceive future options for themselves, like college. RQ1b and RQ1c explore the influence of socializers on students' perceptions of a college-going possible self and their decisions to pursue it. Additionally, RQ2d asks the extent to which students consider proximal behavior that supports pursuit of a college-going possible self to be identity congruent. These questions

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illustrate how the possible selves theoretical framework explores issues of socially-constructed identities that may organically bring about discussions of race or ethnicity. As the following exemplary studies will illustrate, possible selves research offers a robust and relevant conceptual foundation for exploring how students from low-income, minority backgrounds make decisions about pursuing a future that includes college while presently navigating a high-poverty context.

Exemplary Studies

The possible selves literature tends to explore family and neighborhood level socioeconomic variables while attending less to the potential influence of the socioeconomic composition of a student's school. Additionally, it tends to operationalize an education-dependent future self as careers that require postsecondary education, while overlooking the other potential reasons that a student may want to go to college. Further, there is very little current qualitative research in the possible selves literature, and contextual influences therefore tend to be measured by variables like neighborhood poverty level, free and reduced lunch qualification, and parent education level, rather than allowing students to offer a rich description of their own context. Finally, while IBM researchers postulate that students are more likely to pursue school-focused identities when they feel identity congruent (e.g. racial/ethnic), there is little attention afforded to *how* students incorporate this consideration of present identities when making decisions about pursuing future ones. The following exemplary studies (presented chronologically) represent the current state of this research, and where the opportunities are for the present study to offer a contribution.

Destin and Oyserman (2009) sought to influence how a sample of low-income, minority seventh graders perceived the pathway to college as open or closed based on

availability of financial aid to moderate perceived costs. Researchers divided 48 students into two groups, one receiving information about the availability of financial aid to pay for college (an "open" mindset) and the other receiving a message that college was expensive (a "closed" mindset). Students receiving a message of an open pathway to college expected to earn higher grades than those receiving a closed pathway message, and planned on spending more time doing homework. These studies offered insight into the connection between perception of access to a distal possible self (going to college) and behavior supporting a more proximal possible self (doing well in school). There are, however, some lingering questions.

Because the authors considered the pursuit of college to be something attractive to low-income students but perhaps limited by their level of financial assets, they assumed that the primary undermining factor in the decision to pursue college was financial cost. The possible selves literature emphasizes that there is more associated with living in poverty that influences present motivation than just financial capital, such as social pressure to conform to group norms of academic underachievement. Additionally, as this chapter will describe in its coverage of expectancy value theory, there are other elements of cost that tend to influence decision-making processes rather than just perceptions of financial cost. The present study will extend the work of Destin and Oyserman (2009) by qualitatively exploring additional components of cost as they may relate to the decision of low-income students to pursue college (RQ3d).

Oyserman, Johnson, & James (2011) employed hierarchical linear modeling to explore the relationship between economic disadvantage and school-focused possible selves and relevant behavioral strategies to attain them. They operationalized economic disadvantage at both the neighborhood (poverty percentage, unemployment percentage)

and family level (parent education, occupational prestige), hypothesizing that higher SES parents would be able to mediate the effects of neighborhood disadvantage on both the number of school-focused possible selves and the behavioral strategies students described to attain them. They looked at family and neighborhood socioeconomic variables as predictors while controlling for student GPA. They captured school-focused possible selves and corresponding behavioral strategies by asking students to "write what you expect you will be like and what you expect to be doing next year" and indicate with a "yes" or "no" if they currently have been working on that possibility with a space to list the strategies they were using to pursue it (p. 479). Researchers coded education-dependent possible selves when students listed school in their answers and behavioral strategies when students indicated activities related to educational success (e.g. "do all my homework") (p. 479).

They found that low-income youth living in more disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to have school-focused possible selves, but less likely to have behavioral strategies to attain them. These results suggest that both family and neighborhood socioeconomic variables are related to how students perceive education-dependent possible selves, but not always in ways that preclude their formation. Where this study perhaps falls short is in its ability to capture *how* elements of neighborhood and family socioeconomic disadvantage are related to the generation of education-dependent possible selves. The present study seeks to extend this work by qualitatively exploring the relationship between economic deprivation and pursuit of a college-going possible self, allowing students to describe their decision to pursue college and relate it to their contexts (RQ1).

Oyserman, Destin, & Novin (2015) conducted a series of experimental studies outlining the connection between possible selves as motivators and the context in which they exist. Researchers induced a context for their undergraduate participants by either having them read information about college having a high likelihood for success or failure. They then manipulated whether students generated positive or negative future selves by asking them directional questions about who they wanted to become or avoid. They measured motivation through a variety of education-related outcomes, including reports of anticipated study time and perception of academic task difficulty. There were four experimental groups: negative context/negative possible selves, negative context/positive possible selves, positive context/negative possible selves, positive context/positive possible selves. They found that students who were in the negative context condition were more motivated by the presence of negative possible selves while those in the positive context condition were more motivated by the presence of positive possible selves. The authors indicated that motivation is a feature that emerges when there is a congruent fit between an accessible perception of the future and present context.

While the results of this study illuminated the connection between context, possible selves, and motivation, there are a number of persisting questions. First, the population for this study was undergraduate students. It is likely that the results would be much different if this study were replicated with the typical population for possible selves interventions: low-income, racial minority secondary students. Second, both context and possible selves were manipulated in this study. UPHS students live in a context that likely automatically cues negative possible selves, as examples of education-independent identities are readily available in their environment. The results of this study suggest that

their perceptions of negative possible selves might be more presently motivating than their consideration of a positive one, like going to college. The present study extends these findings by asking about examples of positive and negative possible selves in students' current context (RQ1a), and how balanced their perception of a college-going possible self is with other negative possible selves (RQ2b).

A key limitation in the possible selves literature is how researchers tend to primarily consider an education-dependent future identity as being related to a career that requires a college degree. This assumes that low-income, minority students who aspire to college are pursuing it simply as a stepping stone to an occupational outcome. However, there is evidence suggesting that students have different reasons for pursuing a college degree beyond just the utility it potentially offers to their career ambitions, as described in a 2016 qualitative study by Ozaki. In it, she interviewed 48 community college students who had previously left school about their decisions and experiences that led them to return. She found that most of her participants had developed a college-going possible self while in high school. Many articulated that they had parents who were supportive of their decision to go to college, that it felt congruent with their other important identities, and that they tended to balance their perception of an education-dependent future with negative possible selves that they wished to avoid. The students in her sample who did not develop a college-going possible self in high school were more likely to have dropped out and delayed their entry into community college, often needing exposure to a negative possible self like working in low-pay work before deciding to complete their education. This study demonstrated how having a defined college-going possible self was related to the decision-making processes that people employ in pursuit of postsecondary educational attainment. The present study seeks to extend these findings

by applying a similar line of inquiry to low-income, minority students attending a school of concentrated poverty.

Ozaki (2016) demonstrated how students develop a college-going possible self, and how that development is related to both internal processes (e.g. wanting to build a better life for their families) and external influences (e.g. having parents reinforce the importance of going to college). Rather than asking postsecondary students to retrospectively describe these influences, the present study asks students pursuing four-year college to presently evaluate how they develop a college-going possible self within a high-poverty context (RQ1). Ozaki's qualitative study set the stage for how perception of possible selves (RQ2) are related to present decision-making processes (RQ3). The present study qualitatively explores those decision-making processes through the lens of expectancy value theory, which offers a particularly robust and parsimonious approach to exploring how people make decisions by considering expectancies for success (RQ3b and RQ3c), the value of engaging in the task (RQ3a), and the perceived costs associated with task engagement (RQ3d). Qualitative research is rare in the possible selves literature, yet there is potentially valuable information to be gained from asking low-income minority students to explore in depth how they perceive their environments influencing the development of a school-focused identity.

The present study follows the assumption of possible selves researchers that future identities motivate present behavior by exploring students' decision-making processes in pursuit of a college-going possible self in a high-poverty context. EVT researchers believe that people choose to engage in a task for a variety of reasons. The present study argues that students may choose to pursue a college-going possible self for reasons beyond just the utility of receiving degree and the potential career that follows.

Consequently, it explores the full expectancy, value, and cost structure outlined in EVT as each likely contributes to the decision to pursue college.

Expectancy Value Theory

The literature on expectancy value theory (EVT) has a rich history, with robust quantitative measurement of its components and application with a variety of student populations. Still, the search of the literature for the present study did not reveal any EVT studies directly exploring the decision-making processes of low-income, Black students attending schools of concentrated poverty. The following section will outline the history and structure of EVT, offering important definitions and arguing for its applicability for the present study by illustrating its overlap with the possible selves literature. It will conclude by relating the typical conceptual model of EVT with the model utilized in the present study, arguing for the importance of studying decision-making processes about the pursuit of college in context.

History

John Atkinson first introduced expectancy value theory in his 1964 book, *An Introduction to Motivation*. He defined expectancies as how people believed their performance on a task would eventually lead to success or failure and values as how attractive the task was (Wigfield, 1994). While Atkinson rigorously tested his early model of EVT, he did so only in laboratory settings, undermining its applicability to capture how people make decisions in context (Buehl, & Alexander, 2005). Because of this, the decades of EVT research following Atkinson's seminal model have sought to expand its structure by testing it in real-world settings.

In her 1983 seminal piece, Jacquelynne Eccles (broadly considered to be the founder of modern EVT) explored the differences between male and female middle

school students in how they valued mathematics and the level of confidence they had in their abilities to do well in the subject. In her new model, she offered an extension from the earliest conception of the theory, arguing that students tend to have their values and expectancies influenced by both their performance history and the expectations dictated by their sociocultural backgrounds, primarily focusing on gender differences. Eccles and her colleagues used this updated model to inform their research on student choice in different contexts (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). While they maintained much of the original structure of EVT, there were some significant departures from Atkinson's theory that have allowed it to become one of the most prominent models of motivation in modern educational research (Nagengast, Marsh, Salas, Xu, Hau, & Trautwein, 2011).

A primary departure from Atkinson's original conceptualization is that modern EVT currently attends to contextual influences as sources of individuals' expectancies, values, and perceptions of cost (Wigfield, Tonks, & Eccles, 2004). Although the inclusion of these elements has made the model noisier, it has also enhanced its applicability to real-world contexts. Its researchers have rigorously applied the model with different populations, including elementary students (e.g. Watkinson et al., 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002); secondary students (e.g. Trusty, 2000; Zhu, & Chen, 2013) and postsecondary students (e.g. Bong, 2001; Matusovich et al., 2010; Wang & Degol, 2013) in domestic as well as international settings (e.g. Chen & Liu, 2009; Nagengast et al., 2011; Pang, 2004). Modern EVT researchers employ both quantitative (e.g. Buehl, & Alexander, 2005; Durik, Shechter, Noh, Rozek, & Harackiewicz, 2015; Eccles, Wigfield, Flanagan, Miller, Reuman, & Yee, 1989) and qualitative methodologies (e.g. Flake et al., 2015; Peters, & Daly, 2013; Rodgers, K., 2008). The present study tests the

applicability of EVT as a lens for explaining how students make decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self in a high-poverty setting.

Modern EVT Structure

Today's model resembles its original roots by considering individuals' decision-making processes to be based on their expectancies for success, subjective values, and perceptions of costs associated with task engagement (Eccles, 2009). As this section will describe, some of these definitions have evolved over time while others have remained relatively constant.

Expectancies. Expectancies represent how well an individual expects to do on a task, either through present beliefs in ability or perceptions of potential future success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Factor analyses have demonstrated how difficult it is to separately measure both future expectancies and present abilities as they tend to demonstrate collinearity (Eccles, 2009; Guo et al., 2016; Pang, 2014). Still, EVT researchers tend to believe that each component of expectancy plays a role in making decisions by asking "can I do this?" both presently and in the future (Matusovich et al., 2010, p. 289). While values tend to be a better predictor of task choice and intention, expectancies tend to be a better predictor of task performance (Bong, 2001). Expectancies have historically received more attention in EVT research than values and costs (Matusovich et al., 2010).

Present ability beliefs. Present ability beliefs represent one's current valuation of how capable he or she is to currently engage in a task (Eccles, 2009). They are domain specific (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), and overlap theoretically with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (Wigfield, 1994). EVT researchers tend to define ability beliefs more broadly than Bandura while extending his theory to also attend to how the perceived

value of a task is related to one's assessment of present ability to engage in it (Bembenutty, 2008). As Wang & Degol (2013) advocate, ability beliefs are a critical element of understanding how an individual makes choices about task engagement but are insufficient in isolation. People do not simply pursue a task just because they believe they have the ability to do it. They must also consider the task to be valuable to engage in it. RQ3c explores how confident UPHS students are in their present ability to do college preparatory work.

Future expectancies. In addition to considering present ability beliefs, EVT researchers believe that individuals also evaluate how likely they are to successfully complete a task, should they choose to engage in it (Wigfield, 1994). Having high success expectancies tends to facilitate continued task engagement (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Just as children tend to begin school with a generally positive view of themselves as students, they also tend to have optimistic expectations for future success (Wigfield, 1994). Over time they tend to incorporate previous success and failure experiences into their future expectancies, reducing them in particular domains (Wang & Degol, 2013). These expectancies tend to be related to demographic variables like race and SES, and are often established early and persist throughout school and into adulthood (Mello, 2008). RQ3b in the present study asks how successful UPHS students expect to be in college, should they decide to pursue it.

Values. Values represent the attractiveness of a task, and inform the question "do I want to do this?" (Watkinson, Dwyer, & Nielsen, 2005, p. 180). Eccles and her fellow EVT researchers tend to believe that the value structure of the theory is one of its most meaningful contributions to existing theories of motivation, as others tend to align more directly with the expectancy domain (Chen, & Liu, 2009). Still, there is theoretical

overlap between the value component of EVT and other prominent theories of motivation including interest theory, achievement-goal theory, and self-determination theory (Barron & Hulleman, 2015). One of the seminal contributors to modern EVT was Feather, who expanded Atkinson's earliest concept of values by conceptualizing them as stable guides or standards for action, disaggregating into two levels: terminal (future life goals) and instrumental (methods used for achieving those goals) (Wigfield, Tonks, & Eccles, 2004). Eccles expanded on Feather's conceptualization by defining values at four levels: attainment, intrinsic, utility, and cost (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Subsequent factor analyses of this structure revealed that attainment, intrinsic, and utility values tended to positively load together while cost tended to load separately as an apparent moderator of task value (Chen & Liu, 2009). Consequently, EVT researchers have increasingly called for cost to be considered as a separate component of EVT, advocating for an expectancy-value-cost model (Barron & Hulleman, 2015; Flake et al., 2015). It is rare to see quantitative studies that measure all elements of value and cost together due to their frequent collinearity (Guo et al., 2016). Values tend to be positively correlated to both future expectancies and present ability beliefs (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) and some EVT researchers have argued that people tend to increasingly make decisions based on values once they have more secure concepts of their own abilities, affording them greater precision in their decision-making processes (Chen & Liu, 2009). RQ3a asks how UPHS students perceive the value of college.

Attainment. Attainment value represents "the importance of doing well on a given task" (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 72). It stems from the personal meaning based on an individual's self-concept or identity, meaning that tasks tend to feel more valuable when they confirm important and salient elements of the self (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). A task

may feel personally meaningful when it confirms a current sense of identity or facilitates the development of a desired identity (Masson, Klop, & Osseweijer, 2016). Eccles' conceptualized attainment value in response to recommendations for values like relatedness, competence, and esteem by other researchers (Barron & Hulleman, 2015). Statements of attainment value often begin with sentiments such as "I have always wanted" or "I am someone who" (Masson et al., 2016, p. 86). Eccles (2009) explained that recent research has considered attainment value more in terms of one's idiocentric and allocentric identities, also reflecting one's present ability beliefs and expectancies to be able to fulfill salient elements of the self.

Intrinsic. Intrinsic value is the level of personal enjoyment that an individual gets from engaging in an activity based on his or her subjective interest in it (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). It tends to be closely related to attainment value as it also has tendencies to correlate with measures of self-concept, contributing to the difficulty of measuring both value components concurrently (Guo et al., 2016). This element aligns somewhat to Ryan and Deci's concept of self-determination, as having a task be personally interesting may increase a student's desire to engage in it, leading him or her to pursue it more enthusiastically and for longer periods of time (Masson et al., 2016). Intrinsic value can either be individual (personally interesting regardless of circumstance) or situational (only interesting depending on the context) (Durik et al., 2015). It has proven to be highly predictive of students' course selections (Wigfield, 1994).

Utility. Utility values represent "how a task fits into an individual's future plans" (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 72). This value component may be reflective of one's extrinsic motivation for task engagement, particularly when there is an absence of intrinsic motivation (Masson et al., 2016). It typically relates directly to one's goals, both

current (e.g. getting a good grade on a test) and future (e.g. career) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). EVT researchers have described a task's utility value as being a means to an end (e.g. going to college in order to get a higher paying career) (Barron & Hulleman, 2015). Eccles (2009) described utility value as fulfilling "a less personally central goal," and that while it may overlap conceptually somewhat with attainment value because both may represent one's goals, utility values do not contain the same identity elements as attainment values. An apparent limitation of possible selves research is the discussion of college as only having utility value toward an education-dependent career. While this may be part of a student's decision to attend, he or she may also consider it to be valuable in other ways that are more personally meaningful. For example, it may feel personally relevant to elements of a student's identity, like race or ethnicity. This study will therefore be looking for all types of value for going to college in its exploration of students' pursuit of a college-going possible self.

Costs. Costs have received the least amount of research attention in EVT, and are a growing area of interest for scholars in the field (Barron & Hulleman, 2015; Guo et al., 2016). Cost is associated with perceptions of negative aspects of task engagement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) and all decisions are assumed to have at least some cost associated with them (Pang, 2014). Eccles (1983) first introduced cost as a mediator for one's consideration of value for an activity, initially dividing it into three types: perceived effort, loss of valued alternative opportunities, and psychological risk of potential failure (Flake et al., 2015). Her foundational concept of cost introduced it as a negative value that subtracted from the potential decision to engage in a task.

Modern models of EVT assume that decision-making processes incorporate both positive and negative assessments of a task, evaluating the potential for success with the

perceived costs of participation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). A relatively high perception

of cost in relation to expectancy for success and value of the task could have a negative

impact on the decision to engage in it (Masson et al., 2016). Cost tends to be

significantly, negatively related to the multiple components of value in EVT, but not

significantly related to expectancy (Zhu & Chen, 2013). Similar to values in EVT,

studying one type of cost in isolation may insufficiently capture the true breadth of this

element (Chen & Liu, 2009). However, unlike research findings on values demonstrating

collinearity in their measurement, the pending development of a validated cost measure

(e.g. Flake et al., 2015) leaves the potential collinearity of various cost components

relatively unknown. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses support a separation of

expectancy, value, and cost, and recent qualitative research on cost has illuminated the

multifaceted perception of it that people have (Barron & Hulleman, 2015). While effort,

opportunity, and psychological cost have received the most research attention, it is likely

that others exist as in-depth explorations of cost are still relatively new (Eccles, 2009).

For example, financial cost has recently emerged as a component of student decision-

making (e.g. Mello, 2008). RQ3d asks about what UPHS students' perceptions of cost are

regarding that pursuit.

     Relationship between EVT components. Researchers' understanding of the

intricate relationship between expectancies and subjective task values has developed over

time through improved measurement of its components and assessment of how they tend

to interact with each other. Atkinson's original multiplicative model (expectancy x value

theory) considered expectancies and values to be inversely related, arguing that more

difficult tasks with lower expectancies for success would be deemed more valuable

(Bong, 2001). Today, EVT researchers consider these components to be positively

related, domain-specific, and influenced by an individual's goals, perceptions of task difficulty, and memories of past performance on similar tasks (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Additionally, although modern EVT has trended toward a more additive model (Nagengast et al., 2011), recent research has suggested that the relationship between expectancies, values, and cost perceptions may actually be multiplicative, although in a more sophisticated way than the original model suggested.

Guo and colleagues (2016) captured how consideration of the relationship between the elements of EVT have evolved over time. They explained how movement toward an additive model was a necessary and beneficial departure from the original model because it presented expectancies and values as being positively rather than inversely related. In this newer model, having high expectancies for task success (e.g. "I know that I will do well in college") could compensate for low value for the task (e.g. "I do not consider going to college to be personally relevant"), or vice versa. However, they criticized the possibility of a purely additive model because it would suggest that the components of EVT work independently of each other. As new measures of expectancies, values, and costs have emerged, researchers have increasingly explored how these components relate to each other and how they tend to predict various outcomes. Through structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis, Guo et al. looked at all levels of task value (attainment, intrinsic, and utility), a multivariate conceptualization of cost (effort, opportunity, and emotional/psychological), as well as both present ability beliefs and future expectancies for success. They found that while different types of cost loaded together, they all negatively loaded with task values, expectancies, and ability beliefs. They also found that not only did expectancies, ability beliefs, and values tend to load together positively, they tended to enhance the effects of each other. Through these

analyses, they recommended that the components of EVT actually support a multiplicative, synergistic model. This marks an evolution of EVT from a model that was originally inverse and multiplicative, to additive and compensatory, to synergistic and multiplicative.

Sociocultural Context

Unlike the original model, it is now routine for EVT researchers to link motivational beliefs to contextual experiences with students' peers, school, and family (Wang & Degol, 2013). Eccles believed that individuals internalized these influences, incorporating them into his or her identity and using them as a guide for future decisions (Bembenutty, 2008). Confidence beliefs, success expectancies, subjective task values, and perceptions of costs stem from previous experiences and social influences like parents, friends, and school personnel (Matusovich et al., 2010, Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). As Wang & Degol (2013) explain, "individual motivational beliefs do not develop in a psychological vacuum" (p. 310).

Cultural groups create their own concepts of values, expectancies for the future, and developmental trajectories, which create behavioral norms that guide decisions of group members (Eccles, 2009). These norms shape the perspectives of youth to navigate their lives through the lens of what is expected of them (Wang & Degol, 2013). Eccles (2007) explained that culture can dictate which activities are considered valuable. For example, a culture that values autonomy is likely to encourage behaviors that promote independence in children, like going to college (Wigfield et al., 2004). The difficulty of effectively measuring culture does not necessarily mean that EVT is not an appropriate lens for studying the decision-making processes of different groups of people, but it does emphasize the importance of EVT researchers continuously seeking to improve their

understanding of context in their work (Wigfield et al., 2004). The present study situates the EVT framework within a high-poverty context, both in and out of school, in which UPHS students make decisions about going to college.

Research has demonstrated that race and SES are two variables that are highly relevant to students' decision-making processes in education. Parents with higher educational attainment and income tend to provide their children with more educational (e.g. tutoring) and cultural (e.g. going to museums) enrichment opportunities (Eccles, 2007; Wang & Degol, 2013), supporting the connection demonstrated between parental SES and the expectations they have for their children's success (Mello, 2008). Higher SES students are also more likely to have support in their pursuit of college as their parents are more likely to have previously navigated the college admissions processes, leading lower SES students to rely more heavily on school-based resources like counselors (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007). Stability in the availability of household resources (e.g. access to a computer) can also promote stability in future expectancies for success, as well as early academic achievement, and parent-teacher interactions (Trusty, 2000). Ogbu (1988) found that members of racial minority groups tend to perceive more potential barriers to their future academic success than their non-minority peers. Although research has consistently demonstrated that low-income, racial minority children and their families tend to have high values and aspirations for education, their expectancies for accomplishing their educational goals do not tend to be as high (Oyserman, 2013). This gap between values, aspirations, and expectancies may be related to the stereotype threat endured by low-income minority students (Eccles, 2007).

Just as a supportive home environment can promote high expectancies for success, a school environment can do the same by providing emotional support, communicating high expectations, and minimizing perceptions of risk associated with engagement in educational tasks (Eccles, 1993). As students interact with school staff and peers, they tend to internalize their perspectives into their own approach to education (Wang & Degol, 2013). Students' racial and socioeconomic backgrounds often influence teachers' expectations for their success (Mistry, White, Brenner, & Huynh, 2009). These expectations may impact students' performance by either confirming or undermining their own ability beliefs (Wang & Degol, 2013), and low-income students tend to be particularly susceptible to this influence (Sorhagen, 2013). The present study explores how socializers influence not only UPHS student expectancies, but also their values, and perceived costs related to college (RQ1b).

Models of modern EVT typically begin with an individual's sociocultural context preceding subsequent values, cost perceptions, and expectancies. Figure 1 depicts a current model of EVT frequently employed by scholars in the field (adapted from Masson et al., 2016 and Eccles 2007).
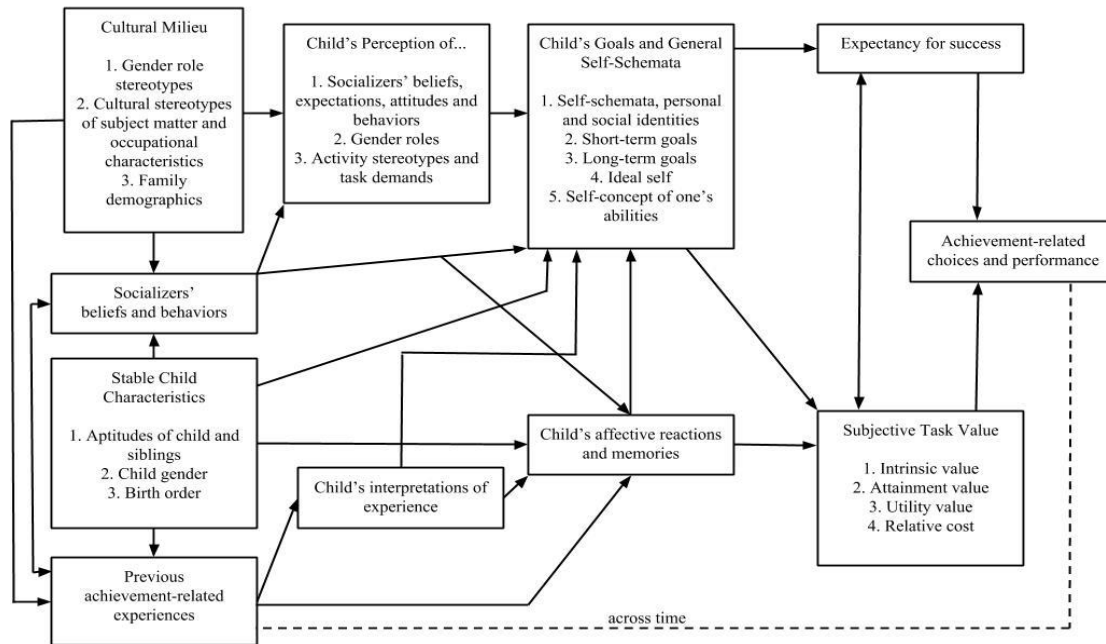
Figure 1. EVT Model

EVT is built to account for social influences, but its presentation of their place in motivation is somewhat unidirectional. Prominent models of EVT, like the one presented in Figure 1, tend to list contextual influences to the left of student expectancies and values, implying that they precede these motivational elements, which then precede achievement-related choices and performance, which then become previous achievement related experiences that contribute to future choices. While this model attends to context while granting individual agency over choice (e.g. interpretations of experience and perceptions of socializers' beliefs) it does not seem to account for contextual influences throughout the decision-making process. Further, apart from accounting for "cultural milieu," the remainder of the contextual influences on choice seem to relate to family-related demographics and socializers in a student's world. It does not appear to account for other environmental influences, like the experience of living in poverty or attending a high-poverty school. The model for the present study builds on this framework by

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situating all decision-making processes in pursuit of a college-going possible self within the high-poverty context that UPHS students navigate, offering relational validity for the specific population and context in this study (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015).

Conceptual Model

The present study follows a conceptual model that presents an overlap of the literature on poverty and education, possible selves, and expectancy value theory (Figure 2). It is a working hypothesis of this study that students who have ambitions to go to college while living in a high-poverty context have perceptions of a college-going possible self and make all decisions about pursuing it within that context. Low-income, racial minority students tend to aspire to postsecondary education but live in an environment where there are few examples of educational attainment. Thus, if they decide to pursue a college-going possible self, they are likely approaching a future that is external to their present context. The possible selves literature has offered considerable insight into how perceptions of potential future identities can be presently motivating, particularly if congruent with other allocentric identities, but little is known about *how* low-income, minority students make decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self in a high-poverty context. The proposed model investigates those processes. The model begins by situating students within their individual socioeconomic and cultural context (RQ1) including family socioeconomic variables as well as neighborhood poverty. It also includes the presence of socializers in the student's out of school environment (RQ1b and RQ1c), as well as examples of both education-dependent and education-independent possible selves (RQ1a).

INDIVIDUAL SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXT *(RQ1)*

Family background (parent education and occupation, family income, family structure, race/ethnicity)
Neighborhood poverty level
Influence of socializers (parents, peers, other influential adults) *(RQ1b and RQ1c)*
Examples of education-dependent and education-independent possible selves *(RQ1a)*

HIGH POVERTY SCHOOL SETTING *(RQ1)*

School structure, climate, racial/ethnic composition, and culture *(RQ1d)*
School personnel support of college pursuit *(RQ1d)*
Influence of socializers (parents, peers, other influential adults) *(RQ1b and RQ1c)*
Examples of education-dependent and education-independent possible selves *(RQ1a)*

DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES *(RQ3)*

Values *(RQ3a)*		
Attainment	**Intrinsic**	**Utility**
Personal meaning and identity congruence for attending college	*Interest or personal enjoyment in attending college*	*Service to future, education-dependent career goals*

Costs *(RQ3d)*				
Effort	**Financial**	**Opportunity**	**Psychological**	**Other**
Work required for college eligibility	*Money required to pay for college*	*Loss of valued alternatives for pursuing college*	*Risk of failure in pursuit of college*	*Other potential costs of going to college*

Expectancies	
Future Expectancies *(RQ3b)*	**Present Ability Beliefs *(RQ3c)***
How successful the student expects to be as a college student	*How much confidence the student has in his or her present abilities to become eligible for college or do college-level work*

POSSIBLE SELVES (RQ2)

PROXIMAL

Positive Possible Selves (Approach) (RQ2c and RQ2d)
Social acceptance
Competence
Academic success?

Negative Possible Selves (Avoid)
Delinquency?
Academic failure?
Social ostracism
Incompetence

DISTAL

College Going Possible Self (Approach) (RQ2a)

RQ2b

Negative Possible Selves (Avoid)
School dropout
Low wage work
Unemployment

Figure 2. Conceptual Model

Within that level of influence is the high-poverty school setting that all UPHS students attend, but may perceive differently (RQ1d). Components associated with the influence of the school setting include its overall structure, climate, and culture. Additionally, there are socializers within this environment, just as there are in out of school contexts, that influence students' pursuit of a college-going possible self (RQ1b and RQ1c), as well as the presence of examples of both education-dependent and education-independent possible selves (RQ1a). A UPHS student who lives in a high-poverty environment and attends a school of concentrated poverty who aspires to go to college makes all decisions about that pursuit within those contexts.

The model for this study depicts students' perceptions of possible selves as being situated within the high-poverty environment in which they live and go to school, with one exception: a college-going possible self. As the model depicts, proximal possible selves, both the ones they wish to pursue and those they might wish to avoid, all exist within their present school and individual contexts. Distal possible selves, however, exist outside of their school context as they reflect the future they could have after high school. Negative possible selves that are alternatives to going to college (e.g. school dropout, low-wage work, and unemployment) still likely exist within a student's individual context. UPHS students may or may not consider these alternatives when making decisions about pursuing an education-dependent future (RQ2b). It is a central working hypothesis of this study that a student's college-going possible self largely exists outside of both school and individual contexts which tend to contain fewer examples of postsecondary educational attainment. The presence of proximal possible selves that are related to the pursuit of the distal college-going possible self, like being a strong student (RQ2c) and seen as congruent with other important identities like race or ethnicity

(RQ2d), would likely promote a more open pathway for that pursuit, making it feel more proximal (RQ2a). Conversely, students who find proximal behaviors unsupportive of an education-dependent possible self, like delinquency or academic failure, to be more identity congruent would likely perceive a more difficult pathway to get there, perhaps making it feel more distal.

These perceptions of possible selves are likely presently motivating according to the literature, and the model specifically explores how they inform UPHS students' decision-making processes (RQ3). Following the EVT framework, the model indicates that students weigh subjective assessments of the value of going to college (RQ3a) with their perceptions of potential costs (RQ3d) along with their future expectancies for success in college (RQ3b) and present beliefs in their ability to do college preparatory work (RQ3c). According to this study's conceptual model, UPHS students use this framework to make decisions to pursue a college-going possible self within their individual and school contexts. These processes facilitate their proximal behaviors that either support or inhibit the pursuit of college.

Conclusion

The present study works under the assumption that we currently have an incomplete understanding of the experience of low-income, racial minority students attending schools of concentrated poverty who desire to go to college. Research with this population has repeatedly demonstrated that they often value education and aspire for postsecondary attainment, but that their performance in school does always not align with those ambitions. The possible selves literature suggests that the perceptions that these students have of potential future identities motivates their present behavior, and that the experience of living in poverty provides few examples of educational attainment while

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offering extensive evidence that school is not for "people like me." Expectancy value theory posits that people make decisions about task engagement based on their expectancies for success as well as perceptions of task value and associated costs. Because the experience of poverty appears to undermine the pursuit of the college-going identities that low-income, minority students have for themselves, the present study uses EVT as a framework for understanding the gap between postsecondary educational aspiration and attainment in this population.

What are the decision-making process students use to pursue a college-going possible self in a high-poverty context? The present multiple case study of UPHS students presented in the following chapter qualitatively explores this overarching question through the perspectives of these students about the context and processes surrounding their pursuit of college in a high-poverty environment. More specifically, it asks about the contexts in which they live and go to school (RQ1), as the literature on poverty and educational outcomes suggests that there is a complicated relationship between one's socioeconomic status, academic motivation, and achievement outcomes. It explores their perceptions of college-going possible selves (RQ2), as the literature suggests that having an education-dependent future identity like college can be presently motivating depending on context, proximity, social-congruency, and balance with negative outcomes students wish to avoid. Finally, it explores how these perceptions of possible selves activate present motivational processes by asking students to describe their expectancies, values, and perceptions of costs as these components interact to generate the decision to pursue a college-going possible self or not (RQ3). Qualitative exploration of these three research questions and their corresponding subquestions offers the potential to contribute to these literature bases and provide unique perspective on the

gap between postsecondary educational aspiration and attainment in low-income, racial

minority students attending school in a high-poverty context.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter will present in detail the qualitative research design that the present study used to explore its research questions by asking UPHS students to describe their pursuit of a college-going possible self in a high-poverty context with triangulated evidence from interviews with other key stakeholders, school and neighborhood observations, and relevant quantitative descriptive data. This study seeks relational validity to ensure that the findings ring true for the participants and are reflective of the circumstances in which they live and go to school (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). It pursues transferability rather than generalizability as its purpose is not to make broad statements about all students pursuing college in a high-poverty environment, believing that those experiences are highly individualized but nevertheless potentially relatable (Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk- Jenkins, 2016). This chapter will begin by discussing my stance as the researcher in this study. It will then offer an overview of the design and describe its foundation in a constructivist/naturalistic research paradigm. It will then discuss the different methodological phases of this study, including participant recruitment and selection, forms of data collection, and analysis. It will conclude by discussing the methods by which I established trustworthiness and credibility in my findings.

Researcher Stance

It is commonly understood across qualitative research approaches that the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in the study (Merriam & Tisdell,

2015). Because the researcher is so enmeshed, his or her presence must be reported as it is inauthentic to depict qualitative findings as simply occurring without including the interactive, collaborative processes that researchers used to arrive at them (Patton, 1999). As the present study follows a constructivist research paradigm, it is assumed that not only is it not possible to fully control for the perspective of the researcher, that position is critical to the active construction of information that generates through qualitative data collection techniques (Fernqvist, 2010; Finlay, 2002). Still, as the researcher in this study it is imperative that I begin by engaging in the practice of reflexivity to describe my experiences and perspective as both might play a role (Berger, 2015; Roulston, 2010). While those experiences motivate me to engage in this work, they also must be considered as potential threats to the validity of my findings.

Although I grew up in a rural, mixed-income, racially homogenous area in North Carolina I have long been acquainted on a professional level with urban poverty and K-12 students aspiring for postsecondary educational attainment. During my undergraduate experience at Appalachian State University I became involved with Upward Bound and GEAR UP, two federally-funded programs working with middle school and high school students with ambitions to become the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college. In both programs, most of our students grew up in either rural or urban poverty. The students from our participating rural county school districts were mostly White, and those from our urban city school districts were mostly Black. I visited students in their schools, hosted them on college campuses, and spent summers with them offering academic enrichment. They were excited about the idea of college, and the beneficial effects of the program often masked the ways that living in poverty can influence educational performance and ambitions.

From there I received my Master of Arts degree in Counseling from Wake Forest University in 2010 and immediately began work as a high school counselor in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School district served students from a variety of racial and social class backgrounds and the school where I worked as a counselor reflected that, with a student population that was roughly 40% White, 40% Black, and a 20% mixture of Hispanic or other races/ethnicities, with 38% of the student body receiving free and reduced lunch (FRL) subsidies. My students who tended to struggle the most were those deemed "economically disadvantaged" by their qualification for FRL. They were traditionally the ones who came to us performing below grade level on their middle school standardized tests, who failed classes and required summer school, and who eventually walked the threshold between high school graduation and dropout. They missed school more often than my higher-income students and were more difficult to contact when they did, as they frequently had phone numbers listed in our system that were disconnected. Despite all of this, our guidance team worked diligently to ensure that all students had a pathway to school completion and our four-year cohort graduation rate rose from 86% to 94% over the four years that I worked there. Each year we would graduate a higher percentage of our students and each year we would inherit a higher percentage of our incoming freshman class that were low-income and academically underperforming. I left that position to pursue a PhD in Educational Psychology because I saw that there was a connection between poverty and education that I did not understand.

Early in my PhD program I encountered an opportunity to engage in a program evaluation of a freshman academy at UPHS. I came into the project biased by the perspective I had built working at my previous high school, recognizing that there was a

connection between poverty and education but believing that the issue could be addressed through efforts like the interventions we used in our guidance office to boost our graduation rate. In January of 2015 I sat in a meeting with the Board of Directors responsible for the creation of the freshman academy at UPHS. This collection of educators, church leaders, and other members of the community had worked for years to alleviate poverty in the section of Mid Atlantic City where UPHS was located. I spoke about our evaluation plan and recommended some outcome goals for retention, graduation, and college-going rates in the student body that were higher than what the Board initially discussed. I briefly explained what we had accomplished at my previous school and suggested that the same could be true at UPHS. The Chairman of the Board politely listened to my suggestions, and then politely suggested that I "check my demographics." I did.

That moment sharpened the focus of my research and shifted my perspective on how poverty and education were related. Through my subsequent work evaluating the freshman academy at UPHS and reading about high-poverty schools, I found that the socioeconomic concentration of a school matters considerably for the outcomes that its students experience. As a counselor in a mixed-income school I generally had around 20% of my senior class every year who were at risk of not graduating on time, most of whom were economically disadvantaged. Had I worked in a high-poverty school, that percentage would have likely been much higher and the time and energy I allocated for dropout prevention work would have been spread thin. UPHS was a qualitatively different school experience than the one where I served as a counselor.

As an evaluator for UPHS I have visited the school frequently over the past two years. I have engaged in data collection in disruptive classrooms. I have witnessed

students wandering the halls during instructional time. I have seen how committed staff members are to serving the students there but also witnessed some procedural issues that potentially undermined their efforts. I have collected data on how frequently UPHS students miss school, get suspended, struggle to pass standardized tests, and fail classes. Although I have been intimately involved with UPHS as a researcher, I believe that I have a fairly balanced perspective on what occurs there. UPHS, to me, embodies the challenges facing racially-segregated, high-poverty schools situated in urban, high-poverty neighborhoods.

Throughout my career as a K-12 educator and researcher, my race and social class have situated me as an outsider in this work. As a White person from a middle-class background I am unable to relate directly to the experiences of the students I have served as a counselor and studied as a researcher. When I go to UPHS I am frequently the only White person in the room, a fact that often does not go unnoticed by the students. They seem to quickly recognize that I do not quite fit. Just as reading about poverty has helped me to look outside of my social class, I have incorporated literature on racial and ethnic identity in the preceding chapter to help me be more receptive to these themes as they may emerge. While my research questions do not attend specifically to race, they do explore the social construction of identity and how context tends to influence perceptions of future options. Race is certainly a critical part of that context, and I have never had to worry about mine precluding me in any way from who or what I wanted to be. My voice in this work is as someone who has not experienced the same prejudice or lack of privilege, but nevertheless seeks to contribute to a world where one's position at birth is less predictive of one's position later in life.

I have chosen to approach the present study through the methods described in this chapter because I believe that the story of UPHS will resonate with other students pursuing college in a high-poverty context, with educational practitioners working in these settings, with policymakers seeking to better understand how their decisions contribute to the wellbeing of their citizenry, and with scholars in this field who are also curious about the gap between aspiration and achievement in arguably our most marginalized student population. It is my hope that the results of this study contribute not only to the literature on poverty and education, possible selves, and expectancy value theory, but also to a conversation about how students make decisions about their lives in context. I hope that the students, families, educators, and community partners who participated in this study believe that their voices matter, and that they find that the results are practically relevant and authentic to their experience.

Study Design

This section will outline the overall design of this study, beginning with a discussion of the rationale for using a multiple case study design, followed by the research paradigms used, and then describing how the sources and methods for data collection and analysis align with the research questions. The present multiple case study of students attending UPHS sought to offer an in-depth look at their experiences pursuing a college-going possible self in context. To accomplish this, it was imperative that I engage in prolonged involvement with my study participants (Guba, 1981) and utilize triangulation with multiple data sources to enhance credibility (Maxwell, 2008). This section will conclude with a description of the phases of data collection and analysis I followed to conduct this study.

Case Studies

According to Flyvberg (2006), case studies offer human illustrations of different phenomena that can prove very useful in the development of theory or expertise in a particular subject. Although in isolation they may appear anecdotal, collections of case studies offer real-world examples of what a theory may be attempting to describe and therefore captures how it applies in different contexts. These can help guide researchers to better understand what tendencies exist within the population they are studying. They can also help build expertise in a subject by helping people better understand where a theory applies and where it does not apply. Flyvberg argued that case studies are versatile and valuable as a method for answering a variety of qualitative research questions. While the n may be small in these studies, the attention to rigor persists. These purposes align with the present study, which sought to offer a more in-depth understanding of the experience of low-income, racial minority students aspiring to go to college while navigating a high-poverty context. Additionally, it sought to serve as a test of the possible selves and expectancy value theory conceptual frameworks with this population. The research paradigms employed further supported efforts to establish relational validity and test existing theory.

Naturalism

According to Guba (1981), much of quantitative research is rationalistic while much of qualitative research is naturalistic. Rationalistic research assumes that there is one reality that researchers attempt to explain by paying attention to any of its disaggregated parts, ultimately converging on a central "truth." Naturalistic research, on the other hand, believes that there are multiple realities and that the more people engage in research, the broader the spectrum of "truth" will become. Consistent with the

common approach of qualitative research, naturalists believe that the researcher is intractable from the study itself and that his or her presence in it ensures that there cannot be pure objectivity. Statements about findings lack veracity unless they effectively attend to the context in which the study participants exist.

By the very foundation of the research questions in this study, it is naturalistic. The purpose of engaging in a multiple case study of UPHS students stems from the belief that decisions about the pursuit of college are highly influenced by living in a high-poverty context and that quantitative, post-positivistic research has largely attended to this context in limited ways. Naturalistic, qualitative research often attends more effectively to the ways in which the lives of people are inextricably contextualized (Flyvberg, 2006). Following this tradition, the present study assumes there is no single "truth" for students living in a high-poverty context who aspire to go to college, but that the relative "truth" that belongs to each of these participants contributes to a better understanding of how a college-going identity develops in context (Tracy, 2010). While there were steps taken to ensure that the present study was rigorous in its approach, it also prioritized the relevance of the findings to the subjects and setting to which they belong.

Constructivism

Much of qualitative inquiry is constructivist in nature, as researchers typically believe that the process of collecting and analyzing data involves the active and dynamic generation of knowledge that effectively captures the experience of research subjects (Roulston, 2010). In attendance to the inescapably subjective involvement of the investigator in qualitative research, constructivists advocate for looking outward into the world in which the study is conducted to gain perspective on how one fits inside of it

(Finlay, 2002). They also believe that the perceptions of individuals participating in research is continuously influenced by their context and culture (Patton, 1999). Epistemologically, constructivist qualitative researchers argue that the "knowledge" produced by more positivistic, quantitative approaches offers a false claim to the truth and advocates that more discourse is needed in truly understanding what is to be gained from published research (Demuth, 2015). "Knowledge," according to the constructivist view, generates from the interaction of social context and history (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The meanings generated in research belong to the participants rather than the researcher (Onwuegbuzie, & Leech, 2007).

The present study follows a constructivist paradigm by engaging in the active construction of data through interactions between the researcher and participants. In this way, participants are not merely vessels of information (Fernqvist, 2010). Instead, the relative truth of their experience surfaces through active interviewing as well as the collection of related data (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Further, all data collected in this study was done within the context in which it organically existed, interviewing students in their school, parents in their homes (when possible), and school counselors and college advisors in their offices. The results of this study offered no false claim to a central "truth" and instead emphasized findings generated by discourse. The knowledge constructed from this study is based on the meanings generated by its participants from start to finish.

Research Questions and Corresponding Data

This section will outline the research questions in this study and the data sources that inform them. The present study used primarily qualitative data while also triangulating claims using some supporting quantitative evidence.

Data sources. The following data sources provided the information needed to answer the research questions in this study. While the primary source of data was interviews, this study also included observation protocols, field notes, self-reported academic performance and demographic data, and quantitative data regarding school and neighborhood settings. After engaging in memoing in the conceptualization of this study, I found it important to include multiple sources of data in addition to student interviews to make sure that I had rich accounts of their experience and their overall contexts. This section outlines those data sources and the rationale for including them in the study.

Student interviews. Throughout this study I engaged in two separate interviews with participating students. The first included questions regarding their present contexts: at home, in their neighborhood, and at school, as well as their perceptions about college (Appendix A). The second asked students to further elaborate about their college-going possible selves and the decision-making processes they used to pursue them (Appendix B). Students selected to participate in the second interview were also asked follow-up questions based on the content of their first interview. The rationale for conducting two separate student interviews is three-fold. First, the nature of the research questions for this study are such that there is too much content to cover effectively in a single interview. The content of the first student interview about context and perceptions of college informed the second interview about the decision-making processes that students used to pursue them. Second, engaging in two separate interviews over the course of the semester allowed for more prolonged engagement with the student participants, offering the opportunity to build a relationship and provide richer data for the study. Third, part of the purpose of the first interview was to determine which students participated in the second interview. Selection for the second interview was based on expressed student

interest, how much students elaborated during the first conversation and how their unique perspective contributed to an overall variety of cases for addressing the research questions in this study. I selected these students through criteria outlined later in this chapter, as well as through memoing during data collection and analysis about who had the potential to offer the richest data possible for the study. These interviews were the primary source of data for answering the research questions. The first took place during phase two of data collection. The second took place during phase three.

Parent/guardian interview. In addition to interviewing students about their decision-making processes, I also conducted an interview with students' parents or guardians to gauge their perspective of the context in which their child was deciding whether or not to pursue a college-going possible self (Appendix C). I interviewed whichever parent or guardian signed the consent form, which had a place for a second parent to sign if the student and his or her parents wished for me to interview both (if both were present). This did not occur, as I interviewed three mothers and one older brother (legal guardian) for the four underclassmen student participants, and the parents/guardians of the upperclassmen did not participate for reasons outlined in Chapter Four. Students filled out a similarly-worded, separate assent form, unless they were over the age of 18 and could fill out their own consent form. I interviewed two mothers over the phone, one mother at UPHS at the same time as her daughter, and one older brother/legal guardian at his home during phase one of data collection. Each of these locations and methods of communication were deemed most convenient by the participants. Parents/guardians tend to act as socializers influencing their children's academic identities (Destin, 2013), as well as their values, expectancies for success, and perceptions of cost (Eccles, 2007).

College advisor/school counselor interview. UPHS employs school counselors, college advisors, and other personnel who help students in their pursuit of college. To gauge their perceptions of the college-going environment at UPHS, I contacted advisors and counselors using a standardized script and after obtaining consent conducted individual interviews (Appendix D). Although I spoke with a total of four counselors and advisors in this study, I described them each as "advisors" to help protect their anonymity as some served in individual roles in the school and would be quickly identifiable. Evidence from the advisor aggregate data informed multiple research questions and were an integral component of the description of UPHS and its current college-going culture presented at the beginning of Chapter Four.

School observation protocol. The literature on high-poverty schools is very clear that the socioeconomic composition of a school tends to have consequences for the motivation and performance of the students who attend it. To get a sense of what the environment is like at UPHS, I conducted an observation for approximately seven and a half hours on February 17, 2017 at the school following a semi-structured protocol that I created (Appendix E). I observed the learning environment in the school (e.g. noise level, number of students in the hallways during class, interactions between students and school personnel, evidence of school climate), as well as evidence of a "college-going culture." I also engaged in memoing during this observation to make sure that I was only describing the present data collected without incorporating my previous experiences at UPHS and the expectations that they may have developed in me.

Neighborhood observation protocol. Although I asked students in their interviews to describe their neighborhood contexts, I also engaged in a single observation of the specific block on which each student lived. I followed a framework outlined by

Caughy, O'Campo, and Patterson (2001), who presented a brief observational protocol of high-poverty, urban neighborhoods (Appendix F). While their measure was quantitative in nature, with the intention of using components of neighborhood deprivation in regression analyses, I instead used the structure as a guide for observing elements of a neighborhood that might be emblematic of its level of poverty, including physical incivilities (e.g. presence of graffiti and maintenance of grounds) and territoriality (e.g. resident reaction to the presence of a researcher and presence of security bars on windows). I conducted these observations during school hours to see if there were any school-aged youth present, which offered potential evidence of students who had dropped out or were skipping school. These observations took place during phase three of data collection for all six students selected for the second interview. My memos during these observations included accounts of how I felt when I was in the neighborhoods of these students (e.g. my perceived level of safety).

Academic and demographic data. Participating students were asked to fill out a demographic and academic data questionnaire using an online form (Appendix G) that loaded the data into a password protected drive. All questions asked in this form were optional. The academic data collected on each participant in this study represented how their past and present performance in school positioned them as a potential candidate for college. The relevant information that this study collected included grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, attendance data, discipline data, academic course rigor (e.g. honors and Advanced Placement), and individual course grades. Standardized test score data tends to be predictive of performance on college entrance exams (e.g. SAT and ACT). It is a common finding that school attendance tends to be related to academic achievement (Roby, 2004). Finally, school discipline records like suspensions are

frequently required for college admissions applications like the Common Application. Self-reported demographic data collected for this study included parent education level and occupation, number of siblings, sibling education level, family structure (e.g. living with both parents or mother/father only), and an address for the neighborhood observation. I created separate folders in the online password-protected drive for each participant's pseudonym, which will also contained relevant academic information. To help keep this information aligned, I maintained a list of pseudonyms with the corresponding names of participants that was also kept in the online password-protected drive accessible only by my dissertation advisor and me.

Census data. In addition to the above data sources, I also collected US Census data about the neighborhoods surrounding UPHS in which students lived (phase three). This data source was publicly accessible and offered triangulating evidence to inform case descriptions.

Field Notes. Throughout the study I took extensive field notes based on my observations each time I went to UPHS. These notes described what I saw at the school and how my interactions with students, staff, and parents informed the research questions of the study. These notes offered triangulating evidence for multiple research questions as well as negative cases, when present. They totaled 18 single-spaced pages, broken up into three phases: pre-recruitment, recruitment, and post-recruitment/data collection.

Research questions. The above sources of data correspond with each of the research questions in the present study. This section outlines each of those questions, along with their corresponding data sources used to answer them. Methods for collecting these sources of data will receive coverage later in the chapter. Each research question primarily used student interview data with triangulating evidence from other data sources.

Table 1 presents the alignment of research questions with their corresponding data

sources.

Table 1

Research Questions and Corresponding Data Sources

RQ1: What are the contexts in which UPHS students make decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self?		
Research Question	Student Interview	Triangulating Evidence
RQ1a: What examples of a college-going possible self are present for students? What alternative examples of possible selves are present?	One, Two	Census data Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews School observation Field notes
RQ1b: How do socializers influence students' sense of value for a college degree? Expectancies for success in college?	One, Two	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews Field notes
RQ1c: How do socializers influence students' perception of a college-going possible self?	One, Two	School observation Counselor/college advisor interviews Field notes
RQ1d: How does the school environment at UPHS influence students' pursuit of a college-going possible self?	One, Two	School observation Counselor/college advisor interviews Field notes

RQ2: How do UPHS students perceive their college-going possible selves?		
Research Question	Student Interview	Triangulating Evidence
RQ2a: How proximal do they consider their college-going possible self to be?	One	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews
RQ2b: How balanced is their college-going possible self with	One, Two	

negative possible selves they wish to avoid?		Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews
RQ2c: What proximal possible selves relate to their more distal, college-going possible self?	One	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews Field notes
RQ2d: To what extent do they consider proximal behavior that supports a college-going possible self to be identity congruent?	One	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews Academic data Field notes

RQ3: How do UPHS students describe their decision-making processes in pursuit of a college-going possible self?

Research Question	Student Interview	Triangulating Evidence
RQ3a: How do students perceive the value of going to college?	One, Two	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews
RQ3b: How successful do students expect to be in college?	One, Two	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews
RQ3c: How confident are UPHS students in their ability to do college preparatory work?	One, Two	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews Academic data
RQ3d: How do UPHS students perceive the costs of going to college?	One, Two	Parent interview Counselor/college advisor interviews

<center>**Method**</center>

In this section I will outline the methods that I used in the present study to recruit and sample participants and collect data in three phases (Table 2). I will then discuss each phase in detail, including the specific methods used at each step of the research process and attention to sampling methods during phases one and two. I will conclude this section by offering a more general discussion of the methodological approaches taken to ensure qualitative rigor before transitioning into how I established trustworthiness in this study.

Table 2

Phases of Data Collection

Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three
Timeline: 02/17-03/17	*Timeline:* 03/17-04/17	*Timeline:* 05/17-06/17
Participant recruitment	First student interview	Second student interview
Parent/guardian interview	Remaining parent/guardian interviews	Neighborhood observation
School observation		
	Student academic/demographic data collection	Census data
Counselor/College advisor interviews		Field notes
School data	Final student case selection	
Field notes	Field notes	

Phase One

Phase one of the study initiated after I obtained IRB approval from the school district (January 17th, 2017) and the university (February 9th, 2017). It began with recruitment of participants using purposeful sampling at UPHS. Maxwell (2008) outlines multiple purposes for utilizing purposeful sampling in qualitative research that apply to this study. The first was to offer representativeness of the broader context in which

participants existed, attempting to capture some of the variability created by culture, place, and history. In the present study, I recruited participants by working with two UPHS staff members to identify students across grade levels who professed an aspiration for attending college. One of them was the coordinator of the freshman academy that I have been evaluating for the past two years, and the other was the Director of Counseling at the school.

I requested that my two UPHS research partners provide a list of names of about 30 students (about seven or eight from each grade level) to provide perspectives at various levels of proximity to college. Selection criteria for this initial group only included having previously communicated a desire with a UPHS staff member to go to a four-year college immediately after high school graduation. To avoid any potential violation of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) I did not ask for any demographic or academic information explicitly until after receiving parent consent (when applicable) and student assent. Any employee who provided any information of potential participants for this study was asked to sign a non-disclosure form. The initial list they provided included 35 students (eight freshmen, 14 sophomores, eight juniors, and five seniors).

From that list, I worked with my research partners at the school to distribute hard copies of initial interest letters to students that they could return to signify their interest in potential participation. These letters were intended to allow students to opt-in to the study reduce any risk of possible coercion. From that initial distribution list, 19 (54.3%) returned the letter in a sealed envelope to a folder posted outside of the counseling office with my name on it. Interest letters had students' names on them so I could know who was replying while maintaining their confidentiality in a blank, sealed envelope. Each

student returning this letter indicated that they did want to be invited to participate. I then sent each student a hard copy of a meeting announcement through the counseling office to let them know that they would be receiving an invitation from me to meet in the auditorium during lunch later that week. On the morning of the date indicated in their student meeting announcement letter, I sent a hard copy of an invitation through the counseling office. That letter served as a pass for the student to meet me in the auditorium during lunch, which was locked to the student body but opened for me on recruitment days by my contact in the counseling office. I also provided copies of recruitment flyers in the counseling office throughout recruitment (about four weeks) to inform other students not on the initial list about the study and allow them to opt into participation by contacting me directly to receive an invitation. None elected to participate through this recruitment strategy. On recruitment days (three total) I set up a desk at the back of the auditorium by an open door to greet students one at a time as they came for their recruitment meeting.

During those individual recruitment meetings, I briefly discussed the purpose and procedures of the study with each student using a script indicating that qualifying students were those who aspired to go to a four-year college and had parents who did not graduate from one. For each student, I provided a copy of the parent informed consent in a sealed envelope for the student take home, along with a cover letter. The envelope read "To the parents/guardians of" followed by the student's name and a number to contact me on a prepaid cell phone that I got exclusively for the purposes of this study. The purpose for using a prepaid phone with a separate phone number to make that contact rather than using UPHS phones was to ensure that it did not appear that the school nor the school district was sponsoring the research. For students over the age of 18, I also provided them

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with a student consent form. Their parents/guardians did not have to complete their own consent form unless they wished to participate in an interview, as adult students were able to consent for themselves.

In the script, I asked the students to share the form with their parents/guardians and ask them to call me or return the signed consent form within a week of our meeting. I also told students that if their parents/guardians did not want them to participate or be contacted further for the study, they could bring the envelope back to the counseling office within a week of our meeting. This was only true for one student, whose name I then removed from my master list of potential participants. If I did not hear from a parent or the student had not returned the envelope to school within a week of our initial meeting, I sent out another copy of the invitation to the student to meet me during lunch in the auditorium. I then conducted a brief follow-up meeting with those students following a standardized script. The purpose of this meeting was to offer students a reminder of our previous conversation and provide them with a new copy of the informed consent and cover letter in a sealed envelope with the same information, if necessary. I informed students during this meeting that this would be the last time that I would meet with them unless they decided that they want to participate in the study and their parents offered consent (if applicable). Ultimately, I engaged in three rounds of recruitment following this procedure. In total, seven students (five sophomores and two seniors) elected to participate. Four of the five underclassmen had their parents simply sign the consent form, and one guardian contacted me first via phone. I followed a script to discuss the details of the study and set up separate interview appointments with that guardian and student.

During this phase, I also conducted my observation of UPHS, the purpose of which was to be as descriptive as possible of the building and the experience of a typical school day there. On the morning of the observation day, I asked one of my research partners at UPHS to send out an email to the staff to alert them of my presence that day and detail how I would go about my research without going into classrooms or interviewing anyone directly. In that observation, I primarily looked for evidence that aligned with RQ1b (socializer influence of expectancies, values, and cost perceptions), RQ1c (socializer influence of a college-going possible self) and RQ1d (school environment influence over college-going decision-making processes). In addition to these specific pieces of information I described other resources available in the school, some of which were already presently known (e.g. a school counseling office and college advising office). I did not conduct individual classroom observations because there would likely have been too much variability between classroom climates to be able to communicate accurately if it exemplified the experience of attending UPHS. I also conducted interviews with four advisors throughout phase one after obtaining their email addresses from a research partner at UPHS and sending them individual messages using the script described in the data source section of this chapter.

Phase Two

Phase two of the study began on March 6, 2017 when I conducted my first student interview. The first interview protocol asked students to confirm that their parents did not attend a four-year college, and to describe their general perceptions of college, as well as their neighborhood, social, and school contexts as they related to their pursuit of a college-going possible self. It attended to each research question broadly to get an overall idea of how each student made decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self in

his or her contexts. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and took place after school hours, per request of the school district IRB. Students also filled out an online form to self-report their academic and demographic data on my laptop that I brought to each interview. All the questions were optional to ensure that students did not feel coerced into sharing any information they did not wish to share. Their data uploaded directly into a password-protected drive associated with the mefirst@vcu.edu account accessible only by my dissertation chair and me. I interviewed seven students, four parents, and one legal guardian during this phase.

Following this round of interviews, I transcribed all audio myself as transcribing one's own data allows the researcher to become more intimately familiar with it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I coded two transcripts (one senior and one sophomore) using a codebook based on operational definitions from the EVT and possible selves literature bases. I then shared these two transcripts and the codebook with two peer debriefers who I had worked with on a related qualitative study with first-generation college students and were familiar with the literature on EVT and possible selves. They each coded these same two transcripts separately and then we met as a group to discuss our results to ensure we had mutual understanding of the definitions outlined in the codebook and to analyze remaining quotes using an in-vivo coding process and updating the codebook along the way (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). From this approach, we eventually reached 100% calibration on our codes (Patton, 1999). I then used the resulting codebook to analyze the remaining transcripts.

Based on the content of the first interviews with seven students, I made the decision to only follow up with six of them. There were two primary reasons I selected to not follow up with the seventh student, who was female and in the tenth grade. First,

although she initially indicated that she was interested in going to four-year college, she only described future careers that did not require a four-year college degree during our interview, including wanting to become a fire fighter or a cosmetologist. Although other students in this study also described considerations of careers not requiring a bachelor's degree (deemed "education-independent" in the possible selves literature), they still described other options that would require completion of four-year college. Second, while other students in this study offered rich accounts of their experiences during their first interview, this student tended to offer brief answers without much elaboration, even after follow-up questions. Qualitative research requires rich description for effective exploration of research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, as a multiple case study it was important to offer student profiles that were robust to maximize the potential for relational validity and offer potential transferability (Flyvberg, 2006). There were no selection criteria used based on self-reported academic or demographic data. Each of the six students selected for follow-up interviews expressed a willingness to continue their participation at the conclusion of their first interviews.

Testing existing theory with targeted cases is another reason for using purposeful sampling in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2008). In this study, the six students selected to be featured as cases offered the greatest opportunity to test the applicability of both possible selves and EVT to their experiences with pursuing college in a high-poverty setting. Studying the experiences of low-income, racial minority students in schools of concentrated poverty is particularly rare for EVT, and qualitative exploration of this population is very rare in both theories. Finally, purposefully selecting these six students allowed me to draw comparisons between cases. For example, variability in responses between grade levels helped illuminate how proximity to college related to the decision

to pursue it. In addition to the follow-up interview questions presented in this report, I drafted personalized questions for each student based on the content of their first interview to ensure that I could answer all research questions and explore some of the themes that emerged in our first conversations. I submitted these questions for both VCU and school system IRB review, which they approved on April 26th and May 5th, 2017, respectively. This approval allowed me to move on to phase three.

Phase Three

I conducted my first follow-up interview on May 10th, 2017, which initiated the third phase of this study. The second student interview focused more specifically on students' decision-making processes in pursuit of a college-going possible self. Following the EVT framework, I asked students about their perceptions of the value of going to college (RQ3a), their expectancies for success in college (RQ3b), their current confidence in their abilities to do college preparatory work (RQ3c), and the potential costs associated with pursuing college (RQ3d). When exploring costs, I asked about perceived "barriers," as the term "cost" may have only elicited descriptions of financial concerns. Throughout both interviews, students discussed how socializers in their lives like peers, parents, and other adults (RQ1b), as well as their school environment (RQ1d), were influential over their decision-making processes and perceptions of themselves in the future. I also conducted individual observations and collected census data on the neighborhoods for each of these six students. This information offered relevant evidence for each student's individual neighborhood, like average educational attainment, income, unemployment, family structure, crime, and overall poverty level. Observations were concentrated to the specific block where each student lived, and census data was focused on the most targeted information publicly available for their immediate neighborhood.

Methodological Approach

To proceed through these stages of data collection, steps were taken to ensure that the design of the study was rigorous. Qualitative researchers prioritize rigor in their studies just as quantitative researchers do, and see it as an ethical consideration because poorly-conceptualized and implemented studies could have the potential of doing harm to their population (Hays et al., 2016). Therefore, I gave careful consideration to the relationships I had at the beginning of this study as well as those I had yet to establish. I also underwent two IRB review processes through the university and school division that helped refine the processes of gaining consent, the protection of participant confidentiality, and potential challenges that could have arisen throughout the study.

Relationships. A central tenet of qualitative research is that it builds from relationships formed between the researcher and participants. Qualitative researchers believe that meaning is "negotiated within a particular social context" such that the same study conducted with different people in a different setting would presumably yield different results (Finlay, 2002, p. 531). Quality, rigorous, qualitative research ensures that the relationship between the investigator and participant is reciprocal in nature, as any other approach may perpetuate a power differential that compromises the richness of the meaning drawn from the data (Lincoln, 1995).

I was fortunate to already have established relationships with some staff members within UPHS, as well as with the director for research in the school district, through my previous evaluation work with the school. My primary contacts at the school were important points of connection for granting me initial access to students to allow them the opportunity to opt-in to participate in this study. Being able to collect rich, meaningful data in this study was contingent on the establishment of relationships with participating

students and their families. Engaging in a recruitment meeting followed by two interviews over the course of a semester with each student helped build these relationships. I also made myself readily available via email, phone, and text to students and their families using the accounts created specifically for this study. Processes that helped ensure trustworthiness in this study, like member checking, also helped in the establishment of trusting relationships. These processes will receive further coverage at the end of the chapter.

Consent. Prior to conducting in the first interview, I collected consent forms from the parents of interested students as well as a separate form for students to offer their assent for participation. Students over the age of 18 signed their own consent using a separate form. The purpose of collecting both signatures was two-fold. First, if students were under the age of 18 then it was a legal requirement to have parental permission for them to participate. Second, parents who consented for their children to participate in this study also had the opportunity to consent for their own participation by marking a separate line on the form. As outlined on the form in Appendix D, consent to participate in the study included approval of three components: 1) student participation in at least one and as many as two interviews, 2) asking students to self-report academic, attendance, discipline, and demographic data with specific pieces of information outlined on the form, and 3) parental consent to participate in one interview (if they decided to do so). The consent form also outlined the overall purpose of the study, a brief description of the research and summary of participants' involvement, potential risks and discomforts, potential benefits to participants and others, ensurance of confidentiality, and emphasis about the voluntary nature of participation. Additionally, I collected consent forms from counselors and college advisors prior to their interviews. This form outlined similar

components as the parent/student consent form, but only requested consent for participation in one interview.

        Confidentiality. Although protection of participant confidentiality is imperative in any research, the nature of the present multiple case study required particular attention to this element as there was potential for the identification of participants if not considered thoroughly. There were several steps taken in this study to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The initial selection of students required that some employees at UPHS were aware of which students were being considered as potential participants. To ensure that these individuals maintained the confidentiality of study participants, they signed a non-disclosure form. This signified an agreement to not share the identities of these students with anyone not directly involved in the study. While this would have applied to any UPHS employees involved in the identification of potential participants, it was only necessary for my two research partners on the study.

        A key component of protecting the confidentiality of participants was the use of pseudonyms. On a broader scale, I used "Urban Public High School" (UPHS) as a proxy for the school being profiled in this study, and "Mid Atlantic City" as a proxy for its location. These pseudonyms were intended to protect the identity of the school and its district while still upholding it as an example of a setting where students navigate the pursuit of college in a high-poverty environment. UPHS employees will eventually have access to this report, which will hopefully inform their future work with students in their school who aspire to go to college. Consequently, this pseudonym is intended to protect the school's confidentiality outside of those involved with the school who are aware it was the subject of a research study. I also ensured the identity protection of participating students in several ways.

During phase one of data collection my two research partners at UPHS provided a list of 35 students who might be good candidates for this study according to the aforementioned criteria. Rather than asking multiple UPHS staff members to contribute to this effort, my research partners used their familiarity with the student body as a whole to make their suggestions. Once this list was compiled and students opted in through an invitation process, I met with each of them individually for roughly five minutes in the auditorium to explain the purpose of the study to them and provide them with a copy of the consent form and cover letter to take home to a parent/guardian. Students could then return the letter, which had their name on it for my record keeping, in a sealed envelope to the counseling office or freshman academy office. There was no name on the envelope they returned, and they did not have to interact with any UPHS employee to turn in the sealed envelope. Invitations to meet with me during lunch for recruitment were delivered by student assistants in the counseling office, who only saw student names on the outside of envelopes and were not familiar of the purpose of the enclosed forms. While my UPHS research partners secured the auditorium for my use during recruitment, I still met with students individually, although they had the option of having a UPHS employee present if they wished. Students returned signed consent forms to the same envelope where they returned their initial interest letters, and my communication henceforth was directly with students and their families. I booked interview rooms through the main office, which did not staff any employees familiar with this study, and I did not indicate student names when reserving interview space. Therefore, the identities of students who persisted through the recruitment and study participation processes were only known to me following the return of their initial interest letters. I learned later that some students

participating in this study were friends and decided to share their participation with each other, but I ensured that I did not share their identities with anyone at any time.

The six students selected for the follow-up interviews were assigned pseudonyms, which I used in all reporting of their responses. Data from the student not selected for a follow-up interview was not used. Additionally, although I collected self-reported academic data on each of these students, I only requested ranges (e.g. GPA between 2.25 and 2.49) in order to avoid potentially identifiable information based on performance. I identified parents based on the pseudonym of their children (e.g. "David's mother"). When I interviewed school counselors and college advisors I reported all of their responses in aggregate as "advisors," because labeling it as belonging to a college advisor or counselor could perhaps directly identify the participant. When I conducted observations of students' neighborhoods I did not use any identifying information whatsoever and restricted descriptions to generalities (e.g. the presence of graffiti rather than what it said).

All data collected for this study was stored in a password-protected drive whose entire contents were only be accessible by my dissertation chair and me. I shared specific documents for recruitment with the UPHS employees assisting in that effort and de-identified transcripts with the two people assisting me with coding to achieve analyst triangulation. I transcribed all audio recordings, removing all identifying information like names from the transcript, should they be mentioned on the audio. I stored all signed confidentiality forms in a locked file drawer in my office. To engage in member checking, I shared each individual interview transcript with only the participant to whom it belonged.

Challenges. There were several methodological challenges I encountered during the execution of this study. The first involved gaining approval from both the Mid Atlantic City School District and university for conducting this research. As I previously mentioned, I had a working relationship with their director of research who offered preliminary approval. I submitted my external research study request to the school district on December 1st, 2016 and received approval on January 17th, 2017. My university IRB request went under review on January 11th, 2017 and received final approval on February 9th, 2017 after two rounds of requested revisions to recruitment processes, which are reflected in the methodological approach described in this chapter. Second, I encountered issues with absenteeism during data collection. Students had to reschedule interviews on a few occasions and two parents required multiple interview reschedule attempts, one of whom ended up not participating. Fortunately, I had no issues with participant attrition in this study, as all six of the selected cases were able to engage in both interviews.

Finally, one of the primary challenges I encountered was in the writing of the results section for this dissertation. Much of the information shared by stakeholders in this study was critical of their experiences at UPHS. The school and its district trusted me to conduct this research because they recognized the value in learning more about their students who were actively pursuing college. It was therefore important to me that I not write a report that was simply critical of the school, but rather communicated the nuance of what it is like to be there. This required careful writing and revision throughout the multiple drafts of this dissertation, but was certainly a worthwhile endeavor to ensure an accurate and honest account of what I learned about UPHS, its students, and their experiences.

Data Analysis

I collected data from eight different sources in this study, and utilized them to address my research questions through both inductive and deductive approaches to analysis. While quantitative approaches often have a heavily-prescribed set of rules and procedures in place, rigorous qualitative inquiry still allows some room for creativity by the researcher (Patton, 1999). This creativity may be less of a luxury than it is a requirement, as the subjective nature of qualitative research also leads to more opportunity for serendipitous findings and over-standardization may compromise such discovery (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some describe this process as "semi-structured" (Demuth, 2015). Others advocate for a procedure that is just the right amount of "unruly" and even "promiscuous" (Childers, 2014). Regardless, the analytical processes employed in qualitative research are cyclical (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with constant attention to interpretation along the way (Mcleod, 2015).

The primary data source I used for this study was participant interviews, which I audio recorded and transcribed to ensure that I was able to capture the sentiment of students, parents, and advisors verbatim (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Once I transcribed the first round of interviews, I analyzed the data by developing and affixing codes based both on my conceptual framework as well as through themes that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I engaged in this analysis concurrent with the collection of additional data, as qualitative research involves a fluid process of collecting and analyzing data simultaneously (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). During this process, I calibrated my coding with two peer debriefers who were also familiar with the literature (Guba, 1981). The two debriefers on this study were my research partners from a

previous study using EVT and possible selves literature to explore the precollege decision-making processes of first year, first-generation college students.

Some of this coding was deductive in nature, as there were existing constructs from the literature that applied to my data, such as the different types of values outlined in EVT or examples of possible selves that students sought to approach or avoid. For the deductive elements of my coding I developed a codebook with my peer debriefers using an in-vivo coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) that I maintained in an online spreadsheet in the password-protected drive. It also contained operational definitions for the terminology from the EVT and possible selves literature related to this study. We each coded two transcripts separately (one sophomore and one senior) and then met to discuss our results until we reached 100% agreement (Patton, 1999). I then coded each remaining transcript twice to ensure that I was consistent in my own coding for the rest of my analyses, based on the codebook and calibrated approach built with my two peer debriefers.

Still, it was critical that I also approach my data with a certain amount of "theoretical naivety" to not be too beholden to existing theory, which could have precluded me from exploring new themes that emerged from the data (Bendassolli, 2014). I engaged in memoing in ATLAS.ti throughout the coding process to ensure that I was consistent in detecting and describing the important themes that emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The codes that I developed, both from existing theory and trends in the data, were also the lens through which I analyzed my other data sources, like observations and field notes. Content from the first student interviews also informed selection of students to participate in second interviews, as well as individualized follow-up questions for those students.

The six students selected for a second interview were the cases used as the primary source for answering the research questions in this study. They were each assigned a pseudonym and they offered individual illustrations of what it is like to be a student attending a high-poverty high school who aspires to become the first in his or her family to graduate from a four-year college. While I transcribed all parent/guardian interviews ($n = 5$), I only conducted a thematic analysis for those belonging to the students selected for the follow-up interview ($n = 4$). The two upperclassmen in this study were able to consent for themselves and did not have parents or guardians elect to participate, although one made multiple attempts but found that her work schedule precluded her involvement. The purpose of these parent interviews was to offer a rich account of the contextual supports with which each student made decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self. Interviews from counselors and college advisors offered triangulating evidence for statements made by all students in aggregate rather than specifically speaking to the experience of any individual student. They were not aware of which students participated in the study, and instead spoke about the college-going culture at UPHS as a whole.

In addition to addressing each individual research question, I also included a concluding section to Chapter Four that offered commentary on the overall research question of this study about how students make decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self in a high-poverty school context. The possible selves and EVT literature suggests that these perceptions and decisions are dynamic and multidimensional. Thus, it was important to offer profiles of how students' perceptions of a college-going future identity activated their expectancies for success, subjective task values, and considerations of cost in pursuit of it. Capturing how these multiple elements interacted

and contributed to students' decisions about pursuing college was critical to offering an authentic account of each case's experience.

Throughout data analysis I engaged in the process of reflexivity. This involves "thoughtful, conscious self-awareness" where the researcher continuously attends not only to the nature of the findings but also considers how he or she might be influencing them (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). This process ensures authenticity in qualitative research and should occur in every stage of the project (Maxwell, 2008). As Tracy (2010) reflected, the process of reflexivity allows authors of qualitative research to be candid and transparent about their study, their findings, and their perceived influence in the process. This dialectic approach to qualitative analysis sharpens the work and allows for more robust, honest findings (Finlay, 2002). I engaged in reflexivity by memoing throughout data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and some of those memos became a part of the narrative in Chapter Four as I discussed my perspective and experiences when appropriate for explaining the findings.

Each time I went to UPHS to collect data I took thorough field notes on my observations, as they became key data points for this multiple case study (Yin, 2014). In addition to offering triangulating data for different research questions, these notes helped me keep track of my time at the school and incorporate memos about my reactions to what I witnessed, in case they might be biasing my interpretation of the observation. Similarly, as I coded data I continuously kept memos in ATLAS.ti about why I selected each code to ensure that the rationale aligned with the coding process established with my peer debriefers rather than my opinion of the data. Although it was not possible to entirely control for the influence of my perspective as the researcher (Maxwell, 2008), the process of continuous reflexivity contributed to enhanced trustworthiness of the

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findings for my study. In total, I spent approximately 58 hours at Urban Public High School, drove 415 miles for data collection, and transcribed 17 hours and 12 minutes of recorded audio.

Trustworthiness

Similar to the more positivistic, quantitative concept of "validity," qualitative researchers focus on establishing the "trustworthiness" of their findings (Hays et al., 2016). A trustworthy study is one where the qualitative researcher believes that the findings are consistent, authentic, and sufficient for making decisions that could potentially impact the lives of people (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010). To establish trustworthiness in this project, I engaged in the following procedures.

Member Checking

The process of member checking in qualitative research seeks input from participants about research claims reflecting their perspectives, granting them voice, and by extension power, in the research process (Lincoln, 1995). Member checking involves corroborating the collected data and corresponding analyses and claims with the people that it purports to represent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I engaged in member checking at multiple points during this study. First, I sent each participating student, parent/guardian, and advisor a copy of his or her interview transcript to ensure that the content was accurate and to offer an opportunity to make any corrections or additions. Students each received the transcript of their first interview via email before participating in their second interview. I also sent advisors their transcripts via email. Parents/guardians received their transcripts through whichever method they determined was preferable during our interview, with two sent via direct mail, one over email, and one through a hard copy handed to the student to deliver to his or her parent. All interview transcripts

for adults were accompanied by a brief form letter either delivered electronically via email or sealed in an envelope with a hard copy of the transcript. The letter indicated that they could contact me via phone to discuss the transcript if they desired. For each member check, participants were given two weeks to offer feedback or suggestions, and several did.

I also sent each student his or her case description (depicted in Chapter Four) via email to ensure that they were accurate profiles of who they were based on information that students shared during our interview. For this member check, students also had two weeks to offer feedback and two students wrote back with suggested changes. Finally, I offered all advisors participating in this study an opportunity to read the description of UPHS depicted in Chapter Four to make sure that it was a fair and accurate account of the school. They again had two weeks to offer feedback and one participant made some suggestions that were incorporated into the narrative. Engaging in member checking enhanced the confirmability of my findings with those who could most accurately indicate their veracity (Hays et al., 2016). This process extended the collaborative nature of the qualitative research methodology by including participants not only in the data collection, but also in its analysis and reporting (Tracy, 2010). Guba (1981) described member checking as "the single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion" (p. 85). It was central to establishing trustworthiness and nurturing relationships in this study.

Triangulation

Triangulation allows qualitative investigators to use multiple sources of information to reinforce conclusions and provide examples of negative cases (Tracy, 2010). Truthfully, there is no amount of triangulation that will ever fully resolve the issue

of conflicting explanations for findings, but it is nevertheless important for the researcher to explain as much as possible through these methods (Patton, 1999). I collected eight different sources of data for this study. While the student interviews offered the richest data for analysis, other sources of data like interviews with adults, field notes, observations, and descriptive quantitative data allowed me to triangulate the claims made by students. This collection of evidence allowed for richer descriptions of the experience of UPHS students and presented an opportunity to confirm findings and identify negative cases, when present. As triangulation is intended "to study and understand when and why there are differences" (Patton, 1999, p. 1195), the multiple sources of data in this study helped reinforce common themes as well as illustrate variability in experiences.

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement with participants is necessary for effectively conveying their experience (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After engaging in memoing about this study I decided that multiple interviews would be necessary to build a research relationship with my participating students rather than offering a single snapshot of their experience. By spreading the content of the interviews over two sessions, I was able to collect richer data and prolong my engagement with participants throughout the semester. Additionally, by engaging in member checking with students and parents I was able to maintain ongoing communication beyond the phase of data collection.

Peer Debriefing

Including the perspectives of multiple researchers in a study can help enhance its trustworthiness by checking potential individual bias and triangulating with another person who is familiar with the relevant literature (Guba, 1981). I engaged in peer debriefing with two colleagues for both reasons. Because I am intimately involved with

UPHS and have previously worked with students from similar backgrounds, it was critical for me to include the perspective of researchers who were unfamiliar with the setting or population, thus allowing them to potentially be more objective. Engaging in peer debriefing also helped establish dependability in this study, as it ensured that there was consistency in the generation and assignment of codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Researcher Memos

Qualitative researchers continuously attend to the accuracy of their data and seek to ensure that it effectively captures the experience of their subjects through memoing (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2010). In the conceptualizing of this study I engaged in extensive memoing with my methodologist, and that process continued through data collection and analysis. Additionally, every time that I went to UPHS for data collection I incorporated memos when appropriate in my field notes to ensure that I gave as accurate of an account as possible of participating UPHS students. Engaging in this process also allowed me to document where I might be biased in my interpretation of the data (Maxwell, 2008).

Rich Description

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasized the importance of offering rich description of the data collected in a qualitative study, as it allows the investigator to be an "anthropologist" of his or her research, its setting, and its people (p. 27). Providing a rich description allows the qualitative researcher to more accurately attend to the context in which his or her study exists (Onwuegbuzie, & Leech, 2007). Prioritizing this approach speaks to a mission in qualitative research to offer transferability of its findings rather than generalizability, as inclusion of rich descriptions of the data and the context in which it exists presents the reader with the opportunity to relate it to other similar cases

rather than attempting to apply the findings to broad populations of people (Tracy, 2010).

In depth interviews, along with the collection of field notes and observations of both

school and neighborhood contexts, offered richer descriptions of student experiences as

they related to the research questions in this study. Rather than seeking to make

generalizable claims about low-income students aspiring to go to college in a high-

poverty school and neighborhood environment, I aimed to credibly relay the experience

of these students embarking on this journey in this setting (McLeod, 2015).

Authenticity

Authenticity is a key element of the constructivist paradigm of qualitative inquiry,

and requires the researcher to be clear about his or her own perspective as it may

potentially influence the construction of knowledge being presented in the study

(Lincoln, 1995). Constructivist inquiry involves the active and dynamic construction of

knowledge through interaction between researchers and participants (Tracy, 2010).

Ensuring an authentic study empowers the participants by prioritizing their input

throughout the process, affording them the opportunity for their voices to be heard in the

research (Mcleod, 2015). This can prove therapeutic for participants who may not be

accustomed to someone caring about their stories in this way (Rossetto, 2014). One of the

ways that I worked to accomplish this in the present study was to make sure all of my

interactions with students were focused on their pursuit of college rather than this simply

being a project to fulfill dissertation requirements. Additionally, I made sure to be

transparent about the research process by maintaining open communication with

participants and answering any questions they had along the way. Engaging in member

checking also enhanced the authenticity of the present study by making sure that the

interpretation of the data did not come solely from my perspective or that of my peer

debriefers, but also from the students who were the focus of this research. The present study sought to ensure an authentic presentation of the experience of participants by keeping them engaged throughout the process.

Conclusion

As this chapter has outlined, the present study sought to capture the experience of six UPHS students to answer its research questions by richly describing how they made decisions about pursuing a college-going possible self while navigating a high-poverty school and neighborhood context. Using the aforementioned methods, data sources, and steps to establish trustworthiness, I worked to conduct rigorous and credible qualitative inquiry. Ultimately, the goal of this multiple case study was to offer an account of pursuing a college-going possible self that was authentic to UPHS and its students, and potentially transferable to other students, families, and school personnel with whom their stories might resonate.

CHAPTER 4

This chapter will proceed as follows. First, it will offer case descriptions of the six students participating in this study. Next, it will describe the research setting by offering stakeholder accounts of Urban Public High School, as well as data from my full day of observation at the school. It will then discuss results related to each research question. The results for research question 1c will follow research questions 2a-2d, as it discusses how students' possible selves were socialized. The results for research question 1b will follow research questions 3a-3d as it discusses how students' decision-making processes were socialized. Finally, results for research question 1d will be discussed at the end of the chapter to explore how the environment at UPHS influenced students' perceptions of their possible selves and decision-making processes in pursuit of college.

Case Descriptions

Tavonne, LaQuia, Shauntel, Alexus, Adrian, and Jasmine (pseudonyms) each participated in two interviews, offered self-reported academic and demographic data, and granted permission for me to conduct an observation of their neighborhoods. The information gathered from these data sources are presented here. Students received drafts of their case descriptions prior to its publication in this report. Their suggestions, when offered, were incorporated into the narrative.

Tavonne

  Tavonne is in the twelfth grade, is male and identifies as African-American. He lives with his legal guardian because both of his parents passed away within months of each other during his junior year. Neither his mom nor his dad had earned a high school diploma, and he lived with his mom most of his life. He described her as a hard worker, "Literally if she lost her job she would have a job the next day." By Tavonne's account, his mom tried to keep him away from his dad, who was a known drug dealer in the neighborhood. He told his son differently, "As we got older he was just like, 'Yeah I am a plumber' and were like 'Yeah, alright. We know what you are doing.'" His guardian played a very different role in his life. He went to college and they talked about it frequently, "He is always talking about it. It's annoying." Tavonne has four siblings, none of whom have earned a high school diploma. He did not share their ages or discuss them at all in our interviews.

  Tavonne takes mostly honors and Advanced Placement classes. He typically gets an B in English, a C in math, an A in science, and an A in history. On his standardized tests (scaled 0-600 with 400 being a passing score and 500 being advanced/proficient) he typically scores between 450 and 499 in English, 400 and 449 in math, 450 and 499 in science, and 450 and 499 in history. His favorite class, or at least the one he discussed most frequently in our interviews, is Veterinary Science, which he takes at a Career Center (pseudonym) accessible to all students in the school district. He enjoys science and dislikes math, and plans on being a veterinarian one day. On the SAT, he scored between 500 and 530 in critical reading and between 380 and 410 in math. His ACT composite score was between 17 and 21. His cumulative unweighted GPA is between 3.0 and 3.24, which he believes is lower than it could be in part to the challenges he faced the

year both of his parents passed, "Yeah, I went through three homes over a year." He is almost never absent from school and has no days of out of school suspension (OSS) in his time in high school. He is involved in several extracurricular programs at the school and in the community. He has a ride to school, although he did not indicate who takes him each morning.

He described his neighborhood as "quiet" in comparison to some of the low-income housing projects around UPHS that he rode through on his way home every day, "As you go down (the street) you see the change." By his account, Tavonne has never lived in a neighborhood as "bad" as some of the students at UPHS, and he has lived in several different places because of his change in guardianship and domicile. According to local Census data, the median household income in 2010 where Tavonne lives was between $20,000 and $23,000 and the median home value was around $110,000. Median rent was around $700. Unemployment was between 11 and 13% and between 19 and 21% of the residents lived below the poverty level. The neighborhood was approximately 65% African-American, 30% Caucasian, and 2-3% Hispanic. Approximately 17% of the residents did not have a high school diploma, and the highest educational attainment for 37% of the residents was a high school diploma or its equivalent. Between 8 and 10% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

I visited Tavonne's neighborhood on a Friday afternoon towards the end of a school day, around 2:00 PM. He lives in a housing development of attached, two-story condos. The property grounds were well maintained overall. There were some weeds growing through the sidewalks and it looked like the streets and parking lots in the development had not been updated in some time. The grass was mowed, hedges were trimmed, and there were some trees throughout the complex. There was no visible litter

present apart from a pile of boxes and broken furniture in front of one of the units. There was no graffiti, burned or vacant residences, or crime watch signs present. There were no bars on windows or other barriers in front of the condo units. There was a basketball court on the grounds with the rim missing from one of the backboards. There was little auto and no pedestrian traffic while I was there, which also meant there were no school-aged children around, nor anyone there to notice my presence. As Tavonne had described, the neighborhood was quiet.

LaQuia

LaQuia identifies as African-American, is female and in the twelfth grade. She lives with her mom and two younger brothers. Neither her mom nor her dad earned a high school diploma. While she did not elaborate on why her dad was not currently living with the rest of her immediate family, she did mention him several times during our interviews. She also spoke frequently about her grandfather on her mom's side of the family, whose guidance proved to be very motivational for her pursuit of college. I got in touch with her mom on the phone to schedule an in-person interview at a coffee shop in a neighboring county, but her work schedule precluded the conversation on two separate occasions. After the second attempt to meet in person and scheduling a separate phone interview that she also had to miss, I decided to not pursue further contact to be respectful of her time. These communications did, however, offer a glimpse into the challenges that her mom faced by working multiple jobs.

LaQuia takes mostly honors and Advanced Placement classes. This year, she is taking AP Environmental Science, AP Art Studio, and AP Literature. She typically makes an A in English, a C in math, a B in science, and an A in history. Her cumulative unweighted GPA is between 3.25 and 3.49. On her standardized tests, she normally

scores between 450 and 499 in English, 400 and 449 in math, 450 and 499 in science, and 450 and 499 in history. On the SAT, she scored between 400 and 430 on the critical reading section and between 330 and 360 on the math section. She has not taken the ACT. She reports that she is absent from school about once a month and that she has had no days of out of school suspension in high school. A typical school day for LaQuia involves getting on two separate busses to get to school. She also takes public transportation to her job about a half hour outside of town. She described how busy she is every day and how challenging it can be to fit in the things she needs to do for college on top of her classwork, "I do my applications and stuff like that. I got resumes and stuff to do." She is also involved with extracurricular activities every day of the week, "I go home around 6 or 8:00 and then I go to sleep and do it all over again. It's like I am always busy. It's always something."

Like Tavonne, LaQuia also described liking her neighborhood in comparison to the other neighborhoods feeding into UPHS, "I could not live over here. And wouldn't want my kids growing up over here like in any type of project." According to local Census data, the median household income in 2010 where LaQuia lives was between $20,000 and $22,000 and the median home value was around $70,000. Median rent was around $600. Unemployment was between 23 and 25% and between 34 and 37% of the residents lived below the federal poverty threshold. Her neighborhood was approximately 85% African-American, 9% Caucasian, and 2% Hispanic. Approximately 16% of the residents did not have a high school diploma, and the highest educational attainment for approximately 35% of the residents was a high school diploma or its equivalent. Approximately 10% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

I observed LaQuia's neighborhood at the end of a school day at approximately 2:30 on a Friday afternoon. She lives the farthest away from UPHS of any of the participants in this study. LaQuia lives on a busy, four-lane road with no street parking so I had to park a block away to observe from a distance. Her neighborhood was mainly comprised of small to medium sized single story homes. Although the street directly in front of where she lives seemed to be freshly paved when I conducted my observation, the side streets surrounding it had several potholes and the sidewalks were in poor condition with weeds growing through the cracks. The lawns in front of the homes were mostly well maintained, but the homes themselves seemed to often be in poor shape. Several had broken porches and peeling exterior paint. A school playground up the road was overgrown with weeds and had rusty equipment. There was a moderate amount of litter, and no graffiti or neighborhood crime watch signs present. Two of the houses on the block appeared to be abandoned, one of which had boarded up windows and another seemed to be partially collapsed. Nearly all the houses had chain link fences, several of which were rusted. There was heavy pedestrian traffic in the area, but no one appeared to notice my presence during the approximately 15 minutes I was parked there. No high school-aged youth were present, and most of the people I observed in the area appeared to be in their 30s to 50s.

Shauntel

Shauntel is in the tenth grade, is female and identifies as African-American. She did not mention her parents at any point in our interviews, other than to disclose that her mother had previously received an associate's degree. She did not share any background information on her father. She has four brothers, the oldest of which is her legal guardian who participated in an interview for this study. She reported that the highest level of

education earned by any of her brothers was a high school diploma. Although she was the youngest in her family, she expected to become the first among her sibling to go to college, "I would rub it in their faces." As her brother told me, "She has a little bit of an attitude sometimes. But for the most part she's a very good person."

Shauntel takes all standard level classes. She typically makes an A in English, a B in math, a B in science, and a C in history. Her cumulative unweighted GPA is between 2.75-2.99. She sometimes struggles with her standardized tests, and typically scores between 400 and 449 in English, 400 and 449 in math, 400 and 449 in science, and 400 and 449 in history. She is almost never absent from school, and has had no days of out of school suspension. A typical school day for Shauntel starts early and runs late. She wakes up between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning to complete any remaining homework, walk the dog, and catch the bus to school. She helps clean up the cafeteria in the mornings after breakfast and volunteers in the school's daycare. She frequently stays after school to participate in different extracurricular programs or to help her teachers prepare for school activities the following day. Her brother shared his perspective on her level of involvement, "Yeah she is always after school. She loves helping."

Shauntel described her neighborhood as "mostly quiet," a common adjective used by students like her who do not live in the housing projects around UPHS. On afternoons when she misses the bus or is not able to get a ride from a teacher or her brother, she walks the approximate three miles to her home. According to local Census data, the median household income in 2010 where Shauntel lives was between $26,000 and $29,000 and the median home value was around $100,000. Median rent was around $800. Unemployment was between 19 and 21% and between 20 and 23% of the residents lived below the poverty level. The neighborhood was approximately 95% African-

American, 3% Caucasian, and 2% multiracial. Approximately 11% of the residents did not have a high school diploma, and the highest educational attainment for approximately 46% of the residents was a high school diploma or its equivalent. Approximately 10% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

I observed Shauntel's neighborhood at approximately 10:00 on a Thursday morning in March. Her block is comprised entirely of detached houses, most of them two story. It is a one-way street that appeared to be recently paved. However, the sidewalks were mostly broken apart, seemingly because of tree roots growing underneath the concrete. Houses were positioned a few feet back from the street with cinder block retaining walls separating them from the sidewalks. Most had chain link fences in front of them. The strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street appeared well maintained, but the yards in front of the houses were mostly overgrown. It appeared that the homes on the block were several decades old, and were not updated but not in bad shape either (apart from some peeling paint). There were no public spaces in the immediate area, nor was there any graffiti or crime watch signs present. There was very little litter on the ground, apart from an orange road sign lying face-down on the street towards the end of the block. It was difficult to assess if any of the houses were vacant because of the time of day (residents may have been at work). None appeared to be abandoned or burned. There were no commercial establishments nearby. There was almost no auto or pedestrian traffic in the approximately 15 minutes I was parked on her block. No high school-aged youth were present.

Alexus

Alexus is in the tenth grade, is female, and identifies as African-American. She indicated that she lived with her mom and dad, and that the highest level of educational

attainment by either parent was a high school diploma. Her stepfather, presumably the "dad" she mentioned in her demographic form, sat at a table near us during our interview at McDonald's, which she waited to point out until the end of our conversation. I introduced myself once we concluded. Her mom participated in a brief phone interview (about seven minutes) and was the one who consented for Alexus' participation in the study. She called me multiple times that day from three different phones that she borrowed from three different people just to be able to participate. When we were finally able to connect, the owner requested his phone back during our conversation, which required that we conclude it prematurely. Alexus has one older sister who also attends UPHS.

Most of Alexus' classes are at the honors level, although she has experienced standard level classes previously at UPHS. She described feeling academically challenged in her classes and getting along well with her teachers. As her mom explained, "Her teachers love her. She is very nice and she is just a very smart student." She normally makes an A in English, a B in math, a B in science, and an A in history. Her reported unweighted cumulative GPA is between 3.75 and 4.0, the highest of the students participating in this study. On standardized tests, she normally scores between 450 and 499 in English, 440 and 500 in math, 400 and 449 in science, and 500 and 549 in history. She is almost never absent and has no days of out of school suspension. Alexus takes the bus to school, and helps Shauntel clean up the cafeteria every morning after breakfast. She described enjoying school overall, but fitting in more with her teachers than her peers. After school, she participates in a variety of extracurricular activities.

According to local Census data, the median household income in 2010 where Alexus lives was between $12,000 and $15,000 and the median home value was around

$75,000. Median rent was $164 a month. Unemployment was between 27 and 30% and between 32 and 35% of the residents lived below the poverty level. The neighborhood was approximately 100% African-American. Approximately 58% of the residents did not have a high school diploma, and the highest educational attainment for approximately 20% of the residents was a high school diploma or its equivalent. Less than 1% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Alexus is pursuing four-year college while living in a neighborhood where more than half of the residents have not completed high school, and virtually no one has earned a college degree.

When I observed Alexus' neighborhood, the street was poorly maintained, with cracks and potholes in the pavement. The sidewalks were also broken, with some weeds growing through them. There was an abundant amount of litter all around, the most of any neighborhood I observed for the study. On the sidewalk across from where I parked there was a pile of garbage with large pieces of a red, broken couch inside of it. The residences were a collection of two story red brick apartment buildings. They appeared to be somewhat poorly maintained, with dirty brick and white awnings on the front of each unit stained dark gray. There was no real landscaping around the buildings and the yards behind the units had clothes lines covered in various items of laundry set there to dry. Several of the windows in the buildings had AC units in them that appeared to be several years old. I saw no graffiti, crime watch signs, bars on the windows, or any other physical barriers present. There was a basketball court nearby with no nets on the hoops. A group of women that looked to be in their 30s sat in white plastic lawn chairs in front of one of the apartment buildings, smoking cigarettes and talking. There was a group of young men who looked to be high school-aged gathered around an old pickup truck with the hood

open, looking inside of it. They did not seem to notice my presence until I passed them while driving around the circle to exit the neighborhood.

Adrian

Adrian is in the tenth grade, is male, and identifies as African-American. He lives with his mom and two younger brothers. He described his home as a joyful place, "I always loved my brothers and stuff and my mother and we try to have fun times." His dad did not receive his high school diploma and does not live with the family. His mom has her high school diploma and started at a four-year college until she became pregnant with Adrian. By his account, she is the foundation for much of who he is and what he believes, "I get a lot of things from my mother." I interviewed her over the phone while she was at work one morning. "Yeah that's my baby," she shared the closeness of their relationship, which grew from their initial challenges she faced in having him during her attempt at a bachelor's degree in nursing. "I look up to him for a lot of things. We talk a lot. He is not just my son, but my best friend." By her account, Adrian has been talking about going to college "since he was a little boy."

Adrian takes mostly standard level classes. He typically makes a B in English, a C in math, a B in science, and a C in history. He enjoys his art class most of all, "That's my favorite thing. I like to draw a lot." He had brought a few art pieces with him to our interview. His reported cumulative unweighted GPA is between 2.5 and 2.74. On standardized tests, he typically earns just above a passing grade in all subjects, scoring between 400 and 449 in English, math, science, and history. He is almost never absent from school and has no days of out of school suspension.

His mother described her efforts to keep Adrian out of the local housing projects, despite their financial struggles, "He has no concept of living that kind of life. Adrian

mostly likes where they currently live, which is between five and seven miles from the school. He describes it similarly to other students in this study who do not live in the projects, "It's very quiet. It's a good neighborhood." According to local Census data, the median household income in 2010 where Adrian lives was between $14,000 and $17,000 and the median home value was around $13,000. Median rent was $700 a month. Unemployment was between 11 and 14%, but approximately half of the residents lived below the poverty level. The neighborhood was approximately 70% African-American, 25% Caucasian, and 5% Hispanic. Approximately 12% of the residents did not have a high school diploma, and the highest educational attainment for approximately 45% of the residents was a high school diploma or its equivalent. Between 12% and 17% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

I observed Adrian's neighborhood at approximately 1:40 on a Friday afternoon. Although his mom expressed that they had lived there for most of Adrian's life, the development looked like it could have been newer than that. It was comprised of attached brick condo units that were well maintained with white front porches. The road and sidewalks were very well maintained, with no noticeable cracks or potholes. The landscaping around the units was nicely manicured, with lush, green grass and well-trimmed bushes that appeared to be there for decoration rather than as a barrier. There was very minimal litter on his block, and none of the residences appeared to be vacant or burned. There were no public spaces or commercial establishments nearby. I saw no graffiti, crime watch signs, fences, or bars on any of the windows. There was minimal, if any, auto traffic, nor any pedestrians to notice my presence during the approximately 15 minutes while I was there. There were also no high school-aged youth present.

Jasmine

Jasmine is in the tenth grade, is female, and identified her race as "other." She lives with her mom and has four siblings, three brothers and one sister. Neither her mom, nor her dad earned their high school diploma but her mom recently earned her GED. Jasmine's dad passed away when she was two months old. Her mom, who requested to be interviewed at the same time as her daughter, became emotional when talking about her, "Out of all my children..." She paused, "I'm sorry, you know how I get when I talk about y'all. Jasmine is going to be that one." She had Jasmine's oldest brother when she was 16, and Jasmine is the next oldest of her siblings. Jasmine often looks after her younger siblings after school. Her mom went on to describe her as someone who is kind, but not afraid to stand up for herself. "Nice nasty. And I love that about her."

Jasmine takes mostly honors classes at school. She typically makes a B in English, a C in math, a B in science, and an A in history. Her reported cumulative unweighted GPA is between 3.0 and 3.24. On her standardized tests, she typically scores just above the passing mark, earning between a 400 and 449 in English, math, science, and history. She is almost never absent from school and has had no days of out of school suspension in high school. She believes that her experience attending a private school before coming to UPHS prepared her academically, but has had some negative implications for her social life, "It's just I haven't been close with a whole lot of them because the school differences. They went to that school and I went to a private school." She often walks to school because her neighborhood is so close to it. Her ability to participate in after school activities is often dependent on whether or not she has to pick up her brother from his school. She also volunteers in the community and is involved in

extracurricular clubs at UPHS as well as at her old school. When possible, she seeks out opportunities to earn some money to save up for college.

Jasmine lives in a housing project less than half a mile up the road from UPHS. Throughout this study, I often saw students walking in and out of this neighborhood, including during school hours. Her mom explained that they had not lived there her entire life, but expressed concern for the potential implications of living where they do now, "I look at the other kids out here…I have watched them grow up and just turn into the product of their environment." According to local Census data, the median household income in 2010 where Jasmine lives was between $13,000 and $16,000 and the median home value was around $138,000, although this number may be inflated by her Census block encompassing more than her immediate neighborhood, which is primarily apartment buildings. Median rent was $295 a month. Unemployment was between 18 and 20%, and a little more than half of the residents lived below the poverty level. The neighborhood was approximately 94% African-American, 1% Caucasian, and 4% Hispanic. Approximately 15% of the residents did not have a high school diploma, and the highest educational attainment for approximately 33% of the residents was a high school diploma or its equivalent. Between 0% and 5% had a bachelor's degree or higher. These educational attainment numbers may also have been inflated by her Census block including some of the residential areas behind the school where there is more home ownership compared to the housing projects where she lives.

I observed Jasmine's neighborhood at 1:30 on a Thursday afternoon. It was comprised of brick, two story apartment buildings. Those that were painted had paint chipping off them. The doors on the units were generally old and in poor condition, and there were old AC units in the windows. There was a church on her block that was the

only real public space nearby, besides the school itself. The street and sidewalks were in decent condition, with only some cracks and no visible potholes on her block. There was a lot of litter on the ground. None of the apartment buildings appeared to be abandoned or burned, but there was one house in the middle of the units that appeared abandoned and was starting to collapse. There were no bars on any windows or other barriers. The grass was mowed, but patchy with weeds mixed with some small pieces of gravel. There was no graffiti present, but there was a neighborhood watch sign that appeared old and was starting to peel. Only a handful of cars drove by during the approximately 15 minutes we were there. Over that timespan, we saw an increasing number of pedestrians (approximately 20 total), several of which appeared to be students from UPHS walking up the road. It was possible that they had either left school before the final 2:45 bell or they had returned from the Career Center and were not required to go back to school for the rest of the day. No one appeared to notice my presence, and an elderly woman played with a toddler on a tricycle beside my car nearly the entire time I was parked.

Urban Public High School

As Chapter Two outlined, there are often particular challenges facing schools of concentrated poverty in urban settings, and UPHS is not an exception. It is a challenging place. LaQuia described the student culture within her school, "Everybody has their own characters and personalities and where we come from, it's like we all bump heads because of the communities that we come out of." Alexus offered her estimation of how many students were acting this way, while making sure to qualify her response, "A good 50%…but I think it's always the trouble makers that get more attention than the ones that want to act right." An advisor triangulated this estimation, "I would say that it is kind of a mixture. I wouldn't say that either one outweighs the other." All of this contributed to a

general, ongoing "noise" in the school. One advisor had a different term for it, "For me, we call it 'drama.'"

Students described how this environment affected them. "It's hard. Like when I first got here I was so amused by people fighting and stuff like that. But then it gets tiring. Like why do people act like that?" Shauntel had gotten used to it, "I don't think nothing big of it. I feel like every school has its flaws. Students probably just need better parenting because they don't listen to the adults." Adrian had built up his tolerance over the years, "Well I mean if I blocked it out in elementary school why not now?" His mom had coached him on how to navigate the noise "I said Adrian, you just have to block them out. And it's easier said than done sometimes." One advisor shared how this behavior impacted daily work, "I have to say right now with this population, I am spending my entire day policing...it's more than I could have ever imagined that I would have to contend with."

According to the stakeholders participating in this study, issues in the surrounding neighborhoods tended to spill over into the school. Said one advisor, "I don't know how much you keep your ear to the ground in this community but especially within the last four to five months there has just been a lot of violence." Students were acutely aware of this. Tavonne described "family members dying, people getting shot or injured." LaQuia shared a similar account, expressing some empathy for their experience, "everybody that goes here has got a story and has a rough background." Students also described how common it is to see teen pregnancy, single-parent households, drug abuse and addiction, and crime. An advisor explained what it was like when parents struggled with substance abuse, "It's a disease. And you still have this person who still cares for you…She may make some very very frustrating choices that really impacts the entire family. But at the

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end of the day it's your mother." Alexus experienced this herself, "Recently I found out that my mom was on drugs. But then you have to think about it, everyone is on drugs."

These issues at UPHS tended to be related not just to the experience of living in poverty, but having so much of it concentrated in one place. As one advisor reflected, "If this school wasn't 90% in poverty…if (it) wasn't as challenging as it was in terms of the high-risk demographic, I think students would be a lot better and there is research to support that." When asked if students are acutely aware of their own poverty, one advisor posited "Yes and no. I think many are very cognizant but I think they are embarrassed to talk about it." While the neighborhoods immediately around UPHS are generally high-poverty, the school zone also contains areas that are higher-income. Those children typically go to school elsewhere based on their parents' negative perceptions of UPHS, as one advisor explained, "A lot of young families will move here and be here for like five or six years and then when it is time for their kids to go to school they move just because the schools are better."

Students in this study often described teachers and other school employees at UPHS encouraging and supporting them, which will receive further coverage throughout this chapter to inform research questions 1b, 1c, and 1d. While some participating parents expressed some frustrations with the staff at the school, others expressed appreciation for how much they were supporting their children. Some advisors held parent events twice in the same day, once in the morning and once in the evening, to accommodate those who had to work second and third shift. These events often included free food or other prizes and giveaways but attendance was still minimal, if anyone showed up at all. They also described myriad resources available to the students and their families, including closets of donated food and clothing that students could access, as needed.

As the advisors spoke about their students, they clearly had great affection for them, despite the challenges that they often presented. "Those are my rugrats. I call them my rugrats," said one. "The students are great. The staff are great. The support and the ability to do really anything creatively with the students and staff. We have that available to us," said another. Advisors expressed how they focused on building rapport with their students, "Because without building a relationship with the students you really don't get anywhere." They also described how UPHS as a school tends to be receptive to outside help and resources, recognizing that it takes support from multiple people to make a difference in the lives of the students who attended there. Their willingness to support this study is perhaps evidence of that. Still, as one advisor expressed, having resources and invested staff members can fall short of having an impact if students are not receptive, "I don't care how many people you have there, how much support and how many resources you have there, until they make up their mind that they are ready to receive it, sometimes it's just nothing you can do." This was also true about students who expressed an interest in four-year college, but did little to actively pursue it.

"I guarantee you, if you went and asked all (1000) kids about (850) of them would probably tell you 'yeah I want to go to college.'" Alexus agreed with this advisor's estimate. "I'm sure everyone at UPHS wants to go to college. But it's just the money part of college that really gets people off." The advisor posited that the barrier might be more about effort than finances, "Every kid knows that they are supposed to apply and do financial aid. But they might show up to one thing, do half an application and never pick it up again…you see so much of that." Each of the advisors interviewed for this study discussed a need for building a "college-going culture" at UPHS, meaning an overall norm at the school that it is not only common for graduates to go to college, it is expected

of them. They believed there was work to be done in that direction, although at the time of this study there were several supports available for UPHS students who wanted to go to college. This included a center in the school staffed by a full-time employee that was set up specifically as a place to apply for college admission, scholarships, and financial aid. There was also a full-time college advisor and school counselors to help guide students in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Students had Advanced Placement courses available to them that counselors promoted, and there were pennants, signs, and banners in the school advocating for college attendance. Extracurricular leadership programs, in which many students in the present study participated, provided opportunities to go on college visits and learn about available scholarships. Still, it appeared that the student body at UPHS, by and large, was not yet invested in actively pursuing four-year college. As Shauntel explained, "No one talks about it. Everyone is enjoying themselves, living in the moment."

Still, there are students like Shauntel, Alexus, Adrian, Tavonne, Jasmine, and LaQuia who are thinking and talking about college, and are seeking their place within a rare cohort in the school. Advisors shared what tended to be different about these students. They indicated that students at UPHS who were serious about their pursuit of four-year college were typically those who had been there all four years, worked hard in classes despite the distractions, completed their applications and essays without much prompting, took advantage of announced scholarship opportunities, and were frequently in the College Center at the school. In short, they put forth effort. While this may sound like typical behavior for high school students who want to go to college (it certainly is what my college-going students did when I was a high school counselor), what makes these students different at UPHS is their comparative rarity. As one advisor explained,

this tends to be related to the priorities of students' peer groups, "If one student is going to go apply... they are probably going to bring another student with them...But then you also have the other cohorts where nobody is going to college…and nobody is being productive and trying to better their future." The outcomes at UPHS suggest that the peer groups within the school who are pushing each other to do what is necessary to get to college are either smaller in size or lower in frequency than peer groups engaging in counterproductive behavior. As one advisor observed, "the college-going culture right now, it is very lacking on a lot of core things."

Observation

In addition to the field notes that I took throughout this study, I observed one full school day at Urban Public High School on Friday, February 17, 2017. I arrived at 7:40 AM and left at 3:15 PM. Thus, I was able to observe students before they began their first class at 8:00, be in the school throughout their four, 90 minute class blocks, and then observe students at the end of the day after they were dismissed at 2:45 PM. I observed students during less structured times of the day (before first period, lunch, and after school), as well as when they were scheduled to be in classes. I did not observe inside any classrooms as requested by the school division IRB. I asked one of my cooperating staff members at UPHS to send out an email on the morning of my observation to alert the staff of my presence there. Over the approximately six and a half hours that I was at the school that day I took approximately 11 pages of single spaced observation notes. For the sake of parsimony, rather than sharing the experience of the day chronologically, I will instead describe my observations according to the following categories: descriptions of UPHS, student experience and routine, students out of class, aggressive student behavior, and student/faculty interactions.

Description of UPHS

There are three primary approaches to UPHS, one from the interstate that has exits onto freshly paved roads, one from downtown that includes broken streets haphazardly filled with concrete, and one through the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the school. The latter two travel through areas of the city where the median annual income in 2010 according to Census data was less than $13,000, median rent was less than $250, unemployment was between 16 and 20%, and a little more than half of the residents lived below the poverty line. These neighborhoods were also nearly 100% African-American, as are the students at UPHS. Most days I went to the school, including this observation day, I took the interstate route, which approached the school on a street lined with small houses. Across the street sat an abandoned brick building, perhaps an old school or government office, that was overgrown with vegetation.

UPHS is a two-story brick and cinderblock building. The front doors remain locked throughout the school day and visitors press a buzzer to be let in by a School Resource Officer (SRO) who mans a desk approximately 50 feet away from the doors. In the mornings, however, the doors are unlocked and students walk through one of three metal detectors, each manned by an SRO. The SRO desk has a sign-in book for visitors as well as four flat panel television screens inside of a cage, each with a feed of a separate part of the building. Behind the SRO desk is the auditorium. To the right of it is the main office and the school counseling office. To the left is the cafeteria. Around the back of the first floor is the gymnasium. The first floor also houses a daycare for the children of students who attend UPHS (Shauntel volunteers there during the day), as well as some other offices and classrooms. There are some cases holding trophies from various sports accomplishments as well as a case containing pictures and information about the history

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of UPHS. There are banners in the school's colors hung high across the main hallway of the first floor, reading positive attributes like "Integrity," "Courage," "Responsibility," and "Respect." There are also posters on the walls advertising for different programs in the school.

Wrapping around the front lobby and metal detectors is a main staircase that leads up to the second floor, where most of the classrooms are. Like the first floor, it has a rectangular layout with classrooms on the outside corridors surrounding a central Media Center, teacher's lounge, and access to the balcony of the auditorium. These doors remain locked during the school day. The walls are lined with lockers in the school's colors, which take up about half of the wall space. Along the top half of the wall, some of the space is covered in student work, posters, and some college memorabilia. Other parts are empty, or covered in staples, scotch tape, and lingering remnants of paper from where something used to be posted. The Media Center resembles what I have seen at most of the other schools I have visited throughout my career: a large room with cases of books, computers, and a desk in the middle where the school librarian is stationed. There are posters on the walls of iconic Black leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, and Barack and Michelle Obama. There is a sign above one of the bookcases that reads, "I believe in you."

School climate. This quote in the library was just one of several examples of positive school climate I observed throughout the building. The main office had the school's name, mascot, and student artwork displayed. The cafeteria had a large, painted mural displayed on the back wall with the school's mascot, reading "Welcome to UPHS." The gym had a similar mural painted on the wall, this time with the mascot depicted as bursting through the cinderblocks, as well as the words "Freshmen," "Sophomores,"

"Juniors," and "Seniors" above different sections of the bleachers. On one of my visits to UPHS they had a pep rally scheduled for the afternoon, and I assumed these class designators were for that purpose. A student program was hosting "Fruitful Fridays" on the day that I observed, bringing in guest speakers from the community. One hallway on the second floor displayed posters that students had made of Black leaders like Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman. There were glass cases along the hallway containing trophies, student work, or inspirational quotes. On the day of my observation, about two out of three cases contained these things, while one out of three remained empty. The morning announcements concluded with "And in case nobody has told you yet that they love you today, we do."

There were also some college-related materials present. Approximately a handful of college pennants were posted above the lockers, spread out on the front hallway of the second floor, as well as in the school counseling office. Also in that office was the College Center (pseudonym), a dedicated computer lab to work on applications, financial aid, and scholarships. It was staffed by a full-time employee. There were a few letters missing from the sign by the door. There was also a bulletin board posted with information about the SAT and financial aid. One advisor had the words "College is Possible" posted on the wall behind the desk.

Student experience and routine. On the morning that I observed, students collected inside of the front doors to wait to go through the metal detectors and have their bags checked by an SRO. Approximately half appeared to have backpacks, while the other half did not. In my memos, I wondered whether this search process in the morning perhaps deterred some students from bringing backpacks to school. One student walked through the metal detector and hummed the same tone that the buzzer made, signifying

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his familiarity with this process. Teachers mainly walked in through a separate entrance on the side of the building. Most who walked by me appeared to be in a good mood, smiling, talking, and laughing. Students either walked around the hallways before the bell or congregated in the auditorium or cafeteria. In the hallways, they appeared to primarily walk alone, although some walked in pairs or small groups. The auditorium contained approximately 100 students scattered throughout the rows of seats. They primarily sat in groups and talked with each other. None appeared to be doing school work. The cafeteria contained approximately 50 students. An SRO walked around the room, wheeling a trashcan to each table for students to throw away their trash.

A bell rang at 7:58 signaling students to go to their first period class. Students began moving out of the cafeteria and auditorium, and none appeared to be in much of a hurry. I walked upstairs with the large group of students making their way towards the classrooms. The bell rang for class to start at 8:00. At 8:01, I observed approximately 30 students in the hallway around me. By 8:05, there were approximately 15. By 8:06, that number approximately doubled, with students coming in from other parts of the second floor. It appeared students were walking laps. School employees stood in the hallway and prompted students to "Get to class, please. With some urgency." Not many students appeared to change their pace after this prompting. By 8:08, the hallway was mostly clear except for a few students who were walking in pairs. This process of students slowly making their way to class despite persistent reminders occurred each of the three remaining class changes I observed that day.

Students were not allowed to come to the cafeteria during lunch on the day that I observed. One teacher explained to me that this was because students were on "restricted movement," meaning they were not allowed in the hallways for any reason unless

accompanied by an adult. This was because of excessive student misbehavior in the morning and the anticipation that a fight might break out in the cafeteria during lunch. School employees, including teachers, advisors, and administrators, assisted cafeteria workers in boxing up lunches in Styrofoam containers to deliver to students' classrooms. Despite not being allowed to come to the cafeteria, nor in the hallway unaccompanied by an adult, several students attempted to come downstairs to go to lunch. An administrator stood in the hallway reminding students that they were not allowed to be there. "There is no lunch today! Get back to class!"

The final bell rang at 2:45 and students filed out of the building to go home. Approximately ten busses lined up in front of the school, and approximately another three lined up in the side parking lot. The busses quickly filled up with students, several of whom leaned out the windows to call out to their friends who were still standing in the lawn in front of the school. Administrators and SROs helped facilitate the dismissal of the busses, talking on hand radios and waving drivers to proceed. Approximately 50 students appeared to be walking home, heading into and around the neighborhood directly across from the entrance to the school. Some cars pulled up to the front of the school to pick up students to take them home. It appeared that most students went home by bus, followed by those who walked, followed by those being picked up in a car.

Students out of class. Perhaps the most prolific behavior I observed in students throughout the day was their tendency to be in the hallways unaccompanied by an adult during class. Each of the six participants in this study described this tendency in their peers, as did their family members and the advisors that I interviewed. Each time I visited UPHS I noted how many students I observed in the hallways, including when I did not see any. When I was not able to count the exact number of students, I noted an

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approximation. The most students I saw in the hallway at one time was approximately 40, who were gathered around the front SRO desk to observe a fight between two students. I observed no students in the hallway on only two occasions. On average, I observed an average of ten students in the hallway during instructional time. Additionally, I observed an average of approximately three students outside of the school building on each of my visits to UPHS. This did not include students returning from the Career Center or those waiting on a city bus in front of the school.

On the day of my observation I sat in the same spot of the second floor for the entire final period of the day (approximately 90 minutes) and made a note each time I saw a student in the hallway. When I was unable to get an exact count of the number of students (e.g. when they were walking in a group), I made an approximation. In total, I observed approximately 251 students in the hallway during the period. Of these students, approximately 30 were clear repeats, meaning I had seen them in the hallway previously during the same period. Approximately 16 were on their cell phones, and approximately nine interrupted other classes in session. I observed students walking in groups of two or more approximately 14 times, typically formed by students leaving from separate classrooms, seemingly texting each other, and meeting in the hallway. Approximately 12 of these students were accompanied by an adult and approximately eight had some sort of pass visible. On several occasions, I observed school employees asking students where they were supposed to be and prompting them to go to class. They offered several excuses, most commonly that were going to the restroom. Students were still on restricted movement during this period, and were therefore not supposed to be in the hallway for any reason unless accompanied by an adult.

Aggressive student behavior. Throughout the day, I observed students engaging in either verbally or physically aggressive behavior, either towards each other or towards school employees. Additionally, it was common to see students engage in behavior that was borderline aggressive, meaning they would interact in ways that seemed to be friendly at first and then either shout at each other, shove or hit each other, or pretend to fight. There was likely also a great deal of positive interactions between students, but it was difficult to observe for two primary reasons. First, much of this positive behavior may have occurred in classrooms, where I did not observe. Second, it was difficult to notice individual interactions when there were large numbers of students in the hallways (e.g. between classes) unless they were loud or otherwise became noticeable outside of the general noise of the school. Because of this, the students who engaged in negative or otherwise aggressive behaviors were often the most noticeable. I did witness on many occasions, including on the day of my formal observation, students interacting positively with each other and with faculty members. In my estimation based on my aggregate experiences at UPHS, this was more common than negative student behavior. It is perhaps true that negative behaviors are simply more likely to leave an impression.

I observed physically aggressive behavior between students on five occasions throughout my full observation day. This mostly involved students pretending to "fight" each other. I observed verbally aggressive behavior between students on five occasions throughout my full observation day. This typically involved students shouting at each other, often using profanity or threatening to escalate into physically aggressive behavior if the other student did not "stop playing." They sometimes fluctuated between yelling at each other and laughing with each other. Overall, verbally aggressive behavior appeared to be more common than physically aggressive behavior in my various observations at

UPHS throughout the course of the study, most often with students shouting profanity or threats at each other.

Student/faculty interactions. During my observation, as with my field notes throughout the course of this study, I more frequently witnessed positive than negative interactions between students and faculty. When coding my observation notes, I assigned a "positive" code when the interaction between the student and faculty member appeared to be friendly or otherwise respectful, even if the faculty member was disciplining the student. I assigned a code of "negative" when the interaction appeared to be unfriendly, hostile, or otherwise disrespectful. Of the 38 interactions I witnessed between students and faculty members during my full day of observation, 23 of them (approximately 61%) were positive while 15 (approximately 39%) were negative.

Nearly all the negative interactions I witnessed between students and faculty members during my observation day at UPHS were catalyzed by a student engaging in behavior that was against school rules while a faculty member attempted to address that behavior. This was most often due to a student being in the hallway when he or she was supposed to be in class. A faculty member asking students to go to class or otherwise enforcing a school rule was not considered an inherently negative interaction. Several times, students were receptive to this prompting, or at least were not disrespectful in their response to the faculty member. However, I also frequently observed students reacting negatively to these interactions. Sometimes these were more passive responses, like when an administrator asked a student to go to class and when the administrator was no longer in view, the student turned away from his class and continued to wander the halls. He stayed on his phone during the entire interaction. On other occasions, they were more directly disrespectful. At one point, a teacher came out of a classroom with a student and

called over an SRO. Visibly frustrated, the teacher indicated that this student had just been added to his class that day and asked that he be escorted to the office for making obscene comments. As the SRO walked the student up the hallway, he yelled out "Fuck him! He act like I'm dumb!" This was not the first, nor the last time, I observed a student swearing at a faculty member at UPHS.

The majority of the interactions that I observed between students and faculty members were positive, and most appeared to offer evidence of relationship building. Several teachers referred to students by nicknames and some even had special handshakes between them. A female employee who was talking to two female students in the main office who had gotten in trouble called them "baby" to communicate that she cared about them while still holding them accountable for their misbehavior, which seemed to soften their frustration. A male student came up to a teacher asking if he could get his work early so he could be ahead of the class before they got started the next period. A teacher who was asking his class to stop talking during the lesson joked with the students, "I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation with my teaching." A male staff member complimented a passing student on his hair and told him that he used to wear his the same way. A male employee put his arm around a male student who was upset and walked up the hall with him. An SRO pulled a student to the side who was angry with a classmate to calm him down, "It's me. I know you. Don't fight that boy. I don't want to see you getting in trouble." While trying to urge a group of male students to get to class, an employee walked up to the group who then gave her a group hug. A student who was wandering the hallway encountered his teacher, whose class he had left several minutes earlier with instructions to go straight to the Media Center. She pulled him to the side and urged him to make better decisions, "You are just too damn smart to be doing this."

General impressions of UPHS. I had been to UPHS several times prior to

spending my full day of observation there. In the dozens of hours I had spent there, I had

built up some understanding of what to expect. Still, I found myself fatigued at the end of

the day, encouraged by some of the positive things I had observed, but also discouraged

by the persistent issues with student behavior. In my memos, I noted about how

challenging it must be to work in the school every day, or to be a student trying to learn

in such a noisy environment. This was punctuated by a passing conversation I had with a

faculty member on my way out the door that afternoon. "Quite a day," I observed. "It's

always quite a day," she replied.

RQ1a: What examples of a college-going possible self are present for students?

What alternative examples of possible selves are present?

Advisors offered a recurring prediction about how often their students interact

with people who went to college, "If you are talking about UPHS, every day. Teachers

count I guess. What you don't see is people who have gone to college at home very

much." Students attending UPHS with aspirations to graduate from a four-year college

would be, by and large, first-generation. Although students did not offer much

elaboration on their perceptions of their teachers and other school personnel as college

graduates, they did go into detail about people in their lives serving as examples of

proximal and distal possible selves alternative to their college going possible self.

Consistent with selection criteria for this study, none of the participating students

had parents who had graduated from a four-year college. LaQuia described how in her

immediate family, she would be the first one to graduate from high school, let alone

college, "All my immediate family didn't graduate at all. Like my grandma, my poppa,

my aunt, my mom and my dad. None of them graduated." Jasmine's mom dropped out of

high school after she became pregnant with her older brother, but eventually got her GED. Alexus did not discuss the educational attainment of her parents, but did express concern about potentially "ending up like my dad." Shauntel never mentioned her parents during our interviews, although she indicated in her demographic form that her mother had attained an associate's degree.

Adrian and Tavonne were somewhat exceptional to the norm experienced by the other four students in the study, as Adrian's mom had attended one year at a university before dropping out when she became pregnant with him and Tavonne was living with a legal guardian who had earned a four-year college degree. Because of his mom's experience, Adrian had at least some understanding of what to expect in college, "She said it's very different than high school...she gave me a little bit of information about college other than it being fun." While Tavonne indicated that neither of his parents earned a high school diploma, he talked about how his guardian had earned a four-year college degree and was currently working as a teacher.

Students discussed having siblings who were old enough to have had the opportunity to go to college, but did not do so. Shauntel expressed frustration with her perceived lack of role models, "I feel like my brother, he should lead by example. But he doesn't. So I think I should." Jasmine also had experience with her older brother not going to college, and explained that although he cared about the family he was also "burning his bridges." Alexus discussed concerns about constantly being compared with her sister who was graduating from UPHS this year, but not about whether or not she was going to college. As the oldest of their siblings, Adrian and LaQuia discussed feeling like they needed to set the example. Tavonne mentioned having siblings in his demographic form, but did not discuss them in our interviews.

In addition to having a lack of examples of college-going possible selves within their families, several students had relatives serving as examples of alternative possible selves. Adrian's mom described how her parents (his grandparents), had previously struggled with addiction, "and he sees me trying to fight and I still have issues with my parents even to this day." As previously mentioned, Tavonne's father used to sell drugs, and Alexus had recently learned that her mother was drug addicted. An advisor described how experiences like these leave students stuck between anger and loyalty, "But the interesting part about it, through it all, they still love their moms unconditionally."

Students reflected on watching their parents and other family members struggle, financially or otherwise. LaQuia described her grandfather lecturing her about his experiences in his youth and how they contributed to a lifetime of poverty. Her mother had not been receptive to his message when she was younger, and subsequently ended up not graduating from high school and having to work multiple hourly-wage jobs to make ends meet. "He said if he knew how important education was today he would be there before the school even opened up." Adrian recognized how hard his mom had to work to provide for the family, and offered to contribute some of his pay from his part time job, which she refused. This ran counter to the experience of many students at UPHS according to one advisor, who explained that they often work to earn money only to have it taken from them by their parents without their consent. Some students and parents in this study described living on public assistance, which advisors described as a common experience of students at UPHS. They hypothesized that this led students to expect to receive similar subsidies when they reached adulthood.

There was variability in how much participating students spoke with their parents and guardians about college. Although her brother informed me that he had spoken with

Shauntel about her future on multiple occasions, she indicated that "We do not talk about college." Alexus also did not mention her mom or stepdad discussing college with her, apart from being mindful of its financial cost. LaQuia described conversations she had with her grandfather about college, but not with her mom or dad. Conversely, Adrian made it clear that his mom had spoken with him at length about her brief college experience and about his eventual enrollment. Jasmine's mom, who requested to be interviewed concurrently with her daughter, expressed certainty in her postsecondary ambitions, "Oh she going." Tavonne's guardian discussed it with him to the point of being "annoying." Advisors observed varying levels of parental support for the postsecondary education of UPHS students. Although they encouraged their students to pursue college, they felt that the message was not reinforced at home. They explained that parents who did speak with their children about college often phrased it as wanting them to "be better than me." Still, they expressed doubt that many parents brought up college unless students initiated the conversation. They speculated that this may have been due to their lack of familiarity with enrollment processes. Most, they believed, wanted their children to attain higher education.

Several students described having to seek out examples of postsecondary educational attainment through their participation in various programs. Tavonne was a member of a music program through a local university, with several participants who were college students or graduates. Jasmine participated in an after-school tutoring program where she had the opportunity to work with current college students, who she frequently questioned to learn more about their experiences. LaQuia had a mentor who she worked with on the weekends to complete applications and scholarships. Each of the participating students were engaged in after school programs where going to college was

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a frequent topic of discussion. Alexus described how participating in this study and getting to interact with me as a researcher had influenced how she saw her future as an aspiring psychologist.

Particularly for Jasmine and Alexus, who both lived in low-income housing projects, there were persistent examples of possible selves that were alternative to a desired, college-going possible self. Alexus explained how clear the consequences of not going to college were, "It's really real. Because I have a lot of examples...It's all here. It's in my neighborhood." Jasmine described living in an area where several people had dropped out of school, few of whom ever returned. She expressed frustration and concern with the behavior of the people in her neighborhood, which often involved criminal activity. Alexus wondered if people where she lived had "already given up." She was upset about how they were fulfilling "stereotypes," lamenting that they "always seem to be true. Girls as young as 16, even 15 are at home taking care of kids…Guys are just selling drugs. Being involved in some type of gang." Jasmine similarly discussed the prevalence of teen pregnancy where she lived, sharing a story about standing with a friend outside of UPHS one afternoon and watching classmates pick up their young children from the school's daycare. She observed, "It's just common, like it's so common." Jasmine's mom became pregnant when she was 16, and expressed how relieved she felt when Jasmine turned that age without experiencing the same outcome.

Students described not encountering many people in their neighborhoods who went to college, regardless of whether they lived in low-income housing projects. Shauntel talked about people performing odd jobs like mowing lawns or begging for money where she lives. Her brother corroborated her experience, "I am not saying people who don't go to college tend to be bums on the street but she sees a lot of people on the

street with signs, like holding signs up for change and stuff." LaQuia talked about how people in her neighborhood typically did not go to college and had to work in low wage jobs, but still emphasized how much better her experience was than those who lived in the neighborhoods surrounding the school. Adrian also described his perception of these areas, "I know it's a lot of illegal things that goes on in the neighborhood…I know it does effect the kids a lot. I feel like the more they see, the more they end up doing it." None of the students in this study lived in areas where more than 10% of the residents had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. Thus, it appeared living in a higher income neighborhood did not do much to increase their chances of being around college graduates, but did expose them to fewer examples of possible selves that were alternative to their desired, college-going possible self.

Participants' interactions with their peers were a major topic of discussion during interviews. Their classmates provided persistent, immediate examples of proximal possible selves, which they primarily wished to avoid. Tavonne and LaQuia were both part of the same peer group where going to college was the norm, but its formation was not without consequences. LaQuia described being harassed by other students in the school because of her efforts to be a good candidate for four-year college, including academic achievement and extracurricular involvement. She was frustrated with the student body at large, who frequently wrote off the idea of pursuing college at all, "People that don't want to do nothing with theirself or can't see theirself, or say 'college ain't for me,' you ain't get there yet! You can at least try!" She distinguished her friend group from this prevailing sentiment in the school, "The people that want to walk the hallways, don't care, don't come to school everyday, those are the people that say 'Oh college is not for me.'" Tavonne described how their college-going friend group included

older peers who had graduated before them and were currently in college. One advisor described the relative infrequency of students at UPHS who were actively pursuing postsecondary educational ambitions, "So of the senior class, about (250) kids, we probably have a good core of like (40, 50) that are active every day. Either checking in or working on their stuff for next year. Maybe less than that."

The underclassmen in this study were less likely to describe being a part of a college-going peer group with other students their age. Still, their participation in extracurricular programs at the school afforded them the opportunity to interact with classmates who were planning to go to college, many of them upperclassmen. As Shauntel observed, "I feel like people, if they were being pointed into the right direction and if they actually listen they probably would go to college. But right now…they feel very excited to work at McDonald's." Adrian talked about how common it was to see his peers wandering the halls, being disruptive in class, or otherwise not taking school seriously. He believed that their experiences in their neighborhoods contributed to the development of a negative mindset, "because they live their lives and they don't see the outer box of things…They don't get out of that role and be a different person." Jasmine described trying to fit in with this peer group initially, before ultimately deciding "these people are whack." Adrian, Jasmine, Shauntel, and Alexus each described having at least one friend in their grade level with whom they could talk about college. Students' often asserted that those who were misbehaving in school largely came from the housing projects and brought some of the struggles they experienced at home with them to school. Advisors primarily supported this claim, although one was careful to emphasize, "I have never had a student use their situation as an excuse." Alexus, who lived in one of the neighborhoods in question, was also quick to offer a caveat in their defense while not

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excusing her peers' overall behavior, "It's like the majority of the kids there are really smart but they never ever want to do anything."

RQ1a Conclusion

Students in the present study encountered far more examples of people who had not attained postsecondary education than those who had. This was true not only in their families, including parents, siblings, and other relatives, but also in the communities in which they lived. It was true, as several college advisors asserted, that students were exposed to examples of college attainment through their interactions with faculty at UPHS. However, participating students were more likely to describe encounters that they had with college-going adults through their participation in programs, some of them based at UPHS, than their interactions with their teachers or other faculty. Upperclassmen, in particular, described interactions with college-going peers, but made it clear that students at UPHS who were actively pursuing higher education were the exception rather than the norm. Even membership in a college-going peer group did not inoculate them to the larger peer culture at the school of underachievement. They also frequently encountered examples in their families and communities of distal possible selves incongruent with a college-going possible self. Perceptions of what is possible for one's future tend to be largely socialized, and these future perceptions tend to motivate present behavior (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). This indicates that examples of possible selves described by students in this study are critical to understanding how they made decisions about pursuing four-year college.

RQ2a: How proximal do they consider their college-going possible self to be?

Tavonne expressed what it meant to him to have college be so near in his future, "It's in August! That's soon! And I can't wait to go!" While its proximity generated

excitement for him, he acknowledged that it did not always feel that way. This was true even as recently as the previous year. "It felt like it was really far away." He reached out towards a file cabinet sitting across the room from us, "I just can't get it. And now it's like I am standing up in front of the cabinet." He discussed how getting closer to college had changed him, "It has been a huge change in my maturity." He described becoming more "analytical" of the world around him. While he had long been critical about the negative behavior of his peers at school, being closer to college made him recognize the consequences of it as they began to materialize. He noted how many of them did not have any established postsecondary plans, contrary to him.

Similarly, LaQuia had been interested in college for some time but noted how getting closer to it added energy to her pursuit, "When I got to high school I am like 'Oh my gosh. It's so far!' But then the school years pass by so fast. And now I am getting ready to graduate!" She noted that this particularly became true in her junior year. Like Tavonne, LaQuia became more animated and excited when talking about how close college felt for her compared to talking about her long-term pursuit of it. She discussed a perceived mindset among her peers when they were younger that they did not have to try as hard in school yet. She rejected this, emphasizing how it could sabotage future college ambitions, "It gets harder and harder when you get to that point…You've got to keep your GPA up in order to get into colleges and apply for certain scholarships." Although she had already been accepted to several colleges at the time of our interview, she was maintaining her long-standing commitment to her grades to remain a good candidate for scholarships, "I ask the teacher for progress reports. I know that report cards come out April 19th. I know my GPA still gotta be where it's at because if not my GPA going to drop." By her account, participating in this study helped LaQuia reflect on how long she

had wanted to go to college and how close it now felt, "I actually see the progress that I have taken since I was in elementary school…12 years passed by that quick."

It was unsurprising that the two upperclassmen in this study considered college to be near in their future. By comparison, one advisor described the perceived sentiment of younger students in the school about college, "If we are talking about ninth grade I would say that they are probably not there yet…tenth grade and up I would say that they can feel the urgency a little bit." Another advisor explained that it was a common expectation among UPHS students to wait to go to college until later in life, "They are not thinking about that. It is only when they get in their 20s when they come back." When students did express an interest in starting their postsecondary education right after high school, some advisors wondered how authentic it was, "I am not sure if when they say 'I am going to college'...if it is just to shut me up, or because they genuinely want to go." All but one of the underclassmen in this study expressed how college felt proximal and that they wanted to go immediately after graduating from UPHS.

Adrian, Alexus, and Jasmine all offered similar sentiments about how close college felt for them. Alexus described how it felt soon for her, "because I only have two more years left," but did not make it clear how long she had felt this proximity to college. For Jasmine, she felt as though the school years had been moving quickly for her since the 8th grade, leading her to recognize that these final years before college would likely feel the same. For Adrian, he expressed feeling like college was soon for him, but acknowledged that it recently felt far, "Yeah it has been times when I felt like that. But now it's getting closer." They each described what their increasing proximity to college was doing to them. For Adrian, it made him feel "excited" but also recognize the work that was ahead of him with applications and scholarships, adding "I don't have that long

man...These years go by so fast." For Alexus, it primarily made her feel pressure about starting her adult life, recognizing that she was going to have to make some very consequential decisions soon, "I'm going to be gone and be an adult. It's scary. But I don't want to be here. I just have to face down into it and just let it happen." For Jasmine, who had wanted to go to college for a long time, being closer to it did not do much to change her mindset other than her work ethic, "In middle school it's like everybody fantasize about what they want their future to be like. But now I am getting older so it's like really time to start getting it together…because high school don't last that long." Overall, for Adrian, Alexus, and Jasmine, college felt like it was close on the horizon.

Shauntel was weighing her options for the future at the time of our interview. She expressed an interest in going to a four-year college, but did not know if it was necessary because of her current ambition to eventually work in childcare. "Because I don't feel like it's for me yet...Because what I want to do, I still don't see it as a real job so I don't think I need to go to college for it." She only considered careers requiring a college degree to be a "real job," and her current interest in childcare was related to her experience volunteering in the high school daycare. Thus, she was not yet committed to actively pursuing four-year college. In Shauntel's mind, being interested in going to college was not sufficient reason to go without a clear desire for a career that required a four-year degree. While she expected to eventually end up in an "important" job requiring at least a bachelor's degree, she predicted that would only become clear by working different jobs and figuring out what she did and did not like. Because of this, college felt farther away as it was not likely that she would be going directly after high school. By her account, none of her peers were thinking seriously about college yet, but expected this would change soon, "I think they'll start talking about it when they get to 11th grade." She

hypothesized this would also eventually be true about her, "I probably would be (thinking about college) because by the time I am a senior I probably will fill out a lot of papers to go to college. I don't think I would be wondering where I am going to be in ten years."

RQ2a Conclusion

Students in this study were faced with a choice between aligning with the majority of their peers who did not pursue college with much fervor or trusting their growing instinct about its proximity and the need to be ready. They largely appeared to be choosing the latter. Shauntel served as a negative case for this research question, as she professed a current belief that college felt far away, but acknowledged that this would probably change when she became an upperclassman. Overall, participants' understanding of the proximity of college enhanced their present motivation to do well in school, as the possible selves literature suggests, but came at a social cost with peers who did not share this mindset.

RQ2b: How balanced is their college-going possible self with negative possible selves they wish to avoid?

As students described their pursuit of a distal, college-going possible self, they frequently discussed other distal possible selves that they wished to avoid. Inherent in their status as potential first-generation college students, they found themselves desiring a future that was different than what their parents and other adult family members experienced. Additionally, they sought to avoiding a future of poverty and the experience of working in low-wage employment. They were also eager to not fulfill stereotypes or low-expectations that they perceived others having for them. These distal avoidance possible selves weighed heavily on their decision to pursue a college-going possible self.

Distal Approach Possible Selves

Before exploring how distal avoidance possible selves balanced participants'
pursuit of a college-going possible self, it is necessary to first explore who they did want
to become after high school. Each student described distal approach possible selves
related to college and career. For Tavonne, he was highly motivated to become a
veterinarian, and college would allow him to fulfill that goal "I see how challenging the
career is and how bad there is a need for African-American male doctors or veterinarians
in the field. I want to contribute to it." He recognized how this was a rigorous task ahead
of him, and was receptive to backup plans just in case he was not able to go to four-year
college, "If I didn't go to college I would at least go to trade school, or at least get a job."
Still, as discussed later in the section for research question 3b, Tavonne had little doubt
that he would fulfill his primary ambition. LaQuia wanted to be a cardiovascular surgeon
and open a trauma center for women. She believed that her ambitions would find her in
good company at a four-year college, "The people that's in college have the same goals
as I do. I just want to go to college. Just graduate and go about my business." LaQuia was
willing to do whatever it took to fulfill her college aspirations, "I just know that I am
going to get a degree." It seemed that what she had already overcome eclipsed any
perceived challenges ahead of her, "There is a lot of stuff that could have stopped me but
I did not let it happen."

Alexus had a strong desire to become a psychologist, and was not interested at
stopping at her bachelor's degree, "If I have a PhD, which I want to get, I want to be able
to just flash it out there and people will be like 'OK come on in…I want to be able to help
people and do what I want to do." The only people she routinely encountered with a
college degree were employees at UPHS. When they told her about their experiences, she

wanted to believe that it could also be true for her, "I hear people talk about it and I will be like, 'Oh my God I wish that was me." Adrian was excited about the idea of going to college, and believed that it was part of a broader purpose for him, "I feel like I can make something big out of it. Something big that no one else did. And I feel like it's not only going to change my life, it's going to change other people's lives." While he had not yet decided on a career path, he felt that being in college was inherently significant, "That's not only a thing for me to strive to go to college and achieve my goals but to learn from things that other people hasn't in my family."

Jasmine's pursuit of college was related to her ambitions for working in an elementary school, "I want to be a counselor and a teacher." She did not have her sights set on a particular university, "I just want to go to a good school. It don't matter where it's at." By her account, this was a long-held ambition for her, "I have always thought about going to college and graduating from it. It's just who I am. It's my ultimate goal." Shauntel was interested in going to because she believed it was an important experience to have, even if it happened later in life, "Probably going in my 30s or 20s. Late 20s." For now, she was considering different distal possible selves that predominately did not require a four-year college degree. This included being a childcare worker, a chef, or a baker. By her account, these career ambitions were not yet "important" enough to actively pursue college. While she did not want to miss out on having the college experience, she was waiting for something more tangible to motivate her to go, "I don't want to go to college just to say I have been there. I want to do it and get a degree in something that makes me feel like I am in a real job."

Participating students each had distal approach possible selves that involved four-year college in some way, but did not always find that these identities were immediately

reinforced in their environment. They did, however, routinely encounter peers and adults who exemplified who they did not want to become. Because of this, as students discussed their pursuit of college they often did so in the context of describing distal avoidance possible selves that balanced who they wanted to become in the future.

Family Role Models

As discussed in RQ1a, all students had members of their family who modeled what life as an adult was like without postsecondary education. For some, these examples generated frustration. Jasmine and Shauntel both described having older siblings who were "not good role models" because of the decisions they made in their adult lives, proclaiming their determination to not follow in their footsteps. Tavonne similarly criticized the lifestyle of his now-deceased father, who was a known drug dealer but lied to his family about it. He profoundly rejected this future for himself, while staking claim over his own destiny, "If I wanted to be a drug dealer then I would be a drug dealer. If I wanted to be a CNA like my mom I would be a CNA. But no, I want to be a vet. Because that's what I want to do, not based off of what they did." Adrian's mom described how her son also did not want to end up like his dad, "He didn't even want his father's name at one point. He felt ashamed for being named after his father for what his father was doing." She explained that this included drug addiction and criminal activity, "His dad has been locked up most of his childhood." When Adrian expressed concern that he might end up the same way, his mother was quick to offer her perspective, "I tell him, you are not him. You are not going to be that man. You are going to be the man he should have been."

Often, as students described how family members modeled possible selves that they wished to avoid, they still expressed great affection for them. Their desire to pursue

a college-going possible self meant that they aspired to a future that was very different than people they loved. This potentially challenging balance to strike was often made easier through the substantial support that their family members provided. For Jasmine, this included her mom warning her about the long-term impact of teenage pregnancy, using her own experiences as an example. For Shauntel, this reflected in her critique of her oldest brother's lifestyle of living on disability subsidies, but also expressing appreciation for how he looked after her as her legal guardian. Adrian shared how much he cared about his family, while also expressing his desire to not perpetuate their intergenerational cycle of not attaining higher education, "I don't want to be another person that didn't go. And I feel like it would be a big impact if I do go. I feel like that balances out." LaQuia described how her grandfather used his own life as an example of what she should not become. He had challenged her to not be another person in the family who did not finish their education, as she would be the first to graduate high school, let alone college. He reminded her that she was uniquely positioned to be a role model for her younger siblings, "Because my mom and my dad and my aunt didn't. So I needed to. I ain't going to let them down. That's not an option." Often, the existence of a distal approach possible self focused on college catalyzed this tempered critique of family members, as students balanced their desire to go to four-year college with the reality of being the first in their families to do so.

Poverty and Low-Wage Employment

The desire to pursue a college-going possible self was often balanced with avoidance possible selves related to students' concerns about living in poverty or working in low-wage work. Living a life of financial struggle was often modeled by family members. Jasmine's family received food stamps and Medicaid, and her mom indicated

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that she did not want her daughter to do the same. Jasmine similarly rejected a future where she would need financial support, "I want to go, come back, and have my own place to go to and not have to depend on nobody else for my living." Adrian and LaQuia, who were both the oldest siblings in their families, each described observing the financial challenges that their mothers faced raising multiple children while working low-wage employment. They both expressed a desire to make sure that their own children did not have to grow up poor, which served as a motivator for their pursuit of college. Shauntel expressed a similar desire, "If I have kids, I think I would need to go to college. I mean I don't want to be one of those single mothers who's struggling." Advisors described how common it was for students at UPHS to desire more financial security than they currently experienced with their families, many of whom received subsidies and wondered if it might be a part of their own future, "They don't expect to be completely on public assistance or anything like that. They expect to figure something out and do something. But they are not sure what that something will be."

Concerns related to low-wage employment, particularly fast food, were especially salient possible selves that students wished to avoid. Nearly all of them described how common it was for their peers at UPHS to expect to end up working in this industry. They sought to avoid this outcome while emphasizing distal approach possible selves related to their college plans, as LaQuia proclaimed, "I am not going to lower my expectations and say oh I want to apply for a Burger King job...I want to be a cardiovascular surgeon." Shauntel believed that she would be trapped in a fast food job if she did not fulfill her postsecondary plans, "If I don't go to college I feel like I am going to be working at McDonald's and I don't want to work at McDonald's the rest of my life." Alexus pointed behind the counter of the McDonald's where we conducted her first interview. "If you

could talk to one of these people over here and ask them 'What do you want to do?' They would probably say 'work here' because they work here." She did not buy that this could actually be a desired outcome, "But if you get that out of them they will be like 'I actually want to do something else.' And then it's like 'How did you get here?' You start to wonder how they get here." An advisor expressed how hard it was to convince other students at UPHS to similarly reject this potential future and instead consider college as a real possibility, "Creating that college going culture is something that I am really focused on doing. And that's just to get that conversation and the expectations that you can do more than just work at McDonald's"

While going to college was a possible self these students sought to approach, they did not always consider it to be a guarantee that they could avoid a future of poverty. Like many of their peers, they had heard stories about people who went to college and but dropped out with accumulated debt, or attained their degree but still could not find a job. One advisor explained how this made it difficult to advocate for students to actively pursue college, "It is kind of hard to tell someone 'Hey, you come from a poor environment and you are going to become more poor after four years.' Especially when you hear all of these stereotypes about you going to college and can't find a job." Another described how students and their families considered this outcome to be, "the worst case scenario. 'I am not going to go because I am going to be in debt. My family is already in debt...I am going to go to school just to get more debt? What sense does that make?'" When asked whether she was more likely to end up with a lifestyle that she did not want with or without college, Shauntel replied "It's 50/50." Like Shauntel, the students participating in this study typically did well in school but sometimes doubted whether

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college could provide the secure life they wanted, as one advisor explained, "That's been the deterrent even for some of my scholarly students."

Perpetuating Stereotypes and Low Expectations

Students often referred to not wanting to fulfill stereotypes that they perceived about people in their school and neighborhood. Living in a low-income housing development, Jasmine was immersed in an environment where she was around examples of outcomes that she did not want for herself including criminal activity and drug abuse. She described watching their behavior and considering it to be self-destructive, and rejected this possibility for her own future, "I just don't do what they do." She balanced this with her college-going possible self, nurtured through interactions she sought out with people like mentors who had been to college and could tell her what it was like. Seeing their example served as a stark contrast to what she experienced in her own neighborhood, "When I see how different their environments are and I think about how I want to be, it just gives me the extra motivation to like work even harder…I know I don't want to be like the people I see around my house." Jasmine also expressed a desire to avoid a future where she became pregnant at a young age, which she witnessed at UPHS when her peers picked up their children from the daycare at school. Her mom became pregnant in high school, and communicated a message that advisors described as common among some UPHS parents that, "you don't want to be like me. You want to be better than me. I want better for you." Jasmine perceived people having low expectations for her because of her family background and the neighborhood where she lived, but rejected their underestimation, "It just gives me the drive to do it even more so I can show them that I am not what you said I was going to be."

As upperclassmen, Tavonne and LaQuia more commonly described witnessing peers who had dropped out of high school or went to college but did not persist to their second year. Tavonne expressed frustration about their decision, attributing it to lack of preparation for the rigors of postsecondary work, "Obviously, you didn't know what you wanted to do...Everything is not always going to go your way. You have to make a way in order to get there." An advisor corroborated Tavonne's account, as this was apparently a fairly common occurrence amongst UPHS graduates who had pursued college and dropped out when they encountered adversity, "It's just like, no, just because you are struggling now, you don't quit. You have already taken out the loans…Work hard and push through." LaQuia explained how the experience of attending a school like UPHS related to this lack of follow through, "Most of the kids that graduate from a poverty school don't make it or don't decide to go because it is too hard or they had enough." She believed that this led to a stereotype of students at UPHS that she was eager to not fulfill, "Just because they bring you down don't mean you've got to listen to it because you can prove them wrong. You can always prove them wrong."

For Alexus, rejecting a future of employment in fast food was not only a financial decision, but also a repudiation of a stereotype that she perceived for people at her school and in her neighborhood. "I know that people in my school are going to be right here…I won't have it. I'm not going to have it." She found herself stuck between feeling "disgusted" at the idea of working there and wanting to help the people who did, "I don't know how, I want to help…If I could be what I want to be, and they could be what they want to be, I would be good. It would be like the perfect life." She wanted to help them "get out" while also proclaiming her own unwillingness to live their lifestyle. This ran counter to what she described as a prevailing sentiment among her peers at school that

fast food was the best option available to them. Alexus perceived working at McDonald's as another example of a fulfilled stereotype in her community, "It would always be Black people that work here. It will always be. But I don't have to be one of them."

Working in fast food was a component of broader stereotypes about the African-American community that Alexus perceived. She described these negative generalizations as being grounded in low educational attainment that leads to low wage employment. Because of this, she believed that if she did not pursue postsecondary education, she would be fulfilling the stereotypes that she was committed to breaking, "I don't want to be that other statistic in the book. Like the majority of Black kids don't go to college. They just stay in sterile jobs." She elaborated on her rejection of this potential outcome as well as how often she witnessed its fulfillment where she lived, "I hate when people being a statistic. You know? Another teenage parent. Another boy in jail…All the stereotypes you can think of all in that one neighborhood." By her account, people in her low-income housing development who did not go to college, which Census data suggests is likely true of nearly everyone there, were having to "hustle" for their money. She believed that people in her neighborhood, by and large, were smart and similarly wished to avoid an outcome where they were fulfilling negative expectations, contributing to her confusion over why they continued to behave the way they did, "I have a lot of empathy for other people and sometimes when I see other people doing bad stuff I be like, 'Why can't you just do something else?'" She reflected on how her behavior differed from theirs, "It makes me feel better that I'm not doing it but then it also makes me feel sad because they are doing it."

Consistent with her desire to avoid a possible self related to fulfilling negative stereotypes, Alexus wanted to go to college. However, she did not see it as the only

means for doing so. Her primary interest was in "getting out" of her low-income neighborhood, "I think everything happens for a reason. But if I do get out of here without even going to college, I think that would be fine." For now, college was perhaps the most likely vehicle for achieving this outcome, "I don't think college is everything but I think what I want in life...it's kind of preventing me from saying no to college." She rejected a distal possible self reflecting the world she was accustomed to while balancing it with a possible self that was more desirable, but also more foreign, "Not me."

RQ2b Conclusion

Because the inclusion criteria for this study required that students have a professed desire to attend four-year college, each of the six participants had distal approach possible selves related to going to college. This included picturing themselves there as well as the careers and lifestyles they would have after graduating. However, students often found that these distal approach possible selves were not readily reinforced in their immediate context, apart from the examples set by UPHS staff who had earned degrees. By living and attending school in a high-poverty context and growing up in families where postsecondary educational attainment was rare if not entirely non-existent, students were intimately familiar with the consequences of an education-independent future. Faced with this possibility, they had the choice between accepting or rejecting it. Because they sought to reject it, they each had distal avoidance possible selves that motivated their present behavior. It appeared students' sense of who they did want to become in the future was often balanced by these perceptions of who they did not want to become, although their assessments of the latter seemed to often be what more readily came to mind as they discussed their pursuit of college.

RQ2c: What proximal possible selves relate to their more distal, college-going possible self?

RQ2d: To what extent do they consider proximal behavior that supports a college-going possible self to be identity congruent?

This section presents a combined discussion of results for research questions 2c and 2d as students' descriptions of their proximal possible selves that they wished to pursue or avoid tended to illuminate which proximal behaviors felt identity congruent and incongruent. They described their desire to engage in proximal behaviors that supported the pursuit of college. More commonly, they described the behavior and mindset of the student body at large at UPHS that felt identity incongruent and modeled proximal possible selves that they wished to avoid. This included the tendency of their peers to criticize college as an unworthy pursuit, a mindset they sometimes struggled to reject given the evidence in their immediate environment.

Identity Congruence of Academic Effort and Achievement

All students in this study cared about their classes, their grades, and the implications that their academic performance had on their future ambitions. LaQuia described her personal standards for success, "I do not like Bs. I just want to get straight As for some reason." Shauntel had a similar ambition, "I want to make scholar roll. I'm tired of honor role. You can't have no grade below a B for scholar roll." Her brother described this as an enduring identity for her, "Ever since she went to preschool she loved school. She had no problem with going. She always wanted to go to school." Jasmine also pursued academic achievement and accolades, "On my recent report card I almost had scholar roll...Nothing below a B." Adrian cared about doing well in school, but acknowledged that he could probably perform better than his current grades suggested, "I

think I am a good student but sometimes I can get distracted, which is normal." His mom pushed him to do better, "I said Adrian, you need to pull your grades up...You can't use the excuse of your environment. That's an excuse to me." Alexus took rigorous classes that challenged her, which she valued not only because they were in line with her pursuit of college but also because she cared about learning, "In most of my classes I like learning it because it's like filling my brain. I have learned a lot this year." By her mom's account, she had always done well in school, particularly in relation to her peers, "She just smarter than everybody else. Her mind is set on learning." Alexus described how her peers had often described her academic achievement and mindset as "acting White," reflecting, "I remember in third grade I was talking and a student asked me, 'Why she talking like that?' I never knew what I talked like, but I always talked White."

For Tavonne, his academic performance and class rank were important to him. Both were impacted by the adversity he faced in the previous year when his mom passed, "Because you know when you drop your grades, it's not easy to pull your grades up in one year...So I am just trying and pushing." Tavonne expressed how rare it was for students in his school to achieve academically, acknowledging that the top performers at UPHS would likely not be ranked as high at other schools. He was frustrated with his peers for their lack of effort, "I think I am a standout student…I'm not being cocky or anything, but I just think differently than the rest of the kids is what I would say." Tavonne and LaQuia both had a group of friends who cared about school and reinforced this proximal approach possible self for them. Both had friends who had graduated before them and went on to college. Still, they were immersed in an environment where most of the students did not seem to put forth effort in school. LaQuia described how even in her advanced classes, she experienced peers trying to cheat off her work, "I feel sad for them.

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Because they don't do the work but then expect them to get a bigger or a higher grade than I do." Both Tavonne and LaQuia acknowledged how their academic performance made it more difficult to fit in with the student body at large at UPHS. However, their proximity to graduation had provided some perspective on what was soon in store for their peers, as LaQuia reflected, "Do they really think when they get out in the world they can continue to act like this?"

Several participating students described how their peers would often not even do easy assignments, attributing this mindset to a lack of social acceptance for trying in class. I witnessed this behavior multiple times when I came to UPHS, often evidenced by students walking out of classes and wandering the hallways. In one instance, I saw an underclassmen male student sitting in a chair outside of his class holding a blank worksheet. "He want me to do this," he explained, gesturing back into the classroom in the direction of his teacher. I asked how it was going so far and he replied, "I'm just sitting out here long enough for him to forget about me so I can go to the library." Alexus attributed this type of mindset to individual decisions rather than the school at large, "It's not that the school is bad. It's just people don't want to do what it takes to get them far. So they want to take things the easy way."

Proximal Avoidance Possible Selves Modeled by Peer Behavior and Mindset

Participating students were consistently critical about the behavior and general mindset of their peers, exemplifying proximal identities that they wished to avoid. "It's like when they get around their friends and everything, everything changes. They are all mean. Disrespectful. I don't know why people do that." Alexus described the groupthink that occurred in her school, attributing the behavior of her peers to their desire to be accepted socially. "I guess people are trying to fit in like I am." Adrian believed their

behavior was emblematic of a lack of attention to their future plans, "People just don't see the bigger picture. They only see the smaller things." Jasmine described what she witnessed every day at her school, "They loud like they don't care. They walk around in the hallways all day. They will cuss the teacher out." Shauntel's experience was similar, "Like they want to skip class or bully someone else or talk back to a teacher or talk about a teacher, this is why they fail." Tavonne believed the behavior of his peers was reflective of their struggles outside of school. To him, this was no excuse, "I am an example. Things that happen at home cannot be brought to school because it will interfere with your future."

The female students in this study described an additional proximal concern about teenage pregnancy, which male participants did not mention with as much depth or frequency. As discussed in the section for research question 2b, becoming pregnant in adolescence had considerable perceived long-term consequences for Alexus, LaQuia, Shauntel, and Jasmine. They knew people who had children while they were in high school and were unable to accomplish some of their future goals, like college, as a result. This included parents, peers, and people in their neighborhood. This possibility also influenced their proximal possible selves, as they regularly encountered peers who were still in high school and either pregnant or already had a child. Some had dropped out of school and the others either had to use the school's daycare or arrange for outside babysitting. Alexus described some of these peers as having already "given up" on themselves. LaQuia explained that if she had gotten pregnant while in high school, she would have "just messed up all the years of effort I have put in to graduate." While Jasmine similarly rejected this, she still expressed concern that it might happen anyway, "I don't know. Say something happens, like I get pregnant or something, and I can't go (to

college).” It seemed the prevalence of examples of people in her life who had experienced this outcome made her feel that it was a possibility, regardless of her desire to avoid it.

Several students talked about fighting in their school as a behavior that they found particularly prevalent and frustrating. Alexus described how she used to fight when she was younger to try to fit in with her peers, but had since decided it was not congruent with who she was trying to become. LaQuia talked about how the frequency of fights breaking out at UPHS ended up having an adverse effect on the entire school, “We get on code red....We've got to walk through metal detectors every morning...They split girls and boys in Cafeteria A and Cafeteria B like it's going to stop something.” In addition to my observation day at UPHS, the school was on “code red” on two other visits. While I witnessed minor fights (often starting with students playing with each other), I did not experience a large-scale altercation like the ones described by students, parents, and advisors until one afternoon in March. As I waited to be buzzed into the building, a fight had broken out between two students at the SRO desk about 50 feet away from the front doors. Dozens of their peers crowded close to the desk while dozens more stood on each of the two stair cases that framed the fight, shouting threats across to each other. This lasted for approximately one minute until several administrators and officers managed to break up the fight and disperse the crowd.

While the possible selves literature indicates that delinquent behavior such as this may satisfy proximal identities that students wish to pursue like being daring or socially accepted (Oyserman et al., 1993), participants in this study professed the opposite. It was clear from their descriptions that what they saw every day in their school was not congruent with the proximal possible selves that they wished to pursue. As Jasmine

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declared, "I don't want to be like that." She said her mom had instilled something different in her, "I'm just grateful that I wasn't raised like that, like with that type of mentality." Her mom elaborated on Jasmine's desire to be different, "She chooses not to be like a lot of people…That's just not what she into. And I'm proud that she has that mind frame." LaQuia had long endured the social consequences of choosing to have a different mindset than most of her peers at school, inoculating herself to their influence by focusing on her future goals, "I keep my distance from the other stuff that is going on in the hallways and I am going to graduate. I am going to go off and do what I am going to do." Shauntel similarly described feeling frustrated with her peers without allowing it to impact her own ambitions, "It makes me want to hit them but it don't affect my grades." Her brother characterized Shauntel as a spectator rather than participant in the noise in the school, "When she come home she let me know what happened and stuff. But she don't have no problems."

Adrian's term for what he witnessed in his peers every day at UPHS was "negativity." He felt stuck between rejecting what he saw and wanting to improve the situation, "I feel like that's not me. But sometimes I feel like I can also help them." He described a tendency to occasionally give in to peer pressure and engage in "negativity," but that his "positivity" still ultimately won out in the end. His mom shared conversations she had with Adrian about this struggle, "Life is about choice. Everything is about choice. You have to choose to want to do something different." Adrian had internalized her message, "I have to tell myself that's not me. And stick back to reality. Stick back to Adrian." Alexus experienced a similar struggle between trying to be a dedicated student and trying to fit in with the prevailing social norms in the school. "I can tell when I am fading away from myself. I have to bring myself back." Students interpreted the negative

behavior and mindset of their peers as examples of proximal possible selves that they wished to avoid.

Perceptions About and Efforts Towards College

The students participating in this study had ambitions to become the first in their families to graduate from four-year college. For LaQuia and Tavonne, they had established a friend group over time who not only had similar plans but were also actively pursuing them. For Alexus, Adrian, Shauntel, and Jasmine, they were beginning to establish this social support, but still found themselves primarily isolated from their overall peer group in the school. In addition to the preceding evidence regarding their academic efforts, general behavior, and overall mindset running counter to the social norms at UPHS, what set the six students in this study apart seemed to be their willingness to believe that college was actually possible. This belief manifested in their decisions to put forth effort in their classes, be respectful to their teachers, be involved in extracurricular activities, and pursue opportunities that arose. All of this required that they intentionally reject the negative stereotypes about college held by so many of their peers in school and echoed by people in their neighborhoods, several of whom were stuck in a cycle of poverty.

"They just, they don't feel any of that internal pressure," one advisor discussed the prevailing attitude toward college by UPHS students. "And I don't know what it is… That's like the most common kid." Alexus and Shauntel both explained how many of their classmates believed that college was not worth pursuing because it was not necessarily a guarantee of success in the future. As Alexus explained, "It will get you farther than what a high school diploma will get you. But most of them don't get that." Students explained that their peers also considered college to be more of the same thing

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they were experiencing in high school, and therefore chose not to pursue it because they were "done with school." Tavonne had peers who now talked about going to college because they were seniors, but he believed their casual attitudes about it would not lead them to be successful even if they made it there. LaQuia offered a similar account of classmates who vacillated between saying they wanted to go to college, and proclaiming that they were going to drop out of high school. Adrian believed his peers were not very informed about it, contributing to an overall lack of a college-going culture at UPHS, "They don't talk much about college here when they should be." Still, he believed they wanted something better for their future but self-sabotaged the pursuit, "I feel like with some of those students, deep inside they really want to go." Although the pursuit of college may have been related to their distal possible selves, attitudes about that pursuit were more proximal. Students in this study had to reject negative stereotypes about themselves and about postsecondary education to be the type of student who would be a good candidate for it. Their distal pursuit of college required that they first successfully navigating this proximal struggle.

RQ2c/2d Conclusion

Students were immersed in an environment that lacked a strong college-going culture, by the account of multiple stakeholders. Because of this, they found themselves among persistent examples of behavior by their peers that ran counter to their future ambitions, which they had to actively reject to effectively pursue four-year college. Informing research question 2c, it was clear that they had proximal possible selves that were related to their distal, college-going possible self. While they each professed a desire to approach proximal identities like doing well in school, they elaborated much more on the proximal behaviors that they found to be identity incongruent and therefore

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wished to avoid. This presented a challenge to these students as they had to select a path less socially acceptable at UPHS. Informing research question 2d, while their pursuit of college may have felt congruent with an idiocentric identity for these students (independent of social influence), it was often incongruent with the prevailing allocentric identity in the school of underachievement. While Tavonne and LaQuia had established a small but supportive peer group, the process of doing so was tumultuous. Alexis, Adrian, Jasmine, and Shauntel still found themselves largely isolated by their peers in their pursuit of college. For all participating students, their explanation of their college ambitions required that they elaborate on the proximal possible selves that they wished to approach and avoid. By their account, they encountered more of the latter.

RQ1c: How do socializers influence students' perception of a college-going possible self?

Many people in participants' lives socialized their possible selves. This included how proximal they considered their college-going possible self to be (2a), what distal avoidance possible selves they perceived and how balanced they were with a perception of themselves in college (2b), and what proximal possible selves they considered identity congruent and incongruent (2c/d). Socialization occurred primarily through peers and adults modeling behaviors and outcomes, which informed who students believed they could become in the future. On occasion, the people that students encountered in their daily lives reinforced their perceptions of themselves as college-going, but more commonly exemplified education-independent outcomes.

Participants frequently described a peer culture at UPHS that, by and large, did not approach their pursuit of college with much urgency. By Shauntel's account, this was primarily true about underclassmen, "Ninth graders you just get into high school, tenth

grade you start getting used to high school, eleventh grade you start being serious." An advisor described how common the sentiment was in the student body that college was not happening for them anytime soon, "It is really hard to get them to think about it, because they think it is so far away." Another explained that this was because college was not much of a priority, "They look at it definitely as far away because it is not something that they are really looking forward to…you have to introduce it to them and then they think about it." LaQuia and Tavonne tended to feel that college was very soon for them because they were almost finished with high school. However, they described how actually being close to college did not always translate into a sense of proximity for their fellow seniors, as LaQuia elaborated, "Yeah people are like 'I'mma drop out. I don't have time for this.'…I'm like ok three years ago, two years ago, it's a long time. But it passed by so quickly!" As one advisor explained, students often did not realize the consequences of not making an early priority of their pursuit of college until it was too late, "You should have gotten your act together in the ninth grade. Because it counts, everything counts. Everything is for keeps." As research question 1d will discuss, advisors often worked to actively combat this mindset in the UPHS student body. Participants in this study primarily subscribed to a belief that college was proximal, which required them to refute the socializing influence of the majority of their peers.

The distal avoidance possible selves that students described in research question 2b were primarily socialized by adults that students encountered outside of school, who often modeled lifestyles that they did not wish for themselves in the future. Each had family members who had modeled a life without college education, which often included living in poverty. This often put students in a complicated position of having great affection for someone whose lifestyle they did not wish to replicate. LaQuia

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repeatedly discussed how much she cared about her grandfather, but also how much she did not want to struggle like he did. Going to college allowed her to show him that she was receptive to the lessons that he sought to teach her. Neither of Tavonne's parents had a high school diploma, but he admired his mother's trademark work ethic. He believed he was applying similar commitment to his pursuit of college. Adrian was eager to not be another person in his family who "didn't make it." This included his mom, who had to drop out from college when she became pregnant with him. His pursuit of a different outcome for his own future was highly motivated by his belief that he could "finish what she started." For Alexus and Jasmine, they had the added influence of living in a neighborhood that was particularly low-income where residents were less likely to have educational attainment and more likely to engage in criminal behavior. They pursued four-year college, at least in part, to no longer live where they currently did.

For all participating students, peers served as key socializers of their distal avoidance possible selves in two primary ways. First, they often professed a mindset about college that it was not worth pursuing because it was not necessarily a guarantee of a secure future. Second, they exemplified the consequences of not attaining higher education by often ending up in low-wage employment or otherwise perpetuating stereotypes that students in this study perceived and wished to avoid. This skeptical mindset communicated by their peers introduced doubt that college would be worth it, but the example they set confirmed that going to college was more likely to help them avoid a life of financial struggle. While it was sometimes difficult to stick with their pursuit of a college going possible self in a school where few of their classmates actively did the same, their pursuit was often reinforced by recognizing the distal consequences of their peers' proximal behavior.

Peers also socialized participants' proximal possible selves. All students in this study described proximal approach identities related to doing well in school. They cared about their grades, even if they believed they sometimes performed below their ability level. LaQuia and Tavonne, both upperclassmen, had built a small group of friends who also cared about school and reinforced this proximal approach possible self in them. When younger participants put forth effort towards doing well in school, it largely ran counter to the mindset of their classmates. Instead, peers by and large socialized proximal avoidance possible selves for participants. They found their behavior to be identity incongruent, and routinely expressed frustration about what they witnessed every day. While this sometimes served as a balance for their proximal approach possible selves related to doing well in school, it sometimes did the opposite. Adrian described occasionally slipping into "negativity" and not taking his classes as seriously as he should. Shauntel criticized her underclassmen peers for not putting forth enough effort in school, but also acknowledged that she did not think she needed to give it her all until junior year. It was clear that peers had considerable influence over participants' proximal behavior in relation to their pursuit of a college-going possible self.

RQ1c Conclusion

"What others like me are now, I can become," (Markus, Nurius, & Goodstein, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves tend to be highly socialized, as was the case for students in the present study. The peers and adults that they routinely encountered tended to influence how they saw themselves in the proximal and distal future. The lack of urgency that their peers had for pursuing college tended to run counter to participants' instincts that college was coming soon and that they needed to actively invest in its pursuit. While students professed distal possible selves that they wished to approach related to four-year

college, they were unlikely to be exemplified by people they encountered outside of UPHS staff, often leading to the generation of distal avoidance possible selves in response to this socialization. Similarly, although students had a desire to approach proximal possible selves related to academic achievement and building their candidacy for college, it was rarely shared by their peers. Because of this, they frequently described how peers socialized proximal avoidance possible selves that felt identity congruent for what they wanted for themselves. Participants in the present study had a desire to do well in school and ultimately graduate from four-year college, but often found that they had to balance those ambitions with salient examples of who they did not want to become, proximally and distally.

RQ3a: How do students perceive the value of going to college?

Students offered myriad reasons for wanting to pursue college that largely aligned with the value structure of EVT. These values offered considerable insight into what made college important to them, informing their decision-making processes. Their descriptions of the utility, intrinsic, and attainment value of college highlighted themes related to their thoughts about the future and assessments of their present contexts. These descriptions often included rich accounts of students' possible selves related to their pursuit of college, both those that they wished to approach and avoid.

Utility

Utility value represents how well a task fulfills a future goal, and tends to be the least personally meaningful subjective task value (Eccles, 1983). Students in this study were well aware of the utility value of earning a college degree, despite hearing counter messages from peers and seeing examples of people who had dropped out with accumulated debt. When they discussed the utility value of college, it was generally

related to two things: the career and lifestyle it would afford them, and the increased likelihood of avoiding an undesirable outcome. While these two themes were certainly related, the latter did more to emphasize the role that their high-poverty context played in their decision-making processes about college.

Career and lifestyle. The challenge for Shauntel was that she had not yet figured out what "real" job was worth pursuing, preventing her from fully committing to going to college yet. Still, she indicated that if she did not eventually find passion for a career that required going to four-year college, she would just pick one that did to capitalize on the financial opportunity, "I feel like if I am not getting paid enough I would rather go to college and get paid so so so so much money." By Jasmine's account, the utility value of college was commonly communicated at her private middle school, but thought that this was obvious and did not need to be reinforced, "That's like one thing they always talked about was bettering our future and all of this mess." Adrian did not have a singular career in mind that was contingent on going to college, but knew that college was the way to get where he wanted to be, "I feel like college, it has something. It changes people's lives, you know? And I feel like it would change my life too."

LaQuia described conversations within her group of friends about how excited they were about the lifestyle they would have because of their pending college degrees and the careers they would afford them, "We be talking about how we going to be older. We going to go out and go on vacations and stuff…So it's like, I gotta be on my stuff." Tavonne perhaps had the strongest orientation towards the utility value of college for his future goals, and sometimes described the subsequent career as a veterinarian primarily in relation to its financial stability, "All that money. Just imagine that money! I am going to be the flyest grandpa ever!" This had been his plan for some time, "I knew you had to go

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to college at some point. And I was going to go…I am just like my mom. I mean it. If I say I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it." For Tavonne, remaining oriented to what he wanted to accomplish in the future was instinctive, "I have long-term goals rather than short-term goals."

Avoiding undesirable outcomes. Perhaps related to how obvious she considered the utility value of college to be, Jasmine described the alternative that was frequently role modeled in her neighborhood. Few (if any) of her neighbors had attained higher education and many had dropped out of high school. To Jasmine, going to college would make it more likely that her future would be different, "I don't want to be stuck there all my life...Going to college I have a better chance of being what I want to be." Shauntel believed that without college, she was almost certain to struggle, "I think if you don't go to college you just going to be homeless. Nobody is going to support you." While Adrian also communicated a desire to not live in poverty as an adult, he was primarily concerned with making sure his mom did not have to continue to struggle. He tried to share his paycheck from his part-time job with her, but knew that college would allow him to make a more significant contribution. One advisor described students like Adrian who saw college as a vehicle for helping to eventually support their parents financially, "They definitely are appreciative of everything that their parents have done for them and they want to be able to help their parents out. They want to be able to help their family out."

For Alexus, college was an opportunity get out of her neighborhood. Her utility value for going to college was less about the amount of money she would make, and more about how it would allow her to not experience the same struggle as other people in her life, "I don't want to be out there hustling for money because I can't see the end. Because here it's not the end of the road." Although she had her doubts that college

would be a guaranteed exit ticket from her neighborhood, she thought it was worth a try, "I just need to get somewhere that I know will get me far. Even if I don't get far." She felt that if she did not go to college, a life of poverty was highly likely, "Not going to college is kind of like, that's when I really would lose a lot." She was not the only one at UPHS who had this desire to build a better future for herself than the one she inherited, as one advisor observed, "Some students will straight up tell you 'I don't want to live my childhood again.' And you tell them, cool. How do we do that?" Alexus recognized how college could take her far, "I don't think college is everything…(but) if you see the things I want in life you would be like, 'You're not going to get that with a regular job so I think you want to take this route instead.'"

The utility value of going to college for LaQuia was also less about the potential for a lucrative future and more about avoiding a continuation of her current circumstances, "I have high expectations for myself because the way I was raised and I saw how my mom and the rest of my family struggled to provide for us. It's just I don't want my kids going through it either." Her mom was not the only one who role modeled this lesson for her, as she had also witnessed her grandfather's financial adversity, "He says 'I'm living proof.'...he said he used to eat everything off train tracks and stuff like that. It was just like, are you serious?" One college advisor described how stories like this tended to come out in students' personal statements for college applications, "For some of them it turned into, I wanted to go to college because I just wanted to go, to I want to go to college because I don't want to end up the same way my family did." According to LaQuia, she was not only the first in her family to pursue four-year college, but also the first to take her grandfather's message to heart and invest in the utility value of education.

Intrinsic

The intrinsic value of a task is related to how enjoyable or interesting it is (Eccles, 1983). For the students in this study, they described the intrinsic value of college in two primary ways: through their interest in their intended majors, and in the overall experience of going to college. While they recognized that college was necessary for the type of lifestyles they wanted to have, many saw it as more than a means to an end. It appeared they were looking forward to the experience itself.

Interest in major or career. For Jasmine, her future career was already clear, "I like kids and I have patience so I think I would be a good teacher and counselor. People always tell me I give good advice." She described her eagerness to learn more about working with elementary school students, including asking her tutor about her experiences, "She is in college and she majored in elementary education, so I have been talking to her about it. And I just recently did a project on it. So I have been doing my research." Her involvement in various programs had helped to nurture her intrinsic value of college, including the Boys and Girls Club and opportunities made available to her through school. These programs allowed her to visit colleges and be around people who were either in college or had recently graduated. An advisor explained what programs like these tend to mean for students who have not had previous exposure to college through their families, "They want to be that. They want to do that...it encourages them to do better in school and to go harder."

By LaQuia's account, there was never a doubt in her mind about what she wanted to do with her life, "I have wanted to be a doctor since I was five years old. So it's never been oh I'm going to do this and this and this. No. I stick to one thing." Similarly, Tavonne described a long-held desire to become a veterinarian. While it was highly

related to the lifestyle it could afford him, he was clearly very interested in the subject of veterinary science, as reinforced by his class at the Career Center, "I saw a dissection of an elephant...I mean imagine this whole room. It would take up this whole room...And that was just lying down." He was eager to share what he had already learned, "The animal body is more complex than ours. They get all of the genes that we get plus more because they have more diseases than we get."

Adrian wanted to explore his passion for art in college. He was not fully committed to a career as a professional artist, but he knew that it needed to be a part of his future, "I want to be that type of person where they see my name at the bottom of the drawing and they know that person." Alexus had a deep interest in studying psychology, as evidenced by her tendency during our interviews to ask me questions about my background and the purposes of the study, "I have always thought about that. Like 'Why do we do this?'...I have just always been attached to people and why they do this. Why they do that." She found people fascinating, and spent her days studying their behavior, "I would like to go into the brain and rearrange things. Like little experiments."

College experience. In addition to being interested in their anticipated majors, students frequently described being excited about the college experience itself. Tavonne was looking forward to his upcoming orientation, living in a dorm, and going to football games. Most of Tavonne's friends were also going to college, which was an important influence for many students, according to one advisor, "Some of them are peer driven because their peers they want to go to school so they try to look at the same schools that their peers are going to." Adrian was not entirely sure what college would entail, but his mom's stories made at least one thing clear, "I know that she said college is very fun. I know that." His intrinsic value for college reflected in his excitement about the

opportunity to live on his own, learn new things, and meet new people, "the more you get around, the more people want to know you." He felt that it had a lot to offer in addition to a degree, "When you go to college you get to do new things. You get to learn new things, and that's a fun way of doing things in your life." Jasmine believed that going to college was an important life experience that she did not want to miss. She wanted to be able to reflect on the experience and say to herself, "I was there. I did that."

In addition to her interest in studying psychology motivating her pursuit of college, Alexus had intrinsic value related to the experience of attending. She was eager to be around a diverse group of people, "In college, you'll see Black kids but it won't be just Black kids. You'll see every race…They bring to college how they grew up where they were from, all in one place." LaQuia was also interested in the possibility of attending a diverse college. While she was somewhat anxious about the idea of going to a Predominately White Institution (PWI), she also was not sure that she wanted to go to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), "I don't want to limit myself to going to an HBCU...I want to get out and explore different opportunities and just go outside my culture and learn somebody else's culture." She indicated that if she did go to a PWI she would want to join a group for African-American female students, or create one if it did not already exist. She was used to being a leader.

Shauntel described being highly interested in eventually going to college. However, she believed having this intrinsic value was not enough of a reason to go. It had to be for a career that required a four-year college degree, and at the time of her participation in this study she did not yet have one in mind, "I still want to go to college but I still don't think my job is a real job." As an aspiring child care worker, she felt stuck between wanting to pursue something that interested her but did not feel "important" or

sufficiently justify her going to college, "Because who needs college knowledge to take care of a child? What you need that for is more important jobs." She emphasized that this was just how she felt at the time, and was receptive to another trajectory that might ultimately allow her to satisfy her intrinsic value for college, "I have options. That's about it. I haven't made up my mind."

Attainment

Attainment value is the level of personal meaning that one derives from participating in a task (Eccles, 1983). While it is closely related to intrinsic value, the primary difference is in the identity-confirming nature of the task beyond simply being enjoyable or interesting (Eccles, 2009). Students in this study considered college to have attainment value. It was personally meaningful for them to be the first in their families to go, and it offered them the opportunity to be a role model for younger siblings and cousins. For some, it gave them a sense of purpose in using their eventual careers to help people. It also commonly helped students establish a sense of identity, sometimes related to their racial identity.

First in the family. There were several reasons why Adrian wanted to go to college, but one weighed particularly heavy on his mind, his mom. "I have to finish because she didn't get the chance to finish." Adrian and his mom had talked about him going to college for his whole life. Her brief time there before she got pregnant with him afforded her stories to share about her experience, "I always tell my children since they were babies to get that degree, you know? Have something under your belt and if possible, get more than one." Adrian had internalized this message, and believed that he was finishing what his mom had started, "I feel like I could take her spot, you know? Since she didn't go I could end up going for her." It was not hard for LaQuia to picture

herself at her college graduation, "I will be happy. Overjoyed…I am going to be the first one to graduate high school and college and that's doing something with myself." Like Adrian, LaQuia felt a sense of duty towards her family, particularly her grandfather, "If I miss the bus he will drive me all the way to school knowing that he has to go to sleep to go to work tonight…it was too much (for my mom) paying for like senior dues and stuff like that. But he made sure I had everything to graduate."

For Jasmine, just wanting to go to college to get a degree was not enough of a reason to go, "I feel like there is no passion behind what you want to do then you shouldn't be doing it." Her desire to go to college was not just about her, "I already wanted to go for myself, but just to see my mom happy it makes me want to do it even more." Her mom expressed confidence that she would be the first to make it, "I am looking forward to those moments when I can say, 'Oh I gotta drop Jasmine off. She starts college today.'" Tavonne had a different take about the potential attainment value of college, "Yeah that's what you are supposed to do. So it's not like 'Oh my God I am going to college.' No. That's what I am supposed to be doing." While he acknowledged that it was a significant thing for him to be the first in his family to go, he believed this would be more important to them than to him. In particular, he recognized how important it would have been to his mom, "You know, not to me, to her it is though." His decision to become a vet also related to the expectations his mom had set forth for him when he was younger, "She wanted me to be a doctor and I am basically becoming a doctor." He reflected again on the adversity that accompanied her passing, and related it to his pursuit of college. He believed that that it would have stopped someone else from going, but there was something different about him. "Resilience. If I want to do it I am going to do it. It's just me."

It was also personally meaningful to Shauntel to be the first in her family to graduate from a four-year college. She believed it was incumbent upon her to be the role model she had never experienced in her family, "They didn't, so I think I should." While she was looking forward to being a positive example, she was also frustrated that she had to be the first to do it, "I would like to rub it in their faces. Show them I did something with my life even though they didn't lead me by example." Her brother recognized his little sister's ambition to be first, "She tries to be an example. She's not a follower." Shauntel's frustration with having to be a role model was perhaps related to her being among the youngest of her siblings. By contrast, Adrian had two younger brothers and was eager to set an example for them, "Seeing me going to college would give them that mindset of 'oh my brother is going to college so I can do it also. Because he is achieving so why can't I?'" He also believed his experiences could be a model for other people with similar a background and ambition, "I can say, 'OK I have been in your shoes. But you should do this instead. And look up to your future. Because it can be better than this.'" LaQuia was also eager to be a role model for her younger brother, who she believed would have an easier pathway to college if she was able to make it, "He doesn't have no role model that did it…So when I graduate I know I'm going to give him a ticket so he will know the feeling to say that you made it but you not done yet."

Helping others. Students sometimes described a desire to go to college so they could help others. LaQuia wanted to open a trauma center for women, which she recognized as a local need. Adrian talked about wanting to be someone who "changed the world." His mom described how this was a long-held ambition for him, "When he was a little boy, I still have the picture, he would draw the world or a circle or something, and he was about the world, helping the world…he has always been that child." During our

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interviews, I had asked him about how going to college would help him with this big plan that he had. "That's a good question. I don't know. Maybe I will see when I get there." Alexus believed that going to college aligned with her plans to help other people, "I am trying to be a good person…even if for some reason I don't go to college, I will still always try to be the best person I can be." She believed that the struggles she had endured in the past added meaning to her pursuit of college, "I feel like I have to prove myself…I think my past is the reason I am this person I am today." She was motivated by the service-oriented career she could have with a college degree, "I want to be remembered by helping people. That's why I want to be a psychologist…I just want to help people that's like me."

   Identity confirmation. In addition to the attainment value of being the first in her family to go to college, the thought of having earned a degree gave Shauntel a sense of personal pride, "I would hang up my degree, like hang it up like that," she pointed to the wall in our interview room. "People would walk in and be like 'oh she went to college.' Yes. I would feel so important." Alexus recognized how rare it was for someone to make it out of her neighborhood and go to college. In case she had any doubts about whether or not she belonged there, she had people to remind her, "I can name all of the teachers I had in high school because they all want me to go…A part of me is doing it for them but I want to do it for myself." Her mom offered a similar account about how obvious it was that her daughter belonged in college, "Everybody that she come in contact with teacher wise, it's always college for her." Although she may have doubted herself from time to time, Alexus never needed much convincing about college being worth a try, "I think it's worth proving yourself. Deep down I know I have a desire to be great."

   While Jasmine believed that she had several people in her life that were "rooting"

for her success, she also described people who had doubted her, including some teachers. The former gave her sense of duty to fulfill their expectations, and the latter motivated her to exceed them, "It just makes me feel like I gotta do what I gotta do even more…get out of here and rub it in y'all face." Her mom expressed pride for her daughter's mindset, "I love it. That's what it's supposed to be. It's not supposed to be about what other people want for you. It's what you want for yourself." LaQuia had overcome a lot to get to where she was by the time of this study, including living in poverty, enduring childhood trauma, and navigating a school setting where her ambitions largely left her ostracized by her peers. It all just fueled her attainment value for being the first in her immediate family to graduate from high school, let alone four-year college, "I've gotta move on with my life and leave it all in the past…I'm not going to let something stop me from doing what I want to do."

Tavonne learned from a professor he met on a college visit how rare it was to be an African-American male in the field of veterinary science. While he was already motivated to pursue this career, this added a layer of attainment value related to what it would mean to him as a Black man. Adrian also expressed how his race motivated him to go to college and be successful, "That's a big thing with Black people. They don't get a lot of credit when they do their time on some things. You always end up seeing a White person get the credit." His mom shared a similar sentiment, "He is a young Black man...So you have to be a little more. You have to be a little harder. You have to try a little bit more than someone else." Adrian was well-aware of the implications of him going to college, not so much for his own benefit, but what it might do for others. He reflected on the tendency for people to believe that something was possible for them once

they saw someone else like them accomplish it, "I don't know why it does that. I just know it's like a miracle thing."

RQ3a Conclusion

Students in this study offered myriad reasons for their pursuit of becoming the first in their families to graduate from four-year college. Their utility value was not only based on how college would allow them to get the kind of job, salary, and lifestyle they wanted, but also because it was a practical way for them to avoid a lifestyle that they did not want. Their intrinsic value was often related to the types of majors they wanted to pursue, as well as the overall experience of attending. Attainment value was often associated with family members that students wanted to make proud, or the opportunity to be a role model for younger siblings. Additionally, overcoming adversity to make it to college often added a layer of personal meaning for each of these students to fulfill this ambition. It was clear that all participants had no shortage of reasons for wanting to become first-generation college students.

RQ3b: How successful do students expect to be in college?

RQ3c: How confident are students in their ability to do college preparatory work?

As students in this study described their present ability beliefs and expectancies, they shared how these elements of their decision-making processes might carry them over the finish line or stop the pursuit entirely. This section will combine research questions 3b (expectancies) and 3c (ability beliefs) because participants tended to describe them together when discussing how confident they were as potential college students. As their stories will illustrate, it was clear that this confidence was not exclusively related to college itself, as there were other factors at play that required their assessments of how successful they might be.

Ability Beliefs

By and large, students had high present ability beliefs in relation to their pursuit of college. Doing well in school was not an issue for Shauntel. She knew what her capabilities were, even if she occasionally performed lower than what she could actually do, **"**School is easy. If I have a bad grade, it's probably because I didn't really do my work or I didn't turn in my work. So if it's just school wise I think I will be OK." Performance, for Shauntel, was based more on effort than ability. Her pursuit of college was reflective of this mindset, as she believed she could make it there but wondered if she really wanted to yet. Adrian also described his performance as a student in relation to his current effort, rating his confidence from a scale of one to ten as a, "seven. But, I feel like if I get some help on my back I can really be a ten." Adrian was less concerned with what he was currently doing, and more with what he was capable of doing, "If I ask for help I will end up getting better in the things I am now." He considered himself to be a "curious person," and that he had an internal drive to do well academically, "I feel like because I know more things that other people don't know, that I feel like other people should know." His mom made sure to reinforce this belief in him, "I said son, think outside the box. You can accomplish anything. If you can think it you can do it."

Jasmine also described being confident in her abilities as a student, which was reinforced by a history of doing well in comparison to her peers, "I am very confident because I have always been ahead of my grade." She attributed this to her time at a private school before she came to UPHS, where she believed she was pushed to do rigorous coursework and they had high expectations for her, "I didn't have to worry about doing well because we was already ahead of them. So I came in there and it was like most of the stuff I had already knew." Like Jasmine, LaQuia had built up confidence in

her academic abilities by doing rigorous work that put her ahead of her grade level, "I took 9th grade English in 8th grade and it's always been like I've been taking advanced classes." When she came to UPHS, she was already accustomed to doing challenging coursework and was eager to continue to push herself, "It was just like I did a lot of reports so I knew, like OK I can write stuff." Despite believing that she could do well in school and being willing to put in the effort, she described a contextual element that sometimes threatened her success, "When you got all these distractions it's just hard to focus on one thing because teachers taking they time off from teaching you to learn and fussing at the kids because they are a distraction to others." As described in research questions 2c and 2d, doing well in school was important to LaQuia, but the noise often made it difficult to fulfill that proximal possible self. Their behavior frustrated LaQuia, but their underperformance made her prouder of her own accomplishments, "At the end of the semester if I get an A because I did it and you didn't do it, then you should know why." Adrian, Alexus, Shauntel, and Jasmine also discussed how hard it was to focus in class because of distractions by their peers.

Overall, Tavonne believed that he was a strong student, although he experienced a dip in performance the previous year when he was dealing with the passing of his parents. He was enrolled in all of the Advanced Placement classes available to seniors at UPHS, as well as the most rigorous math class. He had higher confidence in some subjects (e.g. science) than others (e.g. math), but worried overall about whether or not he was being sufficiently prepared academically in his school. He described conversations he had with friends at other schools who were in the same classes as him, "They are doing things in (math) that we haven't even started here." Alexus also expressed measured confidence in her abilities, **"**I feel like I am a great student. I don't know what the teachers think. Maybe

you would have to ask them. Because they can see me better than I can see myself."

Alexus knew her own capabilities and had always done well in school. Her mom

confirmed this tendency for her daughter to be invested in her education, "She cares

about school. She is good in school. She an excellent child...Always. Always." Still,

Alexus' doubt in herself crept through from time to time, particularly in her more

rigorous classes, "Sometimes I get on my phone and I'm like 'I'm not going to pass this.'

And then other times I put down my phone and I'm like 'Yes I could!'"

For Alexus, her beliefs in her abilities as a student were quite different than her

overall self-esteem, which tended to be low and held her back from believing that certain

ambitions, like college, could be possible for her. "Imagine someone in your ear telling

you the whole time 'You are not good enough. You will never amount to anything. You

are going to be just like your dad.'" She knew that if she made it to college, that she

could be successful there. She knew how to work hard and make good grades (her self-

reported GPA was the highest of all students in this study). She believed she had instincts

for the career in psychology that she wanted to pursue. She had people in her life,

including family members and teachers, who built her up and told her that she could be

successful, "They say they can tell by the kind of student I am…I think they don't have to

look far to know that I want to get ahead in life."

Future Expectancies

LaQuia had little doubt that she would go to college, "I am going no matter

what." She believed that her future was entirely in her control, "As long as I put in the

work, it will all pay off in the long run. So I think everything will fall into place." She

had built a "do whatever it takes" mentality and refused to align with the prevailing

narrative among her peers, "Most of the people I know said 'Oh I'm going to stay home

for a year and then go to college' and never go. Or get so used to the life and just work at

Burger King and lower their standards...I have high expectations of myself." She felt like

she had to be confident in her future success because not going to college was "not an

option." To her, it felt entirely in her control, "I can be whatever I want to be in life."

Tavonne, another senior, had also made up his mind about college, **"**There's no

might not go to college. I am going. Going. Been accepted. I am going to go." After all

that he had overcome with the death of his parents, Tavonne had developed a mindset

that carried him through moments of doubt. "There's no 'no'...I will get it. Maybe not

now. I will get it though. Trust me. It happens all the time." He believed that this

mentality was important to his pursuit of college. Tavonne claimed that the adversity he

had faced in his life was typical of students at UPHS. For Tavonne, his future success

depended on how he navigated the challenges that inevitably arose, "You have to be for it

to be something. You have to be confident." He had people who encouraged him and

others that doubted him, and by his account neither had much of an influence over who

he planned to become, "I tell myself about my future." Despite this professed confidence

and independence, Tavonne described occasionally encountered fits of self-doubt

regarding how successful he could be as a college student. During those times, he leaned

on his guardian, "A couple of weeks ago I told my guardian, I was like 'I don't think I am

going to do good in college.'...And he told me, he said 'you'll do good, you'll do

fine…you are a good learner.'"

Adrian also had little doubt that he was going to college, "I will end up going to

college no matter what because I am that type of person. I am going to achieve no matter

what, my goals, my dreams." By his mom's account, he had always talked about going

and never considered a future that did not involve college, "He don't really talk about that

much because his mind is kind of on that. He never really wonder about what if he don't go to school." He not only believed that he would make it there, but also that he would do well as a college student. Again, this was related to his willingness to work hard and ask for help when needed, "I feel like it's not going to take me very long to catch on." Adrian's confidence that he would make it to college was based on a long-held identity that had been reinforced by supportive people in his life. When they told him that he could do or be anything, he believed them, "Yeah I'm that type of person."

By Jasmine's account, she had also always believed that she would be going to college. Because she had done well in school she expected she could handle the academic work, "Now I am used to doing more than the minimum, which is the regular, for them it is the least for me. So I strive past that." Additionally, she believed that she had skills and traits that would serve her well in pursuit of a degree, like time management, "I could stay up all night and still get up and do what I gotta do." For Jasmine, her confidence in her present ability beliefs and expectancies for future success were all about her mindset, "It's like my mom told me…if I have a positive attitude about it and think positive on it and everything I will be able to get where I want to be." For Jasmine, maintaining this outlook that her mom had reinforced in her meant that she was not letting the adversity she had experienced in her life dictate her future. "I just want to be able to do stuff in life and you won't be able to do nothing if you don't have the right type of mentality and always doubt yourself and use other things as excuses." She believed that her current successes in school could build momentum to carry her into college, "If I can do it this year, then it should be a breeze for the next year. Just set my goal higher each time."

As we wrapped up our second interview, Jasmine revealed some insecurity about her future expectancies as she posed her own question about college, "I have always been

nervous about like, I know this is what I want to do but what if I change my mind last minute?" Because she had discussed how she "always knew" that she would go to college, I asked what she meant. She clarified that she had seen many other people who wanted to go to college but had something happen that prevented them from going. Like the other students in this study, Jasmine shared possible selves that she wished to avoid in the future related to her college-going possible self. Like Alexus, she expressed doubt that she would actually be able to avoid those outcomes. She had been doing well so far, including in her classes, but still wondered if it would last, "If I fail then where will I end up? And how long it is going to take for me to get where I need to be?" An advisor recounted similar conversations with students about believing that things will go well, even if it did not always feel that way, "I keep telling them, this is an investment. It's going to come out in the long run. Not right now, but in the long run." Her mom was confident that Jasmine was going to make it to college, even when her daughter had moments of doubt, "I have faith in her."

Jasmine was not the only student to express some doubt in her future expectancies for success. Shauntel was confident that she would go, but was less certain as to when, "I feel like I am going to college. It might take time. It might not. But I will eventually go." While she believed that she was a strong student and would be capable of doing well in college, she thought her effort there might parallel her experience in high school, "See I think of it as 9th grade year, you gotta stumble. You've gotta be really really bad… But when you go to 11th and 12th, that's when you start acting good." Shauntel was self-aware of her capabilities as well as her typical level of effort in school. Because of this, she did not question how well she could do if she tried. However, her recognition of her tendency to not commit herself fully to the task at hand led her to not pursue some

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opportunities like scholarships, "I didn't think I was going to win so I didn't fill out the paper...I'm like I'm not going to get this. It's going to be people working harder than I am." Still, she recognized that she would need financial aid, like scholarships, if she was to successfully complete her postsecondary ambitions. She was confident that she would persist if the circumstances allowed, "I will still be in college if I had enough money to stay there long enough." According to her brother, when she put her mind to something she could accomplish anything. College was no different, "In my heart I would know that she was destined to do that."

Despite the evidence of her abilities and encouragement from adults, Alexus' environment undermined her belief that she could be successful, "I get into a fixed mindset where I am like, this is all. That's it. And other times when I am feeling motivated I go, I am going to get out of here. I have already got what it takes." This mindset generated from her observations of her neighborhood, of people who she described as smart and ambitious but still stuck in poverty, "To see that someone that smart couldn't even get out of there. It's like maybe smart doesn't matter." She wondered if it was worth pursuing college if she could already predict the outcome, "I could try to get out. It would be like a journey for me. And then the whole thing doesn't matter because I'm just going to be right back where I am." An advisor shared how common this doubt was in UPHS students, "They just don't know how to get there and that it is actually possible...I get it all the time. 'I want to go to college.' But they are just stuck with the idea of like, 'But can I really?'" For the time being, at least, Alexus was willing to give it a shot, "You know, we can't all get out. But I like trying to."

RQ3b/3c Conclusion

All students in this study more or less expected that they could be successful in college if they made it there, and were confident in their present abilities to do college preparatory work. However, the context in which they made decisions about their pursuit of college sometimes introduced doubt into those expectancies. These students had to believe they could do the necessary work to make it to college while matriculating in a distracting environment where they believed their peers, by and large, were not being supportive of this ambition. Additionally, they had to believe that they could continue to do well in school through times of adversity. Perhaps most notably, these students had to push through doubt about their ability to make it to college, as they frequently heard peers diminishing its value and encountered examples of people who were smart and capable but did not fulfill their college ambitions. They had to believe that their outcome would be different, that they would be the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college. Their expectancies for how successful they could be as a college student were not compromised. Instead, they experienced doubt about the pursuit itself.

RQ3d: How do students perceive the costs of going to college?

"What happens to my mom if I go to college?" As I spoke with students during the recruitment phase of this study, they often had questions about it, but none struck me so much as this one. The girl who asked it seemed to be wrestling with a decision, not just about whether to participate in the study, but about whether she should be pursuing college at all. There were consequences to consider of this choice that impacted more than just her. According to selection criteria, students identified as potential participants had previously expressed an interest in going to college. This girl wanted to go, but the decision to pursue her college-going possible self was more complicated than that. There

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were perceived potential barriers that she would have to overcome, including her consideration of what might happen to her mom if she left her to go to college. She decided not to participate in this study. Her decision to pursue college remains to be seen.

Participants elaborated in great detail about perceived potential barriers to their college pursuit that largely aligned with the cost structure of EVT. Additionally, because college is an expensive pursuit, they described their perceptions of financial cost. Like possible selves, participants described perceptions of both proximal and distal potential barriers associated with going to college. EVT literature typically does not partition costs in this way, but both were clearly involved in students' decision-making processes.

Proximal Effort Cost

EVT defines effort cost as the perceived difficulty of a task (Flake et al., 2015). When considering the task of four-year college, effort cost was attributable not only to how difficult college would be, but also how challenging the pursuit itself would be. Thus, students had to consider the proximal effort cost while they were still in high school in order to decide to actively pursue their postsecondary ambitions. In her discussion about the amount of proximal effort it required for her to be prepared for college, Jasmine offered an important conceptual reminder, "I don't mind it at all." Her willingness to do the work did not mean that she was not aware of the difficulty of the task at hand, "At first, it aggravated me. It's a whole lot to do but…if all this work is necessary to get paid then I'mma do it." Although cost, according to EVT, can lead to someone choosing not to engage in a task, by its definition it is a "perceived" barrier (Flake et al., 2015). Therefore, a student like Jasmine could recognize that a task might be difficult but still choose to engage in it.

Shauntel described how she often did not put forth much effort as a freshman or sophomore, but recognized that she would have to start trying harder as an upperclassman, "In the 11th grade…you can pay attention to your SATs and stuff but I think it's still more important for 12th grade." As a current upperclassman, Tavonne reflected on what he had to go through to pull back up his GPA after his parents passed in his junior year. He simply saw this as him doing what he needed to do to reach his goals, but recognized how him pushing through this adversity might have some deeper meaning for others, "It's weird. I hear that I am an inspiration for people for stuff like that."

Adrian, was aware of the effort that it would take for him to become a strong candidate for college. He believed his grades were not quite where they needed to be, but he was willing to do the work to get them there, "I need to get myself together and get my preparation together and the things for me to get ahead." As a rising junior, he recognized that the time had come to invest more in his academics and wrap his head around the task ahead of him, "I have to prepare myself in that stage…I have to look at some colleges, do the applications and things." Alexus decided to take rigorous courses in high school that tested her current capabilities because she wanted to go to college. She believed that when her peers claimed that finances were the main reason why they would not go to college, they might be covering up their concerns about the proximal workload associated with the pursuit, "I think it's half and half...I think once they see the work they will be like 'Oh I can't do it.'" As described in research question 3c, Alexus sometimes also believed that she could not do college preparatory work in high school, but she was willing to give it a try. Working hard for Alexus felt identity congruent, and was necessary for her to attain the goals that she had for herself, "You have to. If I didn't, oh Jesus. Oh my God. I would be so behind."

LaQuia described all that had been required of her as a senior to be a strong candidate for college, balancing her AP course load with extracurricular involvement on top of applications, "I applied for twelve colleges and you have to keep constantly going back to see if you submitted all of your transcripts." By her account, she was constantly in the college center at the school, filling out applications, requesting transcripts, completing financial aid paperwork, and pursuing scholarships. Before the year began, she knew that the process of enrolling in college would be challenging, but she was committed to following through, "I mean I'm not the type of person that starts something and gives up on it." This mentality set her apart from most of her peers at school, according to one advisor, "When you first asked me about what the struggles are, it's the follow-up. Every kid knows that they are supposed to apply and do financial aid. But they might show up to one thing, do half an application and never pick it up again...you see so much of that." As someone who was accustomed to being busy, LaQuia did not shy away from a difficult task. "As long as I put in the work, it will all pay off in the long run."

Distal Effort Cost

Perhaps because of her tendency to push through academic adversity when she encountered it, Alexus was not particularly concerned about the workload required in college, "I think college is like high school, but like another level." As someone who was closer to attending college, Tavonne was more aware of how challenging it would be, "College is difficult. Point blank. Period. There's no ifs ands or buts about it." Tavonne believed that this would be particularly true for him, as being a pre-veterinary science major would come with especially rigorous courses, "They say that's one of the most difficult programs at the school, and I have to take one of the most difficult classes at the school, which is Organic Chemistry. Molecular chemistry, I gotta take all those science

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classes." Whatever challenges Tavonne perceived ahead of him seemed to pale in comparison to what he had already worked to overcome.

Adrian knew that college classes would be challenging, but not just because of the course material. He believed that being a college student required a higher level of preparation and commitment, "Yeah class wise, getting on time. Keeping up with learning with new things in the classes." As described in research question 3b, he was confident that he would be able to do well and could "pick up on things quickly." He also discussed how he was willing to do the work because he was eager to "do whatever it takes" to reach his goals. Shauntel had heard rumors that college classes were all lecture without much attention towards student engagement, which concerned her, "If it is like people say where you have to take notes and listen to someone talk for a long period, I can't do it." Her brother shared some related concerns about her also having to work part time in college to be able to live independently, "That could mess with the academic part. You know because if she can't handle the independent part, she probably don't want to stay in school." Part of Jasmine's recognition of what it took to be a good candidate for college came from her time in what she described as an academically rigorous middle school. By comparison, she worried that the education she was receiving in her district might compromise her ability to be prepared for college level work, "Because we already behind as high schoolers, like the county schools…they got access to more stuff than us. So I already know it's going to be harder in college." She was working to have the right mindset for the workload when she got there, "College is more intense than high school so I feel like I have to go in there with high expectations." Like the proximal effort she perceived for her high school classes, she was eager for this distal challenge, "I am more looking forward to it."

Proximal Opportunity Cost

Opportunity cost, defined as the loss of valued alternatives in EVT (Flake et al., 2015), played a critical role in how students made decisions about pursuing college. Proximally, this cost was primarily associated with the social consequences of doing what was necessary to make it to college in a school environment where such behavior was largely unpopular. LaQuia described how she had endured this treatment from her peers throughout her years at UPHS, "They are not supportive at all...it's just like I am doing my best to pull up and they just don't want to see people do good." She felt like they were sometimes actively working to sabotage her, "People started seeing I wanted to do stuff so they started basically hating. So it's like I don't want to see her do good so they made sure this year I would not be successful." This unsupportive peer climate presented a proximal opportunity cost for LaQuia, as she wanted to fit in but found that to be difficult because her behavior was so incongruent from theirs, "When I first got here it was like, oh I'm never going to make friends." She was not the only student in this study who felt that way.

Like LaQuia, Adrian sometimes experienced the proximal opportunity cost of not fitting in very well with his peers because his behavior did not always align with theirs. Pursuing college, for Adrian, was related to his desire to be a "positive person." Still, he sometimes slipped into "negativity," leading him to not focus as much as he believed he should in class, "Everyone else is doing this so I feel like it is comfortable for me to do it. And most of those things are not good things." Adrian's mom encouraged him to overcome this social pressure, "They can try to put you down. They can try to hold you back...But they can never take your mind. That's yours to have." Like many of the things his mom told him, he was largely receptive to the message, "I am not here for them. I am

here for myself." Alexus' pursuit of college also came with the baggage of unpopularity. This presented a proximal opportunity cost that she had to endure, as she was not willing to engage in some of the negative behaviors that she witnessed every day, "I am the opposite of that is why I am so different." While she recognized that being unpopular was a worthwhile price to pay, it was still hard for her, "I think in a way it makes me special, but I just don't want to be alone." Giving in to this proximal opportunity cost would require her to sacrifice something about herself, "If you want to fit you have to change."

Jasmine and Tavonne both understood why it was often difficult to fit in as a student actively pursuing college. However, they tended to not let it influence them, as Jasmine explained "I don't try to be like them so I can fit in with them...it's like I can connect with different kinds of people in different kinds of ways and still not have to change who I am just to be who they are." Tavonne was aware that other people were concerned about their popularity and changed their academic efforts because of it. This was not a deterrent for him, in part because he had built a college-going friend group, but also because he had perspective on the things that really mattered because of the previous adversity he had experienced, "When you lose stuff like I lost, you just don't care anymore. So that's what happened. I told you it's a switch."

Distal Opportunity Cost

When students described distal opportunity costs related to their pursuit of college, it was generally about not being able to spend as much time with their families as they would want. Shauntel wondered what would happen to her brother, who she felt needed her, "Like right now, my brother is home alone. I could be there helping him or I could be here doing this interview...If I go to college and then he is the only one home, it's going to make me sad because he is so lonely." This distal opportunity cost for

Shauntel generated some hesitation about her going off to college. She described the feeling as "homesickness." Still, she believed that she could remedy this by going to college close to home and commuting, or visiting home during breaks from school. Tavonne was also mindful of the distal opportunity cost of being away from his guardian when he went to college. Their relationship meant a lot to him, and he had already experienced losing people he cared about in the past, "I didn't want to go too far away in case something else happened. That would tear me to shreds."

Adrian considered taking a gap year after high school not because of financial reasons, like many students proclaim at UPHS, but because he wanted to spend time with his family before he was not able to see them as much. Alexus did not describe any distal opportunity cost as she discussed her pursuit of college. Although she cared a great deal about her family, Jasmine was not concerned about having to be away from them when she went to college. Her mom made sure that Jasmine knew that nothing would change by her going away to pursue a degree, "I want her to go where she wants to go. No matter where that state might be in. I want her to reach for the stars…Run for it. And I'm gonna be right here for whenever you need me."

Proximal Psychological Cost

The psychological cost of a task is related to how stressful it is, the anxiety that it produces, or the fear of potentially failing in the pursuit (Flake et al., 2015). For these six UPHS students, they had to be cognizant of these stressors that they would endure, both proximally and distally. The pursuit of college in and of itself came with considerable pressure, as Alexus described, "When you get older, there's a lot more responsibility. And I think the pressure is just on and I have to deal with it." Jasmine was also starting feel the gravity of her decision to pursue college, but was less confident about how she would

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cope with it, "Under pressure I tend to panic and I crumble…I feel like I don't want to give up. I just want to get to where I want to be in life." Shauntel was hesitant to actively pursue opportunities related to college, like scholarships, because she was worried about the possibility of failing, "I feel like it's no point in trying if I know I'm just going to lose." Tavonne and Adrian were less likely to describe any proximal psychological cost related to the pursuit of college. For Adrian, it never came up in conversation. For Tavonne, he rejected any proximal pressure associated with his postsecondary plans, although he witnessed it in his friends, "They stress themselves out. I'm not going to do that. You can stress yourself out. I'm not going to stress myself out."

Distal Psychological Cost

There were also potential concerns that students perceived about their time in college, presenting distal psychological costs that they had to consider as part of their decision-making processes. For Tavonne, this anxiety was generally related to having to be self-sufficient, believing that high school, "doesn't teach you about life. I don't know how to pay bills and stuff." Shauntel expressed concerns about her safety on a college campus, citing stories that she heard about people being assaulted, "That is too much to worry about. I would rather just worry about money problems." Adrian did not express much distal psychological cost as he talked about pursuing college, claiming that any nervousness that he felt was more "excitement." The most commonly held distal psychological cost for students was their concerns over how well they might fit in on a college campus. Jasmine described how this might be what ultimately deters her from following through on her college ambition, "I know this is what I want to do but what if I change my mind last minute or what if I go and I feel like it's not right?"

This perceived distal psychological barrier appeared to be most profound for Alexus and LaQuia. Distally, LaQuia was not very concerned about the workload at college, nor did she worry much about having to give up many valued alternatives in the future that some other students did, like spending time with her family. She was primarily concerned with how well she might fit in at her new college. More specifically, she debated between going to a PWI or HBCU, "If I go to a Predominately White School I feel like I won't have a good supportive system as if I was to go to a HBCU." She was also concerned that she might be more likely to be underestimated by some of her professors at a PWI, "I have someone talking down on me everyday because I'm a minority and I'm a female...you don't know what I am capable of doing." Her confidence in her abilities and deeply-held values for going to college helped her push through these concerns. Alexus worried about stepping outside of her comfort zone on a college campus, "I will be lost at first. I think that everyone is lost at first." She was worried that she might get "stuck" without the help she needs to be successful, "Sometimes I am afraid to try but I try anyway, because I don't know, I might just get through it." Her picture of herself in college contained many unknowns, but she was willing to persist in the face of this distal psychological cost, "It would be worth it, but like I said nothing is promised."

Distal Financial Cost

While financial cost is not one of the potential barriers routinely described in EVT, it was a critical concern for students in the present study because of the inherent expense associated with college. This perceived barrier was only distal (after high school), as proximal financial costs related to the pursuit of college (e.g. application fees or SAT registration fees) did not come up in conversation. Therefore, while financial cost

was a clear consideration for these students, it was the only perceived potential barrier that did not seem to be a proximal concern. For LaQuia and Tavonne, however, having to pay for college was immediately on their minds because they were closer to it. Tavonne expressed this concern during his first interview, "Dollar signs always weigh on me. If I don't have the money then I will just get depressed and stuff." He had been saving some money, with encouragement from his guardian, "He's just like 'every time you get a paycheck you need to put money away in the bank and save up.'" He had done his research and filled out the necessary paperwork for financial aid, "With the EFC (Estimated Family Contribution), being that it is zero, most of it will be OK. So with the loans and stuff that I have to take out, I can just pay those back once I get into my career." Tavonne believed that the best way to get more students to actively pursue college would be to drop the price of it. Fortunately for him, though, he no longer had to worry about it. By his second interview, Tavonne had received good financial news, "I got a big scholarship and I got a financial aid package, which they gave me a lot of money. So I don't really have to pay anything actually."

As a senior, LaQuia wasted no time in addressing her financial concerns, "I applied for my first scholarship as soon as I got here. September." She had figured out how to navigate her financial aid opportunities, including grants, loans, and scholarships. At our first interview, she was weighing a recent offer that she received from one of her potential colleges, "It's $50,000 for the tuition but I only get 35." She pulled a letter out of her bag to illustrate. After grants, loans, and other institutional aid, there was a remaining balance that currently proved unattainable, "So they expect me to pay $15,000 out of my mom's pocket and that's a lot." By the time of our second interview, she had received a scholarship that would cover the remaining cost at another one of her choice

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schools, which contributed to her decision to go there in the fall. LaQuia attributed her ability to navigate the financial aid processes to a mentor of hers who gave her step by step guidance of how to locate and apply for scholarships and complete the FAFSA. Although her family wanted her to go to college, they were not able to support the pursuit financially, nor were they able to help her figure out financial aid, "They don't know about college so they can't just push me to say 'Oh make sure you fill out as many scholarships as you can'...they are just worried about 'Oh I am glad you graduated.'"

Like many students in this study, Shauntel was highly concerned about the distal financial cost of college. Because of this, she was actively pursuing employment while she was in high school to be able to save up for it, "I need a bank account because by the time it's time for me to go to college I am going to be broke." Shauntel only wanted to go to college if she could get it fully paid for through a combination of her own savings, grants, and scholarships. Her main concern about future financial cost was the possibility of taking out loans, "I am not doing a loan. That's why I am going to work a lot of jobs in college and it is going to take a lot of years...I don't want to go to college and owe the government money." She was considering going to community college because it was cheaper, but was concerned that it would not "feel the same." An advisor explained how common it was for accomplished students, like Shauntel, to believe that college was a worthy investment but still not go because of concerns over loans, "Going to any university, you are going to be in debt, a substantial amount of it. How do you tell people it's still an investment?" Although she had also expressed how distal opportunity costs like leaving her brother could prevent her attendance, she indicated that it was less of a concern than finances, "I can get over the homesickness. I can't get over the money part."

Jasmine was also preparing herself for the financial cost of college, "I have started my internship and saving my money, so just in case I don't get a scholarship I always have my backup money." She felt confident that she could get a scholarship, either because of her academic accomplishments or because she could get involved with a sport. Still, she was concerned that she might not be in a financial position to go to college right after high school, "I was thinking if I don't get a scholarship I want to take a gap year because I want to have everything together, personally." Jasmine was not the only student in this study that mentioned the possibility of a gap year. Shauntel was also considering it for financial reasons, while Adrian wanted to have more time with his family before moving away to college. According to one advisor, this was a common expectation of students at UPHS related to the financial cost of college, often with consequences for their postsecondary ambitions, "They tell you something like oh I am going to take a year off and work and save up money…That never works." Jasmine's mom was also cognizant of the pending financial cost of college, but did not have any accompanying doubt about the outcome for her daughter, "She going to college in two years. That's it, that's where my mind is at...I'm just trying to get my finances right."

Admittedly, Adrian needed to be a bit more aware of the financial cost of college, "I feel like I don't think about it as much as I need to. Thanks for reminding me!" Compared to other students in this study, Adrian seemed to be the least concerned about potential barriers in general, not just financial. By his account, he had always wanted to go to college, and did not believe that much could get in his way of getting there. His mom echoed this tendency in her son, "He hasn't really said that much about, you know it's going to cost or anything like that. He just know that I told him that I can't afford it.'" Alexus' perception of the distal financial cost of was also reinforced at home, "My

stepdad doesn't sugarcoat anything for me. He tells me straight up...college and money are just, they go together because if you have the money you can go to college." While she recognized that many things related to her pursuit of college were in her control (e.g. the amount of work required), the financial element did not feel that way, "It's not really up to me…if I can't afford it then I just can't do it." The thought of being in debt was a big deterrent for her. As one advisor observed, this was a common fear for UPHS students, "Just everything scary about it. It is the worst case scenario. 'I am not going to go because I am going to be in debt. My family is already in debt...It is completely scary." Alexus saw this barrier to college as contributing to a growing chasm between the rich and poor, "People that come from poor, it's kind of hard to get out of that. Most people who come from wealth they will most likely die in wealth." She wondered if ambition would be enough for her to break the cycle, "Money is tight where I am from so I don't know. I want to go but I can't afford to go so that's the thing. Going to college and actually being able to pay for college that would be the difference."

RQ3d Conclusion

The decision for these students to pursue college meant being willing to take on several potential barriers. This was not only true about college itself, but of the activities that would be required for the pursuit. Because of this, there were both proximal and distal costs to consider when deciding if becoming a first-generation college student was worth all that it entailed. Perceptions of distal barriers, those associated with college itself, are perhaps what more readily come to mind when assessing why students decide to go to college or not. Financial cost is among these concerns, and nearly every student in this study described how much the price tag of college influenced his or her decision-making processes. Additional distal pursuits included the amount of work they would

have to do in college, although the students in this study were confident in their abilities and believed that they would be able to handle it. Their perceptions of distal opportunity costs, when present, included not wanting to leave behind members of their family or other people they cared about by going away to college. Perceived distal psychological costs included worrying about being a good fit at their universities, being able to handle the responsibilities of being independent, being outside of their comfort zone, and the potential for task failure. While picturing themselves at college generated perceptions of distal potential barriers, this was not all they had to be ready to overcome to pursue their ambitions as a first-generation college student.

The proximal costs that students primarily seemed to perceive were related to effort and opportunity. Although they were largely not deterred by how much work it would take in high school for them to make it to college, they were still aware of it. This included taking rigorous classes, maintaining high grades, getting involved in extracurricular activities, and navigating the application and financial aid processes. There may have been other valued alternatives that students had to give up because of their pursuit of college (e.g. free time), but overwhelmingly they talked about how much they had to sacrifice their social popularity. For the students in this study, the barriers associated with college were not just about what they anticipated for the future, but about the pursuit itself.

RQ1b*: How do socializers influence students' sense of value for a college degree? Expectancies for success in college? Perceived costs of attending college?*

In addition to students' possible selves being highly socialized by peers and adults in their lives, their decision-making processes related to their pursuit of college were similarly influenced. Their values for going to college (3a) were reinforced by messages

they received and examples they saw about what made college so important. While they tended to have high expectancies that they could be successful in college (3b) and beliefs in their abilities to do college preparatory work (3c), these were sometimes compromised by how rarely they saw someone fulfill the ambition they held. Finally, their perceived costs associated with the pursuit of college tended to include many potential barriers (3d), which were often reinforced by the messages they heard and the social consequences of the pursuit.

Participants shared their attainment, intrinsic, and utility values for going to college in research question 3a. As they did, they described how those values developed, which often included socialization in different forms. Their utility value was reinforced by people telling them directly that college would allow them to achieve the goals that they had for their future, including career and lifestyle. Jasmine discussed how this message was repeatedly emphasized at her middle school. Shauntel and Adrian talked about how much they discussed the importance of college in their extracurricular programs at UPHS. LaQuia's grandfather drove the message home with her about how critical it was for her to get her education. There were, however, counter messages perpetuated by other students in the school that sought to undermine the utility value of a degree. Advisors described having to actively push against a narrative that college was not worth it because it would not guarantee a secure job or a better life for students. While they acknowledged that college was not a guarantee of financial security, they emphasized that it was likely to improve the present circumstances for their students, "Just a better life. Just to pay for the basic things." Participants in this study appeared to largely be receptive to the message that college was worth it, and this utility value was reinforced through the examples that students saw of people who did not attain

postsecondary education and tended to struggle financially in adulthood. Although students sometimes discussed how they developed their sense of utility value for college through someone directly telling them that it was important for their future goals, they were much more likely to describe having this role modeled in their environment. It appeared that both direct messaging and role modeling were important sources of socialization, but that the latter made it feel more real for them.

Socialization for intrinsic value often occurred through students interacting with other people who either had gone or were actively working towards going to college. Several participated in extracurricular programs where college was a common focal point. Jasmine and LaQuia described meeting with mentors who not only offered some tangible support for academics and applications, but also gave them the opportunity to talk about college, ask questions about their majors, and get excited about the future. Tavonne and LaQuia had friends who had graduated the year before them who went to college and told them about the experience. Adrian's mom told him that college is fun and something that he would enjoy. Alexus' primary intrinsic value for going to college was related to her interest in psychology, which was socialized by interacting with people in her neighborhood and wanting to figure out what motivates them. It appeared that students' intrinsic value for going to college was reinforced through interactions with people who helped stimulate excitement about the pending experience or reinforced a desire to pursue their intended major and career.

Attainment value appeared to be a key motivating factor in students' decision-making processes toward pursuing college. This was primarily socialized through experiences that students had within their families. Several had parents or other relatives who told them how meaningful it was for them to go to college and be the first in the

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family to do so. Adrian's mom described emphasizing this point with her children from a young age. LaQuia wanted to get her degree to show her grandfather that she listened to what he told her about how important her education was. Jasmine's mom insisted on being interviewed with her daughter and made it a point to repeatedly emphasize how proud she was of her for being "the one who will make it." Students also frequently described attainment value of going to college based on a desire to be a role model for younger siblings. LaQuia said her graduation would make her younger brother believe that he could be next. Adrian said that by going to college, his younger brothers would realize that it was possible. Shauntel expressed frustration for her older siblings for not being an educational role model, but also relished the thought of being able to serve that role in her family. Students sometimes also described attainment value related to college based on a desire to help people, like Alexus wanting to be a psychologist to help people realize their potential or LaQuia wanting to open a trauma center for females. The thought of going to college often felt personally meaningful for participants, which was highly socialized by the people in their life for whom it would also offer great meaning.

By and large, students tended to have high ability beliefs and expectancies that they could do well in college if they were able to get there. While these beliefs were often reinforced through things like doing well academically, they also tended to be edified through direct messaging from parents and other relatives. Jasmine's mom let her know that she "is going" to college, offering no room for doubt in her prediction. This tended to help Jasmine in moments where she second guessed herself. LaQuia described conversations with her grandfather where he told her that she "had to be the one" who made it. When Alexus' mom described her daughter, she repeatedly talked about how smart she is and how much her teachers enjoy working with her. It was clear that there

were efforts on the part of socializers to build up the confidence of participating students as they pursued college.

However, there was persistent, counteracting source of socialization that tended to undermine students' future expectancies and ability beliefs. Tavonne described peers who had gone to college before him but dropped out shortly thereafter. Shauntel and Jasmine both expressed concerns about leaving college with debt and no degree or secure job to show for it, reinforced by examples of people who they had witnessed experiencing this outcome. Alexus recounted conversations she routinely had with people in her neighborhood who she described as "smarter" than her who had dreams to go to college, but either never went or tried it but did not successfully complete it. She wondered why she could be any different. Several times, Jasmine referenced her concerns about the possibility of becoming pregnant before graduating high school, which would potentially undermine her college plans. Her mom experienced this, as did several of her classmates, some of whom ended up dropping out of school. While students' were typically confident in their abilities to do college preparatory work in high school, they also discussed how hard it was to perform to their ability levels in an environment where their peers were not as committed. This will receive further coverage in the section for research question 1d. Overall, students tended to believe in themselves, but often doubted if they could successfully complete their pursuit of college. Socializers often worked to directly edify this confidence, but examples in their environment tended to have the opposite effect.

The costs that students described related to their pursuit of college were sometimes socialized and sometimes inherent to the task at hand. Students' considerations of financial cost were reinforced by parents or peers talking about how expensive college was, with the latter influence often adding the conclusion that college

was not worth it. Still, students tended to understand that college came with a substantial expense and incorporated this consideration into their decision-making processes. Effort cost was similarly inherent to college itself, as students recognized that making it there would require hard work proximally and that being successful at college would require continued effort distally. However, Alexus hypothesized that the hard work involved was often what truly prevented her peers from actively pursuing college, and that they referenced the financial cost in part to cover up for this unwillingness to put forth the necessary effort. It seemed an honest recognition of the requisite effort cost, proximally and distally, was part of what separated participating students from their peers who did not actively pursue college. Psychological cost was not highly socialized, as the sense of anxiety, stress, or pressure that students felt tended to be generated through their own assessments of what it would take for them to make it to college or how well they might do when they got there.

Opportunity cost was by far the most socialized of the perceived barriers that students described in this study. Distally, the "valued alternative" that they worried about sacrificing was time with their families. They worried about not being able to access them easily if they had to go away for college. Shauntel wondered who would take care of her brother if she was not there. Adrian considered taking a gap year to spend more time with his mom and brothers before pursuing postsecondary education. Tavonne described how terrible it would be if he was away from home and something happened to his guardian, claiming he would never be able to forgive himself. Jasmine's mom actively worked to diminish this concern for her daughter by telling her that she should make her decision based on what was best for her, and that she would be "right here" whenever she needed her. Proximal opportunity cost was almost exclusively generated

through the prevailing peer culture at UPHS being so unsupportive of participants' active pursuit of college. Deciding to invest in their postsecondary ambitions came at a considerable social cost, as students in this study often found it difficult to fit in with their classmates who were less committed to doing well in school. Proximal opportunity cost also appeared to be among the most difficult of students' perceived barriers to ameliorate. While Tavonne and LaQuia built a small friend group where pursuing college was identity congruent, it took them time to do so and they still experienced some ridicule from peers. Underclassmen continued to struggle with a prevailing lack of peer acceptance, making their pursuit of college more socially tumultuous.

RQ1b Conclusion

Students' decision-making processes towards pursuing college were socialized in many ways. Their sense of values tended to be reinforced by influential adults directly telling them how important postsecondary education was, by engaging in programs that strengthened their interest in college and careers, or by recognizing how meaningful it would be to be the first in their families to complete this ambition. Their ability beliefs and future expectancies tended to be high, perhaps in part through influential adults actively working to edify them. However, the examples they encountered in their environments made them doubt if they would be able to successfully navigate the pursuit of college. Finally, the barriers they perceived in relation to college were sometimes inherent to the task at hand, but also often reinforced by socializers. This seemed to be particularly true about the proximal opportunity cost associated with pursuing college, as they had to make some social sacrifices to actively pursue their postsecondary ambitions. Overall, it was clear that as students made decisions about going to college, they did so

among people who influenced their expectancies, values, and cost perceptions, positively and negatively, directly and indirectly.

RQ1d*:* How does the school environment at UPHS influence students' pursuit of a college-going possible self?

The experience of attending Urban Public High School had implications for students' pursuit of four-year college. They went to a school where an average of one in eight students embarked on the postsecondary journey that they were pursuing, and only one in 19 made it to their second year at their respective institutions of higher learning. Still, UPHS was not without positive socializers who sought to support students' college ambitions.

As described in research questions 1b and 1c, peers often had a negative influence on students' decisions to pursue a college-going possible self. On an individual level, peers tended to model proximal possible selves that felt identity incongruent and students wished to avoid (2c/d). They also tended to experience more distal outcomes that were undesirable for students in this study, like working in low wage employment such as fast food (2b). Participants witnessed the behavior of their peers and tended to reject it for themselves, including the tendency to not take school seriously by being disruptive in class, wandering the halls, or skipping school entirely. While it was not uncommon for peers to profess similar college ambitions, it was less common to encounter those who were actively pursuing it. Tavonne and LaQuia had established a small but supportive friend group as seniors, but underclassmen in this study were less likely to have this type of social congruence related to their pursuit of college. This was perhaps attributable to the tendency for students at UPHS to not approach their postsecondary education with

much urgency until they neared the end of high school when it was often too late to build their candidacy for admissions (2a).

The prevailing peer culture at the school of not investing in their postsecondary education also tended to compromise the expectancies and values that students had related to college, and reinforced certain cost perceptions. Classmates often perpetuated a narrative that college was not worth pursuing because it was not a guarantee of financial security, undermining students' perceptions of its utility value. Students occasionally were able to interact with college-going peers and generate some intrinsic value related to the college experience, but more so through their participation in extracurricular programs than in classes. Even in Advanced Placement and honors classes, students described peers engaging in disruptive behavior or trying to cheat off their work.

Although students tended to have high ability beliefs about doing college preparatory work or future expectancies of success if they made it there, their peers tended to undermine this confidence in different ways. Participants repeatedly expressed how hard it was to perform to the level of their abilities in class in such a disruptive classroom environment. While this did not necessarily compromise their ability beliefs, it did sometimes lead them to perform worse than they could. Alexis, Adrian, and Jasmine each expressed this concern. Additionally, the tendency for students to particularly not take school very seriously in their freshman and sophomore years seemed to have an influence on Shauntel's performance. Although she believed she was smart and wanted to do well in school, she believed she did not yet have to put in full effort. Further, students knew classmates who had preceded them at UPHS who had tried to go to college but ended up dropping out, sometimes with accumulated debt. This led them to wonder if they could be any different, which compromised their expectancies for future success.

Classmates at UPHS also tended to reinforce perceived barriers related to pursuing college. They routinely talked about how expensive college was and expressed, arguing that it was not worth the cost. This felt particularly true due to the risk of accruing loan debt, with or without a degree to show for it. They tended to either not recognize the proximal effort required to make it to college, or know that it would be hard and therefore decide not to try (as Alexus hypothesized). The primary barrier to actively pursuing college that was related to the prevailing peer culture at UPHS was its proximal opportunity cost. By the accounts of students and advisors participating in this study, it was not uncommon for students at UPHS to profess a desire to go to college. However, although they had this distal perception of a college-going possible self, they rarely pursued it. This made active effort towards going to college relatively uncommon, and by extension, unpopular. Therefore, students in this study pursued college in a school environment where there was considerable social cost related to that decision.

Although the influence of classmates generated an environment and UPHS where actively pursuing college was more difficult, there were several positive forces in the school intended to help students successfully navigate their postsecondary ambitions. Tavonne and LaQuia both took advantage of Advanced Placement courses offered to them at UPHS. There was a dedicated College Center at the school, staffed by a full-time employee, where students could go to apply for colleges and financial aid. There was also a full-time college advisor whose job was to support students in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Students had access to extracurricular opportunities where college was a frequent topic of conversation and programmatic support. At a more basic level, students had access to clothes and food closets at school if they needed support with these basic needs. An advisor described how UPHS leadership tended to be

receptive to outside support and programs that could benefit the students. There were clear, intentional efforts routinely made at the school to support the holistic needs of students. This included their pursuit of college.

College advisors described actively working to promote a mindset in students that college was coming up for them soon and therefore worthy of immediate effort (2a). Advisors also discussed how students tended to recognize the lifestyles that likely awaited them if they did not pursue postsecondary education, and how they helped them work towards a "better life" (2b). Although students in this study tended to frequently describe peers modeling proximal possible selves that felt identity incongruent and they therefore wished to avoid, they also had proximal possible selves related to doing well in school that did feel congruent and they therefore wished to pursue (2c/d). As they described these proximal approach possible selves, they talked about teachers who encouraged them in their classes to do well. LaQuia talked about her AP teachers who commended her for her work ethic. Alexus talked about how her teachers continuously reinforced that she belonged in college. Adrian expressed appreciation for his teachers who helped him achieve at his actual level of potential. Although participants occasionally shared frustration with teachers who they believed underestimated them, by and large they tended to feel supported in their pursuit of college.

Attending UPHS also offered reinforcement for students' expectancies and values related to college. Adrian and Tavonne both talked about the Career Center available to them in their school district, where they were able to take courses that stimulated their intrinsic value related to different college majors like art or pre-veterinary science (3a). Their intrinsic value was also reinforced through students' participation in extracurricular programs where they had the opportunity to engage in conversations with peers and

adults about their college ambitions. Although students commonly encountered a narrative among their peers that college did not have utility value because it was not a guarantee of financial security, advisors described working to actively combat this mindset. Participants shared accounts of teachers and other school faculty who encouraged them to take rigorous classes and did not accept them performing below their actual level of ability (3c). Students did not talk much about faculty reassuring them that they could be successful in their pursuit of college, but advisors described how helping students believe in themselves often required persistent encouragement (3b).

The primary efforts on behalf of UPHS staff to reduce perceived barriers related to college appeared to be about the financial cost (3d). Advisors described how they routinely worked with students and their parents to make sure they knew about scholarships and other financial aid opportunities. They also helped them complete the FAFSA and other necessary documents. LaQuia described being in the College Center every day at school to take advantage of these services, and to receive guidance on how to complete her college applications and essays. This reduced her level of proximal effort cost as someone who would have otherwise had to navigate these processes on her own. Proximal opportunity cost appeared to be a powerful influence in students' decision-making processes about pursuing college, and extracurricular programs at UPHS sought to reduce this by providing a space for students who were actively working towards their postsecondary ambitions to come together.

RQ1d Conclusion

The environment at UPHS appeared to influence how students made decisions about pursuing their college-going possible selves. This included supportive and counteracting forces. These results seemed to suggest that participants' classmates, by

and large, tended to undermine their expectancies and values while reinforcing perceptions of barriers and exemplifying avoidance possible selves. They also appeared to indicate that staff at UPHS had to actively work to combat these socializing influences. Still, students and parents sometimes described having issues with teachers or other staff at the school who they reported as occasionally underestimating them or seeming to not care much about their education. However, it was more common for students to describe feeling supported by educators at the school. As Chapter Five will discuss in greater detail, the ways in which attending school at UPHS influenced students' pursuit of college is more nuanced than peers working against them, with staff and support programs compensating for it.

Conclusion

The results presented in this chapter deconstructed the decision-making processes of high school students in an urban, high-poverty environment aspiring to become the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college. This included their perceptions of themselves in the future that they wished to approach and avoid, as well as proximal identities related to their future, college-going possible self. They described their ability beliefs, expectancies for success, subjective task values, and perceptions of potential barriers associated with their pursuit of college. Collectively, these components demonstrated how students' decision-making processes had several common themes while also being highly individualized, often related to students' different contexts and perceptions of their school environment. The following chapter will discuss the significance of these results as they relate to the conceptual framework of this study, as well as implications for practice.

CHAPTER 5

The preceding evidence described how the six students participating in this study perceived themselves in the future and how they made decisions about pursuing their college ambitions. By their account, they had a strong desire to go to college and believed in their abilities to be successful there, but they also perceived barriers that might disrupt the pursuit. Further, they highlighted how important their perceptions of avoidance possible selves were, both proximally and distally, in their decision-making processes of pursuing a college-going possible self. Their experiences informed a more robust understanding of what contributes to the gap between students' postsecondary aspirations and attainment in a high-poverty, urban school environment like UPHS. Furthermore, evaluating their pursuit of college in this context offered a theoretical audit of expectancy value theory and possible selves while also demonstrating how they overlap as a conceptual framework for understanding how students make decisions about who they want to become in the future.

This final chapter will proceed as follows. First, it will outline the theoretical implications of this study, as the stories of Adrian, Alexus, Jasmine, LaQuia, Shauntel, and Tavonne audited the applicability of possible selves and expectancy value theory to their experiences in this high-poverty context. Within this discussion of theoretical implications, it will offer recommendations for future research. Next, it will explore the practical implications of the results, as the preceding exploration of how these students

perceived themselves in the future and made decisions about pursuing college informs the work of educators working with students in high-poverty high schools who similarly aspire to postsecondary education. Further, it will discuss how their experiences inform rationale for deconcentrating poverty in schools. It will conclude with a discussion of the limitations for this study.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Implications**</div>

The results of this study have theoretical implications for both possible selves and expectancy value theory. Each of these theories contains a robust literature base with broad application to students from various backgrounds. As outlined in Chapter One, one of the intellectual goals of this study was to offer an audit of these theories to test their applicability with these students in this setting. The stories they shared demonstrated how richly contextualized their perceptions of their possible selves and decision-making processes were, offering insights for each of these prominent theories.

Possible Selves

Of the conceptual frameworks used in this study, possible selves has historically focused much more on low-income, racial minority students than expectancy value theory. This is perhaps attributable to the theory's emphasis on the role of context in motivation, as it posits that students' perceptions of their future selves tend to be based on their present environment and the people in it (Markus, Nurius, and Goodstein, 1986). One of the primary ways that possible selves researchers have applied this theory towards students similar to the ones profiled in this study is through the Identity Based Motivation intervention (Oyserman, 2013), which outlines several of the themes described in Chapter Four. Specifically, it attends to the importance of socially-constructed identities, a low perception of barriers, and recognition that task difficulty is representative of meaning

rather than impossibility (Oyserman, 2008). Students in this study described, in depth, the influence of socializers (positive and negative) on their decision-making processes toward college (primarily through role modeling), their perceived potential barriers (even if they had conquered them), and recognition that making it to college and being successful there would require hard work. Possible selves as a theory is largely reinforced by the findings presented here. Still, there are theoretical implications that help to extend this conceptual framework.

In studies that measure students' possible selves, they tend to capture them simply by asking students to list them (e.g. Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011). While these are often free responses, they tend to only ask for short answers without requesting much elaboration. Research questions 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d depicted students' rich perceptions of their possible selves, both those they wished to approach and those they wished to avoid. In their descriptions, they elaborated on how those possible selves looked, who socialized them, and how they influenced their present behaviors. Furthermore, asking students to list their possible selves may not be indicative of how they each weigh on their identities or motivational processes. A student who lists fewer avoidance than approach possible selves may still be highly motivated by the few examples of futures that they wish to avoid. Alexus repeatedly discussed the same avoidance possible self of working at McDonald's (2b). Jasmine spoke at length about not wanting to end up pregnant at a young age (2b, 2c/d). Shauntel described in research question 2b how her possible self that she wished to approach (college) may ultimately contribute to a possible self she wished to avoid (ending up with a career that she does not enjoy and ended up paying a lot of money to get). Additionally, students may list more positive or education-dependent possible selves because of social desirability or unaligned ambitions

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(Schneider, Broda, Judy, & Burkander, 2013). A more accurate picture of how they see themselves in the future and how that impacts them in the present emerged through a qualitative approach to exploring their possible selves.

There is much more to explore about the connection between living in a difficult context like poverty and the avoidance possible selves produced by that experience. As discussed in chapter two, Oyserman et al. (2011) conducted a study where they manipulated perceptions of context (positive and negative) and the possible selves (approach and avoid) produced within a sample of undergraduate students. They found that the students in the negative context condition tended to be more motivated to complete an academic task when they were prompted to describe their avoidance possible selves. A key purpose of the present study was to see how students who already live in a negative context, in this case concentrated poverty, perceive their possible selves and how motivational it was for them to avoid a particular outcome. The results depicted in research questions 2b, 2c, and 2d overwhelmingly suggested that they were not only highly aware of potentially negative possible selves, but they were highly motivated to avoid them. Adrian described not wanting to end up living a life of "negativity." LaQuia did not want to live in poverty her whole adult life, like her mother and grandfather. Tavonne did not want to accept a future where he felt like someone was holding him back and telling him "no." Taken together, their proclamations about who they did not want to become in the future suggested that these visions were highly motivational for them.

As posited in the review of the literature, the experience of growing up in a high-poverty environment seemed to have generated several examples of avoidance possible selves. Recent work on "Resistance Achievement Motivation" ("RAM") suggests that this "not me" mindset can be a powerful motivator and inoculate students to some of the

risk factors in their environments (Perez, 2017). The findings of this study contribute to this relatively new area of research by sharing insight into how this mindset tends to develop. For the students in this study, their beliefs about who they did not want to become were highly socialized, either through a parent or other influential adult directly telling them that they would not end up a certain way (e.g. LaQuia's grandfather's lectures described in 2b) or through their observations of the lifestyles of people that they did not want to follow (e.g. Jasmine describing the crime that took place in her neighborhood). Digging deeper into how this mindset develops could help inform the creation of interventions that follow this line of thinking in students, generated by the challenging contexts in which they live.

The possible selves literature emphasizes how future identities that feel more proximal (near) tend to be more motivational for present behavior (Oyserman et al., 2007). The results of this study seemed to support this, as the older students in this study unsurprisingly were highly motivated to put the finishing touches on their pursuit of college while the younger students tended to still be thinking about it more hypothetically (2a). Still, the underclassmen often described how college also felt soon for them, particularly in comparison to when they were younger, often indicating that school was moving quickly. These underclassmen also tended to be highly motivated in their pursuit of college. This suggests that not only might the feeling of proximity add to a student's motivation, but being more motivated might also facilitate a feeling of proximity.

By the accounts of students in this study, proximal possible selves appear to be more than just how close a future identity feels. As described in the literature, in addition to students' perceptions of who they might like to be in the future, they tend to have related proximal possible selves that they wish to approach or avoid (Oyserman & Destin,

2010), although researchers have historically focused more on the latter than the former. For example, students may have proximal identities (e.g. being on the honor roll) related to their more distal selves (e.g. going to college). Other proximal possible selves (e.g. engaging in delinquent behavior) may do less to support a productive distal outcome like going to college but still be desirable because they satisfy other identity needs like being accepted or feeling independent (Oyserman et al., 1993). By comparison, the literature does not attend much to the role of proximal avoidance possible selves, and the stories of students in this study suggested that these were highly motivational for their pursuit of college (2c/d). They attended school in a setting where the vast majority of their peers, even if they proclaimed an interest in pursuing college, were engaging in behavior incongruent with that pursuit, including skipping class or not taking their academic work seriously. In their observations of this behavior, the students in this study largely decided that it was not for them. Although some described slipping into habits incongruent with their pursuit of college because of a desire to be popular, they were more likely to feel frustrated by their peers than attracted to their tendencies. All students in this study had proximal possible selves that felt identity congruent and they therefore wished to approach, like doing well in school. Additionally, they had proximal possible selves that they wished to avoid, like wandering the halls instead of being in class. Both were critically important to their distal pursuit of college, and while both may merit additional research attention, proximal avoidance possible selves appear to be a particularly understudied area in this literature.

The possible selves literature also discusses education-dependent (requiring postsecondary education) vs education-independent (not requiring postsecondary education) options that students weigh for their future (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). The

presence of education-independent possible selves tend to lead students to be less motivated to perform in school (Oyserman et al., 1993). In this study, Shauntel particularly discussed her consideration of education-independent possible selves as she was weighing options for her future (2b). These included jobs that may not require any postsecondary education (e.g. working in a restaurant) to those requiring some level of certification (e.g. becoming a baker, cosmetologist, or child care worker). She recognized the need to pursue what she deemed "important" jobs (those requiring a four-year college degree), but also was concerned that she might not feel fulfilled in a position that required her to go to college, even if it proved lucrative (e.g. a lawyer). While she was interested in college, her current consideration of education-independent careers led her to doubt if she was meant to pursue it. Still, Shauntel was highly motivated in school. She made good grades (she complained about making honor roll instead of scholar roll) and cared about working hard for her teachers. She had a proximal approach possible self of being a good student, regardless of whether she had a clear picture of a distal approach possible self of being in a four-year college. This suggests that education-independent possible selves, depending on what they are, may still satisfy other values deemed important to students. They may be associated with the lower cost of pursuing them. They may be a means to an end, offering utility value as a stepping stone for a future, education-dependent career. Regardless, if Shauntel's experience proves transferable to other students, it may be necessary to reconceptualize education-independent distal possible selves as more than just a hindrance of present academic behavior.

Possible selves serve as the conceptual framework for the Identity Based Motivation (IBM) intervention structure (Oyserman, 2013). The three tenants of this approach to studying and working with underachieving, low-income, racial minority

youth closely align with expectancy value theory and, by extension, the findings of this study. The first tenant of IBM posits that people tend to want to behave in identity-congruent ways and that deciding to engage in a task is more likely when it feels aligned with other socially-constructed identities. EVT primarily aligns with this in its acknowledgement of the importance of socializers and "cultural milieu" in decision-making processes (Masson, Klop, & Osseweijer, 2016), and the testimonies of students in this study suggested that various people in their lives heavily influenced their pursuit of college. This also relates to the concept of racial socialization (Thorton et al., 1990), as students in this study sometimes explicitly discussed how their sense of racial or ethnic identity, socialized by parents and educators, influenced how they made decisions about college. Tavonne discussed how a professor encouraged him to become one of the few African-American male veterinarians (3a). Adrian described learning from a teacher how rarely Black people get credit for their accomplishments, which added attainment value to his pursuit of college (3a). Alexus was acutely aware of racial stereotypes in her descriptions of who she did not want to become (2b), while trying to balance this desire with pressure from her peers to not act or talk "White" (2c/d). While not all students directly discussed the role that ethnic identity played in how they made decisions about college, the ones who did made it clear that it was a motivator.

The second tenant of IBM is that students tend to engage in a task when the pathway feels open and there are relevant behavior strategies to successfully complete it. EVT research attends to this in researchers' increasing emphasis on cost, positing that students will be less likely to pursue a task when there are perceived potential barriers to successful completion. The students in this study described these potential barriers at length (3d), and their reduction tended to facilitate their pursuit of college (e.g. Tavonne

receiving a scholarship, LaQuia finally building a friend group focused on college, and Jasmine's mom encouraging her to go wherever she wants for school). The final tenant of IBM is that task engagement is more likely when students interpret task difficulty as evidence of importance rather than impossibility. This most closely aligns with the EVT concept of effort cost, and by the account of stakeholders interviewed for this study, this is where many students tend to fall off in their pursuit of college.

Taken together, it appears there is considerable theoretical overlap between IBM and EVT and that their tenants were highly applicable to how students in this study made decisions about college while living and attending school in a high-poverty environment. Although the results presented here are not intended to be generalizable, they do suggest that one element of IBM was perhaps more influential than the other two. The social congruence, or lack thereof, of a college-going possible self appeared to be particularly consequential for these students. Tavonne and LaQuia described how important it was to them to have a friend group who was also going to college (1a). LaQuia particularly contrasted this with how difficult it was to stay on track for her future goals while navigating an unsupportive peer culture in her school. Alexus could relate to this social struggle, but had not yet had the time to establish her college-going circle of friends. All participating students complained about how difficult it was to stay on task while navigating the general noise in the student body at UPHS. Even if they considered the difficulty of the task at hand to be evidence of its importance and perceived the pathway as open enough for them to pursue college, the lack of social congruence made it difficult for them to persist in their ambition (3d). For better or worse, peers played a critical role in how the students in this study pursued college. While the role of peer influence in adolescence is not a novel finding, it is worth researching whether social congruence

might perhaps merit a heavier "weight" in deciding to engage in a task compared to the other two tenants of IBM. The results of this study suggest that if going to college was considered the norm, or even popular among the student body, it might provide the momentum necessary for students to actively pursue it, even if it was difficult or there were other potential barriers along the way.

Expectancy Value Theory

As discussed in Chapter Two, expectancy value theory is perhaps the most prominent current conceptual motivational framework in educational psychology for explaining decision-making processes. In its evolution over time, it has become more socioculturally inclusive by acknowledging that a student's contextual experience plays into his or her expectancies, values, and perceptions of potential costs. Still, the present study proposed that the current model for EVT may be too linear, as it implies that a student's background precedes his or her decision-making processes, and that the outcomes of their decisions to engage in a task or not become a part of their previous experiences, which then inform future cycles of choice. Instead, this study used a conceptual model that situated all decision-making processes within a student's context, implying that every decision he or she makes is influenced by the environment in which he or she is making it. Although EVT has been broadly applied, a search of the literature for this study found little to no work applying its structure to students making decisions about pursuing college in a high-poverty school environment. This study therefore sought to audit the applicability of this theory with this traditionally-marginalized student population and it largely passed the test. It appeared EVT was a productive framework for exploring these students' decision-making processes, and their stories offered implications for this well-established theory.

The definitions for values outlined in EVT largely held true to student responses in this study, as described in research question 3a. Expressions of utility value were typically reflective of how a college degree would allow them to get a good job and make money. By extension, they tended to describe how college also had utility value for allowing them to avoid a lifestyle that they did not want, like working in fast food or continuing to live in low-income housing projects. While these may sound synonymous, other students who do not come from poverty but similarly perceive the utility value of a college degree may be less likely to also view it as a means to avoiding a particular end. This perhaps extends this definition of utility value according to EVT. Intrinsic value tended to be related to career interests like Jasmine wanting to be an elementary school teacher, or some of the more "fun" elements of college like Tavonne being excited to attend football games. Expressions of attainment value tended to largely align with the definition presented in EVT of a task being personally meaningful. Students in this study often described their pursuit of college as having deep meaning, which typically extended to what it meant to their family members as well (1b). Some students also described attainment value related to wanting to help people or be a role model for others. Some facets of EVT research characterize this as "communal utility value," or a task satisfying a goal of allowing students to help others (e.g. Brown, Smith, Thoman, Allen, & Muragishi, 2015). However, as the definition of utility value in EVT tends to emphasize that it has the least personal meaning of any of the values (Eccles, 2009), the desire to help others may be better characterized as attainment value. While going to college was perhaps necessary for these students to be helpful or serve as an example to others, they typically did not describe it as simply a means to an end. This suggests that communal value may not fit best in a utility designation, at least not with the students in this study.

The costs or perceived potential barriers described by students in this study were highly influential in their decision-making processes about whether or not to pursue four-year college (3d). Participants often believed that an unwillingness to put forth sufficient effort, along with perceptions of financial cost, was what held back their peers the most from actively working towards this ambition. Even when they did not "mind" the work, they still perceived it. It almost seemed as though a reasonable understanding and accurate perception of the effort cost required of the task was a resource that supported their pursuit of it. This lends itself to the original cost structure of EVT, as theorists originally believed that more difficult tasks would be considered more valuable, suggesting a positive relationship between cost and values. Opportunity cost was almost always related to the social sacrifices that students had to make to pursue college (typically with peers) as well as after they made it there (typically with family). There may have been other "valued alternatives" (Eccles, 1983), but they did not describe them in nearly as great of frequency or detail as their concerns about the social consequences of their pursuit of college. It may be worthwhile to explore a specific social cost as a component of the decision-making process separate from other conceptualizations of opportunity cost, as having to sacrifice popularity might feel very different than not being able to have as much time to engage in alternative activities. This may be particularly true in high-poverty, urban school environments like UPHS where educational tasks like pursuing college may be relatively uncommon within the student body and therefore come at a higher social cost. The EVT definition of psychological cost typically focuses on the stress, anxiety, or pressure that one feels when considering the potential risk of failure associated with a task. By the accounts of students in this study, fear of failure was only part of what made them anxious about pursuing college. The stress that

accompanied their journey was also due to worrying about finances and questioning if they would fit in on campus, among other considerations. Finally, financial cost is not a common component of the EVT structure, but certainly played a role in how these students made decisions about the pursuit of college. This suggests that for tasks with inherent expenses to them, like going to college, it may be important to also consider the financial cost when evaluating how students made the choice about task engagement.

Ability beliefs and future expectancies, according to EVT, are domain specific, much like Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (Wigfield, 1994). Similarly, EVT research often focuses on tasks related to a specific subject in school, much like Eccles' focus on math in her seminal 1983 article. The task explored in this study was broader than the focus of typical EVT work, as the decision to go to a four-year college involved a consideration of multiple domains in relation to the ultimate goal of postsecondary education. By extension, as students described their present ability beliefs and future expectancies related to their pursuit of college, they discussed more than whether they believed they could do college preparatory work in high school (3c) or if they would be able to successfully graduate from college after they made it there (3b). By and large, students had high confidence in both areas. However, they sometimes had their expectancies compromised in related domains that served as potential deterrents for their pursuit of college. For example, Jasmine believed that she could do well in college if she made it there, but had lower expectancies that she could avoid an undesired possible self, like becoming pregnant. Adrian believed that he could do college preparatory work in high school, but doubted if he would be able to get sufficient support to achieve at the level of his capabilities. Alexus believed she was a great student, but doubted if her teachers saw her that way. These results indicate that when considering one's decision-

making processes related to a task that is encompassing of multiple domains, like going to four-year college, it might be necessary to explore expectancies related to associated tasks in addition to the pursuit itself. While this may make the process of assessing expectancies noisier, the rich descriptions provided by students in this study about their pursuit of college suggest that it is a valuable endeavor to utilize an EVT Framework for broad or even long-term tasks.

It is a common description of aspiring first generation college students in the literature that they are often highly motivated to pursue postsecondary education because of the degree and corresponding upward socioeconomic mobility it could afford them (e.g. Martinez et al., 2009). This aligns considerably with the EVT concept of utility value, as it implies that these students are pursuing college primarily for a degree, and less because of any personal meaning or interest related to the pursuit. The students in this study did discuss the utility value of going to college, but they also discussed its attainment and intrinsic value (3a). Furthermore, when students described these values they tended to discuss the ways they were socialized by people in their lives. Utility value tended to primarily be reinforced through role modeling, meaning they tended to recognize that the task of going to college had utility value by watching how other people who did not go to college tended to struggle financially (1a, 1b). Conversely, intrinsic and attainment values were typically reinforced through direct encouragement or messaging from important people in students' lives (1b). While this has some practical implications for how to potentially reinforce specific values in students, it also has some theoretical implications. EVT research that includes interventions often focus on reinforcing the utility value of a task (e.g. Brown et al., 2015, Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz, 2010). While these interventions may sometimes increase

someone's sense of utility value, the nature of the task may be part of the reason why it increased. Students in this study tended to understand the inherent utility value of going to college. They described their peers as also understanding this, often by expressing rehearsed reasons for wanting to go like having a "better life" or "furthering their education" without actually deciding to pursue it. Advisors interviewed in this study expressed a similar sentiment, claiming that almost all their students recognize that college is important and say that they want to go, but their behavior suggests otherwise. For a task like going to college, it may be less valuable to reinforce utility value compared to intrinsic or attainment value. After all, while it may be clear to someone that eating vegetables and exercising is important for staying healthy, he or she may still not do either of those things. For EVT, this suggests that it may be important to focus interventions more on attainment and intrinsic values, and that when seeking to reinforce utility value it may be necessary to consider if it is already inherent to the task at hand.

The results presented in this study suggest that costs absolutely must be attended to more as a key element of decision-making processes in EVT. Moreover, it was clear that students considered both proximal and distal costs related to their pursuit of college, suggesting that the task itself required considerations of layers of barriers before deciding to pursue it (3d). Perceptions of effort cost required not only an understanding of how challenging distal college-level work would be, but also how difficult it would be to successfully complete the pursuit itself. This involved doing well in rigorous classes, being involved in extracurricular activities, and navigating the application and financial aid processes, often without the help of family members. Opportunity cost was not only related to their distal consideration of what they might have to give up to go to college, like moving away from family, but also what they had to give up in the short-term, like

their potential popularity with the student body at large at UPHS. They had distal psychological concerns about fitting in at college or wondering if they might fail in the pursuit of a degree, but also had to endure the proximal stress that accompanied preparing themselves for college in an often noisy environment at school (1d). Not only did their stories reinforce the increasing advocacy in EVT research to pay more attention to cost, it suggested that perceptions of interim barriers likely come into play when students make decisions about engaging in a task like going to college.

As a final theoretical implication for this study, it was clear that the role of context was critical in how these students made decisions. The conceptual model proposed in Chapter Two depicted students' perceptions of their possible selves as well as their expectancies, values, and cost perceptions, to be situated in a high-poverty context both in and out of school. The only exception to this was their perceptions of a college-going possible self, as it was a working hypothesis of this study that this distal perception would not be highly reinforced by their present circumstances. This largely turned out to be true (1a). Students encountered prolific examples of avoidance possible selves, primarily those that were proximal, as they routinely interacted with peers who were engaged in behavior that would not support the pursuit of college and largely felt incongruent for them (2c/d). Proximal identities that were congruent that they wished to approach, like being an honor or scholar roll student, were also contextualized by their high-poverty school environment because they recognized that this was a rare accomplishment in comparison with the other students at UPHS who tended to be less invested in their academics. All students in this study encountered examples of distal possible selves that they wished to avoid, but this was particularly true for Alexus and Jasmine who lived in low-income housing projects where it was far more common to

drop out of high school than to successfully follow through on a college ambition. With a few exceptions, what students were largely lacking in their environments were examples of people who had successfully completed four-year college (1a). This meant that they were pursuing a college ambition in an environment that not only contained few examples of college attainment, but also several examples of education-independent futures.

Similarly, their expectancies, values, and cost perceptions were highly contextualized by their circumstances. Living and attending school in a high-poverty environment often introduced doubt where they were otherwise confident in their abilities (3b/c). It demonstrated how utility value for a college degree alone was not always sufficient for ensuring that it would happen for them, as their peers, neighbors, and even family members who recognized that college was important often did not complete the task and commonly dropped out with accumulated debt. They heard their peers talk about how expensive college was and about how the work was too hard (1b). Those peers often succumbed to the proximal opportunity cost associated with being the type of student who might actively pursue a college ambition (3d). The students in this study carried all of this with them when they made their decisions about going to college. This suggests that when studying their motivation, it is critical to recognize the role that context plays. Someone who has high expectancies and values, and even methods for dealing with barriers associated with college, may still choose not to go. The decision is not made in a vacuum, and whether it involves controlling for additional contextual variables in quantitative analysis or incorporating qualitative triangulation of findings, context demands attention.

Future Research

In addition to the aforementioned opportunities to contribute to the possible selves and EVT literature, there are other potential avenues for future research related to these findings. First, when describing "context" in this study, the focus was almost exclusively on socializing influences in students' lives. This included family, peers, and other adults. However, socializers were not the only forces at work as students made decisions about pursuing their college ambitions. Their context also included a highly socioeconomically and racially segregated neighborhood and school experience. Participants sometimes discussed their recognition of their relative deprivation in comparison with students from higher-resourced, lower-poverty, county schools. Exploring their experiences through a more political or sociological lens might further illuminate how they perceive how their high-poverty school and neighborhood environment as contextualizing their pursuit of college. Additionally, it might highlight how UPHS, and its school district, became so segregated as to create such a challenging environment for its students.

There are other conceptual frameworks or research paradigms that would likely offer further insight into how these aspiring first-generation students made decisions about their future. For example, Chapter Two offered some background on racial identity and racial socialization, but did not explore these literature bases in depth. These theoretical lenses would likely prove robust for understanding the nuanced ways in which the low-income, racial minority students in this study pursued four-year college. Some participants made it clear that their postsecondary decisions were grounded, at least in part, within a sense of racial identity. Indeed, there are many theoretical opportunities for interpreting the testimonies of these six students, including looking beyond motivational

or developmental theories in educational psychology. Understanding their experiences, and ultimately supporting their ambitions, merits a multidisciplinary approach.

Practical Implications

In addition to the theoretical implications outlined above, the results of this study offered practical implications for understanding the experience of these students and addressing their unique needs. Only one in eight students at UPHS went on to four-year college immediately after high school in the last five years. The possible selves literature, supported by the experiences of the students in this study, suggests that this is an issue not only because there are few relatable socializers who have fulfilled the ambition that these students share, but also because there are so many relatable socializers who have experienced alternative outcomes. If students are more likely to engage in behaviors that feel congruent with socialized identities, then they perhaps need more opportunity to establish a socialized identity congruent with the pursuit of college. Attending a mixed-income school would likely increase the odds of being around peers who are actively pursuing college ambitions. The graduation and college-going rates outlined in the most recent Condition of Education report clearly illustrate that on-time graduation and successful enrollment in four-year college are more common outcomes in low-poverty and mixed-income schools compared to high-poverty schools.

By the accounts of stakeholders in this study, pursuing college in an environment where so few actively do so makes it a particularly challenging endeavor. If Adrian, Alexus, Jasmine, LaQuia, Shauntel, or Tavonne were to attend a mixed-income school, their pursuit of postsecondary education might be easier not only because of potentially lower noise pollution and better resources, but also because they would be in an environment where their academically proactive behavior might not be so uncommon.

However, there is evidence in the literature suggesting that attending a mixed-income school may still contribute to students underperforming due in part to a "frog pond effect" where they may be less likely to enroll in rigorous classes because the demographic makeup of the students is largely not reflective of their own (Crosnoe, 2009). Having fewer students attend schools of concentrated poverty would likely have implications for the possible selves they could generate in a mixed-income context, but being mindful of intentional integration within classrooms is also important.

Students described many perceived potential barriers in this study that could prevent them from actively pursuing college (3d), and each have implications for potential interventions to help alleviate them. Programs like the Federal Pell Grant are designed to reduce the financial cost of college for students with demonstrated need, and there are often scholarship programs focused specifically on supporting students from low-income backgrounds, including QuestBridge College Match and the Gates Millennium Scholarship. However, even with this financial assistance many students may still not choose to pursue college because of other potential barriers including those described in this study. Interventions designed to help students perceive the pathway to college as more open may also need to attend to their effort, psychological, and opportunity costs. Doing well in college requires hard work. Making it there does too. The students in this study appeared to not only be aware of these things, but also willing to put in the necessary effort. Interventions designed to attend to effort cost should perhaps offer an honest account of the necessary workload but also an interpretation of that task difficulty as evidence of meaning rather than impossibility, as emphasized in the Identity Based Motivation framework.

Professions of distal psychological cost were related to various future perceptions by students in this study. Concerns about failing in pursuit of college were often related to students encountering several examples of people who had dropped out with loan debt and no degree. Offering students additional exposure to people from their backgrounds who successfully completed college might help alleviate this concern. Students were also concerned about not fitting in on their college campuses, such as LaQuia's hesitation about attending a PWI rather than an HBCU. While promoting HBCU attendance may help alleviate this concern, PWIs could also perhaps do more to embrace first-generation college students who may be more likely to come from low-income or racial minority backgrounds and might align with a more collectivistic culture than is traditionally promoted on college campuses (Stephens et al., 2012). If students know there is a place for them at college, they may be more likely to pursue it. Proximal psychological cost generated from the stress associated with pursuing college may be alleviated through ongoing support systems for aspiring first-generation students. This could include family members, peers, and educators in order to intervene at multiple levels of influence.

Opportunity cost, both proximally and distally, may be the most difficult to alleviate. Students' expressions of distal opportunity cost often related to their concerns over leaving family members who needed them. Shauntel described feeling this way about her brother. Adrian considered taking a gap year just to spend additional time with family prior to college. Tavonne talked about how devastating it would be to be away from home and have something happen to his guardian. Jasmine's mom exemplified a key way that this concern might be reduced by insisting to be interviewed at the same time as her daughter and making it clear to her that she should go wherever she wants for school and that she would "be right here" when she got back. It seems necessary for

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students to hear this message directly, explicitly, and consistently from parents. Proximal opportunity cost described by students in this study primarily was related to the social consequences of actively pursuing their college ambitions. Peer influence tends to be particularly high in adolescence (Palardy, 2015), and having a peer group committed to going to college may help make the pursuit feel more socially-congruent. Tavonne and LaQuia had built such a friend group, although it took time and LaQuia described how challenging it was in the interim. The underclassmen in this study expressed frustrations with how their commitment in the classroom tended to make them unpopular (3d), and how difficult it was to focus with their classmates being so noisy. While building a college-going peer culture in a school like UPHS may be particularly challenging, it may also prove particularly effective in supporting students who want to go to college but currently find the social costs to be too great. If students' friends are going to college, they may feel less stressed about the pursuit, be more willing to put in the effort, and be less concerned about how much it costs. Ultimately, this may lead more students who want to go to college and believe they could be successful there to follow through on the pursuit.

The stories that students shared in this study offered key insights into how educators or mentors might best support their needs. They outlined myriad reasons for wanting to go to college, varying levels of confidence, assessments of potential barriers, and descriptions of how their contexts influenced what they believed might be possible for them in the future. It is challenging work to effectively support students who want to go to college but attend a high-poverty high school like UPHS where few follow through on this ambition. Because of the gravity of the task it is important to approach it thoughtfully. This could include an initial assessment of students' possible selves and

decision-making components prior to deciding on what intervention approach would work best. It might seem instinctive to focus on reinforcing the utility value of a college degree, but the students in this study seemed to largely understand this already (3a). Most appeared to be more motivated by the attainment value of being the first in their families to reach this milestone, or to have the opportunity to be a role model for their younger siblings or other people in their neighborhood. Still, there was some variability as Tavonne was explicit about primarily caring about the utility value of a degree, and Shauntel talked about how she was interested in college but did not consider that to be sufficient reason to go. The results of this study suggest that students are likely pursuing college for several reasons, but understanding whether they are primarily motivated by the attainment, intrinsic, or utility value of the pursuit could be a helpful starting point in personalizing support of their ambition.

Students' expectancies for success, both in the present and future, tended to be high (3b/c). However, they also expressed doubt about if their circumstances would allow them to follow through on their pursuit of college. When intervening with these students, a "you can do it" message may have not been very effective. They already knew that they had what it took to make it to college, so reinforcing that they "can" may be akin to reinforcing utility value when it is already high. Instead, a message of "you will do it" might do more to help them follow through on the pursuit. The literature shows that communicating high expectations for students tends to be related to their achievement in various domains, and that low-income students are often the most susceptible to the expectations of their teachers (Sorhagen, 2013). Students who participated in this study could have benefitted from someone communicating confidence that they would be successful in their pursuit of college. While some described having educators who

believed in them, others talked about perceptions of being underestimated. The latter required them to push forward despite counter messaging to their college ambitions. For someone who perhaps already doubts if ability and desire are enough to make it to college, this introduces an unnecessary barrier.

The results of this study may have implications for the design of mentoring programs. LaQuia and Jasmine described interactions they had with mentors that were helpful and meaningful to them, and they often involved practical help with navigating college admission and financial aid processes. They also described how seeing someone who had gone through the process and been successful made them more likely to think it was also possible for them. Jasmine nurtured her intrinsic value by asking her mentor about her experience as an elementary education major, who she met through a program at her previous school. LaQuia was able to reduce her financial concerns by filling out scholarships with her mentor, although she did not indicate how they were able to initially become connected. Adolescent interventions tend to work best when they attend to natural adolescent priorities, like autonomy and status (Yeager, Dahl, & Dweck, 2017), and as LaQuia and Jasmine described their interactions with their mentors they appeared to feel a sense of agency and respect in the relationship. The possible selves literature suggests that students naturally will gravitate towards the example of people who are "like them." This was reinforced by the testimonies of students in this study. Furthermore, as they described their reasons for wanting to go to college (3a), they tended to describe their intrinsic and attainment values being socialized through direct verbal encouragement from influential adults while their utility value was primarily seemed to be socialized through their observations, like seeing someone struggle financially.

Taken together, these results suggest that an effective mentoring program might do well to concentrate on the following elements. First, it should recognize that the adolescent student has agency over his or her own life and likely desires to make decisions independently. Second, it may not be very beneficial for a mentor to spend much time trying to reinforce the utility value of a college degree (e.g. "You should go to college because…") as students may already understand this. The exception may be if students have begun to internalize a narrative that college is not worth it, as some advisors and even one student (Shauntel) described in this study. Finally, the approach that may be the most beneficial for a mentor to take could be to seek social identity congruence with the student. This may best be accomplished through assignment of mentors with mentees, as this could leverage students' instincts towards believing "what others like me are now, I can become." A successful mentor might be one who has a similar demographic background and has already achieved the ambition pursued by the student, like going to college.

Understanding the role of possible selves also informs how to work with students like the ones profiled in this study. While supporting the pursuit of a distal college-going possible self is important, this was only one of the four identity elements discussed by students in this study. Their distal avoidance possible selves also influenced their decision-making processes (2b), as well as their proximal possible selves that they wished to approach and avoid (2c/d). Distal avoidance possible selves were reinforced by socializers in students' lives who either did not actively pursue college or were unsuccessful in doing so. Believing that they could make it to college meant that they also had to believe that their outcomes would be different than so many other people in their school, neighborhoods, and families. These students were not able to simply decide

to pursue college. They also had to actively work to avoid a distal possible self that might lead them to perpetuate a cycle of poverty in their family, which they often doubted they could do. Supporting their pursuit of college might also mean supporting their efforts to avoid an undesirable outcome.

Additionally, these students discussed their proximal possible selves that they wished to pursue or avoid (2c/d). Being a committed student felt identity congruent for them, but it was often at odds with the priorities of their peers who contributed to a culture at UPHS where actively pursuing college was not popular. This not only made it difficult for them to pursue their proximal approach possible selves, it also generated proximal avoidance possible selves. Working towards making the active pursuit of college more socially acceptable may reinforce proximal behaviors congruent with eventual college attendance while also reducing counterproductive behaviors. This relates to the college-going culture described by advisors in this study. As the conceptual model depicted, although students living and attending school in a high-poverty environment may have ambitions to go to college, it is likely the possible self that is least reinforced by their context. Because of this, interventions focused on working with students in such an environment may need to address the possible selves that are more familiar to students in order to effectively support the pursuit of a college-going possible self.

While the stories of the six students in this study offered practical implications for how to work with those actively pursuing their college ambitions in a high-poverty school environment, the student stories not told offer implications as well. Perhaps because participants in this study seemed to be proximally and distally invested in their education, they may have offered a biased description of their experiences at UPHS. By their account, it largely seemed as though the peer culture served as a force against their

pursuit of college while the educators, curriculum, and programs at the school served as forces in favor of it. However, the peers that participants characterized as not caring as much about their future did not have their voices included in this study. How do students in a high-poverty high school perceive the pursuit of college if they are not actively working towards the ambition? Perhaps they do not see their teachers and other educators as being as supportive as the students in the present study did. State DOE data on UPHS indicates issues with teacher turnover at the school, and there have been three head principals there in the past three years. Perhaps these students do not see the school as an environment that would be conducive to their learning if they were only to work hard enough. UPHS routinely struggles to meet state accountability and accreditation standards. Students who have decided that school was not for them may perceive these structural issues as evidence that they are right to not invest any more in an education system that has not worked very well for them thus far.

Interventions designed to work with aspiring first-generation college students must attend to the contexts in which they make decisions about their future. For the students in this study, that context was one of concentrated poverty, both at home and at school. While working towards their college ambitions, they had to navigate an environment where postsecondary attainment was rare and active pursuit of college was largely unpopular (1a). A key implication of this is that concentrating poverty in schools like UPHS, and the complications that it brings, has psychological consequences for the students attending them. By the account of stakeholders in this study, there are many more students at UPHS who want to go to college, believe that they could be successful there, but do not pursue the ambition. Additionally, students like the ones profiled in this study exist in other urban high-poverty schools. While deconcentrating poverty in schools

may not offer a panacea for reducing the gap between postsecondary educational ambitions and attainment in low-income students, there is reason to believe that it would help. It would likely provide more examples of people who had successfully completed four-year college. It would provide more manageable caseloads for educators intervening with low-income students who may want to go to college but also need more assistance in the pursuit. Mixed-income schools tend to be better resourced (Delany-Brumsey et al., 2014), have less noise pollution (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002), have less teacher turnover (Simon & Johnson, 2015), have fewer issues related to trauma (Bempechat et al., 2011), and produce stronger academic outcomes than high-poverty schools (Rowan, 2011). Students like the ones profiled in this study would likely have fewer barriers to their success in a mixed-income environment, but that was not their reality. Despite overwhelming evidence of the challenges in high-poverty school environments, they are currently growing in frequency (Condition of Education, 2016). Efforts must be made to reverse this trend. In the meantime, the stories of Adrian, Alexus, Jasmine, LaQuia, Shauntel, and Tavonne offer a reminder that ambitious students exist in high-poverty settings, and that their perceptions of themselves in the future and present decision-making processes would benefit from a more equitable school environment.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that qualify the way its findings should be interpreted and applied. As is the case with qualitative research, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to broader populations (Guba, 1981). This is attributable not only to the small sample size, but also to how it was purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2013). Instead, the findings might offer transferability, meaning the experiences described by students could prove relatable to other students in similar circumstances or

the educators who work with them (Hays et al., 2016). The results of this study are not representative of all low-income, racial minority students attending high-poverty, urban high schools. This limitation amplifies when considering the sample selected for this study, as there were only sophomores and seniors represented. Furthermore, there were more sophomores than seniors. Of the freshmen and juniors initially identified as potential participants for this study, only a few juniors and no freshmen indicated their interest. This may be random or it may be representative of group dynamics within these four classes at UPHS this year, as some grade levels may have been more receptive to participating in a study like this one. Their observations of their experiences, including how they felt about their peers, may only be reflective of the sophomore and senior class this year, if anything. Still, the advisors in this study worked across grade levels and described behaviors incongruent with the pursuit of college in the student body at large.

The data collected for this study, while representative of multiple stakeholders, was far from comprehensive. There were inconsistencies in who offered direct triangulating evidence for each student. For Jasmine, Alexus, and Adrian, their moms offered this perspective. For Shauntel, it was her older brother who served as her legal guardian. Although LaQuia described the influence of her mom and grandfather and Tavonne discussed how his legal guardian helped support his pursuit of college, their voices are not directly included in the findings. Additionally, although advisors offered broad perspective on the behavior of the student body and the college-going culture at UPHS, other stakeholders like classroom teachers who could provide helpful information about how students pursue college in a high-poverty environment were not included. This was related to the lack of feasibility to include additional sources of information in a study that already contained more than 17 hours of qualitative data. While there did

appear to be some recurring themes and saturation in what advisors offered, teachers might have provided something entirely different. Additionally, the peers that were the subject of critique by participants in this study did not have a voice in this research. They may have offered valuable perspective about how they viewed college and what prevented them from actively pursuing their postsecondary ambitions, which the literature suggests they might have.

Although there was prolonged engagement with participating students to help build relationships and enhance the credibility of claims (Maxwell, 2008), the involvement was still fairly limited as there were only two interviews over the course of one semester. Had their participation in the study involved more interviews spread out over longer periods of time, it might have provided richer perspective as students became more comfortable or had more time to reflect on their pursuit of college. Because their participation in this study occurred at a snapshot in time, their perspective may have evolved or their ambitions may have shifted. Similarly, while students participating in this study reflected on their present experiences, they were related to their projections about their future. The older students, even with college acceptances and scholarship offers under their belts, still might not complete the task of becoming a first-generation college student. The data on UPHS suggests that this is a common outcome for students, even after being accepted into four-year college. For the younger students, their perceptions of college are still largely speculative, with little to no experience yet with the processes of applying or obtaining financial aid. By the account of some advisors in this study, there are students at UPHS who may be interested in college but digress from the pursuit when the time comes to apply. Still, the students participating in this study could accurately reflect on what it is like to actively make decisions about pursuing four-

year college while living and attending school in a high-poverty environment. These results are not a blueprint on how aspiring first-generation college students make it, but they are a testimony to how these six students are trying to make it.

As discussed in the researcher stance section of Chapter Three, the fact that I was a White person conducting a study in a predominately Black school likely led to some limitations in how I interpreted the findings. I engaged in memoing throughout the conceptualization of this study, the collection and analysis of data, and the interpretation of results. Part of the rationale for doing so was to detect where I might have some biases or potentially be interpreting what I saw through my lens as a White researcher where a Black researcher may have interpreted things differently. For example, some of the behaviors I observed at UPHS that I may have interpreted as being incongruent with the pursuit of college may have been due to my cultural biases. Any discomfort I felt during my observations of students' neighborhoods may have also been related to me feeling out of place there because I am White. There were moments in my field notes and memos where I noted what I considered to be evidence of racial or cultural bias on my part, but no doubt there were other times where such biases may have gone undetected.

Finally, the conceptual frameworks employed for this study presented limitations for how students' experiences were captured, analyzed, and interpreted. Expectancy value theory and possible selves offered parsimonious and well-grounded theoretical approaches to understanding how students made decisions and perceived their future identities in relation to their pursuit of four-year college. Although these frameworks were robust, they also came with inherent limitations. This was a study about how students in a high-poverty environment made decisions about pursuing college, grounded in research suggesting that low-income, racial minority students often aspire to go to

college but do not follow through on the pursuit. Indeed, there are many forces at play that likely contribute to these students not persisting in their efforts toward four-year college enrollment, including both agentic and structural elements. Students make decisions for themselves, but also do so in context. By focusing on their psychological processes, this study tended to emphasize students' agency towards their postsecondary ambitions more so than the structures in which they exercised it.

Similarly, because these theories (possible selves in particular) tend to emphasize the role that socializers play in student motivation, exploration of context was primarily focused on socializing rather than structural influences in students' lives. There was little attention given to the political or sociological forces that have contributed to the existence of UPHS as a high-poverty high school with nearly 100% of the student body being African-American. Those forces that created such a highly-segregated environment are critical to understanding what leads only one in eight students in the school to enroll in four-year college each year. Not considering this context could contribute to a reductive view of the circumstances in which the students in this study made decisions about their college ambitions. The peers and adults who participants routinely described as socializing their avoidance possible selves (proximally and distally) may have perceived the structural forces working against them and interpreted them differently than the students in this study, thereby leading them to abdicate any college ambitions they may have once had. By focusing on possible selves and expectancy value theory, there may be too much stock in the present study in the agentic elements of participants' experiences. Indeed, there is much more structural influence to unpack.

<center>**Conclusion**</center>

The stories of Adrian, Alexus, Jasmine, LaQuia, Shauntel, and Tavonne offered implications for both theory and practice. As aspiring first-generation college students attending Urban Public High School, the decisions they made about their future were contextualized by living and attending school in a high-poverty context. The literature suggests, and stakeholders in this study support, that they are not the only ones in this school with this ambition. Over the past five years, an average of one in eight seniors at UPHS went on to four-year college immediately after graduating. Aspiring to be one of them not only meant pursuing the ambition in an environment where few peers actively did the same, but also one where most did not. The smaller part of that fraction meant there were few examples of students engaging in behavior congruent with the students participating in this study, while the larger part meant that there were many who engaged in behavior counterproductive to the pursuit of college. The results of this study suggest that both of these things matter.

Proximally, having a high number of peers who do not actively pursue a college ambition may reduce the social desirability of it, potentially leading students to intentionally underperform to be accepted by their peers. Distally, the prevalence of examples of people who either never went to college, or attempted it and dropped out with accrued debt may lead students to believe that their expectancies, values, and even willingness to work hard may not sufficiently allow them to avoid this outcome. The decision-making processes of the students profiled in this study were highly contextualized by their high-poverty environment. Understanding their experiences offers a theoretical audit of expectancy value theory and possible selves by assessing how they apply in this specific context. Additionally, the testimonies they shared further justify

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deconcentrating poverty in public schools, while informing the practice of those working with students who currently attend them. Even if there may be few students at UPHS, and other schools like it, who go on to four-year college after graduation, the evidence presented here suggests that there are more who have the ambition to do so. Helping them get there is indeed a worthwhile endeavor.

This was a study about decisions, more specifically, about how students go about choosing to pursue a college-going possible self while living and attending school in a high-poverty context. Striving to become the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college was inherently challenging, but doing so in a school where so few of their classmates actively pursued a similar ambition compounded this adversity. There is clear evidence that concentrating poverty in schools tends to broaden achievement gaps between low and high-income students (Rowan, 2011). However, the number of high-poverty schools in America is growing (Condition of Education, 2016). This is also a choice. Many consider the 1966 Coleman Report to be a seminal piece highlighting the relationship between a school's socioeconomic composition and the outcomes of the students it serves. That document advocated that schools should be equal in their ability to help students overcome different starting places in life. It also highlighted how socioeconomically homogenous schools tend to perpetuate socialized messages in students' homes and neighborhoods. When those messages reinforce a belief that going to college is unlikely, students with postsecondary ambitions may be less likely to actively pursue them. Adrian, Alexus, Jasmine, Laquia, Shauntel, and Tavonne persisted in their ambition to become a first-generation college student while navigating a high-poverty environment that suggested they were unlikely to make it. How they perceived themselves in the future and the decisions they made about embarking on an uncommon

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journey all occurred in this context. One in eight UPHS students each year make to four-year college, but there are more there who could. Understanding the experiences of those who bridge this gap between aspiration and attainment illustrates not only the challenges, but also the possibilities.

Epilogue

"Welcome to the 120th graduation ceremony of Urban Public High School." With this salutation from the principal, the crowd of friends and family gathered that June afternoon offered an growing cheer that drowned out the subsequent announcements detailing the ceremony to come. Pockets of spectators let out competing shouts of enthusiasm for the day. Some signaled to late arriving family members. Others held up handmade signs and cutouts of graduates' faces on popsicle sticks. Not until the choir reached "for the land of the free" did the signal of the afternoon's scheduled activities become clear again, only to quickly lose out to the celebratory commotion that stirred as the first of the awaiting graduates emerged from the landing in the middle of the auditorium. Spectators lucky enough to be seated around their entrance leaned over the railings to make their presence known to the UPHS senior belonging to them. Others further away called out names and haphazardly held up phones in the direction of the capped and gowned group, hoping to steal a picture or video of the moment. "Pomp and Circumstance" began its echo through the speakers of the theatre, and the graduates made their way to their seats near the stage.

This graduation ceremony at UPHS resembled many I had attended in the past. Administrators made their remarks. The director of counseling announced top scholarship recipients. There were speeches by the valedictorian, salutatorian, and senior class president. What was novel about this ceremony, though, was the common theme of those

students' speeches. They were about adversity, "We are not perfect. Our lives are not perfect. But if we are mindful of who we have around us, then we can succeed." Hopeful messages about being ambitious and accomplishing great things were sharpened with commands for classmates to "rise" and "prove them wrong." Their remarks punctuated with a public defense of the reputation of their school, "UPHS is often in the news and on social media for negative things, with the voices becoming the loudest during times of adversity. Those same voices shrink to a whisper in our moments of triumph." The choir sang "The Climb," and the crowd joined in earnest at the chorus, "There's always going to be another mountain. I'm always going to want to make it move." The class of 2017 readied itself, and one by one, made its way to the stage.

Among them was Tavonne, who had lost his mom and dad the previous year, rebuilt his GPA, gotten accepted to a college that had his desired major, and earned a scholarship that would cover his remaining cost of attendance. "Most people when their parents die and stuff they give up. I didn't. I turned all of the negative emotions into a drive to success." As LaQuia walked across that stage on her way to a college education that was fully funded, she carried her whole family with her, but one person in particular, "The only thing I thought about ever since I was in elementary school, I hope that my grandfather is still alive to see that I graduate. That's all I want. To make him happy. I just want to let him know I did it. I listened. I'm not going to struggle." For LaQuia and Tavonne, this long anticipated day confirmed a growing speculation that they may just be the one in eight of their classmates who made it to four-year college.

They left behind them underclassmen with similar ambitions but enduring ambiguity about the outcome. Although Jasmine believed in herself and wanted to go to college, she wondered if something might ultimately derail that dream. Still, she held fast

to her own sense of agency, "I feel like I am my own person. I don't have to follow after what everybody else do." Shauntel had a high interest for going to college and believed in her capabilities as a student, but wondered if ambition and ability offered sufficient reason to go. For the time being, she awaited additional clarity about what she should do with her future before making a final decision about pursuing college, "I don't know. Something just has to come my way." Adrian believed he was meant to make a big impact on the world, but was not yet sure how he would do it. He believed that college was part of the answer, and would allow him to finish what his mom had started long ago, "I feel like my heart would stop at that moment. But who knows? Who knows?" As an aspiring psychologist and astute observer of the world around her, Alexus recognized the broader significance of her desire to go to college, "I think me being out would be enough for them. It would be worth a try, to try to get out." Time and again she witnessed how ability and desire were not always sufficient vehicles for upward socioeconomic mobility and questioned whether her future could be any different than the people she encountered every day. Still, she was prepared for the journey, "I don't even know who I am yet. I am still finding myself. Not that I was lost anyway, you know?"

Tavonne and LaQuia had established themselves in the rare cohort of Urban Public High School graduates who make it to four-year college, but not yet in the even more exclusive society of eventual college graduates. Adrian, Alexus, Jasmine, and Shauntel endeavored to do the same. By the account of stakeholders represented in this study, UPHS is full of students who are confident they could do well in college, have a desire to attend, and still do not go. For those who choose to actively pursue this ambition, the outcome is often obfuscated by a context where few have successfully

reached what they hope to accomplish. Nevertheless, the students in this study continue

to navigate that world every day, working, waiting, and wondering. We will see.

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APPENDIX A – First Student Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's interview. You are here because you have expressed an interest in becoming the first person in your family to graduate from a four-year college. The purpose of this interview is to better understand who you are, what you think about college, and how your neighborhood, school, and important people in your life have influenced your desire to go to a four-year college after graduation. After we finish this interview, you and I might have a second interview at a later date if you are OK with doing so. You will receive a $5 gift card for your participation today regardless of whether or not you participate in a second interview.

I will be audio recording today's interview to make sure that I do not miss anything that you say. What you talk about today may be included in research reports, presented at conferences, and used in interventions to help other students who want to become the first in their families to go to college. Although we will not be using your real name in any of these reports, we will use a fake name called a pseudonym to share your story without anyone knowing that it is you. That way we can protect your confidentiality. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these interview questions and I hope you will feel comfortable sharing your honest perspective today. Do you have any questions?

Describe yourself as a student at UPHS. What are your classes like? What are you involved in at the school? What goals do you have for this semester? What is it like to be a UPHS student who wants to go to college? What do other students at this school say about college? Who supports you in your pursuit of college here? *(RQ1d, RQ2c, RQ2d, RQ3c)*

What is it like to live in your neighborhood? What do you like about it? What do you not like about it? *(RQ1a)*

Tell me about the conversations you have had with your parent(s) and other family members about college. Your friends? People in your neighborhood? Other important people in your life? How do you think these people have influenced what you think about going to college? *(RQ1b, RQ1c, RQ1d, RQ3a, RQ3d)*

Tell me about how you picture your life after high school. How does college fit into that picture? Does that feel soon or far in the future? How has that feeling changed for you over time? What are you doing now to get there? *(RQ2a, RQ2b, RQ2d, RQ3b)*

Wrap Up

What else would you like to say about who you are or what you want to do after high school?

How do you feel about potentially talking with me more about this later in the semester?

APPENDIX B – Second Student Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's interview. You may remember that last time we talked we discussed your perceptions of college, as well as how your neighborhood, school, and important people in your life have influenced how you think about it. The purpose of today's interview is to talk about what plans you have for the future, how college fits into those plans, and how you feel like what you do in school relates to your desire to go to college.

Just like last time, I will be audio recording today's interview to make sure that I do not miss anything that you say. What you talk about today may be included in research reports, presented at conferences, and used in interventions to help other students who want to become the first in their families to go to college. Although we will not be using your real name in any of these reports, we will use a fake name called a pseudonym to share your story without anyone knowing that it is you. That way we can protect your confidentiality. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these interview questions and I hope you will feel comfortable sharing your honest perspective today. Do you have any questions?

Think back to the last time we talked about your plans for the future. Have they changed at all? How much have you thought about our last conversation?

How did you first learn about college? How often do you think about college? What makes you think about it? What do you think your life would be like if you did not go to college? *(RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ1c, RQ1d, RQ2b, RQ3a)*

Describe what you think college is going to be like. What will you be doing every day? How hard will the work be? *(RQ3c, RQ3b)*

What does the thought of going to college mean to you? What does the thought of completing college mean to you? *(RQ3a)*

How hard is it to stick to your decision to go to college? What do you think might get in the way of you being able to go? What/who could help you get through those potential barriers? (*RQ3d*)

What do you expect your life to be like in ten years? Where will you be? What will you be doing? How does college fit into those plans?

Wrap Up

What other thoughts do you have about going to college that we have not talked about so far?

If you would be willing for me to contact you in the future to follow-up about your experience after high school, would you please provide me with a phone number and/or email address?

APPENDIX C - Parent Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. My name is David Naff. I am here today to ask you about your son/daughter/student's name and his/her desire to go to a four-year college. I will be asking for your perspective about his/her perceptions of a future that includes college, what college means to him/her, how successful he/she expects to be, and what barriers he/she perceives as potentially getting in the way. Throughout the interview I will be asking you about how you believe you might have influenced these things throughout -student's name-'s life. The purpose of this project is to better understand the experience of students who want to become the first in their families to graduate from a four-year college. You will receive a $5 gift card for your participation today.

I will be audio recording today's interview to make sure that I do not miss anything that you say. What you talk about today may be included in research reports, presented at conferences, and used in interventions to help other students who want to become the first in their families to go to college. Although we will not be using your child's real name in any of these reports, we will use a fake name called a pseudonym to share his/her story without anyone knowing that it is you. That way we can protect his/her confidentiality. When we refer to your answers, we will say that they belong to -student's name-'s mom/dad/guardian. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these interview questions and I hope you will feel comfortable sharing your honest perspective today. Do you have any questions?

What does -student's name- say to you about his/her future? *(RQ3b)*

How long has -student's name- talked about going to college? Tell me about the kinds of conversations you have with -student name- about his/her plans after high school. *(RQ1b; RQ1c)*

Who does -student's name- know who has gone to college? (*RQ1a*)

What would going to college mean for -student's name-? What would it mean to you for -student's name- to go to college? *(RQ3a; RQ1b)*

How would you describe -student's name- as a student? *(RQ3c)* What is he/she doing right now to help him/her get to college? (*RQ2c*) How naturally do those things come to -student's name-? *(RQ2d)*

What are your thoughts about UPHS? How do you think going to UPHS influences -student's name-'s decision to go to college? *(RQ1d)*

What kinds of barriers does -student's name- see as potentially getting in the way of going to college? What potential barriers do you see? What are some potential ways for getting through those barriers? *(RQ3d)*

When –student's name- talks about going to college, does he/she seem to think that it is soon or far in the future? How soon does him/her going to college feel for you? *(RQ2a; RQ1c)*

How much does -student's name- talk about what life would be like if he/she did not go to college? What are his/her reasons for going to college? *(RQ2b)*

What do you think -student's name-'s life will be like in ten years? *(RQ1b; RQ1c)*

Wrap Up

What else would you like to say about -student's name-, his/her pursuit of college, and your potential influence over that?

I will provide you with a copy of your interview transcript. Would you prefer for me to send it in a sealed envelope with your student or to call you to set up an appointment to get it to you directly?

If you would be willing for me to contact you in the future to follow-up about your child's experience after high school, would you please provide me with a phone number and/or email address?

APPENDIX D - Counselor/College Advisor Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's interview. My name is David Naff. I am here today to ask you about how students at UPHS make decisions about going to four-year college. In this study I will be speaking with students of varying grade levels about their perceptions of college and how they make decisions about pursuing it. As a counselor/college advisor, you have the opportunity to work with UPHS students and speak with them about their future after high school. Today, I will not be asking you about specific students, but instead about the overall college-going culture at this school. I appreciate you sharing your perspective. You will receive a $5 gift card for your participation today

I will be audio recording today's interview to make sure that I do not miss anything that you say. What you talk about today may be included in research reports, presented at conferences, and used in interventions to help other students who want to become the first in their families to go to college. I will be compiling all interview responses from counselors and college advisors and reporting them as a group rather than individually in order to protect your confidentiality. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these interview questions and I hope you will feel comfortable sharing your honest perspective today. Do you have any questions?

What is it like to be a counselor/advisor at UPHS?

Describe the work that you do here to help students go to college. What role do you believe you play in influencing how students perceive college and how they make decisions about pursuing it? *(RQ1b; RQ1c)*

How often do you believe students here encounter people who have gone to college, both in and out of UPHS? How often do you believe they encounter examples of adults who have not gone to college? *(RQ1a)*

What role do you believe parents play in influencing how students perceive college and how they make decisions about pursuing it? Peers? *(RQ1b; RQ1c)*

What reasons do your students give for wanting to go to college? *(RQ3a)*

Are your students confident about succeeding in college? How can you tell? *(RQ3b)*

How confident are your students in their ability to do college level work? *(RQ3c)*

What barriers do your students see as potentially getting in the way of them being able to go to college? *(RQ3d)*

Do you think your students consider college to be soon or far in the future? *(RQ2a)*

How much do you believe your students consider the future consequences of not going to college? *(RQ2b)*

In what ways do your students behave in ways that support their pursuit of college? That do not support their pursuit of college? *(RQ2c)*

How much do you see your students as wanting to engage in behaviors that support their pursuit of college? *(RQ2d)*

Overall, how do you believe the experience of going to UPHS relates to a student's pursuit of a future that involves four-year college? *(RQ1d)*

Wrap Up

What else would you like to say about this?

APPENDIX E - School Observation Protocol

General descriptions of UPHS (RQ1d):

Descriptions of observed peer interactions (RQ1c):

Descriptions of observed student-faculty/staff interactions (RQ1c):

What examples of school climate are apparent? (RQ1d):

What college information is present in the school? (RQ1d):

General descriptions of college advising office (RQ1c, RQ1d):

General descriptions of counseling office (RQ1c, RQ1d):

APPENDIX F - Neighborhood Observation Protocol

Physical incivilities

- Maintenance of street/sidewalks

- Maintenance of resident grounds

- Maintenance of resident buildings

- Maintenance of public spaces (if present)

- Presence/prevalence of graffiti

- Presence/prevalence of litter

- Presence/prevalence of vacant/burned residences

- Presence/prevalence of vacant/burned commercial establishments

Territoriality

- Presence/prevalence of crime watch/security/no trespassing signs

- Presence/prevalence of homes with borders, hedges, or other barriers

- Presence/prevalence of homes with security bars

- Resident reaction to presence of researcher

Other

- Presence/prevalence of school-aged children (during a school day)

- Street traffic (auto and pedestrian)

- Condition of street/sidewalks

- Other observations

APPENDIX G – Student Self-Reported Academic and Demographic Data Form

I would like to know some important pieces of information about you. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

1. What is your birth date?
2. What grade are you in?
    a. 9th
    b. 10th
    c. 11th
    d. 12th
3. What is your race or ethnicity? (short answer text)
4. What is your home address? I will use this information to conduct a brief observation of your street. (short answer text)
5. Which parent(s) or guardian(s) do you live with?
    a. Mom only
    b. Dad only
    c. Mom and dad
    d. Grandparent
    e. Aunt/uncle
    f. Cousin
    g. Friend
    h. Legal guardian
    i. Other
6. What was the highest level of education your mom received?
    a. No high school diploma
    b. High school diploma
    c. Associates degree (2-year college)
    d. Bachelor's degree (4-year college)
    e. Graduate degree (additional school after graduating from 4-year college)
7. What was the highest level of education your dad received?
    a. No high school diploma
    b. High school diploma
    c. Associates degree (2-year college)
    d. Bachelor's degree (4-year college)
    e. Graduate degree (additional school after graduating from 4-year college)
8. How many siblings do you have?
    a. 0
    b. 1
    c. 2

d. 3
e. 4
f. More than 4
9. If you have siblings, what was the highest level of education that any of them have received?
    a. No high school diploma
    b. High school diploma
    c. Associates degree (2-year college)
    d. Bachelor's degree (4-year college)
    e. Graduate degree (additional school after graduating from 4-year college)
10. Which of these best describes the courses you typically take each semester?
    a. All honors and Advanced Placement classes
    b. Mostly honors and Advanced Placement classes
    c. About half honors and half standard classes
    d. Mostly standard classes with some honors classes
    e. All standard classes
11. What grade do you usually get in English?
    a. A
    b. B
    c. C
    d. D
    e. F
12. What grade do you usually get in math?
    a. A
    b. B
    c. C
    d. D
    e. F
13. What grade do you usually get in science?
    a. A
    b. B
    c. C
    d. D
    e. F
14. What grade do you usually get in social studies/history?
    a. A
    b. B
    c. C
    d. D
    e. F
15. What is your cumulative weighted GPA (including advanced classes)?
    a. Above 4.0
    b. 3.75-4.0
    c. 3.5-3.74
    d. 3.25-2.49
    e. 3.0-3.24
    f. 2.75-2.99
    g. 2.5-2.74

      h. 2.25-2.49

      i. 2.0-2.24

      j. Below 2.0

16. What score do you typically get on your English/reading standardized tests?

      a. 550-600

      b. 500-549

      c. 450-499

      d. 400-449

      e. 350-399

      f. 300-349

      g. Below 300

17. What score do you typically get on your math standardized tests?

      a. 550-600

      b. 500-549

      c. 450-499

      d. 400-449

      e. 350-399

      f. 300-349

      g. Below 300

18. What score do you typically get on your science standardized tests?

      a. 550-600

      b. 500-549

      c. 450-499

      d. 400-449

      e. 350-399

      f. 300-349

      g. Below 300

19. What score do you typically get on your social studies/history standardized tests?

      a. 550-600

      b. 500-549

      c. 450-499

      d. 400-449

      e. 350-399

      f. 300-349

      g. Below 300

20. Have you taken the SAT?

      a. Yes

      b. No

21. If you have taken your SAT, what is the highest score (200-800) you have gotten on your Critical Reading section? You should leave this blank if you have not taken the SAT. (short answer text)

22. If you have taken your SAT, what is the highest score (200-800) you have gotten on your Mathematics section? You should leave this blank if you have not taken the SAT. (short answer text)

23. Have you taken the ACT?

      a. Yes

      b. No

24. If you have taken your ACT, what is your highest composite score (1-36)?
    (short answer text)
25. How often are you absent from school?
    a. Almost never
    b. About once a month
    c. About once a week
    d. More than once per week

26. How many total days have you been suspended out of school?
    a. 0
    b. 1
    c. 2
    d. 3
    e. 4
    f. 5
    g. More than 5