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How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and
Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students

by

Karen L. Sherwood

Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of Leadership and Counseling

Eastern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Educational Leadership

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Abstract

A formal college education allows graduates to greatly increase their earning potential. Research has shown that first generation students make up 50% of the college population. This research investigated home and school factors that led to the decision of the selected first-generation college students in one rural northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district (ISD) to attend a two-year community college or a four-year bachelor's degree-granting institution. A qualitative case study research design was employed to understand the social phenomena of school and family influence upon first-generation college students and to explore students' financial concerns about college attendance and their recognition of the benefits of a college education.

Data were collected in informal interviews, discussions, and a focus group with five first-generation college freshmen or sophomores and the students' high school counselors, parents, and teachers who influenced the students' decision to attend college. Student voice provided a more detailed understanding of how the participants interpreted their experiences and offered insights into the schooling in educational institutions from the perspective of students as expert witnesses.

Participants confirmed the importance of family members and the role of counselors, and teachers in their decisions to attend and succeed in college. The high school peer group was not identified as contributors to the decision of the first-generation college students. Implications of the findings of this study suggest that K-12 educational agencies interested in college attendance by first-generation college students must work with parents as well as students and focus on academic readiness as well as college preparation activities that have been shown to be important for the successful transition from high school to college.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Background Information

Compared to high school graduates with a formal college education have increased their earning potential. “As opposed to generations of the past, high school graduates today are unable to obtain the number of high-paying jobs that were once available” (McGuire, 2009, p. 1). Moreover, according to Baum and Ma (2007), “During their working lives, typical college graduates earn over 60 percent more than typical high school graduates; and those with advanced degrees earn two to three times as much as high school graduates” (p. 8). Therefore, it is important to encourage young adults to pursue a formal college education. While a college education is not the only way to prepare our young workforce for the future, it provides graduates with greater opportunities throughout their lives. Increasingly, a college education will be needed for many of the jobs of the future: “By 2020, the United States may face a shortage of 14 million workers with college-level skills. Twenty-two of the 30 fastest-growing career fields require some postsecondary education, yet two-thirds of young adults from poor families do not get a college education” (Zuekle (2008), p. 1). These statistics reinforce efforts by educational leaders to prepare students to meet the challenges of the future workplace.

The decision to pursue a college education may be one of the most important decisions that students can make in their lifetimes. This decision may be influenced by many factors. Some of the factors that impact first-generation students when making this decision would include parental expectations, peer influence, high school teacher or counselor support, and academic preparation (Bui, 2002). Data reported by Choy, Horn, Nunes, & Chen, (2000) suggested that “parents, peers, and school personnel can all contribute to

increasing the college enrollment rates of students at risk of dropping out of high school and of students whose parents had no college experience” (p. 51). Students fitting that description, first-generation college applicants, may need specific assistance from parents, peers and the school.

Statement of the Problem

This study investigated home and school factors that led to the decision of the selected students in one rural northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district (ISD) to attend either a two-year community college or a four-year bachelor’s degree-granting institution. The study focused on college freshmen and/or sophomores who were first-generation college students and sought to understand the factors that shaped the decisions to attend college, including family factors, school-level factors, and an understanding of the benefits of college attendance.

Significance of the Study

It is becoming more and more crucial for students to earn a college education, even for many entry-level jobs. This study provided information to teachers, counselors, and school leaders, as well as parents, about how to support college attendance. The study also provided insight into the home and school factors that shaped the decisions of first-generation college students to attend college. This study gave those first-generation college students a voice to share what factors encouraged them to attend college. This information could be used to improve and/or develop programs for career preparation and to assist students with determining the pursuit of a specific career goal.

The voices of study participants offered the opportunity to recognize and characterize the meaning of their own experiences, to share these experiences, and perhaps to encourage

others to overcome obstacles to become first-generation college students. Hadfield and Haw (2001) said, “voice privileges experience, over theory or training, as the basis of an individual's understanding of an issue or activity, and the meaning they give to it” (p. 487). The voice of the individuals in this study will offer interior authenticity, which is difficult to demonstrate (Hadfield & Haw, 2001). Cook-Sather (2006) described student voice as having a legitimate perspective, presence, and active role in educational research. The stories shared by participants offered individual experiences and a valuable perspective to this study. Cook-Sather (2006) reported: “Student voice, in its most profound and radical form, calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students” (p. 363). The participants of this study had an influence on the continuing work of education reform.

Local school districts and K-12 educational associations, especially those with established relationships with postsecondary institutions, and high school students may find information in this study useful in making decisions about career preparation. Students, K-12, postsecondary organizations, and the broader community are all potential beneficiaries of this study, as they may pinpoint home and school factors that influence students to attend college and may lead to students’ greater success in college, attainment of a college degree, and greater earning capacity throughout their lifetimes.

Purpose of the Study

Time and socioeconomic restraints limit the opportunity for some to pursue a college education. The cost of college continues to increase, yet the benefits students can reap from a college education are still very important according to Pew Research: “The earnings gap by education level among 25-to 32-year-olds has widened significantly over the past half

century” (Taylor, Frye, & Oates, 2014, p. 1). An economy that has evolved from agriculture to manufacturing and currently to information and technology has required different training and skills of the workforce. Other benefits of earning a college degree include not only higher earning potential but also more job opportunities, increased job satisfaction, and greater job stability (College Atlas, 2014). A college degree teaches students or potential members of the workforce skills that employers’ value: “Even if you don’t remember everything you were taught in college, most students come away with (1) a greater ability to think analytically and (2) the discipline to see a task through from beginning to end—two very attractive qualities in a potential employee” (College Atlas, p. 1). Furthermore, many jobs that typically did not require a college degree in the past are more likely to do so today: “The Bachelor’s degree increasingly is becoming the admissions ticket certifying that its possessor is worthy of entry into the white collar and upwardly mobile sector of the corporate and government worlds” (Santaniello, 2011, p. 35). In addition, Americans with a bachelor’s degree receive other advantages compared to high school graduates who never attended college, such as lower poverty rates, a 24% higher probability of employment, lower age of retirement, better health, longer life expectancy, and a lower likelihood of being incarcerated (Trostel, 2015).

The purpose of this research study was to identify school and home influences that led individuals to becoming first-generation college students. This study focused on rural, first-generation students and their transition to college. This study focused on current college freshmen and sophomores who resided in one rural northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district (ISD) and chose to attend either two-year or four-year institutions. According to MiSchoolData (2017), 57.1% of all high school graduates in this rural northern-lower

Michigan ISD enrolled in college within six months of graduation in 2014–2015. Given that statistic, it became more important to identify factors that may have influenced the decision of students who chose to attend college. This study examined home and school factors that influenced college freshmen and sophomores from that district to become first-generation college students in a holistic way: through the voices of first-generation college students, parents, high school teachers, and counselors. Plucker (2006) said, “The societal and personal benefits for continuing onto college and receiving a bachelor’s degree are clear, as formal education has an important impact on U.S. economic growth and prosperity” (p. 1).

Definition of Relevant Terms

Blackboard: A virtual learning environment and course management system.

College Ready: “The level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (Conley, 2007, p. 5).

Facetime: Communicating through a video displayed on one’s phone.

Financial Aid: “The largest form of student aid in the country, federal aid programs come in the form of government grants, loans, and work-study assistance and are available to students at eligible postsecondary institutions (colleges, vocational schools, and graduate schools)” (Showalter, 2012, p. 1).

First-Generation College Students: Individuals who attain higher education, although previous generations of their families have not (Gofen, 2009).

Intermediate School District (ISD): An organization that provides local school districts services and programs, which generally comprises local school districts at the county

or multi-county level. The State of Michigan has 57 intermediate school districts, some of which are called regional educational service centers.

Four-Year Bachelor College: A university that grants at least a bachelor's degree.

Postsecondary Education: “Any type of school or training beyond the high school level (i.e., community college, 4-year university vocational training program)” (Think College, n. p.).

Two-Year Community College: An institution that offers two- or three-year courses and awards certificates and/or an associate degree.

Summary

A formal college education is important for many reasons; in today's society, the need for a college education has become more important than in the past. Understanding the importance of this need was an important part of this study. This chapter comprised the introduction to this study, which focused upon the importance of students making the choice to attend college. A review of relevant literature and the methods employed in this research are addressed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Literature relevant to the decision of a high school student to become a first-generation college student is explored in this chapter. The factors that are reviewed include pursuing learning beyond high school and readiness, first-generation college students, family influence, school support and the college culture, peer influence, college preparation, cost and access to financial aid, and the benefits of a college education. Although many factors were reviewed, this study focused on how schools and home influence first-generation college attendance. All of the issues established a foundation for the current study and brought forth questions that guided the research.

Pursuing Learning Beyond High School and Readiness

Postsecondary education or learning beyond a high school level may take place in many different venues, including at a community college, a four-year university, or a vocational training program. Conley (2007) discussed the concept of college and career readiness:

College and career readiness can be defined as the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed— without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program or in a high quality certificate program that enables students to enter a career pathway with potential future achievement. (p. 5)

College and career readiness has become more of a focus for all students. According to Conley, “The focus of improvement is on preparing more students to pursue learning beyond high school, generally in a postsecondary education environment” (p. 1). Students whose

parents do not have college experience may be among those who need more encouragement and support to consider college attendance. Merisotis (2015) added, “By 2020, labor economists predict that more than two-thirds of jobs will require postsecondary education of some form. And today, only 40 percent of Americans hold such credentials” (p. 1).

Preparing students to become career- and college-ready is essential to their futures. Subtle signs reveal results of failing to be prepared for the workforce, such as a drop in the median household income since the 1990s—over the past three decades, an increase of the median age from 26 to 30 that workers reach financial independence, and that participation in the work force by young adults has reached a rate similar to the level in 1972 (Merisotis, 2015).

In our ever-changing society, the focus of preparation for college has also changed. Preparing students for career or college has become more of a focus on skills and knowledge because, according to Conley (2012), it is “no longer possible to teach students a specific set of technical skills that prepares them for a wide range of jobs” (p. 4). Conley’s research suggested that a core set of skills and knowledge will allow students to transfer those skills across a range of postsecondary and workforce settings:

These are sometimes described as soft skills and include attributes such as the ability to work independently and as a member of a team, follow directions, formulate and solve problems, learn continuously, analyze information, have personal goals, take responsibility for one’s actions, demonstrate leadership as appropriate, take initiative and direct one’s own actions within an organization context, and have a perspective on one’s place within an organization in society. (p. 4)

These essential skills are necessary for success in today's economy to build strong communities and societies (Lumina Foundation, 2013). Educators can help prepare students for postsecondary readiness or for a myriad of certificate programs by beginning with these soft skills. These skills will prepare students to enter the workforce as well. Conley (2012) opined that high school programs can prepare “all students for postsecondary learning opportunities and career pathways and not require students to make a choice between pursuing additional learning and not doing so” (p. 6). Further, Conley urged schools to offer a rigorous curriculum with links to career planning.

The focus of K-12 local education agency has moved beyond the simply process of earning a high school diploma. Sambolt and Blementhal (2013) stated that “college and career readiness is rapidly supplanting high school graduation as a key priority of the K-12 education system” (p. 2). Many preparation factors are essential within a school environment. According to Bottoms (2009), preparing students to be ready for college and 21st-century careers should be guided by six proven strategies, which are the backbone of the High Schools That Work program, tested and refined during two decades of action research in hundreds of high schools across 30 states:

1. Provide students in every program of study with a rigorous academic core curriculum.
2. Insist on high-quality career/technical course sequences that blend academic and technical content through challenging, authentic assignments.
3. Equip all students with 21st-century skills through high-quality career/technical programs.

4. Expect every student to strive to meet standards in academic and career/technical classrooms.
5. Guarantee students have the support needed to meet readiness standards for college, career training, or both.
6. Connect every student to an adult adviser or mentor who has the time and skills to provide guidance and support.

Preparation of students for success in postsecondary education requires change in focus at the high school level. Although the need to prepare students for some type of postsecondary education is increasing so that students can compete in today's global economy, this need is not currently being met (Sambolt & Blementhal, 2013). Bottoms (2009) added, "School systems need to create structures that enable leaders and teachers to make fundamental changes in what and how they teach; how they support struggling students, and how they provide purposeful, personalized and responsible learning experiences" (p. ii). This comment supports innovation in professional development and curriculums that recognize individual learning styles and authentic learning experiences that prepare all students for the future workplace.

The educational system is defined in various contexts. According to Olson (2006), "Many states are trying to connect education from preschool through postsecondary so that more students are prepared for further study, work, and citizenship" (p. 1). Olson is suggesting coordination of systems between levels of government and local school districts to provide a seamless transition for students from Pre-K through postsecondary education. Moving to this model has been challenging in some states, as the governance, finance, data, and accountability systems are different for postsecondary institutions and pre-K-12

organizations (Olson, 2006). Preparing students with essentially the same skill-base to help them to become successful in either a trade program or a college degree program is a tough challenge for educators; high schools have especially demonstrated more resistance (Conley, 2012, p. 7). Bray, Green, and Kay (2010) noted, “Just as there are few opportunities for low-skilled workers, there is no place anymore for a tiered system that tracks students into inequitable college-bound or work-bound pathways to the future” (p. 12). This comment is a reminder of a time when it was common for educators to guide students into an academically elite college-preparatory curriculum or job training classes to prepare for lower-wage employment.

Are high school students prepared for college? According to Royster, Gross, and Hochbein (2015), “The lack of college readiness among high school graduates is troubling in light of changing workforce needs: more and more jobs in the U.S. economy require education beyond high school” (p. 208). All students need to be prepared for college or to enter into the workforce. Only a quarter of the 1.8 million graduates who took the ACT college readiness benchmarks in all four core subjects—English, math, science, and reading—are ready for college (Sheehy, 2013). Lack of college readiness often leads to students taking more remedial courses. Glancy, Fulton, Anderson, Sounay, and Millard (2014) said that students must be ready for college and career before they graduate from high school, and schools should focus on four areas: standards, assessments, high school graduation, and accountability. High schools need to move away from simply moving students from where they are academically or with certain skills to achievement of a set of college readiness standards that define expectations by graduation.

First-Generation College Students

The college population comprises a comparable number of first-generation college students and those who are not. “A 2010 study by the Department of Education found that 50 percent of the college population is made up of first-generation students, or those whose parents did not receive education beyond a high school diploma” (Lynch, 2013, p. 1). First-generation college students must accept that they would be the first in their families to pursue a college education. First-generation college students break the pattern of achieving only the educational level of their parents or the pattern of “intergenerational inheritance of education level; put differently, they break the intergenerational cycle where parents convey their educational level to their offspring” (Gofen, 2009, p. 104). Santaniello (2011) agreed that it is not uncommon for children to pursue similar types of jobs and the educational levels as their parents, noting that “American children in general and working class children in particular often end up in jobs that are similar to their parents’ jobs” (p. 79). Santaniello explained further that parents may influence their child’s decision whether to attend college, and that “those parents who do value education generally do encourage their children to aspire to attend college” (p. 80). These comments give added motivation for the school to play an important roles in encouraging and supporting first-generation students’ choice to attend college.

First-generation college students face many obstacles: “First generation college students tend to perceive less family support for attending college, are less likely to participate in college preparatory course work, and are more likely to have lower grade point averages during their first year of college compared with students with college-education parents” (Gibbons & Borders, 2010, p. 3). The researchers documented the importance of the

role of the school in identifying roadblocks to academic achievement and college choice for some students and to acquire parent cooperation to overcome barriers. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) concurred: “Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (p. 250). In other words, first-generation college students have the same issues to confront as any college student, but their experiences also involve other factors.

Family Influence

Home environment. The involvement of parents is a factor in students’ successful college enrollment. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) stated that “parent involvement in the educational and postsecondary planning process contributes to students’ academic success and educational decisions” (p. 3). Students with involved parents, no matter their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and enroll in higher level programs, be more likely to pass classes, attend school regularly, have better social skills, and graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Dervarics, & O’Brien, 2011). Wimberly and Noeth (2004) concurred, stating that parental involvement benefits students through improved grades, test scores, better attendance, greater homework completion, reduced placement in special education, positive student behavior, increased high school graduation rates, and increased enrollment in postsecondary education.

Family support is an important factor in a student’s decision to pursue postsecondary education. Hodge and Mellin (2010) suggested that family support is one of the best predictors of postsecondary aspirations. Lack of family support is often a disadvantage to first-generation college students because they “do not receive the same levels of support from

their families as continuing-generation students, largely because of the family's lack of knowledge about postsecondary education. This lack of knowledge and resulting decrease in support was found to evoke feelings of anxiety and frustration in first-generation college students" (p. 121). This comment suggests that the school may have a responsibility to fill in the gap of knowledge about college choice and encourage students who may not have the benefit of support at home. According to Choy (2001), many studies found that the influence of family greatly affects the aspirations of first-generation college students. MacAllum, Glover, Queen, and Riggs (2007) noted that "college enrollment rates vary considerably with parents' educational attainment, with first-generation students, especially those whose parents did not graduate from high school having the lowest levels of college enrollment" (p. 7). In support, Lynch (2013) opined that parents who have not experienced college are unable to adequately guide their children toward success in the college-educated workforce.

Parental encouragement/involvement. Parental involvement can influence decisions made by K-12 students. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) said that "parents who are involved in their child's education can be a strong and positive influence on the student's academic achievement and postsecondary plans" (p. vi). Parental encouragement and student achievement are the strongest predictors of both college aspirations and enrollment (MacAllum et al., 2007, p. 7). First-generation college students often receive less encouragement and support from their parents (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Ceja, 2006). Dodge, Nowlin, and Bates (2004) concurred: "Students whose parents are involved in their schooling have higher career and educational goals. Higher levels of parental involvement correlated across the board with increased aspirations among children" (p. 1). In other words, parents who foster a close relationship between home and school, play an important

role in getting their children to think critically about college choices, involving saving money for college, making college campus visits, and attending financial workshops (McDonough, 2004).

Parental involvement may affect a child's academic growth positively or negatively. Fan (2001) found that “one parental involvement dimension, parents' education aspiration for their children, stood out as having a consistent effect on students' academic growth” (p. 56), but that some other kinds of parent involvement, such as inconsistent communication or, volunteer efforts could have less effect.

The amount of encouragement parents provide may influence high school students' decision to attend college. According to Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), “65% of students with strong encouragement from their parents enrolled in four-year colleges after high school, while only 39% of those with mere encouragement did so” (p. 23). With the benefit of a college experience and comfort in the process, parents can provide encouragement and support more frequently for their children. MacAllum et al. (2007) said “Parents who have attended college and are personally familiar with navigating the processes of search, choice and application, as well as parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds, tend to be better positioned to provide tangible support to their children” (p. 17). Often, however, although parents are highly motivated with good intentions to assist their children with postsecondary planning, for various reasons, “Parents were not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children” (Wimberly & Noeth, 2004, p. 6). The findings related to parental influence in students' choice to pursue postsecondary education appear to accept the importance of parental experience, yet acknowledge that college experience of a parent may not be the only factor in the decision.

Mothers appear to play a more important role in the encouragement of college decision-making. The mother is often the primary influence in a child's decision about postsecondary education (MacAllum et al., 2007, p. 18). Wimberly and Noeth (2004) said that high school seniors indicated their "mothers as being a strong influence (84% were somewhat or very helpful) on their college planning process" and more students found their mothers more helpful than any other person in the college planning process (p. 6). In the same study, Wimberly and Noeth found that fathers were also influential in the college planning process, with 62% participants finding fathers somewhat or very helpful in the college planning process (p. 6). The father's influence in the college planning process was not as great as the mother's influence, but the education of the father is often correlated with actual college enrollment (Choy, 2001; Avery & Hoxby, 2003).

Parental expectation. Many students grow up with parents' expectation that they will attend college. Wimberly and Noeth (2014) found that "parents often begin encouraging children to attend college as early as elementary school and their expectation is generally strengthened as students reach high school, regardless of students' academic performance, interests, or other expectations" (p. 3). Many young adults simply have never considered not attending college: "These students (and many others like them) and their parents had assumed all along that going to college was simply the next logical step toward personal and occupational achievement" (Menges, 1996, p. 48). Agreement among researchers about the impact of parental expectations for college attendance begun early in childhood offers reason for school programs to build upon those expectations throughout the child's school experience.

Expectation for a student to attend college is often determined by the education of family members. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) opined that for the college-bound students, the college expectation originated in the educational attainment of parents, older siblings, or close relatives who at least attended, and frequently completed college, and often some form of professional education; the expectation of attending college is more of a struggle for first-generation college students. Research has shown that some factors that predict student educational performance are weight heavier than others. According to Child Trends Databank (2015), “Research has shown that parental expectations for children's academic achievement predict educational outcomes more than do other measures of parental involvement, such as attending school events” (p. 2). Lippman, Guzman, Dombrowski, Kinukawa, Schwalb, and Tice (2008) concurred: “About 9 in 10 students (91percent) in grades 6 through 12 had parents who expected them to continue their education beyond high school” (p. iii). Child Trends Databank (2015) reported that “about one in four (26%) expected their child would achieve some postsecondary education short of a bachelor’s degree” (p. 3). Additionally, Taylor et al. (2011) found that “parents who never attended college are just as likely as those who earned a four-year college degree to say being able to pay for their children's college education is extremely important” (p. 46).

First-generation college students are often influenced by *invisible* motivators. Hodge and Mellin (2010) explained that “some of these invisible motivators included: not wanting to disappoint family members, wanting to support family members (primarily financially), wanting more than family members have achieved, and increasing the sense of family pride, among other motivators” (p. 127). These data related to factors of expectation and support for

students' college attendance recognize that the reality of the choice may be grounded in ability to finance concerns.

Limited means of support and understanding. Parents who have not attended college often cannot financially support their child and do not understand the basic processes involved in going to college because they have not had this experience or have had a limited experience. MacAllum et al. (2007) found that “during the search phase, parental lack of knowledge about the college process may impede first-generation students who may not become aware of resources available because their parents do not know about them” (p. 18). Because parents of first-generation college students have never attended college, these students must be assisted by people other than their parents or older siblings. First-generation students can also encounter other pressures. Engle and Tinto (2008) confirmed that “at home, first-generation students report that relationships with family and friends who did not go to college often become strained and difficult to maintain as they are perceived as changing and separating from them, which causes intense stress for students” (p. 21). This statement confirms that first-generation college students who encounter stress at home may need continuing support from secondary school resources.

School Influences

A student's decision to attend college is influenced by factors that begin in the K-12 experience. Wimberly and Noeth (2005) said that “schools can play a key role in guiding early preparation for postsecondary through fostering academic preparation and achievement, supporting parent involvement, providing college and career planning information, and helping students through the many steps in postsecondary planning” (p. viii). Schools should get parents involved early in their child's schooling. Schools can assist students as

early as elementary grades with academic planning for college and career readiness, enrichment and extracurricular engagement, and planning for the financial burden of paying for college (Martin, 2010). Parents in middle and high school years may be involved in school through course selection, college admissions discussions, college visits, and financial aid and planning (Wimberly & Noeth, 2004).

Oakes et al. (2008) reported that standardized test scores of elementary school students can predict attainment of postsecondary education status. Many educational organizations as well as the U.S. Department of Education recommend that students begin planning for college as early as sixth grade (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005, p. vii). Research continues to show that academic planning and counseling need to start as early as the sixth grade so students are prepared for the rigorous curriculum of high school and future challenges of college and the workforce (Oakes, Rogers, & Valladares, 2008). Wimberly and Noeth (2005) added that “middle school and high school are important times for early postsecondary planning” (p. viii) and that the majority of eighth grade students have already decided whether or not they plan to attend college. “By eighth grade, over 80% of students indicate that they will earn at least a college degree and nearly half also expect to earn a graduate or professional degree” (p. 1). These data clearly indicate the need for information and career planning to begin in middle school or earlier.

To help prepare students for college and careers, schools should “provide early and ongoing exposure to experiences and information necessary to make informed decisions when selecting a college or career that connects to academic preparation and future aspirations” (Martin, 2010, p. 3). College cultures are developed by all staff: “From administrative assistants to custodial staff to security guards, the extent to which the entire

school staff supports college goals indicated how widely college culture is shared throughout the school community” (Corwin, 2007, p. 11). In other words, everyone in the educational environment has a role in guiding students toward postsecondary success.

Establishing a college-going environment in high school is important. Corwin (2007) stated that “college culture in a high school cultivates aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to and enrolling in college” (p. 3). Counselors across grades K-12 can help build confidence in students to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way (Martin, 2010). School culture is a term that encompasses the accepted values, behaviors, and relationships that determine how a school operates. Belief in the importance of college attendance throughout the school system would be seen in the curriculum and demonstrated in the relationships between students, staff, and community. In addition, schools can “maintain high expectations by providing adequate supports, building social capital, and conveying the conviction that all students can succeed in college” (p. 3). The assistance to students were explained in key studies that identified five elements that high schools that nurture college-bound students generally have in common: “1) Academic momentum; 2) an understanding of how college plans develop; 3) a clear mission statement; 4) comprehensive college services; and 5) coordinated and systemic college support” (Corwin, 2007, p. 3). These elements would be evident in the college culture of a school.

Understanding that building a college culture can assist students on their journey to become career and college ready, school personnel can also be prepared to assist students by understanding home and school factors that may actually influence success in high school and college. Factors at the early childhood level that identify postsecondary success were not found in a review of literature, but predictors of future readiness, such as persistence,

emotion regulation, and attentiveness, were identified (Hein, Smerdon, & Sambolt, 2013). Many indicators were found at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, as shown in Table 1. Consistent attendance or low absenteeism seemed to be a common thread that is prevalent at each level as an indicator of secondary success and postsecondary readiness (Chang & Mariajose, 2008; Balfanz, 2009; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Further, whereas no predictors of postsecondary success were found at an elementary level, school indicators of future academic success—social skills, social competence, and behavioral predictors—were identified (Hein et al., 2013). Other factors at the middle level, such as critical thinking and the ability to make informed decisions have been correlated with secondary-level academic achievement (Fleming et al., 2005). The most frequently noted indicators at the high school level included attendance, GPA, and test scores (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mishook et al., 2012).

Table 1

Indicators of secondary success and postsecondary readiness

Elementary

- Reading by third grade
- < 10% absenteeism in school

Middle Grades

- <20% absenteeism in the middle grades
- Remaining at the same school through middle grades
- Passing all ELA and math courses and meeting benchmarks on state exams
- Passing Algebra I in the eighth grade
- NAEP mathematics score of > 292 in eighth grade
- Meeting the following benchmarks on college preparatory exams: ACT EXPLORE test scores of English 13, mathematics 17, science 20 and reading 15; SAT-9 score > 50th percentile

High School

- < 10% absenteeism in school
- No more than one failure of ninth-grade subjects
- Completing Algebra II, geometry, algebra III, and trigonometry or higher, precalculus or calculus
- 3.0 + HS GPA
- Dual enrollment participation
- Passing state exams
- FAFSA completion
- Meeting the following benchmarks on college preparatory exams: SAT > 1550; PLAN test scores: English 15, reading 17, mathematics 19, and science 21; ACT scores: English 18, mathematics 22, reading 21, and science 24
- Participation in the following: summer bridge programs, school year transitions programs, senior year transition courses, and early assessment and intervention programs
- College Knowledge target outreach programs such as: multiyear college-readiness programs, embedded college counseling and college-readiness lessons.

(Hein et al., 2013, pp. 5, 6, &9).

Counselors. Martin (2010) argued that “school counselors are leaders and advocates who can profoundly influence students’ academic achievement, aspirations, decisions and future plans” (p. 5). Further, school counselors understand that most secondary school

graduates need to pursue education beyond high school to achieve success in today's high-tech world (Hoyt, 2001). However, school counselors often begin their influence late in the decision-making process regarding attending college (Hossler et al., 1999; Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991). The foregoing comments reinforce the findings of other researchers that encouragement and support related to college attendance should begin early in the educational experience.

School counselors often play a key role in the college process. Choy (2001) noted: "Students whose parents did not go to college are not more likely to receive help from their schools in applying to colleges" (p. 17). MacAllum et al. (2007) added: "Most of the low-income rural high school students indicated they did not know if their school had a guidance counselor or, if it had one, they felt he/she was not helpful" (p. 17). These findings confirm that first-generation college applicants may not be identified by school personnel, nor do the students recognize counselors or the resources available. MacAllum et al. noted that although teachers are available to students and are known to have college experience, researchers rarely recognize teachers as primary resources for students in decision-making about postsecondary choices. "Counselors categorized their college advising activities as disseminating information to students, providing guidance and support and tracking students through the application process" (p. 20). Martin (2010) agreed that counselors should "ensure that students and families have an early and ongoing understanding of the college and career application and admission processes so they can find the postsecondary options that are the best fit with their aspirations and interests" (p. 3). Martin's advice would motivate counselors to initiate student and parent contact and collaboration to meet students' goals.

Peer Influence

Peers have an influence on college aspirations in various ways. Research found that peer influence has less of an impact on educational attainment than parent relationships (Steinberg, Brown, Cider, Kaczmark, & Laaro, 1998). Steinberg et al.(1998) agreed that “although peers are not found to be as influential as parents in shaping students’ academic efforts or aspirations, most peers seem to encourage, rather than discourage, academic success” (p. 5). Conversely, Steinberg et al. also noted that peer groups are often not tolerant of outstanding achievement and those who flaunt their scholastic accomplishments. Hemsley-Brown (1999) explained that peers play a significant role with influencing others’ self-image and group identity (1999). MacAllum et al. (2007) added that this pressure is mostly found during the stage when students are choosing a college, and “as a result, students may be predisposed toward or against postsecondary education due to peer pressure, often mitigated through social class” (p. 19). In other words, similar values and expectations within the peer group determine the positive or negative influence toward a college choice decision.

College Preparation Influence

Academic achievement is an important indicator of aspirations of attending college. Conley (2008) reasoned that “the likelihood that students will make a successful transition to the college environment is often a function of their readiness—the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped them for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college” (p. 24). Academic success at an early age can be a predictor for college enrollment. Academic success, even at a third grade level, increases the likelihood of college enrollment for a student (Lesnick, Goerge, Smithgall, & Gwynne, 2010, p. 16). Ceja (2006) said: “The educational opportunities that students envision for their

future, as well as the subsequent choices they make about their postsecondary options, are constantly being shaped by a number of important factors” (p. 87). Having access to tangible college-related resources and opportunities is crucial.

One way high schools can prepare students for the academic transition to college is to offer college-level courses. Early college classes can be provided in a variety of ways, including dual enrollment, articulated credit, advanced placement (AP) classes, or through an International Baccalaureate (IB) program (Walton, & Ifill, 2013). Enriched curriculums are encouraged. Glancy et al. (2014) pointed out that “states are also increasingly requiring all districts to offer AP, IB, dual enrollment or other rigorous coursework to ensure advanced opportunities are available to students statewide” (p. 5). In 2012, the Michigan legislature revised MCL 388.513, which requires school districts to pay for dual enrollment classes, expanding students’ opportunities to enroll in college-level classes as early as the ninth and tenth grades for those students who qualify.

Cost and Access to Financial Aid/Student Loan

Accessing resources to pay for college is difficult for many college bound students. Heller (2002) noted that “although academic preparation is a necessary condition for entry to college, without adequate finances it can never be a sufficient condition” (p. 17). Jehangir (2010) added that financial concerns are often a major factor in college decision-making for first-generation students and a leading indication of “inequities between the haves and have-nots in America” (p. 14). Counselors should “provide students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college, and the financial aid and scholarship processes and eligibility requirements, so they are able to plan for and afford a college education” (Martin, 2010, p. 3).

First-generation college students, because they generally come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, find paying for college more of a challenge (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janoski, 2009). A college education is a considerable expense and may be a large factor in whether or not a student decides to attend college. According to U.S. Department of Education (2014) statistics, “at 4-year institutions, the average total cost of attendance for first-time, full-time students living on campus and paying in-state tuition was \$21,680 at public institutions, \$42,960 at private nonprofit institutions, and \$30,190 at private for-profit institutions” (p. 168). Further, the cost at a two-year institution can be significantly lower: “At 2-year institutions, the average total cost of attendance for first-time, full-time students living on campus and paying in-state tuition was \$13,280 at public institutions, \$27,480 at private nonprofit institutions, and \$28,250 at private for-profit institutions” (p. 168). These data document the financial burden for all students, but especially for first-generation students, whose parents may be least able to afford the cost.

Although attending college is expensive, students have opportunities to seek financial aid or other ways to pay for college. The Higher Education Act was passed in 1965 by Lyndon Johnson. The purpose of the act was to strengthen educational resources of colleges and to provide financial assistance to postsecondary students (Burke, 2014). However, since the passage of the act, “U.S. student loan debt has surpassed \$1 trillion” (Wallet, 2014, p. 1), and disparities still exist. Heller (2002) found that “wage and wealth disparities have reached extremes unprecedented in our nation’s recent history, and the least educated and skilled are getting a smaller and smaller piece of the pie” (p. 46). These data support the need for schools and families to recognize the benefits of postsecondary education and work together to support and encourage attainment for students.

Family struggles versus college. Financial concerns may be a contributing factor in the decision about postsecondary education. Often, people have to make a decision between attending college or supporting their families. About “57% say they would rather work and make money, and 48% say they can’t afford a college education” (Taylor et al., 2011).

Debt or borrowing. Students need to make the decision whether they believe a college education is worth the cost. Immerwahr, Johnson, Gasbarra, Ott, and Rochkind (2007) explained: “While the percentage of people who believe that college is essential is increasing, there has been a corresponding increase in the percentage who believe that college is not really available to many qualified individuals” (p. 8). Students must review the expense of attending college and the repayment of debt. College debt often continues long after students earn a degree. And this debt continues to grow. Taylor et al. (2011) reported: “In 2007, 15% of families had outstanding student loan obligations, up from 9% in 1989” (p. 28). Further, financial aid, which is received by a majority of college students, contributes to the burden of debt for college graduates (p. 40). Knowledge of these statistics would weigh heavily upon the decision of first-generation students to attend college.

The question of who pays for college for many first-generation college students is often asked. Families bear the greatest portion when it comes to paying for college (Taylor et al., 2011). According to Pew Research (2011), money can also come from other sources, such as the federal and state government as well as private sources as shown in Figures 1 and 2. In addition, income is linked to the viewpoints on who should pay for college. Lower income households believe the government should be responsible for paying for college, according to Pew Research (2011).

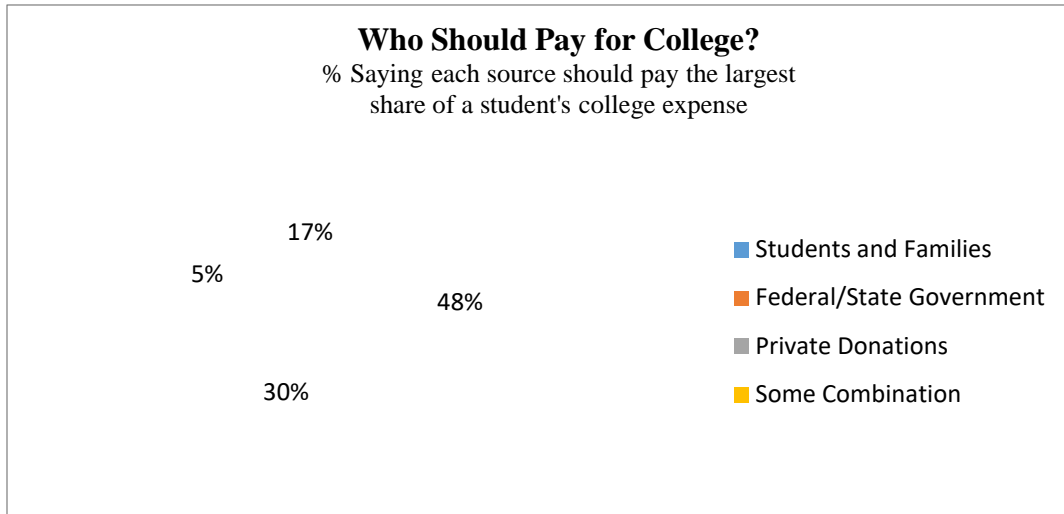


Figure 1. Who should pay for college? (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 40).

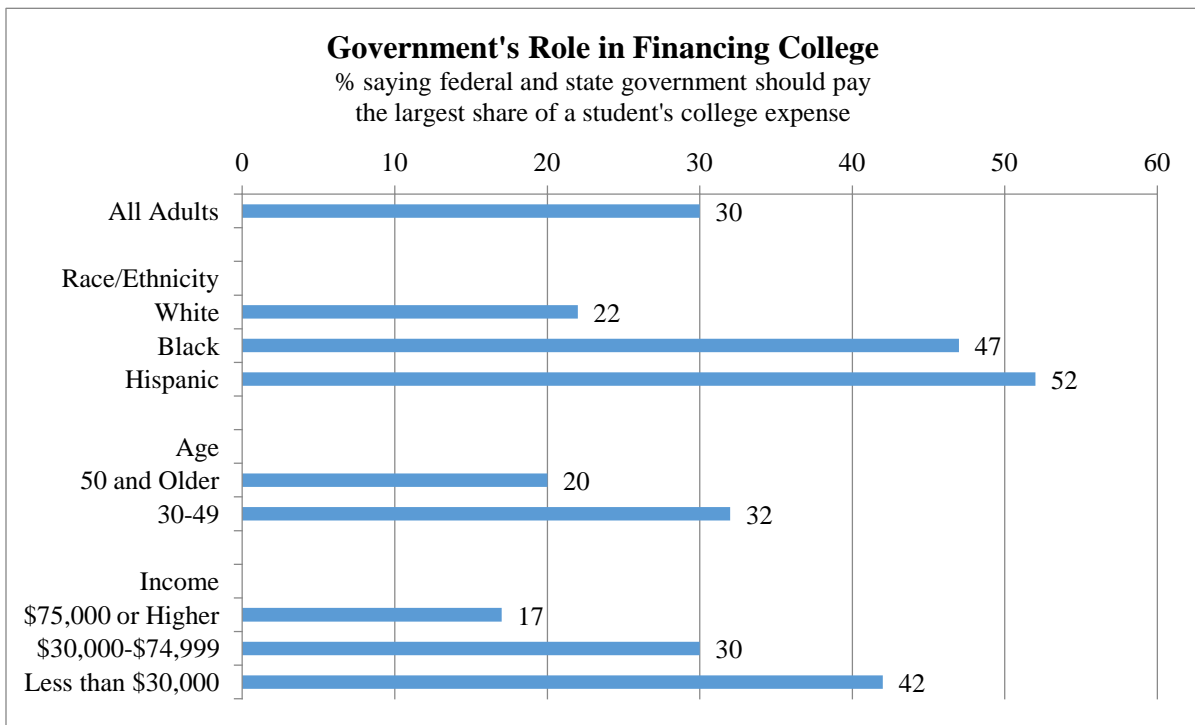


Figure 2. Government's role in financing college. (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 42).

Wimberly and Noeth (2005) noted that federal tuition grants and student loan programs were initiated in the 1970s to help low-income students and families meet college costs (p. 1). However, according to Taylor et al. (2011), even after graduation, it is difficult

to pay back student loans: “Roughly half (45%) say having to pay back their student loans made it harder for them to pay other bills and make ends meet” or even to purchase a house (p. 45). These comments confirm the importance and long-term impact of financial concerns in the decision-making process of choosing to attend college.

Benefits of a College and Postsecondary Education

There are many benefits to some type of postsecondary education or training. Hackmann (2013) discussed the relationship of a highly educated workforce to the position of the nation in world-wide economics: “In an era of increasing globalization, a high-quality education is critical not only for an individual’s future earnings potential and personal well-being but also for our nation’s economic success and continuing global competitiveness” (p. 1). Competition for economic dominance requires attention to educational issues at the national level focused on preparation of the workforce and informed citizens. There are many societal benefits of preparing students for career and college: “Increasing the number of college graduates will not only bolster our economy, it will also strengthen our democracy and communities throughout the nation” (Lumina Foundation, 2013, p. 3). Many of the societal benefits are non-monetary but are shown in lower crime rates and greater, more informed civic and democratic process, such as voting and volunteering, and increased intergenerational degree attainment (Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005; Lumina Foundation, 2013).

Taylor et al. (2011) cited dissatisfaction about the return on the investment in higher education: “A majority of Americans (57%) say the higher education system in the United States fails to provide good value for the money students and their families spend, and about four-in-ten college presidents say the system is headed in the wrong direction” (p. 5). This

comment suggests that perhaps college presidents need to be part of the national conversation about the relationship of education, government support, and the economy. Conversely, Taylor et al. pointed out that a majority of college graduates, 86%, believe that college has been a good investment for them personally. Pope and Fermin (2003) confirmed that “the perceived benefit of attending college to enhance potential workforce earnings upon graduation from the institution is also an influential economic factor for many students” (p. 21).

Adults who have obtained a college degree normally have greater financial stability and earn a higher income. Among young adults in 2013, ages 25 to 32, median annual earnings for full-time working college-degree holders are \$17,500 greater than those with only high school diplomas, as shown in Figure 3 (Taylor et al., 2014).

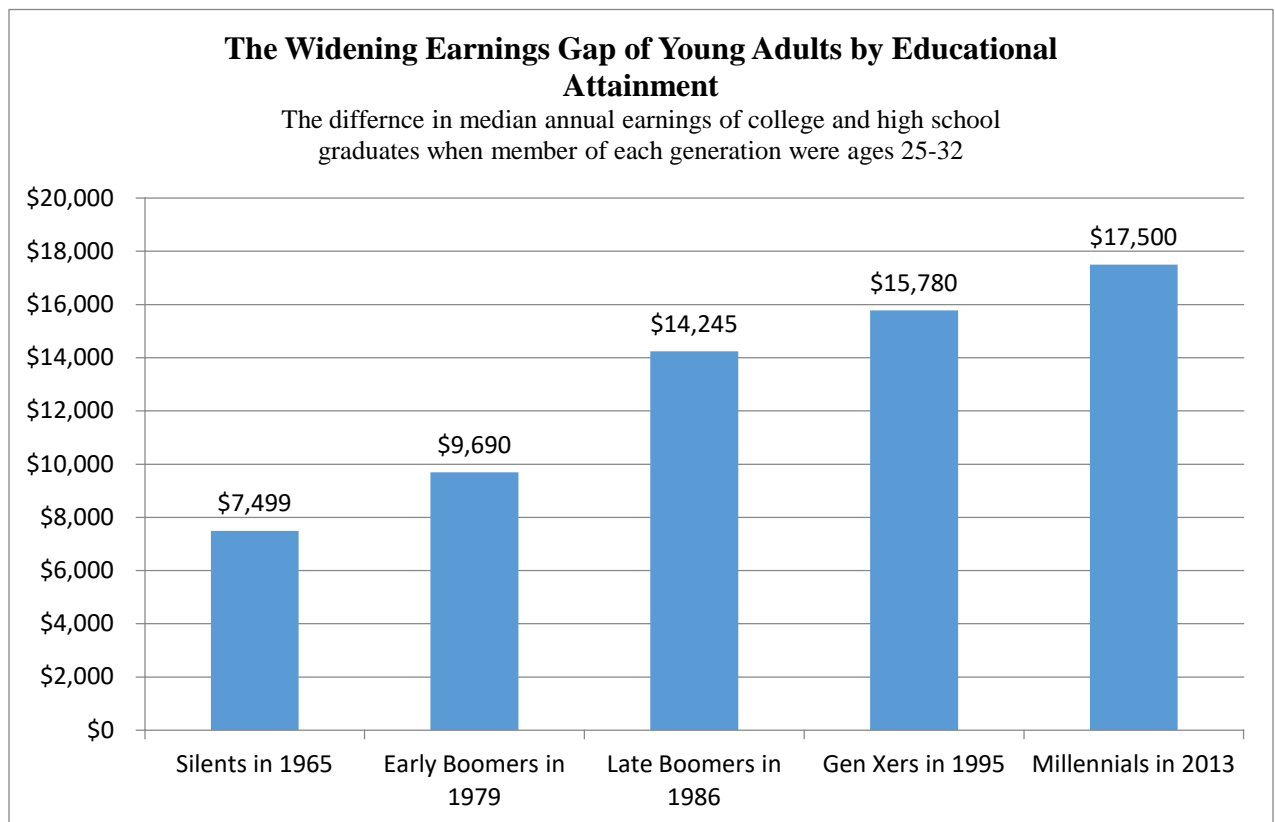


Figure 3. Earnings gap of young adults by educational attainment. (Taylor et al., 2014, p. 8).

In general, the typical college graduate earns more than the typical high school graduate. Given their lower socioeconomic status, first-generation college students generally attend college to make more money (Saenz, 2007). Over the course of a 40-year work life, Pew Research showed that a college graduate earns \$650,000 more than a high school graduate (Taylor et al., 2011). Moreover, the average earnings income, by age, gets larger. The gap between college educated Millennials and those of the same age with less education has grown over time. According to Caumont (2014), “There’s a wider earnings gap between college-educated and less educated Millennials compared with previous generations” (p. 1). The prospects of earnings over a lifetime may be compared to the immediacy of income in technical fields that do not require a college degree.

A college education is not the only factor leading to success. According to Pew Research, the largest factor leading to success is a good work ethic followed by knowing how to get along with people, as shown in Figure 4 (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 56). These beliefs are similar for both college graduates and those without a college degree.

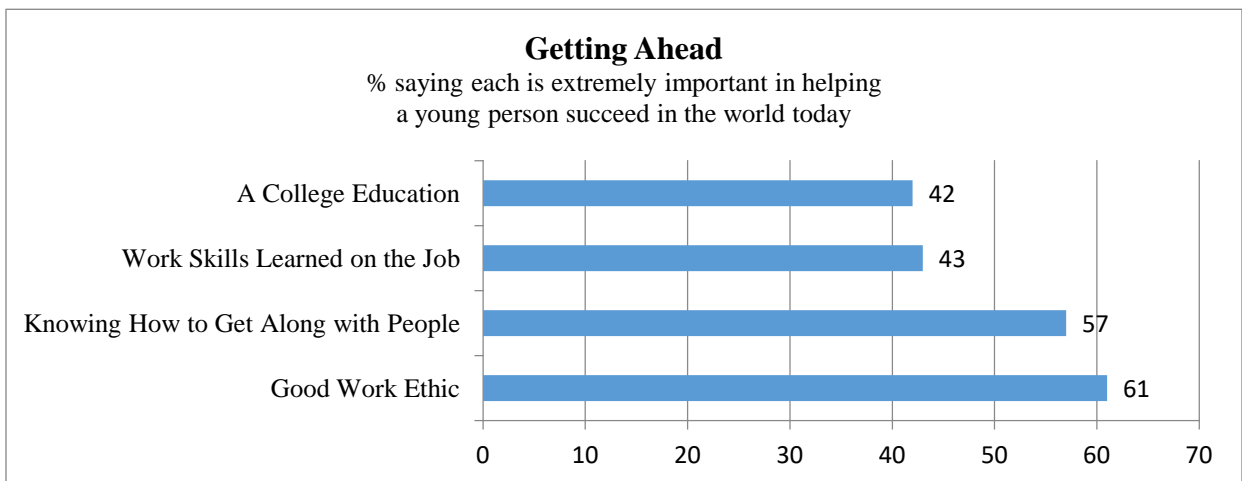


Figure 4. Factors in getting ahead. (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 56).

A college education does provide other benefits besides increased financial security. Baum and Ma (2013) found that college graduates are not only more likely to be employed,

they also may appreciate the benefits of interesting work, may be more socially active and embrace a healthier lifestyle (p. 5). Other researchers concurred: Taylor et al. (2011) found that, highly-educated adults are also more likely to enjoy their work, Caumont (2014) pointed out that adults with college degrees are “also more likely to be married and less likely to be living in their parent’s home” (p. 2), and Carnevale and Rose (2011) added that wages of college-educated workers have been “rising much faster than the wages of people with a high school diploma” (p. 9).

Conceptual Framework

Concepts and theories about school and home factors that most influenced first-generation college students toward their decision to attend college developed into a conceptual framework shown in Figure 5. A conceptual framework, according to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), noted selectivity regarding variables and explained graphically “the main things to be studied—the key factors, variables, or constructs—and the presumed interrelationships among them” (p. 20). The conceptual framework, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, led to a visual representation upon which the present research was based. The conceptual framework led to decisions in the present research about selection of the most important variables and the process of data collection that contributed to choices of high school students to be the first in their families to attend college. The conceptual framework was constructed in a manner to identify the relationship between the school and home factors that occur prior to the decision to attend college and to determine whether these factors may influence a student’s decision toward college attendance.

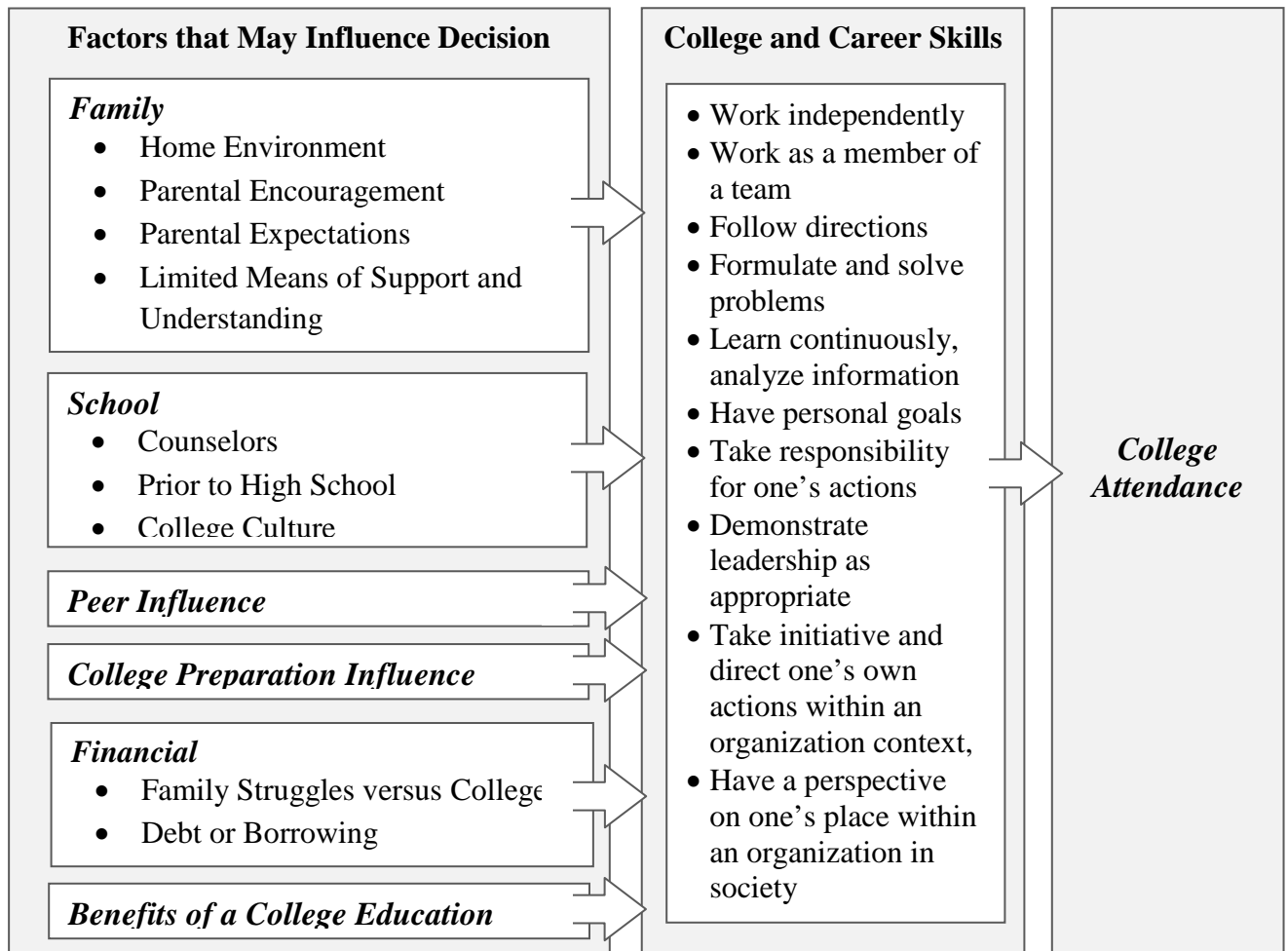


Figure 5. Conceptual framework

Summary

The decision to attend college is one that is influenced by many factors. This chapter reviewed the extant literature about factors that may influence the decision of first-generation college students to attend college. The review of literature helped to establish a foundation and understanding of the many factors involved and how the decisions made by high school seniors may be affected. Chapter 2 also included experts' thinking about the skills, soft skills, necessary to succeed in college, which are necessary in other postsecondary programs as well. Although many factors may influence a first-generation college student's decision to attend college, such as academic readiness and peer influence, this study focused on the

home and school factors and their influence upon the decision to attend college. Chapter 3 comprises the qualitative methods used to conduct this study, the research design, and discussion of the factors that influence a students' decision to attend either a two-year community college or a four-year bachelor's degree granting institution.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the school and family factors that shape the decision of current college freshmen and sophomores from a rural community to attend college.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What school and/or home factors(s) contributed to the decision of first-generation students from a rural community to attend college?
- How did first-generation college students' from a rural community see that their school or home environment encouraged or discouraged them from pursuing a college degree?
- Who were the people who influenced the decisions of first-generation college students who grew up in a rural community?
- Why was attending college important?

Research Design and Methods

A qualitative case study research design was used to address the research questions in this study. This study sought to understand the social phenomena of how school and family influence first-generation college students to attend college. According to Yin (2014), “Whatever the field of interest, the distinctive need for case study research arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (p. 4). A quantitative approach was considered and rejected because that approach would not give a holistic view of the various home and school factors that may influence a high school senior to become a first-generation college student. Miles et al. (2014) stated that “the researcher’s role is to gain a holistic

(systemic, encompassing, and integrated) overview of the context under study: its social arrangement, its way of working, and its explicit and implicit rules” (p. 9). Qualitative research methods helped to develop a more detailed understanding, which was established by speaking directly with participants, to hear their voices and allow them to share their stories unencumbered by what we may expect to find in literature (Creswell, 2013). Yin (2014) added that the qualitative method of case study, as it is employed in the present research, is an important tool to explain complex behavior that is unlikely to be fully captured by experimental or survey methods (p. 19).

School and home factors that influence students to become first-generation college students were determined and reviewed to create a more thorough understanding of a student’s decision to pursue a college degree as a first-generation college student. Miles et al. (2014) described the data-gathering process of “deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding, and of suspending or bracketing preconceptions about the topics under discussion” (p. 9).

Setting for the Study

The northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district in this study has many unique features. The intermediate school district (ISD) in this rural area comprises approximately 24,000 students and 2,000 educators. This intermediate school district provides a comprehensive special education program, career-technical education programs, and an early college program. All of the local school districts participate in School of Choice; thus, parents may choose the school district for their child to attend within the ISD. Most of the school districts in the ISD rank above the national averages on standardized testing and graduation rates (mischooldata.org, 2017). Enrollment in the ISD comprises

38.3% economically-disadvantaged students compared to the state average of 46.3% (mischooldata.org, 2017). The majority of the districts in this ISD enroll fewer than 1,000 students.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2014) website showed that the northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district in this study encompasses a total of five counties with an estimated overall population of around 170,000 and 2,166 square miles. Data indicated that the racial composition in this area is not diverse; an estimated 95% of the population is White. The education level of people in the five-county region showed that the average percentage of those with a bachelor's degree or higher is slightly above 26% compared to the Michigan state-wide percentage of 25.9%. The number of persons in the ISD living below the poverty level during the period of 2009–2013 was 13.58% compared to the state average of 16.8%. Whereas the overall average of median home value in all five counties was \$158,740, the median home values throughout the intermediate school district ranged from a low of \$98,800 to \$235,600.

Study Participants

Fourteen high school graduates from one of the rural districts in one northern-lower Michigan intermediate school districts were invited to participate in this study. The researcher met with potential participants to discuss the study, to determine participants' interest in the project, whether they understood the expectations of the study, and whether they could provide appropriate, necessary data for a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Gay et al., 2011). Four females and one male first-generation college students agreed to participate along with their high school counselors, parents, and selected teachers.

The researcher contacted high school counselors at local districts within the ISD and requested names of students who were first-generation students in their freshman or sophomore year of college. The researcher, a superintendent in one of the districts located in the ISD, did not select students for this study who had attended the researcher's local district. The researcher used purposive sampling to establish criteria based on her experience and knowledge of the group to be sampled (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011).

Data Collection

A minimum of two interviews were conducted with all student participants along with a focus group interview. (see Appendix A). To gain further insight into each student's path to college attendance, interviews were also conducted with the person whom each student believed made the greatest impact on their decision to attend college. As indicated by Merriam (2009), student voice helped to "achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (p. 15). Student voice offered insights to educational institutions about schooling from the perspective of students as expert witnesses (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Student voice will enable "students to actively shape their education as citizens" (Bahou, 2011, p. 3).

Counselors, teachers, and parents individually participated in a minimum of one round of interviews, which allowed the researcher to acquire data that "is inaccessible through observation" (Gay et al., 2011, p. 386). The interviews allowed discovery of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, as they are related to home and school factors that may have influenced the students to attend college as a first-generation college students (see Appendices B and C).

Interview questions were designed to focus on each group being interviewed—first-generation college freshmen and/or sophomores, their high school counselor, selected teachers who have taught at the first-generation college freshmen’s and/or sophomore’s high school, and the parents of the first-generation college students. The interview questions were intentionally open-ended to allow participants to provide more narrative and share their experiences and stories.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their entirety after the interview. Throughout the course of the study, “The research questions may change and be refined as the inquirer learns what to ask and of whom it should be asked” (Creswell, 2014, p. 181). Although the questions elicit specific information, a more conversational mode occurred and the exact delivery of the questions varied. The questions were open-ended so the researcher could elicit the participants’ responses without guiding or leading them to a specific answer .

The guiding questions involved a conversation mode to allow for additional information to be gathered. Yin (2016) opined: “This conversational mode, compared to structured interviews, presents the opportunity for two-way interactions, in which a participant even may query the researcher” (p. 142). The interviews were extensive about what home and school factors affected or influenced students to attend either a two-year community college or a four-year institution that grants bachelor’s degrees. Open-ended questions, in addition to the original interview questions, were presented to encourage a more informal setting in which the participants are more comfortable and can express their responses in their own words, not to be influenced by the researcher.

This study involved human subjects, specifically students, parents, high school counselors, and high school teachers. The researcher requested approval for the study from the University Human Subjects Review Committee and complied with the policies and procedures established by Eastern Michigan University on the use of human subjects in student research (see Appendix D).

Letters of invitation to participate in the study were sent to students who met the criteria as first generation college students (see Appendix E). Letters of invitation to participate in the study were also sent to parents, counselors, and teachers who were associated with the selected students (see Appendix F). The necessary procedures were followed regarding informed consent from the students, parents, high school counselors, and high school teachers to protect the rights and well-being of the research participants. Informed consent requirements were met utilizing a letter describing the purpose of the research, procedures to be used, rights of all participants, and how confidentiality would be maintained (see Appendices G and H).

In addition to interviews, research focused around data collected from artifacts of local schools within the ISD, which included online counseling or college readiness preparation materials. The study of home and school factors that influence first-generation college freshmen and sophomores at the northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district is intended to add to existing information and knowledge to assist students, parents, and educational staff to encourage and motivate college participation. This study was not intended to evaluate any local school district's existing programs, beliefs, and philosophies.

Data Analysis

Data in this study were collected from various participant groups through in-depth interviews. Miles et al. (2014) advised conducting data analysis along with data collection early in the study to allow the field-worker to “cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better, data.” This constant analysis allowed the researcher to not only help correct *blind spots* but also to generate reports early to assist with guiding the study (p. 70).

As the study progressed, “the theory or general pattern of understanding emerged, as it begins with initial codes, develops into broad themes, and coalesces into a grounded theory or broad interpretation” (Creswell, 2014, p. 182). Following the Creswell procedure, similar perceptions of the participants were identified and categorized. A qualitative software analysis package, such as NVivo, was considered for assistance in the data analysis but was ruled out, because according to Auld et al. (2007), “if qualitative research is done infrequently and data sets are limited (fewer than 20 interviews or focus groups), then analysis by hand may prove to be more efficient” (p. 43).

Although more than 20 interviews were conducted, the interviews in the present study were conducted in groups of five or fewer. Field notes or recordings were transcribed directly from dictation. The interview data was coded and inductively examined for patterns. Miles et al. (2014) observed that “codes are primarily, but not exclusively, used to retrieve and categorize similar data chunks so the researcher can quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct, or theme” (p. 72). The researcher developed a description of an individual or setting, analyzed the data for themes or categories, and finally made an interpretation or drew conclusions about its

meaning, personally and theoretically (Creswell, 2014). The data were filtered through the researcher's personal lens: "One cannot escape the personal interpretation brought to qualitative data analysis" (Creswell, 2014, p. 182). In other words, meaning attached to the gathered data reflected the orientation of the researcher within the environment of the study. The overall goal was to understand the issues that influence first-generation college students to attend college.

Validity

Miles et al. (2014) cautioned that "the meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their confirmability—that is, their validity" (p. 14). In a qualitative study, validity is related to authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility, and accuracy which are determined by the researcher, the participants, or the recipients of the data (Creswell, 2014).

Maxwell (2013) identified two specific validity threats—bias and reactivity. Bias is "the researcher's personal agenda, personal demons, or personal axes to grind, which skew the ability to represent and present fieldwork and data analysis in a trustworthy manner" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 294). The researcher's existing theory, goals, or preconceptions and selection of data that stand out to the researcher involve both the subjectivity of the researcher and bias (Maxwell, 2013). It is impossible to eliminate a researcher's bias. The researcher in this study is a first-generation college student. According to Gay et al. (2011), it is important that qualitative researchers stay balanced between becoming involved and remaining fairly unbiased. Bias was reduced through the conscious reflection upon the data and how the biases are specifically related to the conceptual framework of this study. Reflexivity involves the influence of the researcher on the setting or the individuals studied

(Maxwell, 2013). In a qualitative study, it is important to understand the existence of bias and reflexivity and use them productively. Creswell (2014) noted: “The inquirer reflects about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretation, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data” (p. 186). As the researcher is a superintendent in one of the local districts in the northern-lower Michigan ISD in this study, information from participants was closely monitored to avoid any bias on behalf of the participants.

To increase the credibility of the researcher’s conclusions, some strategies were implemented, including rich data, respondent validation, and searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher conducted both long-term involvement and intensive interviews to collect rich data. This rich data were detailed and varied enough to provide a full and revealing picture of what occurred, which was implemented by transcribing the interviews verbatim (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher also used respondent validation by “systematically soliciting feedback about one’s data and conclusions from the people [being studied]” (p. 244). This assisted the researcher in ruling out misinterpretations of the data. The process required the researcher to also “rigorously examine both the supporting and discrepant data to assess whether it is more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion, being aware of all of the pressures to ignore data that do not fit [the researcher’s] conclusions” (p. 244). The researcher’s familiarity with the site and the participants required awareness of the pitfalls of accepting preconceived ideas and dutiful attention to the outcomes dictated by the gathered data.

Limitations and Delimitations of Study

A significant limitation is the small sample of college students who have attended high school in small rural schools in one northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district, their parents, counselors, and classroom teachers. This sample size limits the perspective to those individuals. The researcher cannot require participation; therefore, participants were limited to those who were willing to participate. It is expected that the individual participants or people interviewed were truthful and provided honest answers.

Delimitations of this study included the restrictions in the scope of the study, methods utilized, and choice of analysis to complete this study. The geographic location limits focus of the study upon one very small section of the State of Michigan or one ISD in northern-lower Michigan at one point in time. The participants were selected based on recommendations by local school district counselors in schools within this intermediate school district. Five first- or second-year, first-generation college students were selected by the researcher from those who agreed to be interviewed.

Summary

Qualitative research methods were employed to study the school and family factors that shaped the decision of college freshmen or sophomores to attend college. The research questions that guided this study allowed the researcher to clarify the influence of school and family on the decision of first-generation college students to attend college. Data collection included interviews of selected students, their parents, counselors, and teachers as well as a review of pertinent school district archival information. The results of this study, implications of the findings, and the implications for further research are discussed in the final chapters.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to identify school and home influences that led individuals from one rural northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district to become first-generation college students who attend either two-year or four-year institutions. In this qualitative case study, student voice provided an in-depth perspective and allowed study participants to visualize or make sense of their lives and the factors that influenced them to become first-generation college students. Each participating student's story was gathered through several informal interviews, discussions, and a focus group meeting. The findings of this study will increase understanding and provide insight about the home and school factors that lead individuals to become first-generation college students. This information will assist other first-generation college students in overcoming obstacles that might hinder college attendance and will be invaluable to teachers, counselors, school leaders, and parents about how to encourage and support first-generation college students during their college attendance.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- What school and/or home factors(s) contributed to the decision of first-generation students from a rural community to attend college?
- How did first-generation college students' from a rural community see that their school or home environment encouraged or discouraged them from pursuing a college degree?
- Who were the people who influenced the decisions of first-generation college students who grew up in a rural community?

- Why was attending college important?

Five first-generation college freshmen or sophomores agreed to participate in this study. All participants graduated from one of three different high schools within an intermediate school district in rural parts of northern-lower Michigan. All of the participants were at least 18 years of age and were interviewed as college freshmen. All of the interviews were face-to-face with follow-up questions conducted over the telephone. Four of the five students also participated in a focus group discussion; one of the students participated via facetime, a video conferencing tool. One parent of each student interviewed and the person said to have had the most significant impact on each participant's decision to attend college were also interviewed. Three student participants shared that their grandmother had the most significant influence on them; one student named her mother, and one named his father. One of the grandparents was deceased and unavailable to participate in an interview. A face-to-face interview of a teacher and counselor of each participant was also conducted. Each participant's perspective is shared in story form to truly understand and connect with his/her voice.

Perspectives

Franklin Public Schools. A pseudonym was assigned for the school's name for confidentiality. Two participants attended Franklin Public Schools, a Class D school district that serves approximately 500 students located in a small rural community in northern-lower Michigan. The district is approximately 50 square miles in size. According to the 2015 census, the median household income in the community where Franklin Public Schools is located is \$38,056, whereas monthly housing costs are \$631. The school district comprises one building housing kindergarten through sixth grade and one building housing seventh

through twelfth grade. Student performance in the school district is reported to be above the state average in all content areas, as measured Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP) and the standardized ACT college readiness assessment test (MI School Data, 2016). Franklin Public Schools has a significantly higher, four-year graduation rate of 90.63% compared to the state average of 79.79% in 2014–2015 and a dropout rate of 6.25%, which is also lower than the state average of 9.12% in 2014–2015 (MI School Data, 2016). The school district’s free and reduced lunch participation rate of 74.1% is 0.6% higher than the 2014–2015 state average (MI School Data, 2016). An operating budget of nearly six million dollars is reported on the district’s website. Franklin Public Schools is an out-of-formula school district, which means that their 18-mil tax generates more revenue than they would receive from the State of Michigan in the form of a foundation allowance.

Mary. Both of Mary’s parents live part of the year out of state and part of the year in Michigan for their jobs. Mary’s only sibling is a sister who is two years older than Mary. With the exception of her senior year, Mary’s K-12 education was always in the Franklin Schools. While living out of state where her parents were working, Mary began her senior year of high school taking online classes. Part of the way through her senior year, as she struggled to earn her diploma online, Mary returned to Michigan to live with a friend’s parents to complete the school year.

As a participant in this study, Mary was a college freshman who attended the 5,100-student, local community college close to her high school. Mary was the first person in her family to attend college. Her older sister worked as a personal trainer. In her own words, Mary stated, “I realized I wanted to be either a lawyer or something business-oriented when I watched television with my sister growing up.” That nobody in Mary’s family earned a

college degree was not a concern for her. She knew she wanted to be a lawyer or to work in the business field as she was “good at arguing.” She said she realized early on that she would have to attend college to achieve her goal. Mary also believed that the decision to attend college was in her control as she stated, “I am 18 and, actually, no one can really tell me what to do.”

Family influence. Mary believed that her mother was the person who had the greatest impact on her decision to attend college because, as Mary stated, “She always wanted me to be better and have better than what she did and what she went through.” Ms. Jones, Mary’s high school counselor, agreed that Mary’s mother had a large impact on Mary’s decision to attend college, but her mother would often make the process more difficult. Ms. Jones shared her concerns:

Mary’s mother clearly wanted her daughter to attend college to become an attorney and make a lot of money but she struggled with the college-path process and sometimes actually became a roadblock in lieu of a clear pathway. Nonetheless, Mary was very determined, strong-willed, and independent; she acted, at times, almost more like the parent sharing the information of the college process with her mother while working through the process herself.

Mary’s mother always “hounded” her about going to college by encouraging her to “study hard and get good grades.” Mary’s mother also agreed with her daughter that she would “nag” her and that she was “too smart not to be a lawyer.” Mary’s mother was always a positive support for Mary, cultivating and reinforcing Mary’s belief that earning a college degree was not impossible as well as mother’s own expectation that Mary become a lawyer. Mr. Sound, Mary’s history and United Nations teacher, believed that Mary’s mother,

although very removed and not even living in the same state, was a significant influence on Mary's decision to become an attorney:

I am not sure that it's not mom that's pushing for her to become an attorney more than if she's pushing for herself. Her mom, in a sense, has encouraged her to go to college, but I don't necessarily see Mary going into that specific field. I do think whatever she does, she will do well.

Mary believed that one of her greatest motivations to attend college, as her parents taught her, was to always "Work hard to get where you are, and you know you can do anything if you have a good work ethic." One of Mary's biggest concerns was that she did not want to disappoint her mother, because Mary knew she was capable of earning a college degree. Mary believed the best advice she can give families to assist other students as they move forward toward college attendance is to "Just support their [child's] decision, even if it's not the decision you want because you cannot live your life through your children."

Although Mary's mom pushed Mary to do well in school, neither of her parents were actively involved in her K-12 education. That Mary's parents were not actively involved did not affect Mary's academic performance, as she consistently earned all A's and B's in her high school classes without much effort. According to her mother, "You have to let them live their lives."

Regarding advice to families to assist their children to move forward to college attendance, Mary's mother believed that it is important to "Be supportive and allow them to make their own choices and give them the knowledge to make their own choices." Mary's mother always had "the expectation for Mary to attend college" and she stated, "I always gave her encouragement and support in her decisions." Mary's mother believed that she

ultimately had no control over Mary's decision to attend college. Mary said, "[I] always felt like I was expected to go to college and make a lot of money. I told my family, if I become an attorney, they will still have to pay me for my services."

School influences. School played a key role in Mary's path to college attendance. She believed that her school counselor, Ms. Jones, was like her second mother, even helping her to register for college classes. Ms. Jones also shared that she "went to college orientation with Mary and sat through everything from financial aid, housing, and other kinds of information related to attending their program including visiting the dorms, because Mary's mother found all of this too overwhelming."

Ms. Jones's function as Mary's second mother did not stop there. In Mary's senior year, when Mary moved out of state with her family and later decided to return, Ms. Jones drove approximately 300 miles to meet Mary at the airport and take her to stay with her surrogate family in the Franklin School District and complete high school. Mary explained, Ms. Jones "was one of the biggest reasons I actually realized that I could attend college and made me believe it was possible." Mary said, "Even though the school provided opportunities for visits to other colleges, I knew the only option for me was the local community college, because my scholarship was from this school." Mary's academic success may have been that, because she was smart, she "needed to live up to everyone's expectations." At times, Mary believed that she wanted to live her life more and not stress out, as her classmates did, about "getting a B on a test." Mary believed that part of the expectation for her to succeed was because she was awarded the commitment scholarship program in the eighth grade.

As Mary's school counselor, Ms. Jones spent a lot of time working with first-generation college students and their parents. She explained,

I help them write and fill out college applications, help with fee waivers when applying to colleges. I sit down with parents to help them complete the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], and basically I just do a lot of handholding with first-generation students. It helps that I have known these kids for at least six years, and I know who these kids are so I am helping them plan along the way and plant ideas about career choices into their heads.

Ms. Jones noticed a huge disadvantage for students who are first-generation college-bound students.

Some kids are so driven, and their parents push them and understand the college process, because the parents have attended college; whereas, for a lot of kids, their parents don't get any of the process to the point that it is scary, because if there isn't someone there who says, "let me help with this" then those kids end up not doing anything or getting left behind.

Important advice that Ms. Jones offers students or families who need assistance is to "Simply ask for help and take advantage of the resources of secondary schools and colleges because the colleges want your child to attend their school, so they will be kind and will go out of their way to help."

"Trying to re-educate mom" was one of the struggles that Ms. Jones faced with Mary, because Mary's mother had a lot of misinformation and often the communication went through Mary. Ms. Jones shared, "Mary even understood that her mom struggled with the college-bound process because she would tell me that she would educate her mother about

parts of the process.” Ms. Jones had to find a balance between sharing information with Mary’s mom without “stepping on her toes.”

The school also provided a lot of support for career and college exploration through a life skills class, which helped students explore careers, participate in job shadowing, meet with college recruiters at the school, and participate in mock interviews. Ms. Jones believed that students would benefit if K-12 schools provided more career education. She believed that more resources need to go toward this “because while some kids have really definite ideas and they change them in college, others don’t have any idea about what they want to do.”

Mr. Sound, Mary’s teacher, held similar sentiments: “Students need to see where they fit into society, whether it is a two-year certificate from somewhere, a welding degree from CTC [Career Technology Center], or whether it’s a law degree from the University of Michigan. They need to explore these options and discover what that means to them.” Although Ms. Jones believed in educating students about career options, Mary offered some important advice for educators who assist students as they move forward to college attendance: “Don’t be judgmental, make students feel stupid, or make them feel like less of a person.”

Mr. Sound thought Mary to be a very talented speaker and successful in his debate class. The students who typically participate in that class are college bound, which provides a rich environment for Mary. Mr. Sound explained, “Mary thrived in this class, and she had a natural talent for being able to see both sides of an argument, which is why she and I are both confident in her career pathway of being an attorney.”

Peer influence. Mary did not believe her friends had any influence or impact on her decision to attend college. She often thought that they may have been more of a deterrent, if anything:

My friends were not really the best influence as they would like to have fun and not concentrate on school, although I don't think I focused on school as much as I should have either, but ultimately, I knew I was going to college, so I didn't want anything to mess that up.

Mr. Sound, shared her sentiments:

Mary was oftentimes held back by her friends because her friends were not academically driven and liked to have fun, which in a sense deterred her from excelling academically in high school and pursue more AP [Advanced Placement] and higher level classes as most college-bound students did.

Mary's mother knew Mary was very strong-willed and had friends from various places, not just her school, and she arranged for "safe situations for her [Mary] to drink and party with her friends because Mary's mother knew Mary was going to do it anyway." Mary added that she had to cope with the deaths of some very close friends: "I had several friends who were killed in high school and that was just tough for me; it made me tougher, but it also made me realize that I needed to work harder towards earning a college degree." Ms. Jones, the school counselor, also shared that Mary "had a lot of loss [whom she thought] profoundly influenced her in her decision to finish high school and attend college."

College preparation influence. College and career readiness was not a main concern for Mary; academics always came easy: "I never needed to put in much effort, like my friends. I just found learning and getting good grades very easy." Mary thought it would

have been beneficial to have taken more advanced placement classes, having only taken one during her high school career. Mary was also not worried about the academic rigor of pre-law classes; but she was worried that, because academics were naturally easy for her, she may not have the study habits necessary to be successful in college. Mr. Sound, had no doubt that, if she applied herself, she would be successful academically, but she will have some challenges and find that the academics of college may be more challenging for her, as she never really needed to put much effort in her classes to be successful. His advice to Mary would be to “Find a group of friends who are serious about excelling academically so she doesn’t get side-tracked with other pressures of the social life in college.”

Although Mary, along with teachers and staff, believed her to be naturally gifted academically, Mary noted that the area in which she was unprepared is study habits. Her high school counselor planned to teach her some study skills to help her to be successful in college. Ms. Jones encouraged Mary to pursue college and her dream of being an attorney and to not let her academic concerns deter her “because there are a lot of supports she can seek out in college.” She also offered to help. Mary stated, “I rely on [Ms. Jones] a lot; she not only helped me to figure out the process of applying to college, signing up for classes, and financial aid, but she told me if I needed help throughout college, she would be happy to help out in any way.”

Being academically prepared for college is not the only concern of college-bound students, observed Ms. Jones. She said, “Many of them struggle because they are away from home, don’t have anyone to talk with, or they simply want to come back home.” She did not have concerns about Mary struggling with this aspect because “she has been somewhat on her own for some time,” with her parents living out of state. Ms. Jones believed that “one

way we can actually prepare students is to provide them with some kind of mentor during, at least, their first year of college, especially if they lose any supports they may have had, such as friends, family, and employers.”

Mr. Sound agreed with Ms. Jones’s thoughts about students being away from home: “These kids just know small districts and have to leave the small town, be away from their family and friends, to go to a big city or a large college; the change in the demographics alone can be a pretty overwhelming experience for them to get through.” Mr. Sound expressed that although Mary is “a pretty motivated kid, she’s going to have that apprehension, and that’s something that’s a little scary, the fear of the unknown.”

Cost and access to financial aid/student loans. One of Mary’s main concerns about earning a college degree was being able to afford college; however, she has some sources of revenue that assist her, such as a Pell Grant and a Commitment Scholarship. Mary received a two-year Commitment Scholarship to attend a community college and said that if she did not utilize this opportunity, it would be like “a slap in the face to the people who awarded this to her.” This scholarship was intended to focus on first-generation college students and is awarded to students in the eighth grade. Ms. Jones described the Commitment Scholarship as a “program offered by the local community college, which provides tuition for 60 credits as well as an academic advisory program and other activities.” Ms. Jones explained that Mary was awarded the Commitment Scholarship in eighth grade because she was identified “as somebody who had a lot of potential and had a lot of goals.”

The discussion at school about Mary going to college continued from the time she received the scholarship in the eighth grade. According to Ms. Jones, all of the teachers know the students who have the Commitment Scholarships, and they remind students to

make decisions that would not jeopardize their scholarship. Ms. Jones provided much support to Mary; she went to the community college with Mary to meet with the Commitment Scholarship program representative to go over the scholarship guidelines and the financial aid. Mary believed she was given opportunity for college with the scholarship and, without the scholarship, she would be “more stressed out about coming up with ways to pay for college.”

Mary has been “on her own” for some time now, said Ms. Jones, “This has been a benefit for Mary, in regard to her not believing she needs to help support her mother and father. It has taken Mary a lot of determination and strength to simply move back, without her parents, to earn her high school diploma.” Mary said, “I am on my own and I need to make decisions that work best for me. My parents do not need me to work to help support our family, but I am sure they are hoping that someday, after I become an attorney, I can help to support them.”

According to Mr. Sound, being able to afford to pay for college is a huge concern for all students, and first-generation students seem to have a greater struggle because they often come from families with more limited incomes. He explained further, “We’re getting more information about college debt; college keeps getting more expensive, and more kids are starting to weigh the benefits of that, so I think that’s an obstacle.”

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. Mary first came to the realization that she wanted to be a lawyer while watching television shows when she was a child:

I thought if I want to make money and not work as hard as my parents did for their money, then I needed to go to college, and I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. My parents are constantly traveling for work, yet still struggle to pay their bills.

That the family Mary lived with for six months while finishing high school could more easily support their family was a big influence on Mary. Mr. Sound supported this based on what Mary had shared with him: “The family she was living with had a huge influence on her to pursue a college degree, and they were very college-oriented people. The kids are very success-oriented; Dad’s an executive at a local golf course and Mom owns her own business.”

According to Mary, not earning a college degree would make it difficult to support her family. Both of her parents have worked very physically demanding, low-paying jobs. While growing up, Mary also spent a great deal of time in the same job as her parents and did not want to work so hard for so little money. In the end, Mary knew that she “will either attend college or end up doing something that would not be able to support a family.” The benefits of a college degree and specifically becoming a lawyer were huge motivators for Mary, according to her mother, who said, “Mary always knew she was going to college because she has to make a lot of money.” Ms. Jones believed that the main focus of Mary’s mother seemed to be that “she wanted [Mary] to make a lot of money, and that Mary wanted to become an attorney was very desirable since this was a field that could potentially provide a more beneficial lifestyle even possibly to her.”

Beth. Beth and a younger brother were raised by a single father in the small community where she attended high school—the same community in which her parents and grandmother have always lived. Her grandmother and grandfather began a very successful business in this community, which has since been sold. Beth’s mother has not been involved in her life since she was very young; her grandmother, who has taken on the role of Beth’s mother, has been a very big part of her life. Beth’s entire K-12 education has been in the district from which she graduated and, as a participant in this study, Beth was a college freshman, one of approximately 5,100 students at the local community college close to her high school.

Beth is the first in her family to attend college. Beth enjoys learning. In her own words, Beth stated, “I just like to learn. I love being in a classroom. I don’t know why, I just love learning something new.” Beth worked toward college and career readiness: “I worked really hard to get good grades. I always studied for tests and continued to better myself.” For Beth, a field related to actuaries or statistics was a natural fit for her, as this was a subject she learned quickly and strived for greater achievement. According to Beth, “In my senior year of high school, I started to get a little stressed out because high school was extreme, and I was always told that college was ten times worse. At the time, this made me stress even more about the thought of going to college.” Beth found that she needed to spend more time working to write papers; her teachers pushed her and “edged her step-by-step” to be more successful.

That nobody in Beth’s family earned a college degree was not a concern for her. She explained, “I live in a small community, and my class has only 40 students, so the community actually gave me a lot of encouragement and support.” Beth realized that she had

a natural gift with numbers, and said that she “could not disappoint or let anyone down who believed in her.”

Family influence. Beth believed her grandmother was the person who had the greatest impact on her decision to attend college: “She pushed me to better myself and to always take that step to go farther, because average isn’t enough; you need to excel.” According to her grandmother, Beth “does not want to be like her mother, who has not been a significant part of her life; she turned her limited negative experience with her mother into a positive.” Beth agreed that she did not want to follow her mother’s path: “Not wanting to be like my mother was a significant motivator for me, I wanted to achieve more and be successful, unlike her.”

Beth’s father, although very supportive of any of the decisions she made, did not have a significant effect on her decision to attend college. He was often at work, so her grandmother stepped in to help. In Beth’s words, “I have always just been on my own and grew up somewhat by myself, so I have always known to just push myself.” Beth’s grandmother said that her granddaughter “has a lot of grit, and she has goals. I always preached to her that she has to rely on herself, and I know she wants to do more in her life.” Beth’s grandmother stressed that she never pushed Beth, but that Beth pushed herself. Although Beth agreed that she has pushed herself, she contended that she always knew her grandmother had higher expectations:

My grandmother never told me I had to go to college. She would be happy with whatever I decided to do, but I knew she expected more of me. She knew I was good in math, and I always felt like there was some kind of an expectation from my grandmother that I go to college—to do more.

Beth believed her grandmother had a significant influence on her decision to attend college, because “She always wanted us to be self-reliant.” Beth explained further that she “had a deal with her grandmother to take a personal protection class for women, if [she] was going to be living on campus.” Beth believed the best advice she can give families to assist other students as they move forward toward college attendance is to “basically push them to better themselves, to better their knowledge, to be happier, because high school may be rough, but it takes them one step closer to college and all of these things.”

Beth’s counselor, Ms. Jones, agreed that Beth’s grandmother had a significant impact on Beth’s decision to attend college. Ms. Jones clarified, “Beth’s grandmother talked to me two years before Beth was a senior, telling me we have to get this girl to college, so it’s your job to help me get her to there.” Ms. Jones described how Beth’s grandmother kept in touch with her over the next few years to assure Beth had the support she needed from the school, to give her all of the necessary supports to pursue college. Grandmother asked questions such as, “Have you met with her yet?” and “Does she know what she’s doing?” Beth’s grandmother was very persistent, whereas her mother was “not involved at all, and her father was involved very little as he was busy working much of the time.” Ms. Jones met with Beth and discussed the elements she needed to put in place to attend college.

Although Beth’s father knew she had “natural talent in math and always pushed her,” he was not actively involved in her K-12 education. He also confirmed that Beth’s grandmother played a significant role in the home-school connection: “While I support [Beth] in whatever decision she makes, and I know she is capable of earning a college degree, I know this will be a rough road for her, as I will not be much help financially.” Beth’s grandmother provided major support, mostly assisting Beth with language arts

assignments. Beth's grandmother said she was little to no help in math, because "Beth was naturally smart in math, and she was focused because she wanted good grades."

School influences. School played a key role in Beth's path to college. Beth believed the small school she attended and the connections she made with the school counselor and teachers were very influential in her decision to attend college: "My counselor and teachers just pushed all of the kids to better ourselves and wanted us to go to college, and they all gave us the idea that we could be successful in college." Just as with Mary, Ms. Jones spent a lot of time, not only working with first-generation college students but with their parents as well. She said that the students needed more support because they did not receive it at home, and their parents needed support because they had not had the experience of attending college.

Mr. Bend, Beth's computer and accounting teacher, believed that, in their school, teachers and staff could build successful relationships and have a great influence on decisions of students:

I see my students as seventh graders, I see them as eighth graders, and I see them as ninth graders and seniors. I have the opportunity to work with them in sports. I see them in the hallway, and they know we care.

Beth said that the encouragement she received from her accounting teacher was a huge influence on her decision to pursue a math-related field: "He encouraged me, believed in me, and helped me believe I could actually pursue some kind of degree in math."

Beth believed that the most support she received at school came from her counselor, Ms. Jones, and that the counselor's support had a huge impact on her decision to attend college. Ms. Jones gave Beth opportunities to visit college campuses and provided

information about scholarships and how to prepare for college. Although attendance at the local community college was Beth's general decision, she believed it was good to have exposure to other colleges. Beth shared, "Unfortunately for me, the local community college was the best option financially." Ms. Jones said that she provided a lot of support in school to assist Beth with pursuing a college path, a plan motivated by the persistence of Beth's grandmother. Ms. Jones explained,

Since grandma kept me on the straight and narrow, I sat down with Beth many times and we talked about what she wanted to do, her interests, her interests, and how she was Tuition Incentive Program (TIP) eligible. We researched the assistance she would receive from the TIP to assist her with paying for college (Tuition Incentive Program, 2016).

The TIP grant provides assistance with tuition at participating Michigan community colleges and is considered the last dollar students may use (Michigan Department of Treasury, 2016).

Beth's advice for educators was "to continue to be supportive and help us prepare for tests like the ACT." Mr. Bend, Beth's computer and accounting teacher, encouraged her to pursue her interest in math:

I encouraged all of the students to explore a career in accounting and tell them that they can earn six figures if they really wanted to pursue this field. Beth eventually took me up on the encouragement and researched the field, because she really enjoyed it, and I don't think she realized how successful she was with math.

Mr. Bend divulged that Beth was very talented in math and that he gave her encouragement while she was in high school: "I knew Beth was talented in math; so I just

kept pushing, giving her little nudges, and told her she could do it and that she could be successful in college and with pursuing a career in math or some related field.”

Although Beth made it clear that she was very shy, she shared the best advice she could give to high school students who are thinking of attending college:

Try everything to get yourself out there and get out into your community to do more things. Getting yourself out there and outside your comfort zone will help you figure out what you like, what you don't like, and will help you head in the right direction.

Peer influence. According to Beth's grandmother, Beth was not a “social butterfly.” Beth always considered herself a little shy but did have a small group of close friends. Her grandmother believed Beth “was a little rebellious for a bit with different things, and she kind of drifted off, but she found her way back on path to college when she started to hang out with girls that did have ambition and did want to do something with their lives.” Grandmother believed that, if anything, the cliques Beth associated with had a negative influence on her and her path to college. Beth's father agreed: “Beth was a strong-willed girl, and sometimes hung around with kids who pulled her in the wrong direction; luckily for her, she realized that she needed to work hard and make some better choices.”

Beth eventually realized that it was important to “Do your homework and remember that school comes before everything.” Counselor, Ms. Jones, agreed: “Beth was somewhat shy; and although she didn't always hang around with friends that were the best influences, she seemed to use their negative influence to boomerang her into a positive direction, much like the negative situation of her biological mother.”

College preparation influence. Beth was not worried about the mathematics classes at college; she was more concerned about her English skills and wished she would have spent

more time reading. Beth believed she prepared herself in high school for college because she had good study habits and worked hard to get good grades. Beth's grandmother believed her "grit and drive to do more and be successful helped to prepare her for college. Beth has a good work ethic and works hard on anything she puts her mind to." Beth's father agreed that Beth is ready for college and that she is naturally gifted in math. Being prepared for college in the math field was a concern for her teachers and counselor. Ms. Jones believed that Beth followed her passion for math and that she pushed herself to achieve even beyond what she thought she could accomplish:

Beth was like a mathematician, and I encouraged her to sign up for pre-calculus even though she thought that she was not smart enough to be successful, and it was a big stretch for her, but she rose to the occasion. She was not only successful in pre-calculus but when she took the Compass test, she qualified for college calculus, and she was excited.

Mr. Bend, Beth's teacher, knew when she tested out of accounting she would have no problem pursuing a degree in a math-related field: "Testing out was huge for her, and it gave her a lot of confidence in her ability."

Cost and access to financial aid student loans. Beth's main concern regarding attending college was being able to afford college with her largest funding source being student loans. According to Beth, "Money is just the biggest obstacle I see in pursuing a college degree, and I do not want to have a lot of student loans to pay back when I am done with college." Beth knew that there were options as to how to pay for college. Beth's grandmother explained that Beth even looked into joining the military service to help with college expenses but decided against this. Beth's father also knew and stated, "Paying for

college will be a big challenge, but I don't want her to not pursue college because of this concern." Beth knew, "My father wants me to attend college, and I know he does not need my help financially to survive, but he works very hard and I worry about him as well." Beth's father and her grandmother have encouraged Beth to go to college, but both know finding ways to pay for college will be challenging. Beth's grandmother said, "Beth knows she will have to find ways on her own to pay for college, and I know she is worried about having huge financial debt, but her father and I will help out if we can." The cost of college was not a deterrent for Beth to attend college, but it was still a concern. Ms. Jones knew that, because Beth was eligible for the TIP grant, she would be able to pursue a degree. Ms. Jones shared:

The financial piece was a huge obstacle; and if Beth did not receive the TIP grant, she most likely, would not be able to afford to pursue a college degree. Because Beth's family is low income and have been on Medicaid, the TIP grant qualifies Beth for funding when no other sources of money are available. Paying for college will be difficult for Beth, even with the TIP grant, which picks up costs only when other money is not available. Fortunately for Beth, she is a persistent and she applied for scholarships earning a total of \$7,500. The grant she received for \$2,500 is renewable for four years.

Like Beth's grandmother, Ms. Jones was very encouraged by Beth's drive and determination. She explained, "Beth will be able to earn her actuary certification in two years, start working in her field, and hopefully be able to receive tuition reimbursement from her employer to complete her four-year degree."

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. Beth really began thinking about college in seventh grade, “That’s when you really start thinking about your future.” The benefits of a college education were something that were very important to Beth:

My grandmother always talked about being self-reliant and only having to depend on myself, and college usually allows people to earn much more money than other options. I don't want to spend a lot of time away from my family working all the time, like my father. I want to find a job where I can make a better income and have a family I can enjoy.

According to Beth’s grandmother, Beth’s father has worked very hard to support his family, which caused him to spend significant time away from his children. Ms. Jones “knew Beth wanted to be independent, which was influenced significantly by the fact that her mother was not involved in her life but also had some very negative circumstances surrounding her.” Beth knew she wanted to find a career where she could earn the money to live comfortably and support her family.

Lake Area Schools. A pseudonym was assigned to the school's name for confidentiality. Lake Area Schools is a public school district located in a small rural community in northern-lower Michigan. The Class B school district is approximately 124 square miles in size and serves approximately 1,400 students. According to the 2015 census, the median household income in the community where Lake Area Schools is located is \$40,268, whereas monthly housing costs are \$786. The school district comprises one elementary school, housing kindergarten through fourth grade, one fifth through eighth grade middle school, and one ninth through twelfth grade high school. State reports showed student performance above the state average in all content areas, as measured by M-STEP

and the standardized ACT college readiness assessment test (MI School Data, 2016). Lake Area Schools' four-year graduation rate of 83.81% was higher than the state average of 79.79% in 2014–2015, and the dropout rate of less than 5% was lower than the state average of 9.12% in 2014–2015. The free and reduced lunch participation rate of 56.9% is almost 17% lower than the 2014–2015 state average (MI School Data, 2016).

The Lake Area district has an operating budget of slightly more than twelve million dollars, according to information on the district's website. The school district was scheduled to receive a state foundation per-pupil allowance of \$7,511 in the 2016–2017 school year.

Sadie. Sadie grew up in the general area where she attended high school but moved frequently during her K-12 educational experience. She listed aloud the schools that she attended: "I have attended school in seven different school districts." All of the districts Sadie attended were within the northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district that participated in this study. Sadie lived with her mother, stepfather, and six brothers and sisters, two of whom are older and four who are younger. Sadie's mother and stepfather spend a significant amount of time in the operation of their business. Sadie also worked for the business owned by her mother and her stepfather.

As a college freshman, Sadie attends the local community college, with an enrollment of approximately 5,100 students, which is close to her high school. Sadie is the first in her family to attend college. During her freshman or sophomore year in high school, Sadie realized that her education was nearing an end and that "this is the day and age, if you want to go further, if you want to get ahead in life, you are going to have to further your education." Sadie would like to own a business of some kind, although she knows she does not want to "own the same type of business as [her] mother, as it involves a lot of hard work

and long hours.” That nobody in Sadie’s family earned a college degree was not a concern for her. She stated, [I have] “a lot of support, but the big concern I have is trying to pay for college.”

Family influence. Sadie believed her grandmother was the person who had the greatest impact on her decision to attend college: “She made me realize that I want to better myself and have the ability to earn more money, and she just really made me believe in myself.” Sadie said her grandmother always pushed her to do more and was always supportive of her decisions. In talking about her grandmother, Sadie said, “She just gave me confidence.” Sadie’s grandmother passed away several years ago and was unavailable for an interview but, according to Sadie’s mother, “She [grandmother] was a good role model for Sadie. She had a good work ethic and instilled that value in myself and Sadie.”

Sadie also shared that her stepfather helped to influence her to pursue a college degree: “ He always pushed me to go farther and do more. Although he tells me that running a business is very time consuming and challenging, it is rewarding, but he believes there are other options, starting with some type of business degree that would allow me to have some options, including if I want to open my own business of some kind someday.” Sadie explained, “Seeing my family struggle financially while running a business was something that had a pretty big impact on my decision to attend college. I just wanted to have more options and not have all of their struggles.”

Sadie’s mother asserted that “Sadie had to work harder than other kids in school to do well. Learning did not come easy for her.” Sadie never felt pressured or that her parents always expected her to go to college. They just impressed upon her that a college education allowed her to have more options in her career choices. Sadie’s mother explained, “Sadie

has always been a hard worker, and even though she is attending college, I hope she will find the financial support needed to earn her degree.”

Ms. King, Sadie’s teacher, believed, that Sadie’s parents helped her on her pathway to college: “Sadie has shared that her parents believe they have been successful in business but have had many struggles, and college was necessary to help build a better foundation in their chosen path.” Ms. King hoped that because Sadie sees her parents work so hard, that college will become important to her.

School influences. School played a small role in Sadie’s path to college. Although Sadie believed that her high school counselor and some of the preparatory classes the high school provided helped to prepare her to attend college, she also believed that because she moved so frequently, she was not encouraged throughout her K-12 educational experience to attend college.

Although Sadie did not believe the teachers or the counselor had a significant influence, they did provide students with some key opportunities to prepare them for college and made access easier. Ms. Gold, the high school counselor, shared,

Although they did not target specifically first-generation college students with extra supports, they tried to provide each student and parent with the support needed to navigate the college process, and so many of our students are first-generation college students.

Ms. Gold explained further that they often went to the college campus with the students to assist them with the simply task of registering for classes. It was often difficult for students to have the vision of seeing themselves at a college. Choosing where to go was difficult for a lot of students, but not for Sadie. Ms. Gold shared, “She knew she would be

attending school at the local community college. This was the most financially feasible since Sadie would be living at home while she attended college.” To help make this decision easier for students, the counselors’ goal was to “get them on at least three different campuses so they can kind of say, big school, small school, local school, you know, what’s a good fit?” Sadie seemed to be able to decide this rather quickly with many factors involved.

The counselor organized many special opportunities for students to not only give them exposure but to make it a college-bound culture. Some of these opportunities included students and staff wearing college shirts, and staff have the opportunity to share with students their own experiences with the college they attended and the program as well. These sharing opportunities could also involve any military or vocational experience teachers or staff in their building may have had.

Some more subtle exposure to college included college paraphernalia such as a pendant or banner from the college that teachers attended being displayed in their classroom. Another example were signs each teacher had on their classroom door that depicted the colleges or degrees teachers earned. Ms. Gold made a presentation to high school freshmen at the end of the first card-marking period. She spoke with students about their grades, the requirements for high school, and how those tied into anyone who might be college-bound. She also stressed that “Even if you don’t know if you are college-bound, you shouldn’t eliminate this as an option yet, as you never know the career path you will follow, and you don’t want to limit your opportunities so early in your high school career.” Ms. Gold continued,

Students needed to understand simply that the classes that were required to graduate, such as three years of science, may not be enough to get them into a good college or

the college of their choice. Students were also provided exposure to different colleges through multiple college visits, providing students the opportunity to decide which environment and program fit them best.

Ms. Gold shared that she tried to develop a personal relationship with Sadie:

I knew she came from a large family and lived with her father and stepmother, but I just tried to encourage her and make a connection with her so I could be a resource, someone to ask questions, someone to talk with. Sadie made her decision very early to look at the community college as her best option, mostly because money was such a big concern. Encouraging students to attend college was a team effort at school, as teachers also hear the message about not limiting choices early on and support students who may make the decision to attend college but may not decide until later in high school.

Peer influence. According to Sadie, moving from one district to another so often really created difficulties with keeping friends, even though making friends came rather easily for her. Although she attended school in the same district throughout high school, Sadie does not believe that her peers had a significant influence on her decision to attend college. Ms. Knight, Sadie's English teacher, had concerns that Sadie might not finish college because Sadie's boyfriend dropped out. Ms. Knight thought this was a bad sign, but "This is another thing outside my control, when a love interest doesn't encourage them to go to school."

College preparation influence. Sadie had some concerns about being able to handle the academic rigor of classes at college: "I really only realized how important credits were after my sophomore year." At that time, she decided that she was going to apply herself and

improve her grades because during her freshmen and sophomore year, she failed several classes. After that, Sadie made a decision: “Grades and credits are really important, especially if you have any thoughts of attending college, so I started applying myself, and my grades were better.” Sadie wished she would have started to apply herself sooner in school; she did not take any early college or advanced placement classes while in high school.

Ms. Gold said, “Sadie has some concerns about being successful in college.” Although Ms. Gold agreed that Sadie put forth a much better effort during the end of her high school years, she knew that Sadie was very overloaded with the stresses of constantly moving—at one point living in a camper with her family; her large, combined family; and continual pressures from her family to help support the family business. Ms. Gold continued, “Sadie, unfortunately is saddled with many external factors that have affected her to academically excel in high school and this lack of preparation and the outside issues are, unfortunately, things that have stifled her preparedness.”

Cost and access to financial aid /student loans. Sadie’s main concern regarding attending college was being able to afford college; her largest funding source was student loans. According to Sadie, “My biggest concern is being able to afford college, because my parents will not be able to help. My parents do not need me to help support the business but actually want me to go to college to get a better foundation to start my own business.” Her mother further explained,

Owning a business is a lot of work, and we always need to reinvest in our business so we will not be a lot of help with tuition. The money will be the one thing that may prevent Sadie from earning a college degree, but right now she is looking at financial aid.

Although Sadie used financial aid to help her pay for college and continued to work as much as possible, she explained that she “does not want to overwhelm herself with working and not do well in school.”

Ms. Gold reiterated,

This concern is just another obstacle Sadie will encounter; and even though there are scholarship and financial aid opportunities available, Sadie didn't have a good grasp on navigating finding scholarships and finding financial aid, and the process is sometimes overwhelming and constant.

Ms. Gold described a special place in the community called The Rock, an after-school hangout that allows students to have access to computers and opportunities to find scholarships and complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). The local community college and other college partners allow students to come in at night to complete college applications and provide support for students and parents.

Sadie's English teacher, Ms. Knight, shared stories about her own path to college and that she was a first-generation college student to help students understand all of the challenges there are, but also that these can be overcome. College for Ms. Knight was her way out. She shared with them that she didn't come from much at all and that college was very challenging financially, forcing her to take out student loans, and that she worked three jobs throughout college. However, students should not be afraid of a student loan, because there are jobs out there that also have loan deferment programs:

That is why I talk and share openly about my experiences. They need to understand that a lot of people don't have money but somehow figure out a way to pursue a college degree. It changed my life, which would be a very similar situation for many

of the students in our community. My education and my degree provided me so many great opportunities, and I try to instill that value with students. Sometimes first-year college students have a tendency to take on too much, and I remind them that they don't need everything. They should stay at home and go to a local community college and not burden themselves, not only with the extra cost but being away from their support system of the family, friends, and even school staff. While the financial piece is such a huge barrier for Sadie, if she finds herself in a position where she cannot afford to attend college full-time, she should look at starting small and taking only a few classes. This is still an option.

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. Sadie really believed that one of the biggest influences on her decision to attend college was the benefits of being able to earn a better income and not working so hard. Sadie believed she could start a business without a college degree but recognized that she will be better prepared and more successful if she has some education to give her a better foundation to run a business.

Martin Public Schools. A pseudonym was assigned to the school's name for confidentiality. Martin Public School District, a class B school district with approximately 1,000 students, is located in a small rural community in northern-lower Michigan. According to the 2015 census, the median household income in the community where Martin Public Schools is located is \$36, 314, whereas monthly housing costs are \$680. The school district is approximately 150 square miles in size and comprises one elementary school housing pre-school through fourth grade, one fifth through eighth grade middle school, and one ninth through twelfth grade high school. State records for the school district shows student performance below the state average in all content areas, as measured by M-STEP and the

ACT (MI School Data, 2016). Martin Public Schools has a four-year graduation rate of 80%, which was slightly higher than the state average of 79.79% in 2014–2015, and a dropout rate of less than 10.77%, which is also slightly higher than the state average of 9.12% in 2014–2015. In addition, Martin Public Schools has a free and reduced lunch participation rate of 80.1%, which is almost 7% higher than the state average in 2014–2015 (MI School Data, 2016). The district has an operating budget of slightly below nine million dollars, according to the district’s website. Martin will receive a foundation allowance of \$7,511 per pupil in the 2016–2017 school year.

David. David, an only child, was raised in the small community where he attended high school—the same community in which his parents and grandparents have always lived, and where both of his parents graduated from high school. David was a college freshman who attended the local community college of approximately 5,100 students, located close to his home high school. David lived at home, commuted to the community college, and planned to continue to work while at college. David’s father and mother work outside the home.

David was the first in his family to attend college. He would like to say he thought about college more than he did, but it was in his sophomore year that he actually started thinking about attending college. David’s father understood the importance of good grades in high school and “tried to beat it in his head since ninth grade that grades are important, and you cannot wait until your senior year to work hard.” Although David admitted that he kind of slacked off in high school, his father said, “His mother and I would get after him, and the next test he took, he’d get an A.” His father further explained that this cycle continued through David’s senior year of high school, when his father believed that David realized that

he should have applied himself more throughout high school because he would have had a higher-grade point average. Although David declared that his parents pushed him, his father characterized the process as they “had to motivate him.” Whatever the means, David believed he is ready for college, and he is already in the process of becoming certified in some areas of technology. That nobody in his family earned a college degree was not a concern for David. He stated that his family “gave him a lot of support and that they are all proud of him, because pursuing a college degree is a pretty big accomplishment.”

Family influence. Many family factors influenced David’s decision to attend college. In David’s words, “My parents participated in many of my school activities and always talked to my teachers.” David’s father explained that he “needed to keep David motivated because he was so shy.” David’s father also believed that a large factor that influenced David’s desire to find a career by earning a college degree was the fact that he and David’s mother “instilled a good work ethic, because life is only going to get harder.” David believed his father was the person who had the greatest impact on his decision to attend college because “He just beat it into my head ever since I was little that I had to go to college so I didn’t end up like him working in a factory.” David’s father asserted that for David, attending college was always an expectation and not a choice. Although his father most influenced his decision, his mother was an influence as well. David’s father told him, “He better find something he likes to do because he is going to be doing it for a long time, and he didn’t want to get stuck in a job just for a paycheck. I told David he needs to go to college and find a job where he can earn more money.” David’s mother stated that she “always wanted more for David. [She] didn’t want him to work so hard and [wanted him] to have more opportunities or options to do what he enjoyed.” David emphasized,

My father has always pushed me as long as I can remember that I had to go to college so it just became something that was an expectation. To me college was the only option after high school. Even though I knew I would go to college, I just didn't start getting serious about what college path I should take until I was a sophomore. David maintained that the best support families can provide for their children in the decision to attend college is to "be supportive of what their kids want to do and always encourage them to push themselves."

The school had somewhat limited contact with David's parents. Ms. Dot, the high school counselor, shared, "David generally asked questions about his options after college, and his parents seemed to be updated by him on the process, as his father shared with me one time." Mr. Brin, David's Career Technology Center teacher, also noted that the communication between himself and David's parents was very limited as well, but that he emailed back and forth with David's mother a couple of times with questions on certifications. "The mother seemed to help David to understand classes he needed to take to earn his certification."

School influences. For David, the school district played a significant role in his decision to attend college: "[The staff] pushed everyone to go to college, and they allowed me to take college classes online while I was in high school so I could get credits out of the way earlier." Even though his high school played a large part in his decision to attend college, one thing that influenced him more was his decision to attend college at the Career Technology Center (CTC) at the intermediate school district. "The first defining step was taking the jump in my junior year to the Career Technology Center, because that really

showed me what it would be like in a work environment and what I would be learning the next few years of my life.”

Mr. Brin, the CTC teacher, shared,

I try to use my background in the classroom, because I had somewhat of an untraditional start to becoming a teacher. I went into business originally, and I had experience in the industry so I had the real-life experience and the opportunity to practice what I was preaching.

Mr. Brin understood that not every student is college-bound and that there is a lot of emphasis on the college path, but he believed that it is important to let students know what is available regardless of which path they are going to follow:

I try to let them know all the resources that are out there, but I build relationships with the community, especially with different businesses where students can become exposed by attending business-sponsored events regarding what is going on in the industry with IT and what type of backgrounds and skills they need to bring to the table to get this job.

Mr. Brin felt that, although David only participated in a few of these opportunities, he still had a very solid career path and drive to go beyond his classes and the certifications he received at CTC by pursuing a degree in college.

I tried to heavily promote [the students] getting their certifications because that makes them marketable, so whether or not that makes them enter the job force right after high school or enter the job force, as a vehicle to help them pay their way through college, whatever the case may be, I just try to give them as much information as I can and the resources that are available.

David seemed very motivated to complete some of his certifications and head to a college to pursue some sort of field in IT. I seemed to have a good connection to David, and we often talked about my personal experiences, which I believe helped David to look more closely at certain college options.

Mr. Brin also recognized that David needed other skills on his college path, and verbalized that since David was planning to go to college, it was important to incorporate English and language arts skills into David's classes for many reasons:

I knew David wanted to go to college so we focused a lot on creating a cover letter, resume and portfolio to make him marketable to convey the skills he had to either be successful no matter what his ultimate path was after high school, be it college or a job in the IT field.

David gave credit to his counselor:

[She] was very instrumental, encouraging me to attend college; she even provided opportunities for college visits. The classes I took at the Career Technology Center and a couple teachers there really helped me realize that I had some options to go to college and find a job in the technology area. I essentially had the same teacher for a two-year class that was preparing me for what we would actually be learning in the technology field while earning college credits at the same time.

David explained that the entire school and even his community pushed kids to go to college. The Community in Schools coordinator, Ms. Duncan, explained that David did not need a lot of support: "His parents were very engaged and helped him navigate the process, but he wasn't the one to seek out help, so you had to track him down." Although his high school counselor, Ms. Dot, was instrumental in answering any questions he had about

college, she also helped him navigate the process of exploring options, applying for financial aid, and finally arranging for many college visits that helped him make the decision of what college to attend: “Our counselor just pushed us,” David laughed as he explained, “The guidance counselor just signed me up to go tour colleges without asking me, but she knew I wouldn’t care.” David found this opportunity to visit colleges “very beneficial, as part of the big push to show [him] that attending college was not only an option, but the real opportunity to visit a campus allowed [him] to decide what college was the best fit.” David wondered, “Where did I feel the most comfortable?”

Ms. Dot said that the teachers are often the first line of encouragement for students, and although students were not identified as first-generation college students, supports were put in place for all students:

The teachers who see the students day in and day out offer the best encouragement, because they better know the students interests and if they should sign up to visit factories or colleges. Teachers also know what students are capable of achieving which helps to guide them. We have some idea of which students are first-generation college students, but we don’t particularly focus on that factor, but rather upon simply providing the students the support they need, no matter what the level of support.

Mr. Brin agreed, “Honestly, I don’t think I approach first-generation college students differently, but I simply try to give all student the resources, exposure to current jobs, what the requirements are, what the background skills are, whether it is a college education or whether it is a certification track.” Mr. Brin thought understanding which of his students may be first-generation college students may be beneficial and, in the future, planned to ask “just to know which students come to the Career Tech Center as first-generation college

students.” He explains, “ It will give me greater insight into my students and make me a better teacher with the kinds of support I can provide.”

Peer influence. According to David, his friends did not influence his decision to attend college but did spark his interest in technology, which is the area he has decided to pursue as a career. David’s father admitted that David “usually picked pretty good friends, and he knew the ones to stay away from because he could have ended up in a lot of trouble, and then he might not even be on the college path.”

College preparation influence. David explained, “The decision for me to attend college was not influenced by if I was academically ready or not for college but mostly by my passion for technology since probably around sixth grade, and that I have always enjoyed working with computers.” As far as being prepared for college and the academic challenges, David was not sure if he was totally prepared for the entire time he will attend college but will “figure it out along the way.” David looks back at his sophomore year, the year he really started to think about the direction he wanted to head with his college degree, and believed that because college was always an expectation, especially of his father’s, that he did not have to work very hard in high school. “Everything just fell into place with my interests and the options for colleges, because I visited several college campuses in high school but I decided quickly on the college I wanted to attend, simply because I liked it the most.” David really believed he was ready for college, as he had earned some college credit for classes that he had taken in high school and he had a clear direction of his interests and the career he wanted to pursue. Earning college credits in high school also helped David to believe he was academically ready for the challenge of college.

Mr. Brin shared that one way that the career technology center tries to prepare students for college or a trade is by having them visit local companies where they share employment and internship opportunities and how IT is used in their company day-to-day, so that the students understand the job and the skills necessary to perform the job. Mr. Brin expressed his hope that

there is help to bridge the gap with colleges and the employers so that the students can see what the employers are doing out there, and so that students can get an idea of what direction they want to follow. Either way, they decide they want to enter the field or they realize it is not for them so they don't spend the time or invest the money in education if this is the case.

Ms. Dot added, "The career technology center at the intermediate school district and the local district work closely together to determine the interests and career direction of the students." Most of the programs at the career technology center do have some kind of alliance with the colleges, and they try to emphasize the pathway.

Cost and access to financial aid/student loans. David seemed indifferent about how to pay for college. Although he thinks he should have "planned a little more and worked on applying for more scholarships," he is not concerned about paying for college. He simply said, "In addition to the couple scholarships I earned, I will pay for college like everyone else does, by working and getting student loans." Mr. Brin agreed that "David did not seem overly concerned about paying for college. He has a simply laid-back attitude, and he understands that scholarships are more readily available and pretty easy to research." Both David and his parents believed the benefits of a college education will outweigh the financial stress while earning his degree. David grew up watching both of his parents work hard:

I know I will have to work, but I don't mind that because I know eventually I will have a career I love and work will be something I enjoy. My parents work very hard to make a living but they know they want me to enjoy my job, which is why they encourage me to go to college. It is not important for them to have me help with the family's bills, but to pursue my dream.

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. Many factors influenced David's decision to attend college, and his income potential was not the only factor. David shared his beliefs about the most important factors that influenced his decision to go to college: attending college and earning a degree will help me do what I love to do; and I want to have a career, not just a job; and having a career with a college degree will give me the potential to earn more money in my life." David's father impressed upon David that even where he [the father] works, they are hiring people who have college degrees for jobs that don't need a college degree, so it is making it more difficult to find a job without a college degree whether you go into that field or not.

Ms. Dot, the school counselor, believed that "For David, having a degree in the area he loved, while at the same time being able to make good money, was a huge deciding factor in David's decision to attend college. He has always had an interest in the IT field and will do well following his passion."

Anna. Anna, also attended Martin Public Schools and was raised in the small community where she attended high school. Her mother graduated from high school in a neighboring community. Anna's single-parent family included her mother, one younger brother, and one younger sister. Anna was an unexpected pregnancy for Anna's mother at the age of 19. Although Anna's biological father has not been involved in her life, her

mother's significant other has helped to raise Anna and her siblings; Anna considers him her father.

Anna was the first in her family to attend college. She was a college freshman who attended a community college that serves approximately 11,000 students and is about 150 miles from her home. Anna was pursuing a degree in veterinary medicine. She explained that she started thinking about going to college "in middle school, because you don't really think about it in elementary school." Anna believed she was ready to take on the challenge of attending college for eight years but wished she would have studied a little bit more. That nobody in her family earned a college degree was not a concern for Anna: "I had to push myself outside my comfort zone a little bit to go to college."

Family influence. Anna believed the person who most influenced her decision to attend college was her grandmother: "she is the most hard-working person I ever met, who always told me I needed to go to college because anything else was not an option." Anna's mother explained, "Anna was raised where attending college was always an expectation. If I had not become pregnant at such a young age, I would have pursued earning a college degree." Anna's grandmother remembered that Anna "talked about being a veterinarian for a long time. She has always loved animals, and it has been her passion to take care of them." Anna's grandmother always encouraged her "to go for her goals whatever she wanted to do in life—to just go for it."

Anna's advice to families to assist other students or siblings to move forward toward college attendance was "push them—push them enough but definitely not too hard so they don't go to college. Push them enough so they are encouraged, and let them make the decision." Anna's mother said, "We pretty much let her choose what she wanted to do, if she

wanted to go to college, or do something else. She is really the one who pushes herself. She was self-motivated, determined.” Anna’s mother further explained that Anna is driven and wants to succeed. Anna’s grandmother agreed that Anna was pretty determined, but she believed that Anna’s passion of wanting to be a vet is what most influenced her decision to go to college: “Anna wasn’t going to let her mom or dad discourage her at all. She was determined to get what she wants; what she’s going for, she tries to get.” Anna’s grandmother explained, with tears in her eyes, “I am proud of her. I think her decision will help influence her younger brother and sister to go for their goals. I am nervous about her attending college, but you can’t hold her back.” Anna’s mother supported her decision to go to college and, although she would have preferred for Anna to attend a college that was closer, she also supported Anna’s decision to live on campus: “Anna was ready, but I was not sure that I was.”

School influences. School played a key role in Anna’s path to college. Anna’s teacher, Ms. Wendel, shared advice for first-generation college students and their parents, I think it is more difficult for the first-generation college students, because they do not have any foundational knowledge of what the college process entails, so the parents and the student should make sure to ask questions. This seemed to be the case with Anna, often asking questions and trying to feel her way through the process.

While Anna’s high school counselor did not have a significant impact on her decision to attend college, a program at her high school called Community in Schools was very instrumental in influencing her decision. According to the district’s webpage, Community in Schools provides both prevention and intervention services to students and families with a primary goal of increasing graduation rates. According to Anna, the facilitator of the

Communities in Schools program, Ms. Duncan “provided students with a lot of opportunities to visit college campuses.” Ms. Duncan described her role as the Community in Schools coordinator and said the program has “a specific goal of providing college access activities for our students. One of those activities is, by the time students are seniors they have had an opportunity to visit college fairs, college sites, and have visited different colleges.” Anna’s mother believed visiting colleges was an invaluable experience: “Anna was able to see programs at different colleges and experience the college environment, so I think it is important to get [the students] out there and tour with them.” Ms. Duncan agreed,

Hosting college fairs and giving students an opportunity to talk with college admission representatives has been important, because most of the students do not have the opportunity to visit a college campus because of where we are located, in a rural area close to two community colleges.

Anna also found that she did not really get a lot of help from her high school about how to navigate the college process, including applying for loans and signing up for classes, the community college she was attending helped her with these things. Community in Schools coordinator, Ms. Duncan, contended that there is a gap between high school and college: “I wish we could do a better job or could follow these kids after they graduate from high school to see what we can do at the high school level to help more.” Ms. Dot, Anna’s school counselor, agreed that there is a gap from the time they leave high school and enter college:

This is something outside of our control. Some of the students are signed up and ready to go when they leave high school, but we hear they are not, or they didn’t follow through, and so we wonder if there is another step—is there something that can be done to help them after high school?

Ms. Wendel, Anna's psychology teacher was another important school influence in Anna's decision to attend college. Anna recalled, "She was always pushing us and would always review all of our essay papers or whatever we had to turn into colleges. It was the little things like that that all of our teachers did for us." The school counselor explained that, Anna took some dual-enrollment classes, one of them being a psychology class, taught by Ms. Wendel. The counselor, Ms. Dot, said that the exposure to college classes is important, as "we try to provide some of our students with opportunities to take dual-enrollment classes to earn college credit, because it allows our students to realize they can tackle the academic rigor at a college level." Ms. Wendel shared, "By enrolling in my [dual-enrollment] class, I explain to students from day one that my expectation are that they go to college, because they're already getting a jump start and earning college credits while in high school." She said further that everything in her class is presented as a college class, from the syllabus to utilizing Blackboard, a web application that allows schools to offer instruction online.

When giving advice to former educators about encouraging students to go to college, Anna said, "Just show them the facts of how things will be better if you have a degree, provide students opportunities to visit colleges, and just give them exposure. Let them see everything, all their options."

The high school tries to assist college-bound students as much as possible. Ms. Dot, the counselor at the school, believed that this is especially true for first-generation college students, as "Some of them don't even know where to begin, and the process is so intimidating for the student and their parents. I think we literally have to walk them through the process of breaking down those barriers step-by-step." Ms. Duncan said that it is important for high schools to provide support not only for the first-generation college

students but for the parents as well: “These parents do not know how to navigate the system, so we are here to support them and their child as well.” Ms. Duncan added that “if parents need to contact [school staff] in the summer or eight o’clock at night they want to provide the support to help students be successful.”

In Martin Public Schools, the high school prepares students for the future. Ms. Wendel, the dual-enrollment teacher, shared her belief about the role of their high school:

In general [our high school] is about postsecondary options and is all about preparing students for their future, whether that is college or trade or simply being an outstanding individual in the community. All of those aspects are emphasized. Other educators need to share their own experiences because I think everybody’s dream for college is a little bit different, whether they went to college because of family pressure or to get a better job. Educators need to make their experiences more personal for students.

Advice Ms. Wendel shares with her students is to maintain good relationship with your teachers in high school because they can provide support in college, a trade program, or simply assisting with finding a job.

One way to prepare students for decisions about their futures is to bring back former graduates of their high school and current college freshmen to participate in a college panel to answer any questions high school students have about attending college. The Community in Schools Coordinator believed this is also of great assistance to the high school to determine “what we [the school] can do better and to learn about the struggles of college freshmen.” Ms. Duncan believed this experience is invaluable and also believes it is

important to continue to follow up with the college freshmen, their past high school graduates:

This provides current high school students the opportunity to hear from students who are attending college and their advice to take your studies seriously, do your math, and to take the college classes in high school. Often, the school starts with good intentions of starting educational development plans and career planning or career pathways and helping these kids navigate through school, but all of the testing and state requirements take time when we should be exposing kids to opportunities after high school.

Peer influence. According to Anna, although her friends did not have a significant influence on her decision to attend college, she “does not have one friend that’s not going to college, so we’re all on the right track.” Community in Schools Coordinator, Ms. Duncan, concurred that “Many of Anna’s friends were college-bound, and many of them were from families of parents who have attended college.” Although Anna says she did not pick the specific college to attend because her boyfriend was attending there, her mother believed the “very reason she picked the school she wanted to attend was so they could be together.” Ms. Duncan shared the same belief: “Anna was going to the college where her boyfriend was attending, but I don’t know if she will continue there, as they broke up recently.”

College preparation influence. Anna always found high school easy, according to her mother, who said, “She always had straight A’s and doing well in school for Anna helped in her decision to attend college, but she would have gone even if she didn’t always get straight A’s. Anna is very determined and has a goal, a passion to help animals.”

Although Anna believed doing well in school “helped make the decision to attend college, [her] interest in becoming a vet was the biggest factor in [her] decision.” Anna’s dual-enrollment teacher, Ms. Wendel, also agreed that Anna is prepared for the rigor of college classes, as she has taken college-level classes in high school: “Anna has taken 100-, 200-, and one 400-level class, which are much more rigorous. The students also had to write an in-depth research paper for their class.”

Ms. Wendel said that her expectations are those of a college-level instructor with exposure to APA formatting, understanding how to navigate Blackboard, using *Google Scholar* to access the library online, or MEL (the Michigan electronic library), which is a virtual library: “The classes that I teach allow high school students to earn college credit while being exposed to college-level rigor, which I believe, exposes students to the rigor and allows them to gain more confidence in their decision to attend college.” Ms. Wendel continued,

Dual enrollment classes, attending either classes at the high school or on the college campus or taking an online college class is beneficial, but the dual-enrollment classes that students take at their high school are a great way to introduce students to college where they can get the college experience with the protection of the high school setting. That way students can get the support from a guidance counselor or teacher or a friend or a classmate who has that experience as well.

Cost and access to financial aid/student loans. Anna was concerned about the expense of paying for college. Ultimately Anna knew, “I can make so much more money by earning a degree, it doesn’t make sense for me to stay home with my family just to work.” Anna shared, “My family works hard for everything they have, but they don’t need me to

work and contribute to the bills. They get by without my help, and they understand my passion to become a vet and [they] support my decision.” Although Anna’s first two years of college will be paid for by the Tuition Incentive Program (2016), money and paying for college was still a concern. A federal program, TIP was established in 1987 under the Annual Higher Education Appropriations Act to provide incentive for high school completion and tuition assistance for at least the first two years of college for students who meet income guidelines.

Anna discussed her benefit of the TIP: “Because my family was receiving Medicaid assistance for three consecutive years, my first two years of tuition and housing at a community college will be paid.” Although Anna’s first two years of college are paid for, if she had her way, she would go to a larger Michigan university for her entire degree; however, Anna was unaware that the Tuition Incentive Program does cover a small portion of tuition at a four-year university. Anna believed attending a four-year university was “obviously not an option at all,” not only because it was too expensive but because she did not seem to have a complete understanding related to the benefits of the Tuition Incentive Program.

Ms. Duncan agreed that the financial aspect of paying for college was a concern for Anna, whose goal of being a veterinarian could potentially mean having to pay for college for six years. Ms. Wendel said,

I take time in my classes to write scholarship essays and explain to them that college is affordable, if they work for it. I explain that money should never be a reason for someone to not attend college. One of the biggest obstacles for students to overcome

is the nagging in the back of their minds, that mental block of being able to afford college.

Ms. Wendel often shared her personal experiences with her students and their parents so they could relate to the college experience: “I worked part-time all the way through college, and that fit into my schedule because you may only have classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, so you can work around your classes more easily than in high school.” Anna knew the cost of paying for college was significant: “[Her family was] a little worried about the money situation, but, obviously, I’m not going to expect my parents to help pay for anything, like, it’s all on me.”

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. Anna really began thinking about college in middle school, because she knew she wanted to be a veterinarian: “I have known I wanted to be a veterinarian since middle school, so going to college was mandatory for me, and I also chose to earn a degree and become a veterinarian because I knew I would have a better financial future.” The financial benefits of a college degree had a significant influence on Anna’s decision to attend college.

Sadie explained, “My mom's boyfriend has helped to encourage me to go to college, even if I decided to start a business. The statistics of how much your income would be if you didn’t go to college compared to when you have a degree, and you can earn so much more money. Going to college is the right decision.”

Focus Group Meeting

Four of the five students also participated in a focus group discussion, with one of the four students participating via facetime, a video conferencing tool.

Family influence. Three of the participants shared that their grandmother was the most influential person who encouraged them to attend college. Anna quickly shared, “My grandmother always wanted more for me, she always gave me confidence to do better.” Anna made a strong connection with her grandmother and was encouraged to pursue a college degree. Beth related how her grandmother influenced her to attend college: “My grandmother always pushed me to be self-reliant and not depend on anyone.” Beth did not have a mother figure in her life, and her father spent a significant amount of time working. Beth said, “I was on my own with the exception of the support and encouragement my grandmother provided. She was always there, much like a mother to me.”

Sadie explained that, although her grandmother passed away three years ago, “She always told [her] college was the only option.” Sadie and seven children lived with her biological mother and step-father who owned a business. Sadie believed, “They did not have a lot of time for each of us kids, and I spent a lot of time with my grandmother. She was always there for me.” Although all of those participants stated that their grandmother was the person who most influenced them in their decision to attend college, they also believed that their parents had some impact upon “the skills they needed to be successful.” Beth shared, “my parents were supportive; they always encouraged me to pursue my interests but had some concerns about paying for college.” All of the participants agreed that there were similar concerns from their parents. Anna said, “My mother wants me to go to college, but she is going to miss me, but I have always known I want to work with animals, and to do that I have to go to college.”

The other two participants shared that one of their parents was the person who had the most significant impact on their decision to attend college. David shared,

My father always hounded me to go to college, but it was not something I really seriously thought about until I was in high school. It seems as far as I can remember, he told me I should go to college. I think it was because he really didn't like his job or he had to work so hard.

Mary explained, "My mother encouraged me to make my life better and make more money because she said I always liked to argue so I would make a good lawyer." David agreed with Mary and shared, "Your mother sounds like my father. It sounds like they both thought they had difficult jobs, and they didn't want us following the same path."

School influence. While all of the participants believed that their school community had a significant influence, some did not believe the school had such a large impact on their decision to attend college. Mary and Beth believed that their counselor had a huge influence on their decision to attend college and that she was somewhat of a surrogate mother assisting them with such things as going to campus and helping them register for classes. Mary stated, "Ms. Jones helped me to transition from high school to college and was a big help with making sure I had all of the information I needed." Anna agreed that her high school counselor was a large help with assisting her transition from high school to college but also that Ms. Duncan, the Community in Schools Director, was also a large influence in her decision to attend college. Anna said,

I knew I always wanted to go to college to become a veterinarian, and I knew I had a lot of challenges to overcome, with the first being just trying to understand the process of enrolling in classes, what classes to take, how to find housing, and a ton of other things. Ms. Duncan was always there to assure me not to worry, to help me figure out what to do and how to ask questions to find an answer.

Sadie did not agree that her school played a significant role, but she did agree that they provided her with the opportunity to visit colleges to assist her with that decision. She explained, “I guess my school did provide us with exposure to colleges and information about college, but these things didn’t really influence my decision, but maybe really just confirmed that my decision to go to college was the right one”

Peer influence. The participants discussed the impact that their friends had on their decision to attend college. Some believed that their peers influenced their decision to attend college, but others did not. Mary shared,

My friends really were not college-bound, and I didn’t always hang around with the best crowd; so, if anything, they were a bad influence on me; and I realized I needed to start focusing on my grades because I had an opportunity to go to college, and I didn't want to mess up that.

Mary understood that, in a sense, her peers influenced her to make a decision to go to college by realizing she wanted to accomplish something in her life. She wanted to be successful and not disappoint the people who believed in her. Beth shared, “I am so busy working all of the time, I don’t have a lot of time for friends, but many of my friends did not have the desire to go to college, and it is difficult to go against your friends, but I had my mind set to attend college, and I realized I was really good in math.”

Sadie shared that her situation was similar to Beth’s, with not having a lot of friends because her family moved around so much. Sadie believed, “The friends I have are scattered from several different schools, and it is difficult to stay in touch with them and actually have any real, in-depth conversations about college.” Anna shared with the group that she, too, was not influenced or pressured by her friends to attend college, but more by the fact that all

of her friends were going to college. She stated, “I guess that's just what you do when everybody you know goes to college. It just seems like it is the normal thing.” The discussion about peers was lively and the participants were very passionate about sharing their similarities and differences.

College preparation influence. Most of the participants believed they were ready to take on the academic challenges of college. Only two participants were a little concerned about being able to handle the academic rigor. Mary said, “I just worry about whether or not I have the study habits to allow me to earn good grades. I never really put in much effort, but earning decent grades just seemed to come naturally for me. I just hope my lack of study skills isn’t something that causes me problems in college.”

Sadie also had some concerns about the rigor at college and wished she would have taken some advanced placement or dual enrollment classes. The others believed they were ready to take on the academic rigor of college. Beth shared, “I made a significant effort to do well in high school math; and when I realized I was pretty good in math, I developed more confidence and really started to believe I was ready to tackle college.” Anna shared that she always wanted to be a veterinarian, and she was determined to earn her degree. She expressed her confidence in her hopes of doing well academically in college: “I did very well in high school and did not find it to be an academic challenge, so I truly believe I am ready to take more challenging college classes.”

Cost and access to financial aid/student loans. Throughout the discussion, the concern about the financial resources available to make attending college possible was the underlying factor that arose time-after-time. The participants shared the great resources that gave them an advantage of to attend college; some even shared that college would not even

be an option if these resources were not available. Anna and Beth were fortunate enough to receive money through TIP. Anna shared, “I am glad I am able to receive money through the TIP grant, but I know I am going to have to find other ways to help pay for college.” Beth expressed a similar sentiment: “I agree and I have been lucky to receive some additional scholarships, but I have concerns I will not have enough money. I want to keep working throughout college, and I am hoping this does not affect my grades.” Anna and Beth agreed that they had concerns about finding enough money or resources to help. Beth shared that she does not want to take out a student loan. Anna knew that she most likely will need to utilize that as a resource.

Mary was comfortable with her commitment scholarship and admitted, “I would not have the option of college without this scholarship, and I cannot disappoint the people who believed in me enough to give me this award.” Mary shared that she still does have some concerns that the commitment scholarship does not pay for all of her expenses and hoped that she finds resources in areas that are needed. The financial factor is a huge obstacle for Sadie: “I really want to go to college and get a better foundation than my parents had to start a successful business, but I know I am pretty much on my own with finding resources. My parents will not be able to help out much because they have a business that always seems to be struggling, and I have a lot of siblings.” She added that she hoped she can continue and doesn’t have to quit because she cannot find resources to pay for college.

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. Most of the participants agreed that college was an advantage when it came to earning a better income. Mary shared, “I don’t want to work as hard as my parents, and I want to do something that makes my life a lot easier and something that would allow me to support my family better.” Sadie agreed

with Mary: “I don’t want to work as hard as my parents, either. Although I want to own my own business like them, I want to be better prepared by earning a degree and having a successful business without struggling like they do.” Beth also agreed with Mary and Sadie: “I know my father has worked a lot, and I just want to earn a degree so I can make a better income and not work the long hours like he does.” Although Anna believed she always wanted to be a veterinarian, she shared, “I can earn so much more money if I get a college degree, especially if I become a veterinarian. This was a huge incentive for me to want to attend college, the fact that you can earn so much more money, but it also helps that this is something that I always wanted.”

Summary

Students in this study articulated a variety of factors that influenced their decision to attend college as first-generation college students. The factors included family influence, school influence, peer influence, college preparation influence, and cost and access to financial aid or student loans. Some factors had a greater influence on the participants’ decision to attend college, whereas others had a very small impact. The influences upon the students’ decision to attend college and how they are related to the participants are discussed in more depth in the concluding chapter, which also includes recommendations for school leaders and others about ways to assist first-generation high school students in their pursuit of a college degree.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify school and home influences that led students from one rural northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district to become first-generation college students. The study focused on college freshmen and sophomores who attended a two-year or a four-year institution. A qualitative case study method was chosen, in which student voice was shared through multiple informal personal interviews and a focus group discussion that provided a rich, in-depth perspective of the factors that influenced first-generation college students to choose college attendance. The importance of the home and school factors that may have inspired a student's decision to attend college were assessed. Description of participants' experiences can provide encouragement and insight to other students and their parents and to contribute meaningful information to educators and policy makers in regard to academic and program factors that facilitate individuals' choice to become first-generation college students.

Family Influence

Each of the five participants chose a family member as the one person who had the most influence on their decision to attend college. The relationship of this person to the participants varied, but three of the five participants identified their grandmother as the person who had the most significant influence on their decision to attend college. The other participants identified a parent—in one case, the mother and in the other, the father. Each participant perceived the person who had the most impact on their decision to attend college as motivational, the person who instilled the expectation in each participant to do better and to achieve more than that person had achieved.

Beth shared that her grandmother had pushed her: “My grandmother always supported me to become more and to do better. It just seemed as though she believed I could go to college, and she didn’t let up until I believed it too.” The participants had a conviction that their one family member believed in them and wanted them to succeed in their desire to attend college. Mary said, “My mother’s unfading desire for me to attend college was sometimes more than I had myself. This was a huge motivation because I didn’t want to disappoint her.” David’s father did not want him to work so hard in his career. David’s father wanted him to find something he loved and to earn a good income. His father explained, “I just want David to not have to work so hard and for so many long hours.”

Although Anna knew her grandmother wanted more for her, grandmother did not set her desire as an expectation; she simply wanted Anna “to be successful in whatever she chose to do.” Anna’s grandmother knew that from a very young age, Anna had the drive and determination. Grandmother only “needed to support [Anna] in her decisions.”

Hodge and Mellin (2010) suggested that family support is one of the best predictors of postsecondary aspirations. Although each participant in this study received the support of his or her family, family support of first-generation college students is often lacking because of the lack of knowledge about postsecondary education. The mother is often the primary influence in a child’s decision about postsecondary education (MacAllum et al., 2007); however, in this study, only Mary named her mother as the most significant person to influence her decision to attend college. The other participants were influenced more by their grandmother or their father. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) agreed that high school seniors generally named mothers as being “a strong influence” in the planning process. In this study, none of the participants credited their mother as a significant influence in the

planning process. Most gave credit for that role to their counselor or a person in a similar role in their school. The father, according to Choy (2001) and Avery and Hosby (2003), was generally named as a strong influence with actual college enrollment. In this study, only David believed his father had a significant influence on his decision to enroll in college.

Family involvement in school. Parents' involvement and participation in the high school program as influencing their decision to attend college. Although many of the parents or a significant person encouraged good grades and academic achievement, most had very little actual involvement in the school setting. Mary's parents lived and worked in another state a significant amount of time throughout Mary's school years, especially when Mary was a senior. Mary lived with friends to complete her senior year in high school while her parents worked out of state. Her parents spent very little time being involved in her schooling with the exception of attending some college orientation activities with Mary's school counselor. Although Mary's parents did not attend parent-teacher conferences or school activities, they did want her to do well academically.

Beth's grandmother and parents also did not spend much time at school but pushed her and supported her to do well academically. Beth's mother was completely absent and spent no time with Beth during her K-12 education. Beth's father also did not spend much time with her academic schooling career. Beth explained, "I was on my own because my father worked a lot to support the family." Sadie's family owned a business and was also uninvolved in school activities. Sadie attended seven different school districts during her K-12 education. Sadie's mother and step-father were consumed with making a living. This was a struggle at times, according to school counselor, Ms. Wendel, who noted, "Sadie's family had to live in a camper trailer." Although David's father did have very limited, almost non-

existent, contact with David's teachers, the father pushed David to earn good grades. David's mother did not participate in school activities at all.

Anna's mother explained that she did not have an active role in Anna's K-12 education but knew that "she [Anna] was very independent, driven, and always worked toward getting good grades herself." Anna, lived with her biological mother and her mother's significant other. Anna's mother explained, "Anna did not need me to be involved in her schooling. She had her own direction and nothing would stop her." She explained further, "I pretty much let Anna do her own thing in school because she always earned good grades. I didn't see the point of staying on top of her when she was doing well."

According to Dervarics and O'Brien (2011), students whose parents are involved in their child's schooling, no matter their income or background, are more likely to graduate and go on to postsecondary education. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) agreed that parent involvement contributes to students' academic success and educational decisions. Most of the participants in this study fared well academically in high school without much prodding from their parents.

Mary's mother knew Mary was "capable of earning a college degree and becoming an attorney." Beth's father and grandmother knew that Beth had the drive and determination to earn a college degree. Beth's grandmother said, "We know Beth is very smart and capable of earning a college degree." Sadie's family support came primarily from her grandmother. Although the grandmother died before the completion of this study, she was clearly an influence on Sadie because she imbued Sadie with a steadfast belief in herself and her ability to succeed. David shared that his family gave him a lot of support and that they were proud of him for pursuing a college degree. Anna, believed her family pushed her enough to want

to go to college but also let her make the decision. She believed, “My family supports me in my decision to attend college but also gives me space to make my own decision.”

Family expectations. Expectation for the participants to attend college was another key factor identified in the personal interviews with the persons who had the most influence on the participants’ decision to attend college. Although expressed in different terms, expectations existed for each participant. Mary’s mother knew Mary was smart and pushed her to seek a profession as an attorney. In Mary’s mind, she “didn’t have a choice; she was going to college.” Beth’s grandmother expected her to have higher goals, also knowing that Beth was very smart; and that college was a good way to “take advantage of her knowledge.” Sadie also knew her grandmother expected her to do more. College was an expectation for David from a very young age, as it was for Anna.

Parental expectation was a notable factor that influenced each of the participants in their decision to attend college. Child Trends Databank (2015) reported that parental expectations are highly predictive of their children’s educational performance. Wimberly and Noeth (2014) found that parents’ expectations for their children’s attainment of higher education established in early grade levels become stronger at the high school level. David and Anna believed their parental expectation began when they were attending elementary school or from a very young age; the others shared that the parental expectation of attending college seemed to become predominant in middle school and high school. All of the participants believed going to college was the next logical step, as supported by Menges (1996) who concurred that college attendance becomes expected for achieving personal and occupational goals.

Belief in the intrinsic ability to complete college. The predominant factor, evident in interviews with each participant, was that the person who most influenced the participant's decision to attend college believed that the participant had the intrinsic determination, drive, and work ethic required to successfully complete a college degree. Striving to live up to the faith that others had in them, first-generation college students were determined not to fail because of the belief and support given to him or her. Ultimately, each participant was a hard worker and was determined to achieve their goal of a college education.

Mary's mother described her as "strong-willed and determined," believing that Mary had the determination to accomplish whatever she wanted. Beth's grandmother shared, "Beth has grit and is determined to accomplish her goals." Grit was a term that Beth's grandmother used repetitively throughout her interview. Although Sadie's grandmother was deceased, Sadie's mother confirmed that Sadie had an "instilled confidence and determination to succeed." David's father was adamant that, although he had to push him in high school, "David had a calm confidence about being successful in college." Anna was self-motivated from the time she was very young. Her grandmother encouraged her to fulfil her goals, but "She had the drive all within herself."

The drive and determination attributed to the participants in this study were generally not identified as important factors to influence a first-generation college student's decision to attend college. However, Hein, Smerdon, and Sambolt (2013) identified predictors of readiness, such as persistence, emotion regulation, and attentiveness. Many of these indicators were found at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Lack of understanding about the college process. Many of the parents and participants struggled to understand the college process. Mary's mother used the expertise of

the school counselor to assist her, and often, Mary was required to educate her mother about the process learned through her counselor. Beth's family also lacked understanding of the process toward college attendance and also relied on the high school counselor for assistance. David also relied on support from his school counselor because he was unfamiliar with the navigating the college enrollment process and because neither of his parents attended college. David often asked his high school counselor questions about college and often updated his parents on the process. Sadie did not have a concern about being a first-generation college student or understanding the process because she had "a lot of support." Her main concern was being able to pay for college. Anna had many "friends who already were attending college," and she relied on them for assistance. Although the procedure is difficult for all students, Anna was very resourceful in learning without the assistance of her family and little assistance from her school counselor. Most of the participants in the study found their lack of knowledge of the process to be somewhat of a detriment, not an overriding concern, but they were very successful at finding resources to assist them.

The literature review revealed that "Parents of first-generation college students also do not have the life experience to adequately guide their children" (Lynch, 2013, p. 3); however, in this study, the student, parent, or another person who influenced the student's decision, sought help from someone, such as the school counselor, who could assist with the process. According to Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), "65% of students with strong encouragement from their parents enrolled in four-year colleges after high school" (p. 23). Although the research showed that mothers appeared to play a more important role in the encouragement of college decision-making (MacAllum et al., 2007, p. 18), this study did not

indicate that the mother was a predominant factor in influencing the student's decision to attend college.

According to Gofen (2009), first-generation college students break the pattern of achieving only the educational level of their parents or the pattern of "intergenerational inheritance of education level; they break the intergenerational cycle where parents convey their educational level to their offspring" (p. 104). All of the student participants in this study broke the intergenerational pattern of educational level by pursuing a college degree. Even Anna, with her desire to own and operate a business similar to her parents', believed she needed to establish a better foundation to be successful and not "struggle" like her parents. Santaniello (2011) explained, "American children in general and working class children in particular often end up in jobs that are similar to their parents' jobs" (p. 79). Anna's desire was to own and operated a business like her parents, with the goal of attending college to establish a better foundation for owning and operating her own business. All of the other participants in the study were pursuing a career which required the attainment of a college degree.

Implications for policy and practice. K-12 educational agencies interested in college attendance by first-generation college students must work to identify a family member as a significant person who can create an open, honest, and ongoing relationship to support and encourage students toward college attendance. The knowledge to support first-generation college students in the college process may not be available from this significant person, but it is apparent that someone who believes the student can be successful is a huge motivating factor toward college attendance. Parents and educators should work on identifying this person to encourage students toward college attendance. Family support, more so than

family attendance of school events and activities, is imperative for students to believe in themselves and achieve their goal of college attendance

Counselors, teachers, and parents should expect students to attend college. Although many students may not choose college attendance, students growing up with this expectation considered college attendance the next logical step. Parents and educators should work with students to develop intrinsic determination and drive or a hard work ethic. Determining how this is developed in students may be an additional study because these qualities seemed to be driving factors for all of the participants.

K-12 educational agencies also need to help students, parents, and families to understanding the college-bound process. Schools should not only identify first-generation college students, but determine the support needed for each individual. Counselors acted as mentors to many of the participants in this study; the benefit of mentoring in addition to school counseling services would be a huge benefit to students. Mentors could assist students with college registration, finding housing, and other aspects of the college-readiness experience and work with parents as well as student. K-12 educational agencies do not often provide these specific, but greatly needed, services.

School Influence

Four of the five participants believed the counselor and teachers played an important role in their decision to attend college. Sadie, did not believe she was able to establish enough of a connection with counselors and teachers. Her experience of attending seven different schools during her K-12 education did not allow school staff to be much of an influence. Sadie's counselor attempted to develop a personal relationship, however, and Sadie did believe that this limited connection influenced her decision to attend college.

Mary, on the other hand, believed her school counselor was the most important school influence in her decision to attend college. Mary's counselor assumed a surrogate-parent role because Mary's mother lived out of state. Mary shared, "[my counselor] supported me in so many ways, from picking me up at the airport when I came back from out of state, to sitting through college orientation."

The counselors and the teachers were both instrumental in Beth's decision to attend college. She believed they pushed students to do their best and to achieve more. David also believed the counselor and Community in Schools coordinator established a connection with him and pushed him to explore further career and college options. Anna agreed that school played a key role in her decision to attend college.

Encouragement to attend college. The school staff's influence on the participants' decision to attend college can be narrowed down to some specific factors. The encouragement from counselors and teachers that four of the five participants believed they received was a factor that assisted them with their decision to attend college. Although Mary did not have a really strong connection with any one teacher, she shared that her counselor made her feel like she "could actually be successful in college." Beth believed the counselor and teachers together provided "encouragement to follow any path." The counselor in Sadie's case shared that the "encouragement to attend college was a team effort" of the entire staff. David believed his CTC teacher had a significant impact on his decision to attend college, mostly by sharing "what it would be like in a work environment" in his chosen field.

Early preparation for postsecondary transition. Wimberly and Noeth (2005) found that "Schools can play a key role in guiding early preparation for postsecondary through academic preparation and achievement, supporting parent involvement, providing college

and career planning information, and helping students through the many steps in postsecondary planning” (p. viii). Participants in this study noted examples of the kinds of support offered by the school, including the work of counselors, who, in most cases played an important role assisting students with the college application and enrollment process. In many cases, counselors and the teachers all played a large role in student’s decision to attend college.

Much of the research suggested that schools should get parents involved early in their child’s schooling. Martin (2010) noted that schools can assist students as early as elementary grades with academic planning for college and career readiness, enrichment and extracurricular engagement, and planning for the financial burden of paying for college. None of the participants in this study indicated that the school involved parents at the elementary level with postsecondary readiness; the topics were stressed to some extent at the middle school and primarily at the high school. Wimberly and Noeth (2004) found parents may be more involved in middle and high school years with course selection, college admissions discussions, college visits, and financial aid planning. In this study, most participants shared that their parents were not involved in postsecondary topics; only Mary indicated that her mother participated in many of these activities.

MacAllum et al. (2007) noted that “teachers, though readily accessible by students and presumably academic role-models familiar with college, are rarely mentioned in the literature as key figures in the search and choice process” (p. 20). Although counselors were named most often, a specific teacher was named by three of the five participants in this study as a person who had a significant impact on their decision to attend college. Perhaps teachers are most identified with their classroom activity and/or specific subject areas. However, some

teachers' specialties and interests may connect more closely with career planning. At Lake Public School, Sadie connected with Ms. King; David identified his Career Technology Center teacher, Mr. Brin; and Beth found Mr. Bend to be a person who had an important impact on her decision to attend college.

Although some research showed that planning for college begins as early as the middle school years, Wimberly and Noeth (2005) noted that students begin planning for college as early as sixth grade. Oakes, Rogers, and Valladares (2008) agreed that academic planning and counseling need to start as early as the sixth grade, and by eighth grade, most students plan on postsecondary study. Mary and Anna were the only participants in this study who said that they knew before high school that they would be pursuing a college degree. In their cases, it was their desired profession, Mary, an attorney and Anna, a veterinarian that seemed to be the factor that pushed them in the pursuit of a college degree. Beth, Sadie, and David all came to the realization that college was a possibility only during their high school years.

Martin (2010) confirmed that "school counselors are leaders and advocates who can profoundly influence students' academic achievement, aspirations, decisions and future plans" (p. 5). The counselors had a profound effect on the decision of each participant to pursue a college degree. Sadie was the least affected, although she did develop a relationship with her counselor in high school, who provided some "limited support" in Sadie's decision to attend college. All of the other participants believed their counselor provided support and were advocates for them, not only with their high school career but with their college pursuit. According to Hossler et al. (1999) and Johnson, Steward, and Eberly (1991), school counselors' influence often begins late in the decision-making process regarding attending

college. This was the case with each of the participants, although Mary and Beth's counselor developed a relationship with them in their middle school years and carried on through high school.

Building collegiate culture in high school. The counselors often arranged opportunities for students to visit college campuses, which three of the five participants believed was a large factor in their decision to attend college. Mary and Beth's counselor arranged college campus visits, but Mary and Beth believed that they had no option of attending any school except their local community college due to the financial constraints of paying for college. Sadie's counselor also arranged campus visits to help identify Sadie's best option and fit for attending college; however, like Mary and Beth, Sadie chose she to attend the local community college due to her limited financial resources.

David and Anna's counselor, Ms. Dot, and Community in School Coordinator, Ms. Duncan, arranged for college visits as well. David found the college visits invaluable when making his decision to attend college. He found that visiting college campuses brought him one step closer to realizing college was an option and allowed him to "decide what college was the best fit." Anna's mother also believed visiting colleges was an "invaluable experience" that allowed Anna to "see programs at different colleges and experience the college environment." The decision of which college to attend was very simple for Anna because she had friends attending a community college approximately 150 miles from her home. Anna did review other options to determine the best fit for her but decided she had a lot of support in the college she chose.

All of the schools involved in this study coordinated college-type activities such as college shirt day or college pennants displayed in classrooms to help create a college

environment. Many of the high schools, including those attended by Mary, Beth, David, and Anna provided opportunities to create a *college culture* or college-going opportunities. This exposure to the college culture was limited to college visits for all five participants. Some of the schools also arranged for college fairs, specific days when colleges would visit the high school and students had opportunities to ask questions about the college programs. None of the students shared that these activities were influential in making their decision to attend college. Martin (2010) suggested that schools should “provide early and ongoing exposure to experiences and information necessary to make informed decision when selecting a college or career that connects to academic preparation and future aspirations” (p. 3). Corwin (2007) added, college cultures are developed by staff to support college goals “from administrative assistants to custodial staff” (p. 11). In other words, Corwin advocated that every element in the school environment, including people, program, and process support student attainment of postsecondary education and training.

The counselors in each of the five cases shared that they provided a lot of extra support regarding the process of moving on to college because all of the participants were first-generation college students. Although some of the schools that participated in this study did not identify first-generation college students, the staff did share that they provided the support needed for each student to successfully navigate the college process. Mary and Beth’s counselor, Ms. Walter, shared that there is a lot of “handholding” for first-generation college students; because their parents had not had the experience of attending college, it was difficult for everyone to understand the process. She explained, “We support all of the students to help them be successful, but first-generation college students often need a little extra support to understand the general process of entering a college program.” Sadie’s

counselor, Ms. Gold, explained that many of their students are first-generation college students. She shared that their school provides support for students as needed but does not specifically identify or target first-generation college students. David and Anna's counselor, Ms. Dot, and Ms. Duncan, Community in Schools Coordinator, also followed the same general guideline as described by Sadie's counselor. Ms. Dot and Ms. Duncan shared that they do not focus on the fact that students are first-generation college students but rather more that each student needs a certain amount of assistance. Ms. Dot shared, "We focus on simply providing the students the support they need, no matter what the level of support." That some counselors identify students as first-generation college students and others do not does not limit the amount of support these students need. Each student is given resources and support, and if a student needs more help, such as going to campus to help register for classes, all of the counselors in this study, with the exception of Martin Public Schools' counselors, took on this task. The Community in Schools coordinator said, "If students needed help to register for classes at the college level, this certainly would be a support they would provide."

Choy (2001) said that first-generation college-bound students may not receive added help from schools if the school does not specifically identify those students. This appeared to be the case in most of the participant high schools. However, all of the school counselors admitted to providing the support necessary for each individual student whether they were first-generation college students or not. Support was offered to students as needs were identified, not directed specifically to sub groups of the population. Teachers and counselors could focus support more directly to the needs of individual students if first-generation and other sub groups were identified. Mr. Brin, David's teacher, shared, "I never thought about

if students were first-generation college students or not and I think that would be a good thing to know so I could approach students from a different aspect.” MacAllum et al. (2007) found that “Most of the low-income, rural high school students indicated they did not know if their school had a guidance counselor or, if it had one, they felt he/she was not helpful.” Contrary to the finding of MacAllum et al., all of the participants in this study believed their school counselor had a significant impact on their decision to attend college and were also very helpful at providing support toward the college process and attendance.

Implications for policy and practice. K-12 educational agencies, specifically counselors and teachers, must work intentionally with first-generation college-bound students to assist them toward the goal of college attendance. Counselors need to develop a personal relationship with students to identify their needs. Counselors should identify a key person in the student’s life who may influence with the student’s decision to attend college. In many cases, counselors should look closely at the grandmother. Counselor can assist students and parents with college processes, such as, identifying the best fit college and financial aid, choosing a career path, registering for classes, and perhaps attending orientation with students. Counselors and teachers need to encourage college attendance so that students can identify their own potential and success of college attendance. Counselors need to assist with the college application, enrollment process, and helping students find resources for financial assistance. The focus of involvement and encouragement toward college-bound students needs to be focused primarily at the high school level. Students being able to connect to at least one teacher to assist with the pursuit of college attendance is important.

School leaders, including the researcher, should present the results of the study to schools and school groups to assist them with understanding home and school factors that

affect students from rural areas to make the decision to attend college and to aid with the implementation of programs toward college attendance. The researcher could present findings of the research to various organizations such as counselor groups at intermediate school districts, Local College Access Networks, and conferences such as the American Counseling Association, Michigan Pre-College Conference, the Michigan Association of School Administrators, and the American Association of School Administrators.

Peer influence. None of the participants shared that their peers had a significant direct influence on their decision to attend college. Mary shared that her peers did not affect her decision to attend college. In fact, according to her counselor, Mary's friends often "held her back" because they were not academically driven. Certain circumstances for Mary, with the death of some of her peers, made her realize she needed to work harder to earn a degree. Beth's situation was very similar to Mary's because her friends often "pulled her in the wrong direction," according to her father. Beth came to the realization that she needed to focus on doing well academically to be successful in college. Sadie, moving seven times throughout her K-12 experience, did not have time to build significant peer relationships that might have influenced her decision to attend college. The major concern from Sadie's counselor was that Sadie's boyfriend dropped out of school, and the counselor thought this might be a detriment in the future. Although Anna had many friends going to college, she did not believe they were a significant factor in her decision to attend college.

Research found that peer influence had less of an impact on educational attainment than parent relationships (Steinberg, Brown, Cider, Kaczmark, & Laaro, 1998). The participants in this study did not believe their peers were a significant factor that influenced their decision to attend college. Steinberg et al. (1998) suggested that most peers seem to

encourage rather than discourage academic success. In this study, only David concurred with that concept. Mary, Beth, and Sadie reported that their peers actually were detrimental in their decision to attend college, though, in a sense, their peers made them realize they wanted to attend college. David did not believe his peers influenced his decision to attend college, but they did spark his interest in the technology field. Anna, although not influenced in her decision to attend college, did have many friends who were already attending college.

Implications for policy and practice. Peers were not a factor that affected college attendance. Parents and educators should not discourage relationships of particular students. Ironically, sometimes students who would appear to have the largest negative impact on students actually made the participants realize the need and desire to attend college.

College preparation influence. Conley (2008) stated, “The likelihood that students will make a successful transition to the college environment is often a function of their readiness—the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped them for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college” (p. 24). In this study, research findings emphasized the importance of awareness of readiness for higher education at all grade levels. Four of the five participants in this study believed that they were academically ready to take on the challenges of college. Mary believed she was academically ready for the rigors of college but did have some concerns about her lack of good study habits. Although getting good grades was always easy for Mary, she was worried about being prepared for the rigor. Mary’s concerns did not deter her from going to college; she put structures in place for support. Beth believed she was ready for the rigor of college. Although she did not take any dual-enrollment classes, her confidence was heightened when she successfully qualified to take college calculus. Beth did not always receive good grades

and realized she needed to apply herself more to be successful in college. Sadie was not totally convinced that she was ready for the rigors of college. As late as her sophomore year in high school, she realized that grades were important if she wanted to attend college and be successful. David decision to attend college was not based on whether he was academically ready but rather due to his passion for technology.

Walton and Ifill (2013) found that one way for students to be prepared for the academic transition to college is the participation in college-level or advanced placement classes in high school. David and Anna earned some college credits in high school. David believed that experience helped him understand the rigor of a college-level class. He believed he could succeed in his field and take on any challenge he may confront at college. Mary believed she could handle the rigor of college classes but was more concerned about her lack of study habits. Sadie had some concerns about the rigor of college work and wished she had taken some advanced placement or dual enrollment classes in high school. Beth also did not participate in college credit classes while in high school.

Implications for policy and practice. Academic preparation is important for student self-confidence and the decision to affect the decision to attend college. High schools should provide dual-enrollment and advanced placement class opportunities to expose students to college-level classes. Educators need to provide greater awareness and information about the availability and value of college-level classes. Parents and educators need to encourage students to participate in these opportunities that build confidence in students.

Cost and access to financial aid/student loans. Jenkins, Miyazaki, and Janoski (2009) found that first-generation college students, because they generally come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, find paying for college more of a challenge. This was the case

for all of the participants, as all knew that their parents would not be of any help with financial support. According to Pew Research (2011), money can come from other sources, such as the federal and state government as well as private sources, with the greatest responsibility upon the students and family.

Although the ability to afford the cost of college was a major concern, none of the study participants were deterred in their decision to attend college. Mary was awarded a Commitment Scholarship, yet she knew that financing beyond a two-year degree would be challenging. Mary was highly motivated to keep the faith shown in her by her mother and the people who believed in her enough to award the Commitment Scholarship. Without the resource of the scholarship, Mary would not be attending college.

Beth and Sadie confirmed that money was their biggest concern. Although Beth pursued several options for paying for college, including joining the military, she did qualify for the Tuition Incentive Program, which provides tuition assistance for the first two years of college. Her counselor believed that if Beth did not qualify for this financial assistance, she would not be able to attend college. Beth did not have concerns about having to get a job to help her family financially. Her grandmother and father were very supportive of her decision to attend college.

Sadie used student loans to help her pay her tuition because she does not qualify for any other programs or scholarship. Sadie is not deterred from her decision to attend college by the work involved in her family's business. She knew that her parents did not need her "to help support the family business but actually want [her] to go to college to get a better foundation to start [her] own business."

David did not seem to have a concern about paying for college but was rather matter of fact about it. He knew he should have planned a little better and sought out scholarships but understood that he “will pay for college like everyone else does—by working and getting student loans.” David also knew that his parents both wanted him to find a career he loves and not worry about helping to support his family, because the “benefits of a college education will outweigh the financial stressors.” Family members told him that, in the long run, he will not have to work as hard as they do to make a living.

Anna, like Beth, qualified for the Tuition Incentive Program. Anna was very concerned about paying for college after that point but chose the specific college in lieu of a larger university based on her financial means. She knew that she “can make so much more money by earning a degree” that it does not make sense for her to stay home with her family just to work.

According to Martin (2010), counselors should “provide students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college and the financial aid and scholarship processes and eligibility requirements, so they are able to plan for and afford a college education”(p. 3). All of the participants confirmed that this type of information was provided. Mary was awarded a Commitment Scholarship. Beth received funding from the Tuition Incentive Program and multiple scholarships. Sadie used financial aid to pay for her college but continued to work to help as well. David was not overly concerned about paying for college. He knew that, in addition to the scholarships he received, he will need to take out student loans to pay for college. Anna also used the Tuition Incentive Program. She was more worried about after “the first two years when no tuition support is in place.”

Implications for policy and practice. Educators need to start conversations with parents and students about financial aid earlier than high school. Information about the many different types and resources of financial aid need to be made available to parents and students. Counselors need to provide students access and assistance when applying for scholarships. Various resources for students need to be reviewed.

Benefits of a college and postsecondary education. The benefits of a college education were large factors in influencing the decision of all of the participants. Mary knew that she did not want to “work as hard as [her] parents did for their money,” so she needed to go to college to become an attorney. Mary watched both of her parents’ work at physically demanding, low-paying jobs, and knew she did not want to work so hard for so little money. Mary knew that not earning a college degree would make it difficult to support her family. Mary’s mother knew that the benefits of earning a college degree and becoming a lawyer were huge motivators for Mary. The benefits of earning a college degree were important to Beth. She knew that she did not want to spend a lot of time away from her family, as her father was required to do. She wanted to get a degree and have a better lifestyle for her future. This goal was also supported by her grandmother’s view that “College usually allows people to earn much more money than other options.” Sadie also recognized that the benefits of a college degree, earning a better income, and not working so hard were large factors in her decision to attend college. Although she wanted to own a business, as did her parents, she wanted to establish a better foundation so she did not have all of the struggles experienced by her family. For David, the benefits of a college degree were not necessarily related to just earning more money but to “doing what he loved.” Anna, like David, was motivated to earn a college degree to achieve a professional goal— to become a veterinarian.

Like David, Anna knew that her choice in professions would not only be something that she loved but would provide “a better financial future.”

Taylor et al. (2011) said that a large majority (86%) of college graduates believe that college has been a good investment for them personally. Pope and Fermin (2003) added that “The perceived benefit of attending college to enhance potential workforce earnings upon graduation from the institution is also an influential economic factor for many students” (p. 21). All of the participants in this study concurred that college would provide a better source of income and greater stability. David and Anna were also motivated by the career they choose.

Implications for policy and practice. Educators and parents need to continue to provide students with resources and evidence in the real world, including their own educational journeys, to show the benefits of a college education.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research study focused on one northern-lower Michigan intermediate school district. Using a qualitative case study method, this study explored home and school factors that influenced five first-generation college students to decide to attend college.

Recommendations for further research include the following:

1. Expand the research group. The present study comprised a small group of four females and one male students from one intermediate school district of small rural schools, none with larger than 1,500 student enrollment. Expanded research could test the validity of factors identified in this study leading to college attendance by first-generation students in larger groups with greater diversity of gender, geographic setting, and socioeconomic demographics.

2. Explore the concept of intrinsic determination among first-generation college students, how this characteristic is developed, and how it contributes to choice of college attendance.
3. Follow the first-generation college freshmen or sophomores throughout their postsecondary years. Identify the persistence of these college students throughout their college experiences and identify factors that lead to success in the transition from high school to college and to college graduation.
4. Compare the factors related to choice to attend college by first-generation college students and students who are not first-generation college students.
5. Follow up with participants of this study to see if they are successful with earning a college degree. Identify any problems or struggles they faced, suggestions as to how K-12 institutions could better assist students, and what might have made their college experience easier.
6. Facilitate the understanding of educational support and reform related to first-generation college students. Further research could enter into deeper discussions and relationships with students, parents, families, teachers, and counselors as well as policy-makers and the broader community that surrounds and supports the educational process to encourage and improve opportunities for first-generation college students.
7. Explore first-generation college students who did not attend college, and look for factors that hindered this decision.

Conclusion

First-generation college students were found to make up fifty percent of the college population, according to a 2010 study by the U. S. Department of Education (Lynch, 2013). First-generation college students must move past the intergenerational barriers that exist toward college attendance, including lack of parent involvement in school activities, ignorance about the benefits of postsecondary education and the process of college enrollment, financial concerns, and perhaps, failure of the high school program to prepare students for the academic rigor of college.

This qualitative case study examined factors that influenced the decision to attend college by students who would be the first in their family to do so. Data were gathered in informal interviews with first-generation students, as well as a family member, school counselor, and teacher whom students identified as having the most influence on the decision to attend college. The lived experience of the five participating first-generation college students documented the importance of family and school support for choosing to attend college and achieving success in college. A primary concern for parents and educators of first-generation college students is to view and support students holistically according to their individual needs. Each story of first-generation college attendance, in the midst of obstacles and barriers, is an inspiration for other potential first-generation college students and a story of success for the community and society at large.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Student Interview Questions

1. If you could name one person who had the greatest impact on your decision to attend college, who would that be and why?
2. Describe your path to college: When did you begin to think about college and what steps did you take along this path?
3. What influenced your decision to attend college?
4. Who were the people who had the greatest influence on your decision to attend college?
 - a. How?
 - b. Why?
5. Why was attending college important to you?
6. What was your vision for college and how did this vision compare to the reality of attending college?
7. As you look back on your path to college, how do you feel about the plans you made to attend college?
8. What, if anything, do you wish you had done differently leading up to college attendance? How might this change have affected your decision or preparation for college?
9. Describe the aspects of your journey to college that you had within your control.
 - a. How were these beneficial?
 - b. How were they detrimental?
 - c. Would you change any of these aspects?
 - d. What advice would you give to any first-generation college students about these?
10. Describe the aspects of your journey to college that were outside your control.
 - a. How were these beneficial?
 - b. How were they detrimental?
 - c. Would you change any of these aspects?
 - d. What advice would you give to any first-generation college students about these?
11. Describe your connection with your K-12 schools and your decision to attend college?
12. Describe your connection with your home life and your decision to attend college?
13. How has your decision to attend college affected your immediate family (mother, fathers and siblings)?
14. How do you think your family members feel about your decision to attend college?
15. What were some obstacles you experienced or worries you had in connection with your decision to attend college?

16. Do you believe there was anything you could have done prior to attending college to have anticipated or alleviated these obstacles or worries?
17. What were some encouragements or supports you experienced relative to your decision to attend college?
18. Has this encouragement or support systems continued?
19. What would be ideal support that you may have received to assist you with your decision to attend college?
20. Do you have any lingering fears about your college experience; and, if so, do you believe there were shortcomings in your college preparation that could have been addressed and lessened during your undergraduate years?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. And, by whom?
21. When you look back at your past schooling experiences, what makes you feel most proud or the greatest sense of satisfaction?
22. What advice do you have for your former educators or educators in general to assist other students as they move forward toward college attendance?
23. What advice do you have for families (parents and siblings) to assist other students as they move forward toward college attendance?

Appendix B: Counselor, Teacher, and Principal Interview Questions

1. Describe how students are presented with options after high school?
2. What is the school's vision for postsecondary options?
3. Describe how you support students with the path to college?
 - a. Is this different for first-generation college students?
4. Describe the aspects of the journey for first-generation college students that are within your control.
 - a. What are the steps with which you assist along this path?
 - b. What, if any, other steps do you perceive might be helpful?
5. Describe the aspects of the journey for first-generation college students that are not within your control.
 - a. What are the steps with which you assist along this path?
 - b. Do you perceive any ways in which educators might be able to anticipate and provide assistance with these?
6. What are some obstacles or worries you have identified related to the decision of students to become first-generation college students?
 - a. How do you assist with overcoming these obstacles?
 - b. What other, if any, sources of assistance might be beneficial to these students?
7. What are some encouragements or supports you have identified with the decision of students to become first-generation college students?
8. Describe how other educators within your district work with students toward college attendance.
9. What advice do you have for other educators to assist with first-generation college students' decision to attend college?
10. If you were able to establish a specific program aimed at assisting first-generation students attend college, what would it be the most important aspects of the program?
 - a. Who should implement each aspect?
 - b. When and how would it be implemented?
 - c. What special funding would it require and who should pay for it?
11. What advice do you have for families to assist with first-generation college students' decision to attend college?

Appendix C: Parent Interview Questions

1. Describe your child's path to college.
 - a. When did you begin to think about your child attending college?
 - b. What steps did you take along this path?
2. What was your vision for your child and college and how did this vision compare to the reality of attending college?
3. What do you believe influenced your child's decision to attend college?
4. As you look back on your child's path to college, how do you feel about the plans he/she made to attend college?
5. What, if anything, do you wish you had done differently for your child leading up to college attendance? How might this change have affected your child's decision or preparation for college?
6. Describe the aspects of your child's journey to college that you had within your control.
 - a. How were these beneficial?
 - b. How were they detrimental?
 - c. Would you change any of these aspects?
7. Describe the aspects of your child's journey to college that were outside your control.
 - a. How were these beneficial?
 - b. How were they detrimental?
 - c. Would you change any of these aspects?
8. Describe your connection with your child's schools and his/her decision to attend college?
9. Describe your connection with your child's home life and his/her decision to attend college?
10. How has your child's decision to attend college affected your immediate family (spouse and children)?
 - a. How do you think your immediate family members feel about your child's decision to attend college?
 - b. Do you think your first-generation students' college attendance will influence younger siblings, if any, to attend college?
11. What were some obstacles or worries your child experienced toward his/her decision to attend college?
 - a. Do you believe there was anything you could have done prior to attending college to have anticipated or alleviated these obstacles or worries?
 - b. What?
12. What were some encouragements or supports your child experienced toward his/her decision to attend college?
 - a. Has this encouragement or support continued?
 - b. What, if any, addition encourage could be provided and by whom?

13. What do you think would be ideal support that your child may have received to assist you with his/her decision to attend college?
14. What are you most proud as you look back at your child's schooling experience?
15. What advice do you have for educators to assist other students as they move forward toward college attendance?
16. What advice do you have for your family (spouse and children) to assist other students as they move forward toward college attendance?

Appendix D: Approval of University Human Subjects Review Committee

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: EXPEDITED INITIAL APPROVAL

DATE: April 11, 2016

TO: Karen Sherwood
Eastern Michigan University

Re: UHSRC: # 867715-1
Category: Expedited category 7
Approval Date: April 11, 2016
Expiration Date: April 10, 2017

Title: How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students

Your research project, entitled **How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students**, has been approved in accordance with all applicable federal regulations.

This approval included the following:

1. Enrollment of 30 subjects to participate in the approved protocol.
2. Use of the following study measures: *Student Interview Questions; Counselor, and Teacher Interview Questions; Parent Interview Questions*
3. Use of the following stamped recruitment materials: *Student Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study; Parent/Counselor/Teacher Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study*
4. *Use of the stamped: Student Informed Consent form; Parent/Counselor/Teacher Informed Consent Form*

Renewals: This approval is valid for one year and expires on April 10, 2017. If you plan to continue your study beyond April 10, 2017, you must submit a Continuing Review Form by March 11, 2017 to ensure the approval does not lapse.

Modifications: All changes must be approved prior to implementation. If you plan to make any minor changes, you must submit a **Minor Modification Form**. For any changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a **Human Subjects Approval Request Form**. These forms are available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects **or** change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an **Event Report** form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website

Follow-up: If your Expedited research project is not completed and closed after **three years**, the UHSRC office requires a new **Human Subjects Approval Request Form** prior to approving a continuation beyond three years.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Kellman Fritz, PhD
Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee

Appendix E: Student Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study

Dear XXX,

Study Title: How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students

Hello,

My name is Karen Sherwood. I am currently the superintendent for Kalkaska Public Schools, one of the sixteen school districts in the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study which is part of my doctoral studies in the Educational Leadership program at Eastern Michigan University. The purpose of my research is to better understand the home and school factors that have influenced students to become first-generation college students. I am interested in exploring what you, as a first-generation college student in one intermediate school district in northern-lower Michigan, would identify as the factors which encouraged you to attend college.

Those who do research in this area, as well as educators, students, and families, have ideas about what is important to include in the school's program. I would like to hear your story and experiences as a student who made the decision to attend college. I am interested in hearing what home and school factors you believe helped you make the decision to attend college.

I am inviting you to voluntarily participate in this study. There is no obligation to participate. Participation in the study will involve two conversations with me and one focus group discussion, taking up no more than two hours of your time. You will not be forced to answer questions that are not comfortable for you. If you choose to participate, you may still withdraw your participation at any time. You will not be identified by name in the study. Your identity will remain anonymous.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact me at either my office or cell phone number or my email. If you do not have any additional questions, and if you consent to participate in the study as described above, please respond to this email with an email message that states, "I agree to participate." At that time, we will set up a time to meet.

I hope we can complete the interviews before XXX.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to the possibility of meeting each one of you.

Cordially,

Karen Sherwood
Superintendent, Kalkaska Public Schools

<p>Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee UHSRC Protocol Number: 867715-1 Study Approval Dates: 04/11/16 – 04/10/17</p>
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Appendix F: Student Informed Consent Form

Project Title: How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students

Principal Investigator: The person in charge of this study is Karen Sherwood, Superintendent, Kalkaska Public Schools, 315 S. Coral Street, Kalkaska, MI 49646, 231-258-9109, ksherwood@kpschools.org. The principal investigator is a student at Eastern Michigan University. Her faculty adviser is Dr. Ron Williamson. Throughout this form, Ms. Sherwood will be referred to as the “investigator.”

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of my research study is to better understand the home and school factors that have influenced high school students from one intermediate school district in northern-lower Michigan to become first-generation college students.

Procedure: Participation in this study involves:

- The investigator providing an overview of the study,
- Participation in two individual interviews, no longer than two hours,
- Participation in a focus group discussion with up to five research participants or first-generation college freshmen or sophomores who are from one intermediate school district in northern-lower Michigan, which will take approximately one hour. You will be asked to use your first name in the focus group.

Your interviews will be audio recorded for this study. These audio recordings will be transcribed into an anonymous transcript. The transcriptionist will sign an agreement to maintain confidentiality. Your name will not be identified.

Confidentiality: Your name will not be used in this study and will be kept confidential. At no time will your name be associated with the study. All related materials will be kept in locked file cabinets in the researcher’s office and electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer.

Expected Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of factors that affect the decision of high school seniors to become first-generation college students and may lead to programs that will make the experience easier for other first-generation college students. There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant in this study. All names or other potentially identifiable data will be kept confidential.

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee UHSRC Protocol Number: 867715-1 Study Approval Dates: 04/11/16 – 04/10/17

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you do decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without negative consequences.

Use of Research Results: The results of this study may be presented at research meetings and conferences, in scientific publications, and as part of a doctoral dissertation being conducted by the principal investigator. No names or identifying information will be revealed.

Contacts and Questions: If at any time you have questions about this study you may contact the principal investigator, Karen Sherwood, 231-258-9109 or ksherwood@kpschools.com.

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committees. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant that has not been answered by the investigator, you may contact the Eastern Michigan University Director of the Graduate School at 734-487-0042.

Statement of Consent: I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers received. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements which will include being audio recorded as I take part in the study.

Signatures

Print Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Karen Sherwood, Principal Investigator

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee UHSRC Protocol Number: 867715-1 Study Approval Dates: 04/11/16 – 04/10/17

Appendix G: Parent/Counselor/Teacher Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study

Dear XXX,

Study Title: How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students

Hello,

My name is Karen Sherwood. I am currently the superintendent for Kalkaska Public Schools, one of the sixteen school districts in the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study which is part of my doctoral studies in the Educational Leadership program at Eastern Michigan University. The purpose of my research is to better understand the home and school factors that have influenced students to become first-generation college students. I am interested in exploring what first-generation college students in one intermediate school district in northern-lower Michigan would identify as the factors which encouraged them to attend college.

Those who do research in this area, as well as educators, students, and families, have ideas about what is important to include in the school's program. I would like to hear your story and experiences, as that may have influenced the decision of a first-generation child/student to attend college.

I am inviting you to voluntarily participate in this study, along with your child/student. There is no obligation to participate. Participation in the study will involve one conversation with me taking up no more than one hour of your time. You will not be forced to answer questions that are not comfortable for you. If you choose to participate, you may still withdraw your participation at any time. You will not be identified by name in the study. Your identity will remain anonymous.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact me at either my office or cell phone number or my email. If you do not have any additional questions, and if you consent to participate in the study as described above, please respond to this email with an email message that states, "I agree to participate." At that time, we will set up a time to meet.

I hope we can complete the interview before XXX.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to the possibility of meeting each one of you.

Cordially,

Karen Sherwood
Superintendent, Kalkaska Public Schools

<p>Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee UHSRC Protocol Number: 867715-1 Study Approval Dates: 04/11/16 – 04/10/17</p>
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Appendix H: Parent/Counselor/Teacher Informed Consent Form

Project Title: How Home and School Factors Influenced College Freshmen and Sophomores to Become First-Generation College Students

Principal Investigator: The person in charge of this study is Karen Sherwood, Superintendent, Kalkaska Public Schools, 315 S. Coral Street, Kalkaska, MI 49646, 231-258-9109, ksherwood@kpschools.org. The principal investigator is a student at Eastern Michigan University. Her faculty adviser is Dr. Ron Williamson. Throughout this form, Ms. Sherwood will be referred to as the “investigator.”

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of my research study is to better understand the home and school factors that have influenced high school students from one intermediate school district in northern-lower Michigan to become first-generation college students.

Procedure: Participation in this study involves:

- The investigator providing an overview of the study,
- Participation in one individual interview, no longer than one hour

Your interview will be audio recorded for this study. This audio recording will be transcribed into an anonymous transcript. The transcriptionist will sign an agreement to maintain confidentiality. Your name will not be identified.

Confidentiality: Your name will not be used in this study and will be kept confidential. At no time will your name be associated with the study. All related materials will be kept in locked file cabinets in the researcher’s office and electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer.

Expected Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of factors that affect the decision of high school seniors to become first-generation college students and may lead to programs that will make the experience easier for other first-generation college students. There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant in this study. All names or other potentially identifiable data will be kept confidential.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

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Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you do decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without negative consequences.

Use of Research Results: The results of this study may be presented at research meetings and conferences, in scientific publications, and as part of a doctoral dissertation being conducted by the principal investigator. No names or identifying information will be revealed.

Contacts and Questions: If at any time you have questions about this study you may contact the principal investigator, Karen Sherwood, 231-258-9109 or ksherwood@kpschools.com.

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committees. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant that has not been answered by the investigator, you may contact the Eastern Michigan University Director of the Graduate School at 734-487-0042.

Statement of Consent: I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers received. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements which will include being audio recorded as I take part in the study.

Signatures

Print Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Karen Sherwood, Principal Investigator

Approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee UHSRC Protocol Number: 867715-1 Study Approval Dates: 04/11/16 – 04/10/17
