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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jordan McCarter entitled "Counselor Influences on College Decision Making." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Higher Education Administration.

Pamela A. Angelle, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Karen D. Boyd, Mary Lynne Derrington, Carrie Ann Stephens

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Counselor Influences on College Decision Making

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jordan McCarter

December 2023

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank my committee members for their patience and support in sticking with me through these too-long years. Dr. Boyd, Dr. Derrington, and Dr. Stephens provided invaluable feedback at my proposal defense to help me move forward. Although their support on my committee is important, I am most grateful for the time in class with them, which drove me to ask them to serve on my committee in the first place. I am, by calling and by trade, a teacher, so it makes sense that the times I remember most fondly are of the classroom.

In Dr. Boyd's class, I did a project that led me to explore my interests in history and student life. I ended up being able to find a primary source recording of my own sorority founders discussing student life in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In Dr. Derrington's class, I expanded my learning on education policy and completed a partner paper about student concussion policy. It was out of my comfort zone and something I had never really considered before, but I found it fascinating: hallmarks of good education. Dr. Stephens's focus on women in leadership spoke to my heart. In a time before online learning was a necessity, she was educating online in a way that made me think, "dang, I really wish I could do this in person."

I have another memory of talking with two friends in one of my early classes about who we wanted to chair our dissertation committees- well before we had a right to be talking about this. I remember my friends being adamant about their choices and my having no idea at all. That was because I had not yet met the inimitable Pamela Angelle. Her classes, apologies to everyone else, were my favorite. From Skyping with professors

in New Zealand to comparing leadership biographies, she connected our time as students to our careers as educators with personalized learning and engaging material.

I knew then that I needed her on my committee somehow, although ultimately, it was Dr. Mertz who suggested I ask Dr. Angelle to serve as my chair. I remember her surprise when I asked (which must have turned to regret at least once). It was the best decision I made in this program. I am eternally grateful for her advice, her support, at times, her tough love, and her genuine joy for me as I became a wife and a mother during my time in this program. Most importantly, Dr. Angelle's empathy and patience help make me a better teacher.

Abstract

Although numerous studies have been devoted to understanding the role of the counselor in schools, few studies have been conducted to understand the specific influence that counselors have on girls throughout their college admissions process (Bryan, Farmer-Hinton, Rawls, & Woods, 2017; Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). The purpose of this study was to examine the interactions between girls and their high school college admissions counselors and the resources and programmatic offerings of the college counseling office that girls experience. Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model of college student choice served as the conceptual framework for this narrative inquiry study of five female undergraduate students at a small, liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The data was examined using the lens of the study's three research questions and six themes emerged from the open coding process: outside factors and influences, college-level factors, positive counselor interactions, ineffective counselor, resource for college admissions, and girl's own college admissions journey. While each girl came from a different high school background, they each expressed a need for emotional support and resources from their college counselor. This study found that the availability of resources did not impact a girl's connection to the college counselor. Rather, a higher level of emotional support was correlated with greater satisfaction with the counselor, regardless of resources available.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In 1983, editors at *U.S. News and World Report* magazine designed an academic reputation survey sent to over 1,000 college presidents, compiled the results, and published the magazine's first ever list of college rankings (Morse, 2008). That same year, girls outpaced boys in college enrollment rates for just the fourth time since 1972 and within five years, girls would consistently outpace boys in college enrollment (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2013). These are just two examples of the myriad ways in which the college admissions process has drastically changed over the last fifty years.

One major shift is that the college admissions process has become increasingly competitive at both the high school and college levels, leading researchers and practitioners alike to focus on increasing access to higher education (Kinzie et al., 2004). Colleges are vying to recruit top candidates and to diversify their student body. Simultaneously, some high schools are competing for their students to receive admission to elite institutions (Steinberg, 2003; Stevens, 2009). Of course, high schools have differing access to differing resources, which can dramatically impact the effectiveness of the high school's ability to support students and play the college game (Hubbard & Datnow, 2005; Stevens, 2009).

One of those resources is the high school college admissions counselor. Numerous researchers have determined that the high school college admissions counselor is a vital influence on a student's decision making process of whether to attend college and, if attending, the choice of which college to attend (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000;

McDonough, 1994; Paolini, 2019; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Given the changes in the college admissions process, one might expect significant increases in resources focused on improving college counseling and the relationship between high school college admissions counselors and students. However, data show that the nationwide student-to-counselor ratio in public schools has remained relatively stagnant over the past decade (Clinedinst, Koranteng, & Nicola, 2015). Additionally, college admission counseling is often one of numerous responsibilities of the school counselor. On average, school counselors only spend 30% of their time counseling students about post-secondary plans (Clinedinst et al., 2015).

Many counselors do not develop individual relationships with the students with whom they work. This is particularly detrimental to girls whose educational trajectories toward college attendance can be shaped more by their relationships with high school college admissions counselors than by their academic achievements (Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005). Girls are also more likely to reach out to high school college admissions counselors (Bryan et al., 2009; Cigrand, Havlik, Malott, & Jones, 2015) even if it involves circumventing the official school procedures and schedule (Zarate & Gallimore, 2005). However, little is known about the specific nature of conversations between high school college admissions counselors and female students and the effects of those conversations on the students.

Statement of the Problem

While the number of students aspiring to attend college is increasing (Legutko, 2008), efforts to understand the important role of the high school college admissions

counselor in students' college decision making has not matched the need (McDonough, 2005b). College counselors function as a source of support and social capital for students in the college admissions process and their success in supporting students correlates to the amount of time a counselor has to spend with a student (Bryan et al., 2011). Although much of the research suggests that the lack of time counselors can devote to students is a major impediment to college access (Clinedinst et al., 2015; Radford, Ifill, & Lew, 2016; Zinth, 2014), research has still not answered questions about the nature of student-counselor conversations.

Research suggests that the disposition of students and high school college admissions counselors may be important as they converse (Bryan et al., 2011). Bryan et al. (2011) stated that "future study, particularly that which is qualitative in design, may more fully explore the nature and disposition of students and counselors as they engage in the college application process" (p. 195). The same study concluded that studies of counselors do not "speak to the nature or quality of the interactions between counselors and students, including who initiated the contact and the length or quality of the contact" and that "future investigations should explore other dynamics of student-counselor interactions about college" (p. 197).

According to McDonough (2005b), high school college admissions counselors need to focus their efforts on the needs of specific groups of students, including female students. Bergerson, Heiselt, and Aiken-Wisniewski (2013) point out that "women's college choice decisions have not played a primary role in previous research exploring how students decide whether and where to enroll in higher education" (p. 205).

Furthermore, Bryan et al. (2009) acknowledge the “complex realities of college access counseling for different groups of students” (p. 289). Their study looked at the characteristics of students who seek assistance from high school college admissions counselors but did not explore the nature of those relationships. Thus, Bryan et al. (2009) stated that “future investigations that explore the nature and format of college advising/counseling with specific groups of students are warranted” (p. 289).

While Chapter Two will explain existing research findings in greater detail, it is important to understand the reasons for studying girls as a specific subgroup and what sets them apart from other groups. First and foremost, research demonstrates that relationships are important to girls. That includes both the importance of relationships as a source of social capital in the college decision making process (Bryan et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Riegle-Crumb, 2010) as well as the student-counselor relationship specifically. When girls meet with their high school college admissions counselor, studies have shown that the purpose of that conversation is important to girls’ future plans (Riegle-Crumb, 2010; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005), thus showing that understanding the dynamics of those conversations is an important field of study. In the college decision making process, research has continuously demonstrated over time that girls have specific reasons for both choosing to attend college as well as for selecting a particular college. Girls have also been shown to care more about the fit and feel of a college (Beck & Fleischer, 2005; Mansfield & Warwick, 2006; Sax, Arms, Woodruff, Riggers, & Eagan, 2009), especially on a college visit (Sax & Harper, 2007). Making connections to

a specific college is a resource that predominantly comes from the high school college admissions counselor.

Although numerous studies have been conducted which support the importance of the role of the high school college admissions counselor to any students' college decision making process, existing research supports the need to better understand the nature of the interactions between specific groups of students (Bryan et al., 2009), such as gender, and college counselors as well as the impact on gender, specifically girls, of the college admissions related programmatic offerings of school counselors. This study will answer the calls of Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, and Day-Vines to explore these interactions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the interactions between girls and their high school college admissions counselors and the resources and programmatic offerings of the college counseling office that girls experience. Using the three-phase model of college decision making described by Hossler and Gallgher (1987) as predisposition, search, and choice, the study aims to better understand what Bryan et al. (2009) refer to as the “nature and format of college advising” for high school girls and the ways in which they influence girls' college decision making (p. 289). Although all three phases of the college decision making process are important, most interactions between the student and counselor occur during the search phase (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989), thus this study focuses on this phase of college decision making.

Research Questions

This study aims to understand the interactions between girls and their high school college admissions counselors as the students participate in the college decision process. Research suggests that the role of the counselor is vital (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; McDonough, 1994; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), yet little is known about the specific role of the high school college admissions counselor in girls' college decision making. If the specific interactions between girls and high school college admissions counselors can be examined, then counselors can use this information to guide practice. Therefore, the following research questions addressed the purpose of the study.

1. How do girls describe their interactions with their high school college admissions counselor?
2. How do girls describe the support they received from the high school college counseling office?
3. What are girls' lived experiences of the college search process?

Significance

Although numerous studies have focused on the role of the counselor, this study adds to the literature by examining the specific influence that counselors have on girls. This will be significant to the literature on college counseling and will influence the role of the high school college admissions counselor. In particular, the results of this study may be a benefit as school districts need to ensure that students are best served by providing appropriate counselor resources. This study will add to the growing body of

literature which suggests that schools should increase the focus of counseling on assisting students with preparing and gaining admission to college. In particular, though, the significance of this study lies in its contribution to literature surrounding counseling and gender.

In addition to this study's contribution to existing literature, the intense focus on college education, access, and increase in competition for admission found in the media, politics, and communities suggests that this study has practical implications as well. In spite of the interest on college counseling and college attendance, the specific nature of the role of the high school college admissions counselor is neither understood nor assessed. McDonough (2005b) noted:

counseling is off the radar in virtually all accountability schemas. Helping students prepare for college or assisting students in enrolling in college is not written into any existing accountability system, any leadership performance evaluation, or any K-12 job description. Yet, most of the American public, journalists, and policymakers assume that adequate numbers and adequately trained high school counselors are doing this job. (p. 127)

Studying college guidance experiences among girls attending the same undergraduate institution will further add to the research because of the varying backgrounds of participants. Smyth and Hannan (2007) pointed out that college guidance is important, but the functions of guidance vary across schools. Thus, this study serves to examine patterns that could help explain the most appropriate functions of college guidance for female students.

Counselors will benefit from a more thorough understanding of the importance of the relationship with girls with whom they work. Research says that the role of gender is important in the counselor-student relationship and that the counselors' practice should be influenced by this understanding (Bryan et al., 2009). Specifically, Bryan et al. (2009) write that "school counselors must continue to ensure that their work with female and African American students is culturally responsive and inclusive of environmental and societal influences on students' college choices" (p. 289).

Although all three phases of that process are important, Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) specifically called for a more detailed examination of the search phase as part of a study on college decision making. Greater understanding of the search phase as one piece of the entire model will better allow practitioners to develop intervention strategies for girls (Hossler et al., 1989).

Finally, the activities of the college guidance office could improve with a deeper understanding of girls and their relationships to college counseling offerings. Research shows that the person-to-person relationship of the counselor and student is not the only relevant factor in college decision making, but rather, the resources and programs from the college guidance office are also of importance (Bryan et al., 2009). High school college admissions counselors are an important source of resources such as information about college rankings, admissions requirements, and connections to the traveling college admissions counselors (Bryan et al., 2009; McDonough, Lising, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). Closer attention to the needs of specific student groups, such as female students,

could help high school college admissions counselors provide better college programming and appropriate resources for students (Bryan et al., 2009).

Limitations

This study looks at a choice model for college matriculation as defined by Perna (2006), but also considers the competitive nature of college admissions in recent years. Therefore, the college used for this study may or may not be the first choice of the participants. In other words, their college decision may have been limited by factors of admission. Although not part of the criteria for selection in this study, each participant expressed an expectation that she would attend college, so it is worth noting that the participants may have had advantages over other students in the competitive college admissions process.

Some scholars may assume that conducting a qualitative study is inherently a limitation due to researcher bias, small sample size, and trustworthiness of subjects. One such potential limitation is that students who are interviewed may not answer the questions honestly or thoroughly. Additionally, participants will be asked to reflect on a past time in their lives; thus, the findings could be limited based on what participants are able to remember. This will be addressed through member checking. Another potential limitation, the role of the researcher, is addressed in Chapter Three.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to one college in the southeastern United States. Additionally, the study is delimited to female students attending the undergraduate college identified for this study. Because this study examined the experiences of girls of

different backgrounds attending the same undergraduate college, findings are delimited to female students and to a small, moderately-selective four-year college. The findings, therefore, may not be applicable to male students or students at different types of higher education. In addition, race and ethnicity were not factors in selecting participants, so findings cannot be generalized to understand college decision making for girls of one particular race or ethnic group

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, several terms will need to be defined in order to avoid confusion and establish an understanding of how these terms are used in the context of this study. They are as follows.

Admissions officer- The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) Code of Ethics and Professional Practices (2017) states that

Admission officers are professionals employed by or representing colleges. Their work may include some or all of the following: recruiting and counseling students about the transition to college; informing students about undergraduate admission requirements, programs, and other offerings and opportunities; reviewing and taking action on applications for admission or scholarships. (p. 11)

College decision-making process- a process defined in this study as a three-phase process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) including predisposition, search, and choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) define predisposition as a student's general inclination to attend college, which could have begun even in early childhood, search as the process of information

gathering and contemplating options, and choice as the final decision of which college to attend.

High school college admissions counselor- NACAC's Code of Ethics and Professional Practices (2017) defines counselors as "professionals who advise or counsel students about making the transition from secondary school to college" (p. 11). For the purposes of this study, the high school college admissions counselor is a professional at a secondary school level who may share responsibilities for college admissions counseling, personal counseling, or administrative responsibilities. Notably, the high school college admissions counselor may also have a background or licensure in personal counseling. The high school college admissions counselor may or may not have training or a background in counseling specific to college admissions.

Moderately selective college- defined as a four-year institution using an enrollment management model (Stevens, 2009) and extensive travel to attract applicants. The parameters of acceptance rate determining the selectivity of the institution are defined by the National Association for College Admissions Counselors (NACAC). These parameters will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

The preceding chapter presented an introduction to the topics of college counseling and the college decision making process for girls. In addition, this chapter explained the purpose of the study, research questions, the significance of the study, and limitations and delimitations of the study. The following dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter Two will present a review of pertinent literature, organized into

sections related to the relationship between the high school college admissions counselor and students and the resources and programmatic offerings provided to girls by the high school college admissions counselor or college counseling office. Chapter Three is comprised of a description of research methodology used in this study. Chapter Four will present an analysis of the data. Finally, Chapter Five will explain conclusions from the study, implications for policymakers and practitioners, and recommendations for future research.

The college decision-making process is complex for girls and lacks in-depth understanding. Furthermore, high school college admissions counselors often face a high counselor-to-student ratio and a lack of resources. When so many counselors are faced with the challenge of doing much with little, it is vital to understand how to best direct efforts and resources to help students. Thus, if high schools want their students to pursue higher education and colleges want to recruit a diverse entering class, with the knowledge that girls have specific needs in this process, it is important to understand the experiences of girls in the college decision making process. This study attempts to gain that in-depth understanding of both the counselor-student relationship and counselor-provided resources for girls from different high school contexts attending the same undergraduate institution.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of the study is to examine the interactions between girls and their college guidance counselors as well as girls' experiences with the resources and programmatic offerings of the college counseling office. To better understand the foundations of these interactions, an examination of existing literature was conducted. The literature reviewed includes research on girls' college decision making as well as the role of the college guidance counselor. This literature review begins with an explanation of the search process, followed by the conceptual framework used to guide the study. An overview of research on girls' social capital and influences that guide college decision making is then presented. This is followed by a review of literature related to the relationships formed by college counselors and the resources they provide the review concludes with an identification of gaps within the research that illustrate the need for continued research into the role of college guidance counselors in girls' college decision making.

Search Process

To complete a thorough review of the literature, an in-depth search process was conducted, primarily using web sources. Multiple searches of online databases provided by the University of Tennessee yielded most results. The primary database used was Google Scholar, via the UTK Library website, followed by ERIC. The search provided scholarly sources in various formats but was most focused on articles from peer-reviewed journals. Several search terms were used based on the three main areas covered in this

chapter. In addition, the reference list of the articles provided a helpful cache of information when searching for further sources.

Search terms used varied, depending on the three topics covered in this literature review. To examine personal influences on girls' decision-making process, *college choice* and *influences on college choice* were used. Another search on the same topic added *girls* to each search term. These separate searches yielded information on both the general college choice process as well as the specific nature of girls' search process.

Finally, a search of the resources in college admissions was focused on the search term *college admission(s)* and *college counseling* or *college guidance*. For this section, the reports from professional organizations were of particular use. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) produces yearly reports that provided data for this chapter as well as helpful footnotes.

Finally, a readings course taken in Summer 2015 entitled *Readings in Gender, Race, and College Decision Making* included four books for required reading which have proven invaluable, both in informing this study and in providing further sources.

Conceptual Framework

Although Perna's (2006) proposed model of college decision making serves as the framework for this study, her model is grounded in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) study, which is foundational to understanding the college decision making process of students. Perna's study focuses on influences in decision making, while Hossler and Gallagher's study focus on phases of a process. Thus, it is important to understand how a study

progresses through these phases of college decision prior to understanding how they might be influenced within each phase.

Hossler and Gallagher's results found three phases of choice which were predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition is defined as a student's general inclination to attend college, which can begin even in early childhood. Much of the research on predisposition shows that the earlier a student's family begins discussing college attendance, the more likely that student will attend college. In particular, the consistency of parental encouragement is also key (Kim, Mayes, Hines, & Bryan, 2017; Paolini, 2019; Radford et al., 2016); college attendance was most predictable in families where it was "taken for granted" that the child would attend college. However, as this chapter will explain, counselors and schools have a role in fostering predisposition, too.

During the search phase students gather information on college attendance in general as well as materials for specific institutions. During the search phases, they begin to contemplate their options, with choice as the final decision-making phase in which they decide whether or not to attend college and, if so, which college to attend. Not surprisingly, these phases are more relevant to the literature in this chapter on the role of high school college admissions counselors.

In a review of the literature on college choice, Hossler et al. (1989) found that econometric models, consumer models based on marketing theory, and sociological models predicated on college attendance as a vehicle for social advancement were prevalent in research on factors affecting choice. Hossler and Stage (1992) argued that such models "treat college choice as a single decision" (1992, p. 303) whereas combined

models include factors from both econometric and sociological models and treat the college decision process as one that is multi-phase or multi-step.

For that reason, Perna (2006) developed a proposed conceptual model for student college choice that is grounded in the idea of the three phases of predisposition, search, and choice, but combines econometric and sociological models. Perna's model operates on the notion that student's patterns of college choice are not the same, even within the three phases. Perna (2006) argues that

the model assumes that an individual's assessment of the benefits and costs of an investment in college is shaped by the individual's habitus, as well as the school and community context, the higher education context, and the social, economic, and policy context. (p. 101)

Perna's model is useful for considering the college choice of demographic groups. The use of this model is appropriate for a study of female college choice, given that their decisions are too complex for a model that does not encompass economic and sociological ideas (Beattie, 2002). Although more recent research in college choice is incorporating qualitative methods, quantitative methods dominated in older research that looked only at the three-phase model (Perna, 2006). Lastly, the model is appropriate for research that examines specific dimensions of student college choice (Perna, 2006), such as the role of college counselors. Figure 1 (Perna, 2006) shows the layered model and how each layer is nested within the other layers to ultimately influence the output: college choice.

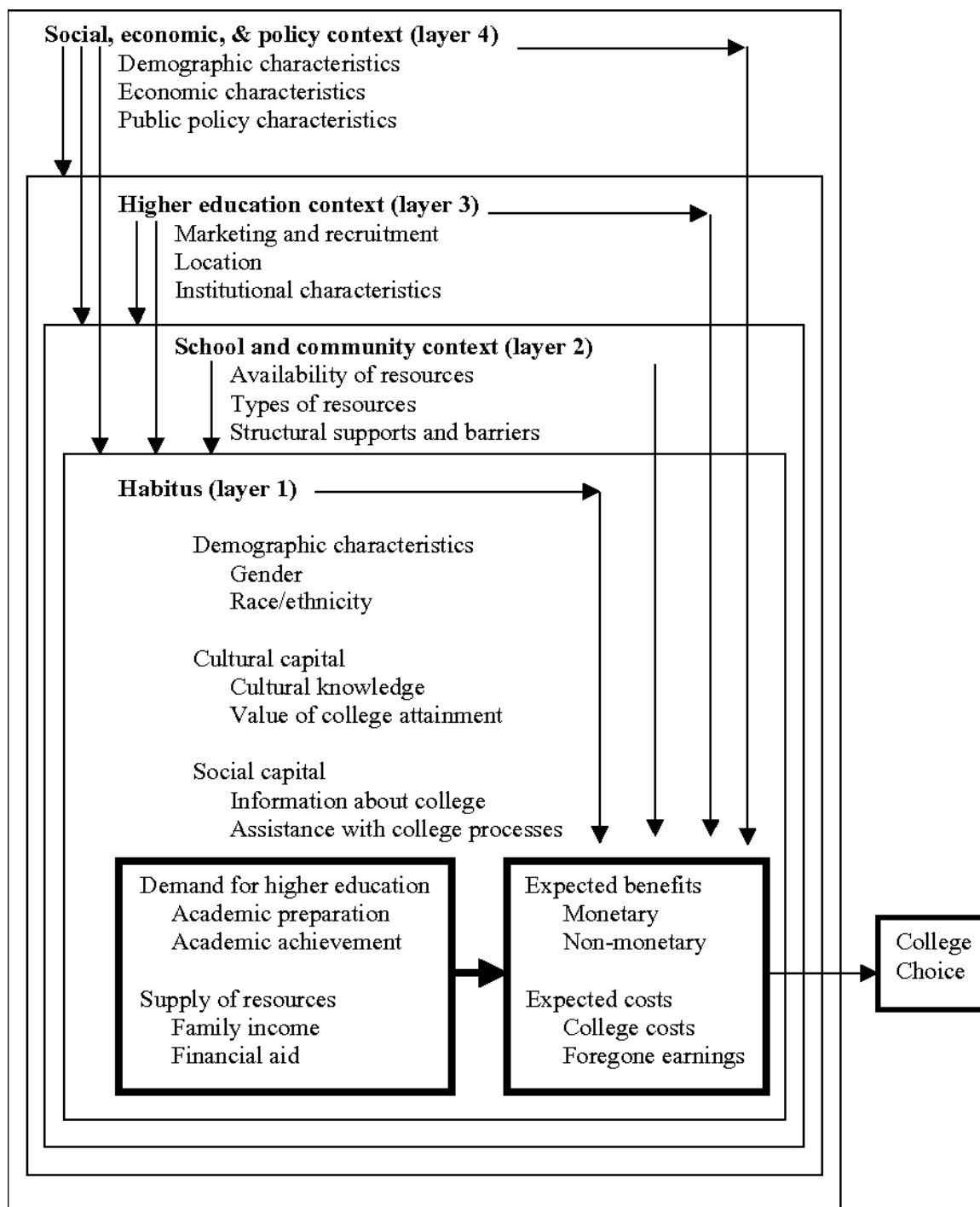


Figure 1. Reprinted from “Proposed conceptual model of student college choice”, by Perna, L.W, 2006, *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* p. 117. Copyright 2006 by Springer Nature.

The model uses four contextual layers which attempt to explain student college choice. Layer one involves student habitus, “or the system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual’s views and interpretations” (Perna, 2006, p. 115). This layer also includes economic decision-making factors. Those factors are supply of financial resources a student has, the social demand for educational achievement, and the expected cost-benefit of attending college. Layer one also considers student demographics, cultural capital, and social capital.

Built on top of layer one, layer two considers the school and community context. The support available at the high school level, the types of resources of the high school context, and the availability of those resources make up layer two. That context affects the students’ habitus and the cost-benefit analysis of attending college.

Layer three further builds on the others below and considers the context of higher education. This layer looks at the characteristics of the institution a student is considering, including location. In addition, marketing and recruitment efforts of the institution are in this layer. This review of the literature will demonstrate the importance of this layer, because of connections between the high school counselors and admissions recruiters. In this way, layer three affects the high school context of layer two, but this layer also affects student habitus and economic considerations of layer one.

Finally, layer four considers the social, economic, and policy contexts in which a student chooses a college. First, the layer includes any current public policies that might affect student choice, either in layer three (policies that may affect the post-secondary institution), layer two (policies that may affect the high school context), or in layer one

(policies that may affect habitus or cost-benefit analysis). Second, this layer uses economic characteristics of society which may affect any of all of these lower layers. Lastly, demographic characteristics are again part of level four, but for the larger society, rather than the individual making the choice.

Each of the higher layers incorporates elements of econometric choice models and sociological models. Moreover, each higher layer impacts the lower layers to influence habitus and, ultimately, student college choice. This has been shown in several previous research studies who have used Perna's conceptual model to explain student choice. For instance, a case study of 15 different high schools examined what information 9th and 11th students had about the college costs, financial aid, and admissions requirements. Moreover, this study examined how students gained this knowledge and found that families, the internet, and the high school context were all important sources of knowledge but varied dependent on the social and economic contexts of students' lives (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009).

Other studies have used Perna's framework outside the context of student college choice process during high school. For example, one study used data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to understand influences on college students' intent to study abroad (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). The study found that 1) a student's decision to study abroad mirrors the three phases of choice determined by Hossler and Gallagher and 2) Perna's framework of college choice also mirrored choice. In particular, the study underscored the importance of financial resources and social and cultural capital in a student's intent to study abroad.

Finally, Perna's framework has also been applied to student school choice at the graduate level. The researchers adapted the model slightly to better fit graduate school choice; for instance, including undergraduate major and GPA as a measure of cultural capital in layer 1 of the existing model (English & Umbach, 2016). The results maintain the importance of the layered model that includes both individual-level and school-level factors, albeit with different results given that students enhance their cultural and social capital at the college level.

Girls' College Decision Making Process

A review of the literature on girls' college decision making process reveals two distinct points. First, a girl's social capital is important to her decision to attend college. Second, girls have been shown to have specific reasons both for choosing to attend college and for choosing to attend a particular college.

Social Capital

Much of the research on college access and choice suggests that the social capital of girls has a great deal of impact on college aspiration and eventual matriculation (Hardie, 2015; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Smyth & Banks, 2012). As explained in the previous section, Perna's model of student college choice includes social capital as part of the first layer. Social capital includes both the knowledge of college processes and the support provided in the process. For girls, this social capital is found in relationships with others, both out of the school context and within school.

Riegle-Crumb (2010) looked at social capital within context of peer, parent, and counselor relationships. According to Riegle-Crumb (2010), "girls' potentially greater

access to the kinds of social capital that facilitate the transition to college as a key factor in the female postsecondary advantage beyond the more typically studied factors of academic performance and related attitudes and behaviors” (p. 589). Sandefur, Meieir, and Campbell’s (2006) study included out-of-school social capital measures, such as family relationships, in addition to in-school social capital, such as peer, teacher, and counselor relationships. Their study suggested that girls are more likely to attend college when they have higher levels of these social capital indicators. However, in contrast to other studies, their results showed that girls do not actually have the higher levels that could be beneficial.

In-school social capital. One advantage for girls’ decision to attend college has been found to be peer relationships (Radford et al., 2016). McDonough (1997) demonstrated that the influence of peers is, indeed, strong for girls. Girls who aspire to attend college, and those who eventually do, report having friends who are more academically-minded (Averett & Burton, 1996; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Having friend groups who are more focused on academics is significantly related to college matriculation (Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Even early on in planning for college attendance, girls rely heavily on the support and advice of peers; their expectations of attending college can change based on peer relationships as early as the transition from eighth to ninth grade (Andrew & Flashman, 2017).

In a study of Hispanic middle school females, social capital variables within the school context, specifically teacher and peer support, were found to have a positive impact on school engagement (Garcia-Reid, 2007). Although this study did not directly

measure college enrollment, the assumption the researchers made based on previous studies is that school engagement has a positive impact on student outcomes, including college attendance. Other studies echo this idea that the more girls are involved in school activities, thus building social capital, the higher their college aspirations are (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013).

Relationships with adults in the high school setting also positively affect college attendance. Girls gain social capital within the school by choosing to see the high school college admissions counselor (Bryan et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Seeking out the counselor as a resource was found to have a positive impact for both Hispanic and white girls, although the counselor was a more important source for Hispanic girls, given that the white students were more likely to have additional social capital resources outside of the school context (Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Even as early as ninth grade, females reported talking to teachers and counselors about college, which can positively impact their eventual matriculation (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). More recent research supports the idea that students talking about college earlier in high school has a positive association with college attendance (Gilfillan, 2017; Radford et al., 2016; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015).

Social capital of families. Across the board, research has found that parents are the number one personal influence on students in the college decision making process. In particular, though, research has also found that the social capital of families is a key part of a girl's college decision or even her goal of attending. The frequency of discussing college attendance with parents positively influences girls' educational aspirations (Stage

& Hossler, 1989). More importantly, girls are focused on the advice (Galotti & Mark, 1994; Perez & McDonough, 2008) and emotional support they receive from family, and parents in particular (Kim et al., 2017; Radford et al., 2016). Although the educational attainment of parents is often a key determinant of a child's college attendance (Averett & Burton, 1996; Kleinjans, 2010; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011) when parents lack knowledge of the college application process, the chance of attendance increases for girls with moral support from parents (Ceja, 2006).

Specifically, girls tend to rely on moral support from their parents (Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchins, & Byun, 2014), but more specifically, the role of the mother is key for girls (Smyth & Banks, 2012). Previous studies noted that greater parental education can positively impact students' aspirations; Kleinjans (2010) found that the link is stronger between mothers and daughters. Although Fiebig and Beauregard (2011) study did not find a significant link between mother's education and daughter's aspiration, they did find that others' nontraditional views on gender roles can positively impact girls' aspirations. When it comes to the college process, girls report feeling supported through other means of assistance as a replacement for parental knowledge (Ceja, 2006).

Siblings have also been found to play a major role in both choice and support of the college decision process. In a study of parents and siblings as sources of information for Chicana girls, Ceja (2006) found that having an older sibling attending college was a determining factor for many young women. Although an older college-going sibling did not mitigate the barrier of parents lacking knowledge, the study found older siblings

served as both protective agents to the younger siblings as well as an information source on topics such as the college process, potential majors, and career aspirations. Because young women are more likely to rely on emotional support through the college process, having an older sibling serve as a role model and a source of guidance is crucial; girls without a sibling report feeling a greater sense of pressure and of being alone in the process (Ceja, 2006).

Factors in choosing to attend college

When considering their reasons for attending college, girls primarily list educational reasons, but interestingly, they also express more anxiety about whether their academic credentials qualify them for college admission. Girls report a sense of being overwhelmed prior to college (Sax & Harper, 2007) and express worry about having the required qualifications for admissions (Moogan & Baron, 2003).

In spite of those concerns, girls primarily choose to attend college for educational purposes (Beattie, 2002; Sax et al., 2009; Sax & Harper, 2007). In one study of girls attending independent and Catholic high schools, girls across each school type said that *to learn more about things that interest me* was the most important reason for attending college, followed by wanting to gain a general education and preparing for graduate school (Sax et al., 2009).

Other research, though, has suggested that there is difference between academic and intellectual factors. Stordahl (1970) argued that girls are more likely to be influenced by intellectual considerations, rather than academic, meaning that a choice of major (an academic concern) would be less likely to concern girls, but that the perceived

opportunities for scholarly discussion with peers would be a factor in choosing to attend college. The study also found that higher achieving women were more likely to have practical concerns (Stordahl, 1970). For instance, women studying closer to home would be more influenced by commute to see family or cost of attendance.

When considering academics versus financial outcomes, girls still choose to attend college for educational reasons, rather than the prospect of earning potential with a college degree (Beattie, 2002). The research of Sax et al. (2009) supports these findings with academic-related reasons listed as the three most important reasons on average for girls, followed by *to be able to get a better job* and *to get training for a specific career* as the third and fourth most important reasons, respectively. The opportunity to make more money in the future was, on average, only the sixth most important reason girls chose to attend college.

Factors in choosing a particular college

Given that girls prioritize educational achievement in making the decision to attend college, it is not surprising that they also prioritize academics when making the decision of which college to attend. Research shows that females consider academic factors of a college first when choosing a school (Moogan & Baron, 2003). Academic factors are most often the availability and/or strength of a particular program of study as well as an institution's academic reputation (Sax & Harper, 2007).

Studies that have asked students to assign importance to a variety of factors resulted in interesting findings about girls' overall weighing of college characteristics. One study compared gender differences in choosing a college by surveying high school

seniors at ten different high schools, both rural and urban, in a midwestern state. The study resulted in the following rank order of criteria that girls considered: program of study, safe campus, financial aid/scholarships, cost of attending, job placement after graduation, facilities, academic reputation, housing available, part-time jobs available, attractive campus, social life, size of city/town (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). A study of high school seniors at private, religiously affiliated high schools also compared gender differences in choosing a college and resulted in the following rank order of criteria girls considered: academics, friendly atmosphere, financial aid, scholarships, tuition, degrees available, security/safety, religious atmosphere, friends, reputation of degree, professors, location, reputation of school, social activity, weather, size, cultural diversity, prospects for marriage, athletics (Mansfield & Warwick, 2006).

An earlier study of high school seniors by Galotti and Mark (1994) found that girls more consistently rated the following factors as important in their decision: admissions process, off-campus study programs, academic calendar, racial/ethnic diversity, character and size of the student body, quality of the residence halls, diversity of residential options, social atmosphere, location" (including geographic location, urban/rural setting, and distance from a major city), and on-campus cultural events. Although these were not listed in rank order in the study, it is clear that many of the same factors for making the college choice are important to girls. In another early study, a survey was administered to entering college freshmen was studied by gender, also asking students to rate the importance of a variety of factors influencing their decision to attend a particular school. The following is the rank order of factors that girls rated: academic

reputation, quality of academic programs, cost, faculty reputation, friendliness of school, financial aid, institutional prestige, size, extracurricular activity, campus beauty, familiarity with the school, distance from home, family preference, athletic programs, friend's preference (Johnson et al., 1991).

Although many studies have focused on breaking down differences between genders, some research has been conducted solely with female participants. A nationwide study of alumnae of all-girls high schools asked them which criteria they used in making a college choice. The following are the factors that influenced them in order of most frequently cited to least: academic reputation, overall reputation, location, size of student body, social climate, recommendation by family, recommended by counselor, school strength in a particular area, and financial considerations (Beck & Fleischer, 2005).

Table 1 compares the studies in this section which resulted in a list of factors that females ranked in terms of relative importance. Although no study gave the participants the exact same set of factors from which to choose, this table shows that several themes emerged which have remained unchanged in past decades. First, academic reputation continues to be among the most important concerns. Financial considerations also consistently rank among the top concerns.

In addition to academic and financial concerns, these studies show that girls focus on the feel and atmosphere of an institution when making a decision to attend a certain school. Visiting the campus was an important factor in selecting a particular school, which suggests that girls are concerned about setting and need to get a feel for the

Table 1. A comparison of studies which asked female students to rank factors of importance in making their choice of a particular college

(Sax et al., 2009)	(Mansfield & Warwick, 2006)	Beck & Fleischer, 2005)	(Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000)	(Johnson et al., 1991)
Academic reputation	Academics	Academic reputation	Program of study	Academic reputation
Campus visit	Friendly Atmosphere	Overall reputation	Safe campus	Quality of Program
School size	Financial Aid	Location	Financial aid/scholarships	Costs
Graduates go to top graduate schools	Scholarships	Size of student body	Cost	Faculty Reputation
Offered early admission	Tuition	Social climate	Job Placement after graduation	Friendliness of School
	Degrees Available	Recommended by family member	Facilities quality	Financial Aid Offered
	Security/safety	Recommended by academic counselor	Academic reputation	Prestige
	Religious Atmosphere	School strength in particular area	Housing availability	Size
	Friends	Financial considerations	Part-time job opportunities	Extracurricular Activity
	Reputation of Degree		Attractive campus	Campus Beauty
	Professors		Social life	Familiarity With School
	Location		College/City/Town size	Distance From Home
	Reputation of School		Average class size	Family Preference
	Social activity		Geographic location	Athletic Program
	Weather		Friends attend	Friend's Preference
	Size		Athletic programs	
	Cultural Diversity			
Prospects for Marriage				
Athletics				

campus before making a decision (Sax & Harper, 2007). Their emphasis on atmosphere may also explain why females are more worried about getting used to university life (Moogan & Baron, 2003). What is also interesting to note is that girls place overall importance on most choice criteria. In surveys using a Likert scale, females rate the available criteria on the higher end of the scale, suggesting that girls place tremendous weight on the college decision (Johnson et al., 1991; Mansfield & Warwick, 2006). For example, in Mansfield and Warwick (2006) study the 19 factors provided to participants, the girls in the study only gave one criterion an average rating below 3.0 on a five-point Likert scale. In a study by Johnson et al. (1991), the girls in the study gave an average rating of below 3.0 on a five-point scale to only three of fifteen factors provided. Other research suggests that female students are more likely to spend time searching for and considering college information (Moogan & Baron, 2003), which supports the idea that girls place more weight on the college decision.

College Counseling and the Role of Counselors

Regardless of the gender of students, counselors are important to student college decision making. The research in the following section demonstrates the importance of the relational and resource-oriented aspects of counselor work for all students.

A comprehensive report and analysis by the Lumina Foundation for Education (Kinzie et al., 2004) of the college admissions process, from both the high school, college admissions officer, and student and family viewpoints provides insight into this complex and evolving part of education. The report generally supports that, over the fifty years under review, the college admissions processed in the United States has been

transformed. Numerous studies support the notion of transformation (Heller, 1997; Kinzie et al., 2004; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001), as well as a more startling characterization of college admissions as a “game” to be played (Kinzie et al., 2004; McDonough et al., 1998; Meredith, 2004). That game did not exist fifty years ago, according to the Lumina Foundation report, but then again, neither did the level of access that exists today. This is complicated by the fact that counseling programs and resources can vary tremendously depending on the school characteristics and state policies (Perna et al., 2008). Thus, one of the clear conclusions of the report is the need for clarity of the process and an increase in resources to support students at the high school level.

Research indicates the importance of counselors as a source of information on college admissions. As plans for educational attainment increasingly involve applying to a four-year institution (Legutko, 2008), the role of counselors is even more important (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Page, Avery, & Howell, 2014). Counselors are often the most influential source for the student outside of the family context (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007). This influence can affect not only the student’s choice but can have an impact on the access to college resources and eventual matriculation. Much research on college access suggests that socioeconomic status (SES) is the main determinant of a student’s chances of college attendance, but research also suggests that school-based practices and a college-going culture of a school can mitigate the effects of low SES on students opportunity to apply to and ultimately attend college (Belasco, 2013; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Royster et al., 2015).

An overarching theme of the research on the role of college counselors is that the nature of the work varies by high school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2008; Clinedinst et al., 2013; Clinedinst et al., 2015; Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; Hawkins & Lautz, 2005; D. H. Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2005a). Perhaps not surprisingly, schools with higher SES student populations have more counselors- and counseling resources- at their disposal (Hannon, 2016; Lee, Weis, Liu, & Kang, 2017) and are, therefore, able to devote more of their time and energy to college counseling activities.

Counselors serve as important sources of information and resources. During the search phase through the final choice of institution, in-school sources, such as counselors, teachers, and peers become the predominant sources of information (Ceja, 2006). As students mature in high school, they naturally start to move away from parents as a source of information and are more likely to consider the advice of those outside the family context (Hossler et al., 1999). When it comes to financial aid information, in particular, students say that in-school resources like counselors are the primary means of finding information (Rosa, 2006). The varying degrees of success in counseling are a primary function of the extent to which counselors develop relationships with students and the resources they are able to provide.

Counselor-Student Relationships

The following section will demonstrate that the relationship between students and counselors is critical to students' college attendance. First, the time counselors have to devote to counseling is discussed. The time they have is largely governed by the ratio of

counselors to students and the overall school size. Furthermore, research shows that the particular nuances of the interactions are important to college decisions.

Counselors Responsibilities

The time counselors have available to meet with students is a major barrier to building relationships with students, which includes the numerous other duties their jobs entail (MacAllum et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2018; Radford et al., 2016; Zinth, 2014).

Counseling duties vary across schools (Smyth & Hannan, 2007); the specific characteristics of the high school generally determine the extent to which counselors can focus on building relationships with students as opposed to performing other duties (Corwin et al., 2004; Zinth, 2014).

Girls are among the most likely groups to attempt to seek out the counselor (Bryan et al., 2009). Girls are also among the most likely groups to have conversations with counselors that are specifically about college planning (Riegle-Crumb, 2010). However, this does not guarantee that the counselor actually has time available for such eager young women.

Overwhelmingly, research shows that counselors are tasked with a variety of responsibilities, including paperwork, hall monitoring (Cooper & Liou, 2007), student record keeping and course scheduling (Burnham & Jackson, 2000) which may prevent them from dedicating time to counseling students on post-secondary school planning (Gilfillan, 2017; Ilic & Rosenbaum, 2019; O'Connor, 2018; Zinth, 2014). One study which asked school counselors to self-report their daily activities and the percentage of time they spent on each found that counselors spent as much as 50% of their time on

administrative or clerical tasks (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). The same study argued that frequently performed tasks, such as testing coordination, are not supported by dominant models of school counseling. In addition, the study suggested that clerical and administrative tasks should be handled by assistants, which few counselors have in their office structure (Burnham & Jackson, 2000).

Parsad et al. (2003) compared the foci of counseling offices from 1984 to 2002 and found that, in 2002, only 26% of counseling staffs said that the primary goal of their office was to help students prepare for college admission. Instead, counselors “tend to focus their time and energies on either the highest achieving students or the most disruptive students” (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009, p. 300). Ilic and Rosenbaum (2019) assert that the role of counseling has changed from that of a gatekeeper to promoting college for all. The downside, they argue, is that in an era of more open college admissions, many counselors are assuming that all doors are open instead of advising students on particular concerns. Thus, counselors not only feel like they do not have the time to devote to counseling, but now feel more inclined not to mitigate that issue.

In public high schools in 2002, only 43% of counseling offices devoted at least 20% of their work time to counseling students in the college process, even though the same research shows that time spent on college counseling is positively related to attendance (Parsad et al., 2003). More recent data supports this finding. A 2015 survey of college counselors nationwide discovered that counselors spent only about 22% of time on college planning at public schools, while at private schools, counselors spent 55% of

their time on college planning (Clinedinst et al., 2015). That is a decrease for public schools, whose counselors spent 23% of their time on college planning in 2013, but an increase for private schools, whose counselors spent 53% of their time on college planning (Clinedinst et al., 2013).

Counselor-Student Ratios

Numerous studies document the importance of a low counselor to student ratio in college matriculation and also argue that high counselor to student ratios, which are most common, are a detriment to student-counselor relationships (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Gilfillan, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; Royster et al., 2015).

The ability to meet with students on a one-on-one basis is critical to student's path to higher education. Without one-on-one counseling, students are hindered in making informed decisions about college planning (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010). In a study that examined the college counseling practices of charter schools, Farmer-Hinton and McCullough (2008) found that having one-on-one opportunities for counselors and students led to greater success in college matriculation, in spite of the fact that the counselors were not trained to develop a model for college counseling in these burgeoning schools.

The literature shows that having a smaller student-counselor ratio has numerous benefits. Students are more likely to seek out a counselor when the ratio is smaller (Bryan et al., 2009). Also, a more modest counselor-student ratio has a positive effect on the students' decision to broaden their college options (Bryan et al., 2011). Having more counselors or a smaller ratio also helps, to an extent, solve some of the problems

previously mentioned of counselors being mired in other non-counseling related tasks (Bryan et al., 2011). Corwin et al. (2004) note that

the implications of the dramatic number of students assigned to each counselor are significant. When counselors work with insurmountable caseloads, they are simply not as effective in providing students with adequate and appropriate information. This, in turn, negatively affects the support that students obtain at school. (p. 447)

Yet, in spite of the evidence to support a low, or even more reasonable, counselor-student ratio, counselors are frequently overwhelmed with large student caseloads. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 1:250 (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Some argue that that number is even too many to manage (Cohen, 2006). Reports vary on the actual average counselor-student ratio. A 2007 California Educational Opportunity Report (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009) states that 1:229 is the national average. More recently, the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) has said that the ratio is as high as 1:476 (Clinedinst et al., 2015). However, that data includes counseling staff for K-12 schools. Survey data from 2013 show that the secondary school ratio is 1:278 (Clinedinst et al., 2013). However, given the suggestion that college planning should begin prior to ninth grade, the inclusion of K-8 grades in the ratio still bears relevance.

This issue of the counselor-student ratio is yet another issue that is site specific. For example, a heavily populated state like California has a ratio that is more than double the recommended number, with the average school having a 1:556 counselor-student

ratio (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). In one particular example, a school's ratio was 1:725 and of the eight counselors on staff, only one was specifically devoted to the school's post-secondary planning counseling program (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Yet, at one example of a private California school, the counselor-student ratio is only 1:90 (Cohen, 2006). NACAC's data supports this distinction. Only 30% of public schools report that they have at least one counselor whose sole job is college planning, as opposed to the 73% of private schools who employ a college counselor (Clinedinst et al., 2015).

One element of the counselor-student ratio problem is the size of the school population. In a qualitative study of twelve high schools in California, Corwin et al. (2004) learned that the size of the school was a factor in matriculation to college. Regardless of the counselor-student ratio, students in high schools with larger populations are less likely to have contact with the college counselor (Bryan et al., 2009).

Interactions Between Students and Counselors

It is clear from the literature that contact with the counselor is important. For instance, contact with the counselor prior to the tenth grade appears to give students an overall advantage in the college application process and, even after tenth grade still has a positive impact (Bryan et al., 2011). In particular, the nature of that contact is important. Three factors are critical to the interactions between students and counselors: the counselor expectations for the student, the purpose of the conversation between the student and counselor, and the focus of the counselor on being caring, especially as it relates to mattering, a desire to get to know the student, and the focus on college fit.

Finally, research also shows that the quality of the student-institution relationship can impact the relationships the student has with the counselor.

Counselor expectations for students. While some research argues that predisposition is primarily a function of family expectations for students (Conklin & Dailey, 1981), more recent research suggests that schools and counselors can actually foster predisposition to attend college (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). The disparity in counselor expectations for students, though, can be a major roadblock to actual college matriculation. For instance, in one study that asked ninth graders about their college plans and counselor relationships, 90% of the students said that they felt that their counselor hoped for them to attend college but only 28% said their counselors believed the students actually would attend (Cooper & Liou, 2007). These perceptions have a marked impact on a students' decision to seek out college information from a counselor. In a study of 12th graders using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, Bryan et al. (2009) found that:

In each case, students who believed that the counselor had any other expectation for them other than college were less likely to report student-counselor contact for college information. More precisely, students who reported that they did not know what counselors expected of them , that the counselor expected them to get a full-time job, acquire an apprenticeship, or go into the military , that the counselor expected them to do whatever they wanted , or that the counselor did not care what they did after high school were all less likely to see the counselor for college

information relative to students who believed the counselor expected them to attend college after high school. (p. 287)

This appears to be the case across all SES levels, according to this study. Even when students simply were not sure of the counselors' expectations for students, students across SES levels did not have student-counselor contact as frequently when they thought the counselor was neutral on college expectations (Bryan et al., 2009).

For girls, research is mixed on the effects of low expectations of the counselor. Qualitative data in one study reflects girls' sentiments that low expectations led to apathy or loss of hope about college planning (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003). In yet another study, girls from a lower SES background seemed to have responded to low expectations by working harder or using other forms of social capital as a means of launching their post-secondary plans (Smyth & Banks, 2012).

Purpose of counselor conversations. When students do seek out the counselor, the purpose of that conversation is also important. Both students and counselors report that conversations earlier in high school are more likely to be about course scheduling or placement (Cooper & Liou, 2007) even though early college discussion is recommended (MacAllum et al., 2007). Often resources are not distributed equally in schools, meaning that counselors often find themselves spending more time either with the highest performing students or the most disruptive students, leaving students in the middle to be more likely to have conversations about course placement rather than college (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009).

Often, though, students lack knowledge about course placement and the appropriate classes for college admission (Corwin et al., 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). This chapter has shown that counselors often become bogged down in the responsibilities of course selection and discipline, among other tasks. Research shows that the opportunity for students to have conversations about appropriate course selection and college advice is important.

This is especially true for girls. A study comparing females of the same background who attended college versus those who did not found that 91% of the students who eventually attended college spoke with the counselor about taking the right courses for college eligibility versus only 57% of the students who did not attend college (Zarate & Gallimore, 2005). Additionally, 95% of the college-attending females sought advice from the counselor, versus 57% of those who did not attend college (Zarate & Gallimore, 2005). One study that found girls have greater access to social capital through relationships with counselors looked specifically at the following as measures of interacting with high school counselors: frequency of discussing educational plans with counselors in the last year; frequency of discussions about choosing a college; frequency of discussing college applications; frequency of discussing financial aid; and whether counselors encouraged the student to go to college (Riegle-Crumb, 2010). This study found that not only did girls have more college-specific conversations with counselors than boys did, but that even among the girls, the females who had college-specific conversations were more likely to attend college.

Caring student-counselor relationships. Research demonstrates that a student-counselor relationship in which the counselor has gotten to know the student as an individual and exhibits a caring attitude is important (Gilfillan, 2017; Royster et al., 2015; Zinth, 2014). Differences in the extent to which this occurs are site specific, depending on the set up of the counseling program (Radford et al., 2016). For instance, in some charter schools, mentoring and programming that included more time for one-on-one relationships has shown some success in increasing college attendance (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). Lack of one-on-one counseling implies an inability to form this type of relationship (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010). Establishing a one-on-one relationship, however, helps students better analyze college options and choices (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). A student's ability to form a relationship with individuals who can influence college attendance, such as counselors, increases college enrollment (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; MacAllum et al., 2007).

Establishing relationships early can help students achieve success in college admissions planning. In one study of ninth graders, 90% surveyed reported that they did not have a strong relationships with the counselor even by the spring semester of their freshmen year (Cooper & Liou, 2007) in spite of research that shows the importance of beginning the college counseling process earlier (MacAllum et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001). However, counselors end up spending more of their time with 11th and 12th graders (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Corwin et al., 2004).

Too often, students have the perception that counselors do not care and they perceive a lack of relationship as a lack of support for college attendance (Alon, 2009;

Corwin et al., 2004). Students want to form counselor relationships and to get college information, but they also frequently do not have counselor relationships and report them as being unhelpful (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006). Even when students ultimately do not attend college, those who developed relationships with their counselors describe them as helpful and, even when counselors have made mistakes, expressed understanding and appreciation of the relationship (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). McDonough and Calderone (2006) studied the perceptions of college costs in choice and found that students' perceived trustworthiness of counselors partly determined the deliberation process of deciding to attend.

The concept of mattering is a particularly relevant area of the counseling field and connects to the importance of the caring student-counselor relationships. Although there are many dimensions to mattering, generally, mattering is seen as the need to feel important to others (Rayle, 2006b). Mattering is important in any counseling relationship and can lead to greater outcomes towards the goal of the counseling relationship as well as increased trust with the counselor (Rayle, 2006b). When counselors use the concept of mattering intentionally in their work with students, students can see benefits in greater academic achievement (Dixon & Tucker, 2008). One study noted that high school college admissions counselors' use of mattering in their work could have benefits to students when they eventually matriculate to college (Rayle & Chung, 2007).

A study by Rayle (2006b) concluded that the relationship with a counselor could benefit from specific efforts related to mattering and found that the use of mattering in that relationship is mutually beneficial. Although the study was completed with

counselors engaged in interpersonal counseling, the results of the study still indicated that the results could apply in any counseling setting. For example, counselors should explicitly demonstrate mattering and that one's feeling of mattering to the counselor encourages repeat visits. The idea that mattering is mutually beneficial in a counseling relationship also extends to counselors in schools. School counselors experience of mattering increased when they feel that their work contributes to student success (Curry & Bickmore, 2012). They also feel greater job satisfaction when they are able to make a difference with students (Rayle, 2006a). This research shows that mattering in a counseling relationship benefits not only the student, but creates a positive cycle of caring student-counselor relationships.

Developing caring student-counselor relationships has benefits for girls in particular. Riegle-Crumb notes that girls' "greater willingness to seek out or engage in interpersonal contact with significant others may therefore be a key to their academic success (2010, p. 576). Generally, girls who have developed relationships with adults in their school report that they have a greater sense of confidence in their abilities (Archard, 2013a). In comparing girls who attended college versus those who did not, Zarate and Gallimore (2005) found that girls who attended college were more comfortable with, more likely to visit, and had a better overall relationship with the counselor than girls who did not ultimately attend college.

The concept of mattering is also especially relevant to girls. Girls' feelings of mattering benefits both their general wellness and the health of their interpersonal relationships. Although mattering is important to boys' wellbeing also, research has

shown particular ways that mattering differs for females. First and foremost, research has shown consistently over time that females perceive feelings of mattering more than boys do (Rayle, 2005; Rayle & Chung, 2007). Across different age groups, females report greater perceptions of mattering (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009). Additionally, girls report greater perceptions of mattering across different relationships (Marshall, 2001). In relation to institutions, girls also perceive that they matter to their school more than boys do (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Interestingly, though, girls also perceive greater academic pressure and stress (Rayle & Chung, 2007) which suggests that the perception of mattering in a counseling relationship can mitigate some of the effects of negative feelings and benefit girls' overall wellness and achievement.

When students and counselors form caring relationships, counselors are better able to know a student's personality and preferences, thereby allowing a focus on institutional fit. Counselors have identified institutional fit as "a function of matching the students' academic, financial, and sociocultural needs with the academic institution" (MacAllum et al., 2007, p. 13). Developing a relationship between students and counselors allows counselors to direct students to look at institutions which may fit desired criteria (Dale & Krueger, 2002). Although they recognize cost as the primary barrier for students, a report on counselors suggests that counselors feel their largest challenge is finding a good institutional fit for a student (MacAllum et al., 2007). Knowing a student is also important because colleges use counselor recommendations in making admissions decisions (Dale & Krueger, 2002).

Several aforementioned studies have shown the emphasis girls place on fit when deciding to attend a particular college (Beck & Fleischer, 2005; Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Johnson et al., 1991; Mansfield & Warwick, 2006; Sax et al., 2009). Those studies showed that girls were most concerned about academics of a school, financial opportunities, and campus atmosphere. Yet another study indicated that girls are concerned about being able to fit in and become accustomed to university life (Moogan & Baron, 2003). Therefore, the studies by MacAllum (2007) and Dale and Krueger (2002) reflect the research on girls' desire to find an appropriate fit for college.

Student-Institution Relationships. As this chapter has shown, the high school context is important to students' college decision making process and to the student-counselor relationship. However, the relationship that the student has with the institution is also relevant, given the impact the student-institution relationship has on the relationship within the context of the school. Many students connect the relational quality they have with the institution to the relationships they have with people in the school community (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Yang, Alessandri, & Kinsey, 2008). The context of the school, including the demographics and organizational structure can affect the relational quality of the student-institution relationships (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). Holland (2015) found that the high school context affects the relational quality that a student has with the high school college admissions counselors specifically. The quality of the student-institution relationship as it relates to college counseling should include a strong college-going culture in order for students to achieve college matriculation (Belasco, 2013; Holland, 2015; Robinson & Roksa, 2016)

Trust plays an important role in the student-institution relationship, as it is intertwined with satisfaction with the relationships students have within the institution (Huang, 2001). One study found that trust in the personnel of the institution led to greater trust in the institution as a whole, but also demonstrated that the relationship between student trust in personnel and student-institutional trust was intertwined (Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota, 2010). In particular, the study found that specific behaviors of the institution's staff connected to greater student-institution trust, such as benevolence to the student from the staff, being helpful with student problems, and considering the needs of the students above the needs of the institution. Although that study was conducted in a higher education context, additional research supports this idea at the secondary level as well, finding that students' trust in teachers and staff led to greater academic engagement and a better overall relational quality with the high school (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011).

Counselors as a Resource for Students

To understand the importance of counselors as a resource of information, one must consider the evolution of the admissions process from both the high school and college sides. The advent of college rankings systems, such as those from *US News and World Report* as well as the proliferation of guides to college, such as *Fiske Guide to College* and guides from *The Princeton Review*, has perpetuated a stratification system of higher education that was, at best, informal in decades past (McDonough et al., 1998). This has created a sense of competition among colleges for students and status. For high

schools, at least the ones who can endeavor to support college-bound seniors, this game has created a clamor for college acceptances among students and high school counselors.

However, it is also important to understand the changing perspectives of students within this structure. First-generation, lower SES, and minority students are increasingly reporting college aspirations. A study of students in rural Pennsylvania followed up with a similar sample from the same study ten years prior and found that more students were planning to attend college, regardless of their parents' educational attainment (Legutko, 2008). The findings suggest that more middle-class families are planning for their children to attend college because they believe higher education is a vehicle for upward social mobility. On the other end of the spectrum, studies of high SES students and their families also support the assumption that college affects social standing, in particular, attending a selective college. McDonough (1994) writes,

Many upper-middle-class parents and students are cued in to attending the "right college," and believe that the best investment in college will come from an acceptance at a well-known, elite institution. Parents are aware that going to a selective college increases one's social standing, contacts, and income potential.

This knowledge, however tacit, is a bone-chilling wind blowing through suburbia where the dread of downward mobility is very real. (p. 433)

Thus, the importance of college counseling resources must be understood across all SES levels. College counseling resources can be categorized into three different functions: college information, connections to admissions counselors, and college counseling training.

College Information

A report from the Lumina Foundation looked at fifty years of changes within the college admissions and student decision making process. Their prevailing assessment that college admissions has become a game families and students must play (Kinzie et al., 2004) is not, by any means, the only writing to use this analogy. McDonough (1994) suggests “college admissions has become a complex, high-stakes game” (p. 427), and Meredith’s (2004) research into the aforementioned *US News and World Report* college report names that competition a rankings game. The ability to understand and explain various rankings can be a resource of high school counselors (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough et al., 1998) and students may be uninformed about the meaning of rankings (Meredith, 2004). A study that asked students about the extent to which they valued college rankings found that those who placed a high importance on rankings also valued the advice of their high school counselors more than those who did not read the college rankings (McDonough et al., 1998).

At the high school level, Harker’s (2000) research has found that higher SES students have better outcomes, which he attributes to the idea that families have known how to play the game of education long before higher education entered into the picture. Rather, they have a head start in this admissions game, when it comes to resources at the secondary school level and general college process knowledge. Conversely, lower SES students actually need more resources to succeed and need those resources and guidance at a much earlier age in order to aspire to and eventually attend college (Terenzini et al., 2001).

Thus, an important resource that high schools can provide to students in this process is information, which is primarily found through the high school counselor. At the school level, high school counselors are the most important source of college information for high school students (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Ilic & Rosenbaum, 2019; Royster et al., 2015), because they serve as a resource for information about a college's academic offerings, reputation, and admissions requirements, among other criteria (Paolini, 2019).

Counselors are also an important source of various digital resources related to the college application process (Paolini, 2019). Digital resources are important to the college search process and understanding the application and matriculation process, but the access students have to these resources is varied (Zinth, 2014). Students who attend high schools with a culture of promoting college attendance have already shown to have higher levels of college attendance (Bryan et al., 2017), but in addition, these high schools also tend to have greater access to digital resources for college planning (Paolini, 2019). Aside from students searching college websites, digital resources from counselors typically fall into one of two categories: general information about the college application process (Zinth, 2014) or information specific to a student's interests, potential for admittance to schools, and the individual applications (Okerson, 2016; Paolini, 2019).

Counselors play an important role in helping students plan for which courses to take to meet college eligibility requirements or to be more desirable candidates in the admissions process (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). For students whose parents did not attend college, counselors help take the place of parents in giving students information

about admissions requirements (Ceja, 2006). Without solid college counseling in place, many students may miss information about which courses to take in order to meet certain eligibility requirements at colleges (Corwin et al., 2004). Unfortunately, lower SES students are tracked according to perceived ability long before they would be entering the search phase (Bettie, 2014). A lack of financial and personnel resources in the high school setting is a key reason students are put into tracks and therefore stratified according to their potential as college bound students (Royster et al., 2015). Latina women and first generation college students in particular may be placed in tracks that do not give them access to Advanced Placement or other college preparatory courses (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009).

On the other hand, schools with higher SES populations are often able to provide more resources like a college preparatory curriculum (Alon, 2009). The use of AP classes and test results in admissions decisions is increasing, and is especially prevalent at selective colleges and is thus, more likely to advantage students from more selective high schools with more resources (Geiser & Santelices, 2004).

College information from counselors also takes the form of help with the application process itself. Counselors also provide assistance in the application process by helping students with fee waiver applications for standardized tests and college applications (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Students applying to college often report having difficulty getting the appropriate help sorting through application materials (Corwin et al., 2004) and need counselor support in the application process (MacAllum et al., 2007). Sun and Smith (2017) and Cohen (2006) noted that more students from high

SES families turn to private college counseling to assist with the application process, in part because they wanted more help than they could get from their high school counselor.

An important step in the college admissions process is taking standardized tests. Students rely on their counselors to provide information about registering for standardized tests (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010) and for fee waivers (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). At schools with higher SES populations, the college counseling program is more likely to have standardized test resources that include test preparation (Alon, 2009).

In a study that asked counselors what resources they felt they most needed, they reported an interest in additional tools like sample newsletter templates to inform students and parents about college application information, tools to assess student interests, and computer-based search tools for students to learn more about colleges (MacAllum et al., 2007). Students at schools with a higher SES population are more likely to have access to a variety of resources at their schools (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000), including counselors, but also guidebooks, educational programming, newsletters, and relevant computer software. However, research has shown that when lower SES students have access to similar information, it levels the playing field of admission for those students, regardless of other barriers (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

Not surprisingly, secondary schools with a higher SES population, including both private and public, have significantly more resources to accommodate students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). On the other hand, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) also determined that access to counselor information was more important to lower SES students than to higher SES students. Counselors are especially important to black students and lower ACT

scorers, both for providing information about the college process, but financial aid options too (Johnson et al., 1991). Kern writes that

financial assistance is important for students wishing to continue their education.

Special consideration for scholarships and information regarding federal programs is necessary. Working with high school counselors can be a key link in assisting students to pursue education after high school. (2000, p. 493)

Research shows that college counselors are one of the most important resources for financial aid information (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Rosa, 2006), but that students find it difficult to sort through all of the materials to apply for financial aid (Corwin et al., 2004).

As this section has noted, counselors are an important source of information for students, but that also extends to families. The information counselors provide is often for parents, via the student, and higher SES schools often have more resources to educate parents about college admissions. This is important for girls, because, as previous studies have shown, girls care about the advice and opinions from their parents (Galotti & Mark, 1994; Perez & McDonough, 2008). The support they receive from parents (Ceja, 2006) and the extent of discussions with parents about college can also positively influence girls in the college process (Stage & Hossler, 1989). Therefore, girls and their families are receiving varying levels of college information.

Connections to College Admissions Counselors

In addition to the resources available specifically at the high schools, connections between the college admissions offices and high schools are a valuable commodity for

the admissions field. Specifically, those connections primarily fall into three areas: professional networks between high school counselors and college representatives, access to travel- either receiving a visit from a college representative or travel by the students themselves, and access to and understanding of marketing information.

Professional networks. A valuable resource at the high school level is the extent to which counselors, and therefore schools and their students, have an established relationship with college admissions officers. In an ethnographic study of one elite college admissions office, Stevens (2009) traveled with admissions officers at “the College”- the pseudonym given to the institution. He found that they routinely chose their high school visits based on existing relationships, such as the school having several top students apply, known interests based on student visits to campus, or even the counselor’s own child being a student at the College. He also noted that colleges are more likely to visit schools closer to campus, in urban areas (and therefore, more accessible for travel), or schools that are feeder schools to the College.

The link between travel and the professional relationships is also important. Frequently, colleges also invite high school counselors to their campuses for tours, which are often elaborate (Stevens, 2009) and include extraneous activities, such as the University of San Francisco tour which pays for counselors to enjoy winery tours in Napa Valley. Some tours even have waiting lists because of their popular activities and, although they are not closed to any high school counselors, it is not surprising that those who have large student loads or other non-college related responsibilities have less time or opportunity to sign up for these travel events.

Competition exists on both ends of the process, for elite students and for admission to elite colleges. Colleges and universities serve as gateways to higher status and interactions within the institutional context, in effect, serve as micro-level interactions for macro-level status interactions (Ridgeway, 2013). In other words, schools replicate macro behavior when it comes to competing for higher status students and students also replicate these patterns in competition for spots at elite status schools. These are separate, but interacting processes between high school college counseling and college admissions (McDonough, 1994).

High schools with higher SES student populations are more likely to have connections with college admissions counselors (Lee et al., 2017; Zinth, 2014) and counselors report that their greatest resource need is ability to better network with college admissions officers (MacAllum et al., 2007). Connections to college admissions counselors are more likely to lead to visits from campus representatives at the high school, which supports students' college preparation (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Students benefit from links between high school and college admissions counselors because students are more likely to seek out certain types of information from the college representatives directly (MacAllum et al., 2007).

Admissions travel. Because of these connections, counselors serve as a kind of broker of admissions-related travel (McDonough et al., 1998). The travel for recruitment process is important, especially at more selective colleges, most of which are actively engaged in trying to recruit a diverse incoming class, even across the socioeconomic spectrum (Stevens, 2009). The patterns of travel seen by Stevens reflects this idea that

colleges want to recruit high-ability, low-income students or, even better, high-ability, racially and ethnically diverse students regardless of ability to pay. “The College” frequently visited diverse high schools, typically magnet or charter schools in urban areas, which is reflective of larger patterns of recruitment visits to high schools (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). On the other hand, Hill and Winston (2010) argue that institutions simply do not recruit well to reach high-ability, low-income students because of their reliance on SAT scores and focus on particular geographic regions (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). By relying more on SAT data for search, rather than ACT scores, they argue, selective colleges are not traveling to major geographical areas with high ability, low-income students. Also, traditional recruitment patterns focus on urban or suburban areas or certain geographic regions (i.e. the northeast), thereby denying high schools visits to a subset of students and failing to build the all-important counselor relationships (Stevens, 2009).

Travel is not a one-way street, however. Student visits to the campus are connected to the decision to attend and, in fact, studies recommend that counselors encourage visits in order for students to find the best fit (Nora, 2004). Students are more likely to visit a campus when they have already had contact with their high school college admissions counselor (Radford et al., 2016). Of course, the ability to afford such trips is a greater likelihood for higher SES students and families. Colleges set aside particular weekends throughout the academic year for high school students to visit, especially for admitted students (in an attempt to increase yield) or for scholarship applicants. Although this travel is often sponsored by the colleges themselves, they are by invitation and thus,

students at high schools connected to the college admissions office are more likely to receive an invitation (Stevens, 2009). The admissions effort in getting students to campus is critical for their yield. In one study, it was found that a student who visited the campus via an official admissions office visit was 12% more likely to decide to attend than a student who does not (Nurnberg, Schapiro, & Zimmerman, 2012).

A study of female students showed that the campus visit was the second most named reason for choosing a particular college (Sax et al., 2009). However, another study asked females to rank the most important sources of information in choosing a particular college and the campus visit ranked only fourth of five sources direct from the college admissions office, behind college admissions representatives, college directories or catalogs, and printed literature from the college (Shank & Beasley, 1998). Girls are also more likely to visit the campus and go on an official campus tour (Radford et al., 2016).

Admissions marketing. For students, the extent to which they are well-informed depends not just on counselor connections, but on the marketing efforts of colleges. Here again, the knowledge of the high school counselor about the admissions personnel is important because the counselors are often the conduit for the marketing information, either verbally, by having participated in a counselor tour or other professional meeting, or by their role as gatekeeper of brochures, websites, and guidebooks (Bryan et al., 2017; Cigrand et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). The nature and volume of information that students receive is important; marketing plays a major role for students in their decision-making process (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). They also look to

marketing materials for information about financial aid and academic offerings (Kim et al., 2017). The role of marketing materials is growing in the admissions field (Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Stevens, 2009). Additionally, girls have been shown to spend more time than boys searching the internet or reading college guidebooks for information (Radford et al., 2016).

An increasing part of the current trends in admissions is marketing various rankings schemes, the most well-known being the *US News and World Report* annual lists of top colleges. Although at face value, rankings systems may seem like an additional source of information, and one that is widely accessible to a diverse audience, higher ability and more socioeconomically advantaged students are the main groups that pay attention to the collegiate rankings (McDonough et al., 1998). However, students' attention to various rankings schema is increasing (Fugate, 2012).

Admissions officers are more likely to focus attention on marketing the rankings towards those who pay attention to rankings, thereby inadvertently focusing on higher SES populations (McDonough et al., 1998). Admissions marketing is responsive to changes in rank, and, although the changes of rankings are generally marginal, a dip in rankings affects the enrollment of institutions differently (Meredith, 2004). For instance, private institutions are better able to stem the tide of slight dips in rank, even more so than top ranked public institutions such as the University of Michigan (Meredith, 2004).

Finally, a key component of marketing is the clarity and transparency of financial aid and cost of attendance information. Leslie and Brinkman (1987) completed a widely-cited study on the effects of cost on attendance and found that as tuition rises, enrollment

drops. While that fundamental principle has been shown to hold true, a more in-depth understanding from Heller (1997) further clarified that it depends on which portion of the population is examined and which type of college is increasing tuition. Heller (1997) stresses the “importance of broadening traditional conception of the ‘cost of college’” (p. 651) to include more than tuition, but also room and board, travel costs, and incidentals as expenses plus the opportunities for aid such as loans, work programs, and scholarships. This is important to understand because girls are more likely to think that they won’t be able to afford college even if they are accepted, but are also more likely to think they will qualify for and ultimately apply for financial aid (Radford et al., 2016). After their high school counselors, college admissions counselors are students’ most popular source of financial information, even more popular for low SES students (Rosa, 2006). Students from lower SES backgrounds are likely to seek financial aid information from college marketing materials, either materials they receive directly from the college via mail or material that they seek out at events like a college fair (MacAllum et al., 2007).

College Counseling Training

Part of the problem with counselors as an adequate resource for the college admissions process is that they need more specific training in college counseling. This is documented in the research from both the counselor and student perspective (Bryan et al., 2011; Gilfillan, 2017; Ilic & Rosenbaum, 2019; Zinth, 2014). As this chapter has already demonstrated, there are frequent reports of counselors whose college guidance role was secondary to their duties of personal counseling, but this is compounded by a lack of professional experience in college counseling.

The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) compiles an annual report of college counseling and admissions trends. NACAC's 2005 report shows that most counselors have had professional training, stating public school counselors were significantly more likely to have completed graduate coursework than private school counselors, due to certification requirements in nearly all of the 50 states that public school counselors hold a master's degree. Public school counselors were at least twice as likely to have completed graduate coursework in "educational counseling" and "statistics/data analysis" as their private school peers (Hawkins & Lutz, 2005, p. 83).

However, less than 25% of counselors "have completed coursework in college admission or student choice theory" (Hawkins & Lutz, 2005, p. 83). Research from Perusse, Goodnough, and Noel (2001) and Farmer-Hinton and McCullough (2008) supports the finding that most counselors have educational training in career and/or lifestyle planning, but not any coursework specific to college counseling. When asked, though, counselors suggested the need for coursework in college counseling (Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005).

As for counselor training after graduate school, less than half of counselors receive any professional training around college counseling. In 2015, only 37% of high schools required their counselors to participate in college counseling professional development activities and of those, only 41% paid all of the related costs (Clinedinst et al., 2015). NACAC reports show that counselors do generally receive time off for professional development activities, but that counselors in rural schools or with larger student caseloads are less likely to have that time off (Hawkins & Lutz, 2005). Schools

with higher student-counselor ratios were also less likely to require professional development or to pay the associated costs (Clinedinst et al., 2015). Private high schools are significantly more likely to require professional development of their counselors (Clinedinst et al., 2013). As McDonough wrote,

counseling is off the radar in virtually all accountability schemas. Helping students prepare for college or assisting students in enrolling in college is not written into any existing accountability system, any leadership performance evaluation, or any K-12 job description. Yet, most of the American public, journalists, and policymakers assume that adequate numbers and adequately trained high school counselors are doing this job (2005a).

Without training, the accountability of counselors to serve as an accurate and adequate resource is limited.

Conclusion

Given the research's clear demonstration of the importance of counselors, the role of the counselor should be clarified and elevated in schools, especially for students who are already under served. First and foremost, the research shows that the overwhelming factors preventing more effective college counseling are the additional responsibilities counselors have as well as the large caseloads. Alleviating these two issues would provide more opportunity for counselors to develop relationships with students. Moreover, allowing for specific training on college admissions and time devoted to college counseling would ensure that counselors were a stronger resource for information on the admissions process, college options, and financial aid opportunities.

Chapter Summary

A review of existing literature on the girls' college decision making process shows clear patterns in their preferred criteria, such as academic quality and campus climate. However, given that these studies all provided a set list of factors, the studies are inconclusive in understanding the experiences girls share of their own college admissions process.

Additionally, the literature reviewed in this chapter explains the important role of the college counselor in the college admissions process. Research shows that counselor-student relationships are both important and dependent on time, caseload, additional responsibilities, and caring interactions. Research also indicates that high school resources for the college admissions process are clearly critical to success in matriculation. As a resource, counselors are important disseminators of information about course requirements, standardized testing, the college application process, college rankings, and financial aid. Counselor connections to admissions officers are important networks, both because it affects the travel patterns of admissions officers and the marketing information that is shared with students. However, research does not explain how girls in particular interact with college counselors as it relates to any of these factors.

Additionally, most studies reviewed here ask students to project the factors influencing a decision they are currently in the process of making, rather than asking students to reflect back on the admissions process after its completion.

This chapter began with a brief overview of the literature on models for college decision making, concluding with an explanation of the conceptual framework for this

study. Next, an exploration into the research on girls' social capital, their reasons for wanting to attend college and the criteria they considered in making a specific college choice provided insight into the extent to which different influences ultimately play a part in making a college decision. Then, an overview of the role of the college counselor provided context to understand the importance of college counseling in student decision making. Research that showed the importance of student-counselor relationships was discussed, followed by research on college counselors as an important resource. In examining resources and then the current competition of the admissions process, this chapter also showed how counselors are important across all SES levels.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to examine girls' perceived interactions with their high school college admissions counselors and girls' experiences with the resources and programmatic offerings of the college counseling office. The study used Perna's (2006) four layer model of student college choice, which considers individual habitus, along with school, higher education, and societal contexts. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do girls describe their interactions with their high school college admissions counselor?
2. How do girls describe the support they received from the high school college counseling office?
3. What are girls' lived experiences of the college search process?

This chapter describes the methodology used to complete this inquiry. Beginning with a description of the study's design and rationale for choosing this design, the chapter follows with the rationale for choosing a qualitative design. Then, the role of the researcher is discussed, followed by an explanation of the site and participants for the study. Finally, this chapter ends with an explanation of data collection and analysis.

Design of the Study

Narrative inquiry was the method employed to examine the stories of participants and their interactions with counselors during the college decision-making process. Although narrative can be understood as simply as any type of verbal or written

communication that is elicited through research techniques or natural conversation (Chase, 2007), the stories that girls tell about their relationships with college counselors in their college decision-making process will be investigated in this study. Including what Chase (2007) describes as an analytic lens, narrative inquiry is “a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole” (p. 64). Czarniawska (2004) claims that “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). Given the temporal nature of the research questions, narrative is the most effective method of approaching this study. A visual model for the design of this study is shown in Figure 2.

The greatest weaknesses of narrative inquiry are the interpretation of data and generalizability of results. Interpretation is considered a weakness of narrative research (Chase, 2011), because a narrator’s words may have different interpretations to different people and therefore, a response from a participant could be construed differently (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants themselves may omit or distort information about their stories; however, the point of narrative research is not to arrive at a concrete, historical truth, but rather to understand the perceived truth of the participants (Polkinghorne, 2007). Some critics argue that the relatively small sample sizes of narrative inquiry end in results that lack generalizability. Again, though, the aim of narrative research is not to generalize across groups to uncover universal truths; rather, it

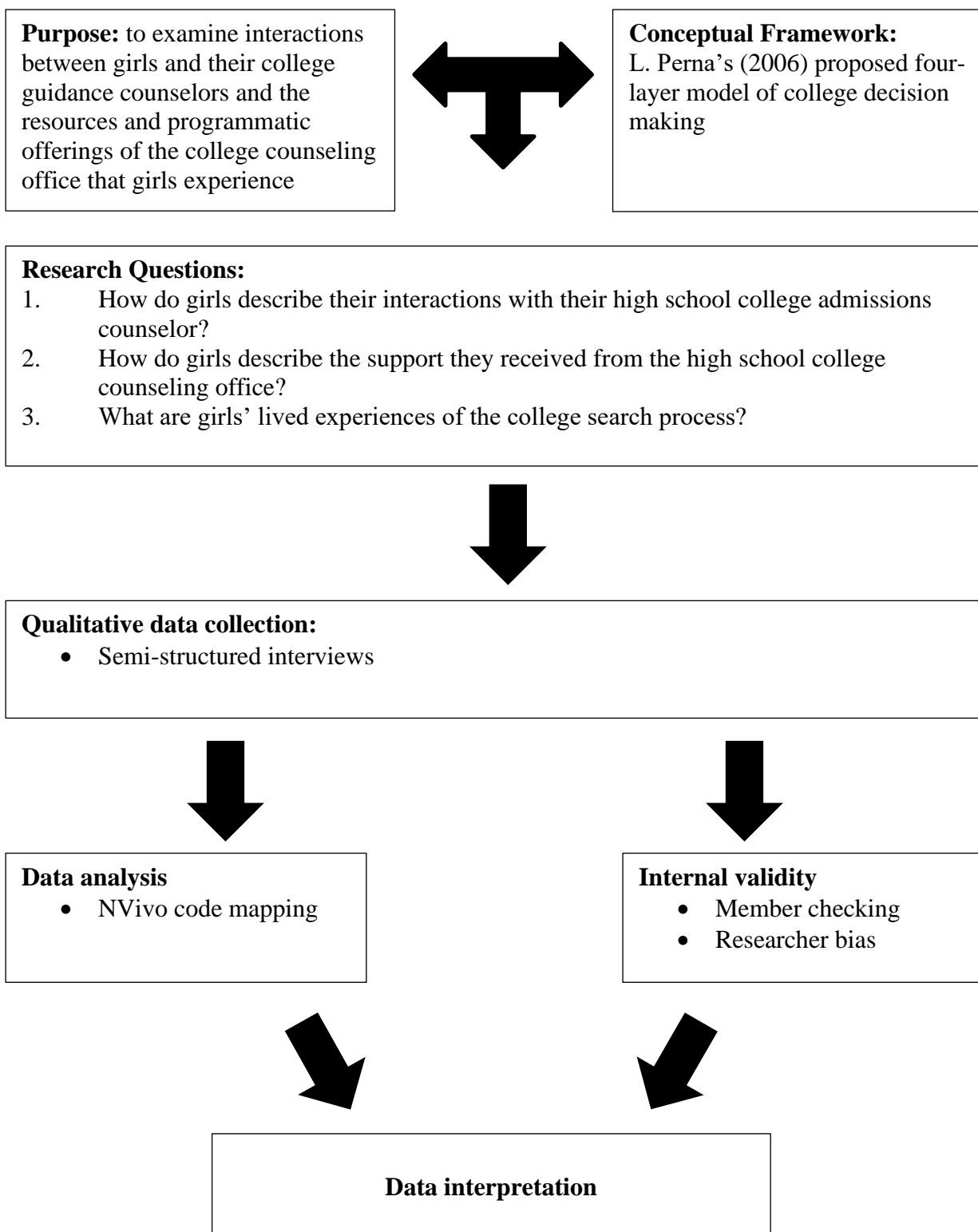


Figure 2: Narrative Inquiry Study Design Model

is to understand individual life events and to construct meaning and themes from each unique story (Chase, 2007). Thus, the strengths of narrative inquiry outweigh the weaknesses because of the meaning participants are able to make of their life events (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Czarniawska (2004) argues that the actions and events that unfold in our relationships with others are, in essence, a narrative. She states:

As to the first narrative (that of an individual history), its importance is connected with the fact that in order to understand their own lives people put them into narrative form- and they do the same thing when they try to understand the lives of others. Thus, actions acquire meaning by gaining a place in a narrative of life.
(p. 5)

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) echo this argument, contending that narrative “is a fundamental structure of human experience” (p. 2). They also believe that although narrative inquiry reflects the experience of individuals, narrative is also “a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience” (p. 2). Finally, participants describe a story that is both social and temporal in nature in a narrative research design (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2007a).

Rationale for the Design

There are two primary reasons that a narrative inquiry approach was chosen for this study. First, the nature of the research questions lends itself to a narrative inquiry approach. In qualitative studies, the researcher should consider the research questions when designing the appropriate methodology used to collect and analyze data (Creswell,

Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). The research questions for this study are best suited for narrative inquiry because, as Creswell (2007b) points out, they “captur[e] the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (p. 55). Second, narrative inquiry is best used in studies which consider participants’ stories in terms of time, place and social context (Clandinin, 2016).

Considering time in narrative inquiry, this method was chosen because I was interested in understanding the stories of female students as they reflect on an experience in its entirety. The historical context of an experience in hindsight is an important part of narrative research (Creswell, 2013). Considering the research questions again, Creswell et al. (2007) state that the most appropriate research questions for narrative research are those which are “chronological/story-oriented questions” such as “questions about the life experiences of an individual and how they unfold over time” (p. 239). Although all three research questions are related to participants’ telling of an experience in hindsight, question number three, in particular, is focused on the opportunity for participants to share their experience as a story as it unfolded.

The place or places in the stories told by participants are also an important part of narrative inquiry. As shown in Chapter Two, the high school context is an important variable in understanding the relationships between girls and high school college admissions counselors. As such, participants responded to interview questions about the context of their high school environment as it related to support provided by their high school college admissions counselor. This allowed girls to reflect back on place, in this case their high school, as it related to their college decision making process. The time and

resources available at each high school played a role in girls' college decision making process. The context of place deals with not only physical environment, but the people involved and the overall community (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this study, that includes elements of Perna's (2006) second layer of decision making: availability and types of resources as well as support systems from the high school college admissions counselors. Each research question could easily connect to the context of place, but research question number two is especially relevant, given its connection to the support and resources of the high school college admissions counselor.

The social context is also appropriate for narrative inquiry research. Narrative inquiry research results in findings related to "how individuals are enabled and constrained by social resources [and] socially situated in interactive performances" (Creswell, 2013, p. 55). This idea is reflected in layer one of Perna's (2006) model of college choice, which considers social and cultural capital. Chapter Two has already illustrated the role of social capital in girls' college decision making. Using the narrative inquiry approach assumes that people's behavior is situational and that the context in which people find themselves is important to gaining a deeper understanding of behavior (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The context could be the social context of an institution like a school or a particular personal experience (Creswell, 2007b). Clandinin (2016) further distinguishes between the personal experiences and the social experiences that frame one's narrative, but also says that both contribute to a person's narrative. Here again, the research questions for this study are appropriate for using narrative inquiry, because they

relate to both the individual experience and the relationship with the high school admissions counselor.

Clandinin (2016) best summed up this type of research by writing “narrative inquiry is situated in relationships and in community” (p. 13). The research questions relate to the experiences of girls in the college decision making process, their relationships with high school college admissions counselors, and the community context in which those relationships developed. Using Perna’s (2006) framework further supports this design because of the inclusion of such factors as social and cultural capital and support structures.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology was employed because it helped the researcher to understand the subjective interpretations that people brought to their own lives (De Vaus, 2001). In addition, qualitative research provides voice to the participants being studied. Qualitative research allows subjects to have their viewpoints heard and understood (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This is critical for female students. Girls often feel that their voice is silenced (Archard, 2013a) and research shows that they benefit from having an opportunity to express their voice (Archard, 2013b). Girls are more likely to thrive when their individual experience is reflected in what they learn (Deak, 1998). This suggests that girls are best represented in research that allows them to develop subjective meaning of their social and historical experiences.

Furthermore, research suggests that girls’ college making decisions are complex. Beattie (2002) supports this idea and notes previous quantitative studies have excluded

females from analysis because of the complexity of their decision making. Instead, Beattie (2002) suggests that “a more defensible approach is to try to figure out what factors complicate young women’s decisions, rather than consistently to exclude young women from the analyses” (p. 39). Therefore, qualitative methods were most appropriate for this study given that, “qualitative reports are usually complex, detailed narratives that include the voices of the participants being studied” (Hatch, 2002, p. 9).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in the research design and usefulness of findings are strengths of qualitative research. In the qualitative approach, the researcher must be flexible in where the data collection leads, which allows the researcher to explore greater options. Girls also prefer to build relationships (Deak, 1998; Riegler-Crumb, 2010) which supports using a qualitative approach since a hallmark of narrative inquiry is the “relationship between the researcher and the researched” (Creswell, 2013, p. 57). Creswell (2007a) writes that “active collaboration with the participant is necessary, and researchers need to discuss the participant’s stories as well as be reflective about their own personal and political background, which shapes how they ‘re-story’ the account” (p. 57). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for a more collaborative interview because the participants were able to share their stories beyond the set interview questions. In addition, the use of member checking and being aware of researcher bias, as described in following sections, helped ensure a more accurate participant story.

In narrative inquiry in particular, the researcher is confronted with the task of ensuring that the participant’s story remains his or her own. Although the researcher is

ultimately re-telling the story, he or she should reflect not just on personal bias, but also the extent to which the researcher controls the story in its re-telling (Creswell, 2007a). In qualitative research, the interaction between researcher and participant is often more personal; therefore, the researcher is expected to consider and account for any personal bias on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such, this can be the greatest asset or the greatest liability to the topic.

Researcher Bias

During the time of this study, I was aware of how my own biases and experiences could have impacted the collection and analysis of data. I am currently a teacher at a school for girls, although I teach middle school rather than the older girls in the midst of the college decision making process. Although my personal experience could have potentially impacted my viewpoint during the research process, it also meant that I am in tune with the experiences of girls, as they are my sole focus as a teacher.

Although I am an observer of the college decision making process, I do, however, have a personal connection to it because my mother is a retired high school college admissions counselor. In her role, she was one of three staff members (two counselors and one administrative professional) who oversaw an office entirely responsible for the students' college admissions process. She had no personal counseling responsibilities, which means that her entire job was devoted to college admissions. Her counselor-to-student ratio was considerably smaller than the national averages; hers was generally around 1:45. In addition, she was able to budget for professional development travel, received numerous visits from college admissions officers each year, and was able to

provide personalized resources to both students and parents. Each of these factors may have potentially biased me towards this highly personalized form of college admissions counseling.

The use of computer software was one way of controlling for bias in the data analysis. Creswell (2007b) states that one advantage of using computer software for data analysis is that

A computer program encourages a researcher to look closely at the data, even line by line, and think about the meaning of each sentence and idea. Sometimes, without a program, the researcher is likely to casually read through the text files or transcripts and not analyze each idea carefully. (p. 165)

In using computer software, I was able to track themes line by line using coding highlighting, often referring back and forth between transcripts to consider the meaning of interview data. This also helped me compare codes to find commonalities among the data, leading to common variables and ultimately, six overarching themes.

Site and Participants

Sites

My goal for this study was to find a college site which would yield participants who has established a relationship with their high school college admissions counselor, based on the requirement of a counselor recommendation for admissions. As such, I conducted this study at a small, moderately selective, private college in the southeast, which I called Sherman College. In the fall of 2021, this institution enrolled 1,058 students, of whom 537 were female undergraduate students. In several ways, Sherman

represents criteria that relate to information detailed in Chapter Two that is important to college decision making. First, the college admissions office requires a counselor recommendation in the application process. Additionally, the college admissions office seeks students who have taken college preparatory courses throughout high school and encourages students to make a connection with the college through a campus visit, meeting with the college admissions officer during a visit to the high school, or reaching out to the college admissions office. Although the cost to attend the college is high, approximately 57% of the students receive need-based financial aid, a merit-based scholarship, or a combination of both. Lastly, the small size of the college indicates that this is not a common choice for students; therefore, some choice factors from the theoretical framework would play into a student making this decision.

Selecting this site also provides an average site in terms of college admissions. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) reports that the national average acceptance rate for first-time freshmen was 65.8% in the 2014-2015 admissions cycle (Clinedinst et al., 2015). Colleges and universities who are moderately selective accept between 50 and 70 percent of their applicants and account for just over a third of the total applications in the U.S. for first-time, degree-seeking students (Clinedinst et al., 2015). The college for this study admitted 53.8% of its applicants for 2019. Of all reporting colleges and universities, 36% fall into the moderately selective category. In 2015, these same institutions enrolled 36.8% of all full-time, first-time degree seeking applicants (Clinedinst et al., 2015). This is the largest category of institutions.

Participants

Creswell (2007a) states that “the procedures for implementing this research [narrative inquiry] consist of studying one or two individuals, gathering data through collecting their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences” (p. 54). In other words, narrative inquiry does not involve a large number of participants, but rather looks closely and in depth at the stories of a small number of participants. Purposeful sampling was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to ensure that specific criteria were met. Those criteria were female students in their first or second year of study, with no more than two having attended a private high school. In addition, one participant sent information on the study to a friend who contacted me; thus, snowball sampling was also used, although Merriam and Tisdell (2015) include snowball sampling as a form of purposeful sampling.

Therefore, the participants in this study were female students who are currently enrolled at the college and in their first or second year of study. Five students were interviewed, ensuring that each student attended a different high school, all of which were public high schools. I used the college admissions office at the selected site to help me identify a pool of potential participants. Admissions officers were the starting point of contact. I asked them to contact girls who were in their first or second year of study to solicit interest. The Vice President of Enrollment Management and one of the Associate Directors of Admission both emailed my participant recruitment email to a listserv of female students. At that point, once girls responded to me with interest, I was able to

contact them directly. Because the participants contacted me directly, the admissions officers are unaware which students were ultimately in the study.

As this chapter has illustrated, a small number of participants is appropriate for narrative inquiry. However, to better understand different dynamics between girls and high school college admissions counselors at different types of high schools, I sought five to six participants who attended different high schools. Chapter Two illustrated the importance of high school context in understanding the influences of the counselor on girls' college decision making. Not only is the relationship impacted by the student counselor ratio, but the resources available to support students vary from high school to high school. Each participant in the study attended a different high school to ensure a wider range of inquiry into various counselor relationships. Researchers (McDonough, 1997; Stevens, 2009) indicate that private high schools may be more likely to receive visits from college admissions counselors, so the study was structured to ensure that no more than two participants attended a private high school. However, none of the students who contacted me attended a private high school.

Of the five participants, all of them were in their first year of study at Sherman College. Four of the five were from the same state as Sherman and one was from a different southern state. Each came from a different hometown in terms of size and rural versus urban or suburban areas. All five students had parents with some level of post-secondary education, but that ranged from one parent with a two-year degree to both parents having four-year degrees with one having a masters. Each girl has at least one sibling. Excepting the one participant whose siblings are not yet college-aged, three of

the other four had at an older sibling who had attended or was currently attending a four-year college. Table 2 illustrates a comparison of the backgrounds of the participants of this study.

Two participants attended mid-sized public high schools, while two attended large public high schools, and one attended a small magnet school. Although not all five schools report data publicly, the three that do report at least 80% of their graduates attend some form of post-secondary education, whereas roughly 60% attend a four-year college or university. From a counseling perspective, most of the five schools share common traits. Counselors have higher than recommended caseloads, and counselors have multiple responsibilities. Although all five schools promote a college-going culture and offer numerous AP or IB courses, only one school employs a full-time counselor dedicated to college admissions counseling. Table 3 illustrates a comparison of the high schools attended by participants of this study.

Data Collection

Interviews

For this study, interviews were the primary source of data collection. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009) lasting approximately one hour each. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this type of narrative inquiry study, because participants were asked to give their historical perspective on an event that had already occurred in their lives (Creswell, 2012).

Table 2. Participant Background Comparison

Student	Annie	Bella	Claire	Dara	Eliza
High School	Washington HS	Adams HS	Jefferson HS	Madison HS	Monroe HS
Hometown	Small city	Rural town	Mid-sized city	Small city with major university	Suburb of mid-sized city
High School Type	Mid-sized public	Mid-sized public	Small public magnet	Large public	Large public
Year in College	Freshman	Freshman	Freshman	Freshman	Freshman
Parent degrees	Both have four-year	Both have four-year	Mom has two-year, dad has four-year	Mother has two -year	Both have four-year, dad has masters
Sibling degrees	Sister has four-year and masters	Siblings are younger	Brother finishing four-year, other sibling is younger	Half siblings do not have degrees, other sibling is younger	Brother finishing four-year, other sibling is younger

Another advantage to semi-structured interviews is that it ensured that each participant was asked a consistent set of questions that guided the interview process while still allowing for flexibility in wording and order of the questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In semi-structured interviews, Merriam (2015) states that

The largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (p. 90)

The advantages to this interview approach were appropriate considering my interest in studying girls' lived experiences. The research questions of this study addressed how events unfolded for participants and what their experiences of those events were. Using a semi-structured interview protocol gave girls the opportunity to tell their story and let it unfold in a directed, but evolving way. It is important to note, though, that even in semi-structured interviews, some elements of structured and unstructured interview protocols emerged, as I needed to be able to gather both specific data about the high school backgrounds of the participants, but also needed to use spontaneous follow up questions as the interviews continued (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interviews took place via Zoom. Each candidate was given an informed consent document for her signature and received a copy as well. I was sure to point out that participation in the study was voluntary and that she was free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 3. Participants High School Background Comparison

High School	Washington HS	Adams HS	Jefferson HS	Madison HS	Monroe HS
Student population (approx. for 2022)	1575	1000-1200	522	2500	2100
% attending post-secondary ed	82%	Not reported	Not reported	93%	82%
% attending four-year college	59%	Not reported	Not reported	58%	65%
IB and/or AP program	17 AP courses and full IB program offered	15 AP courses offered	8 AP courses offered	21 AP courses offered and IB diploma program	33 AP courses offered
# of counselors	3	3	2	6	4
Counselor to student ratio (approx.)	1:525	1:400	1:261	1:415	1:525
Counselors specific to college attendance	None, although there is a senior counselor and an IB counselor	None	None	1- also serves as IB coordinator	1

I also explained confidentiality procedures, which are detailed later in this section. Each interview was recorded, and the file was saved to my UTK Google Drive. I was the only person with the password to the Drive and the only user. The interview protocol was developed based on relevant questions from previous research related to students and high school college admissions counselors.

Confidentiality Procedures

All recordings of the initial conversations and interviews were kept on the secure Google Drive, labeled by participant pseudonym. A separate file was kept with the participant names and accompanying pseudonyms. Interview transcriptions were also saved to UTK Google Drive. All notes from interviews were typed and saved to the same Drive. Prior to the interview, each participant was emailed the informed consent document which she was asked to sign, scan and return to me. At the conclusion of the study, consent forms were sent to my dissertation chair who will store them in a locked cabinet in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department.

Instrumentation

For this study, I used a semi-structured interview protocol. The questions in the protocol were developed based on the relevant literature. Each question in the interview protocol was also developed to answer the research questions for this study and the protocol documents the links between each interview question and the related research question.

Pilot of Interview Protocol

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the interview protocol, the protocol was piloted to gain feedback on the questions. First, a draft of the protocol was emailed to one professor at the University of Tennessee and feedback was noted, resulting in condensing and eliminating multiple questions, in addition to connecting each question in the protocol to a research question for the study. This revised draft of the protocol was then emailed to another professor at the University of Tennessee and a high school college admissions counselor at an independent school for girls in Tennessee.

The second phase of this pilot included individual interviews with girls at different colleges who were completing their second year of college. Four girls agreed to participate, and they were given the draft of the protocol, including the research questions, ahead of the interview for their review. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded with the verbal permission of each girl. Following each interview, I asked each participant to provide feedback on the clarity of question, flow of questions, and whether or not the participants felt that the questions elicited the information needed to answer the research questions. I also asked each participant for suggestions of additional questions that they thought might answer the research questions. They then answered any questions they suggested.

The draft of the protocol that was used for the interviews consisted of ten questions. Eight of those questions had one to three probing questions used for follow up. Based on the feedback from the participants, two questions were re-worded to better elicit a response, one question was deleted, and two questions were added. In addition, three

probing questions were added, and one probing question was altered for clarity. Lastly, based on the extent of the responses I received, I determined that one of the probing questions received more response than its main question; therefore, I switched the order of those two questions. Each participant stated that the questions were easy to understand and did not believe that any questions were irrelevant. Each participant also stated that the flow of the questions was appropriate, and they understood the order. The responses throughout the pilot gave insight into the protocol and helped me to make adjustments that will be beneficial to answering the study's research questions.

Data Analysis

For this study, data consisted of interview data, transcribed from files of recorded interviews. The primary means for managing data was NVivo software. Throughout the data collection process, I read and re-examined each interview repeatedly. This process involved not only re-examining interview transcripts but updating the Nvivo word count and coding maps following each subsequent interview. According to Clandinin and Connelly (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), narrative inquiry data analysis is explained as the “complex analysis process as reading and rereading through the field texts, considering interaction, continuity or temporality, and situation through personal practical knowledge and the professional knowledge landscape of the individual” (p. 342). This is, in part, due to the importance of the researcher having strong knowledge of the data and, in part, because of the collaborative relationship between the researcher and the participant.

For this study, I used the three-dimensional space approach to narrative data analysis, which involves the three aspects of interaction, continuity, and situation (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The first aspect, interaction, “involves both the personal and social. The researcher analyzes a transcript or text for the personal experiences of the storyteller as well as for the interaction of the individual with other people” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 339). This aspect of the approach to data analysis was appropriate given this study’s theoretical framework and research questions, which are focused on both the personal experience of college decision making and the relationship with the counselor. The second aspect of this approach to data analysis, continuity, involves the researcher “analyz[ing] the transcript or text for information about past experiences of the storyteller” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 339). This was appropriate for this type of narrative inquiry study, because participants were asked to give their historical perspective on an event that has already occurred in their lives (Creswell, 2013). Finally, situation was analyzed to understand the importance of specific places in the story of the participant. The second research question for this study is specifically focused on the high school college counseling office and, as noted in Chapter Two, the importance of the high school context in understanding girls’ college decision making is essential.

Using Nvivo software to organize the data allowed me to arrange and code the data. Merriam (2015) points out that the job of data analysis software is not to actually do the work of analyzing the data, but rather to organize the data so that it can be analyzed by the researcher. As such, I reviewed each text thoroughly and along the way. An additional advantage of using software is that it allowed me to view coding not only

within individual stories, but to understand the relationships of codes among the participants' stories (Creswell, 2013). The intent of this research approach was to “create descriptions of themes that hold across stories” (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 243).

As I repeatedly analyzed the transcripts, I used Nvivo to complete open coding of each transcript. I then compiled the list of all codes and categorized them based on similarity. From those categories, I identified variables related to girls' college admissions process for each category. Finally, six themes emerged which unified the variables identified. The final code map and is presented in Appendix C.

Verification Methods

Inherent in narrative inquiry is the possibility of mischaracterizing a participant's story or telling that story through a biased lens. The following sections detail the means of avoiding both pitfalls. However, it is also important to note that the individual human experience is inherent in narrative inquiry. Thus, generalizability is less of a concern in narrative research. Polkinghorne (2007) argued:

Given the complex and changing characteristics of the human realm, narrative researchers do not ask readers to grant validity to their claims only when they reach a level of near certainty about a claim. Readers are asked to make judgments on whether or not the evidence and argument convinces them at the level of plausibility, credibleness, or trustworthiness of the claim. Researchers, thus, should not argue for a level of certainty for their claims beyond that which is possible to conclude from the type of evidence they gather and from the attributes of the realm about which they are inquiring. (p. 477)

Therefore, the following verification methods attempt to account for potential errors in analysis while still maintaining the hallmarks of narrative inquiry: the stories of the individuals and the collaborative process with the researcher.

Member Checks

To address both ethical concerns and ensure validity, member checks were used as a verification method. Chase (2011) argues that

Because narrative researchers do not know in advance exactly how they will use the narratives they collect, they should return to narrators to inform them- and ask again for permission to use their stories- when they *do* know have a plan to present, publish, or perform the work (p. 424).

I asked the participants to review the typed interview transcripts for comments or concerns, giving them an opportunity to ensure the accuracy of their words and to add any additional thoughts that might help me better ensure that I have captured the participant's story. Although this method allowed for specific measures of trustworthiness, it is worth noting that I was also available for questions or follow up with the subjects throughout the research process, since the relationship between researcher and participant is such an important aspect of narrative research (Creswell, 2012). None of the participants responded with changes to their original interviews.

Audit Trail

An audit trail was be another important step in verification of data. The idea of an audit trail is so that an external observer could find research notes and records and understand the process of data gathering and analysis. Two elements of an audit trail

were used. First, I maintained a document that detailed information about the data and how it was gathered, such as people interviewed, time of interviews, location of interviews, and how interviews were recorded. Second, I maintained an audit trail of how data were actually analyzed as described in the previous section. Finally, I recorded notes throughout of my observations on the data.

Conclusion

To best meet the purpose of this study and to understand the relationship between girls and high school college admission counselor and its influence on college decision making, the narrative inquiry approach was used. The study involved participants from different high school backgrounds who now attend a small, liberal arts college in the southeast. The data was collected via interviews and analyzed using the three-dimensional space narrative approach explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and adapted by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002). This approach was chosen because the aspects of interaction, continuity, and situation best fit the research questions. In addition to interviews, this study relied on member checking as a verification method, because in this design, the researcher “negotiates the purposes, the relationship with the participants, the transitions, and the way to be useful as the researcher tells or restories the participant’s narrative” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 344). The use of computer software to analyze data not only served as an additional verification method, but also met the purpose of the three-dimensional space narrative approach to data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study explored the interactions between girls and their college guidance counselors as well as girls' experiences throughout their college application process. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do girls describe their interactions with their high school college admissions counselor?
2. How do girls describe the support they received from the high school college counseling office?
3. What are girls' lived experiences of the college search process?

Chapter Three outlined the methodology employed for this study beginning with an explanation for the design of the study, the rationale for the design's selection, and the role of the researcher. Next, details about site, participants, data collection and analysis were presented as well as a summary of the interview protocol pilot. The chapter concluded with verification methods used in order to support transparency.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with five female undergraduate students at a small, liberal arts college, Sherman College. To ensure confidentiality, all names, both animate and inanimate, are pseudonyms. For each participant, this chapter presents a biographical background including family education, as well as a description of her high school environment. After each descriptive section, an analysis of the themes found in the data will be discussed. First is a discussion of outside influences and support, which includes support and influence from parents,

siblings, and the high school (outside of the college counselor, which is discussed in later sections). The next theme in each case is a discussion of college-level factors, which includes girls' connections to and perceptions of colleges that they were interested in, as well as feelings of finding the right college "fit."

The third theme discussed is the benefit of the college counselor, which includes positive counselor interactions as well as counselor assistance. Within that theme are various interactions and connections with the college counselor. Those have been defined in nine separate codes. The first is personable counselor, which refers to the counselor's positive personal demeanor. The second is helpful counselor, in which the counselor assists the girl with a difficult or confusing task related to the college admissions process. The third is counselor advice, defined as the counselor giving advice on the college admissions process or making a specific college choice. Fourth is counselor support, defined as the counselor providing emotional support about the college admissions process. The fifth code in this theme is counselor interaction, which is specific to student-counselor conversations about completing tasks for the college admissions process. The sixth code refers to counselor relationships, in which the counselor makes a concerted effort to get to know students and to make them comfortable. The seventh is caring counselor, which is defined as the counselor being emotionally invested in student outcome. Eighth is informal connections with the counselor such as students dropping in to the office or seeing the counselor in hall and chatting. Last is counselor transaction, which is defined as the counselor completing a task for the student with no interaction, such as mailing a transcript to a college.

The fourth theme discussed with each case is ineffective college counselors, which refers to either negative counselor interactions or a lack of assistance. The fifth theme is resources for college admission, which refers to information, time, and physical space as resources. The last theme discussed for each participant is the girls' own college admissions journey, which refers to their feelings on the college admissions process as well as their own individual work on college admissions. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter and preview of Chapter Five.

Case 1: Annie

Annie is a freshman in college whose parents both have degrees from a four-year university. She has one older sister who has a four-year college degree as well as a masters. However, Annie's parents both graduated from a regional state institution while her sister's degrees are both from a large flagship state school. Although Annie does attend school in her home state, she chose a different path by attending a small, private, liberal arts college. Regardless, it was implicit that Annie and her sister would always attend a four-year institution right out of high school, and she grew up having repeated exposure to college. Her older sister is about fifteen years her senior, so Annie had the experience as a young girl of visiting her sister on a college campus and her parents showed her around a prestigious university when she was in the fourth grade.

Annie hails from a small town in the southeast, but what differentiates this town from many other small towns across the southeast, according to Annie, is money. Indeed, although Annie's hometown does reflect many typical southern small towns, hers is mostly known for beach tourism and has a largely white population with median incomes

above average for the state. Annie noted that “a lot of my high school was like kind of divided up into like, ‘oh, these are people who have a lot of money, and they’ve been involved in community stuff through their parents since they were born.’ It was that kind of vibe.”

Annie herself stated that her personal high school experience, however, was different because of her participation in her school’s International Baccalaureate (IB) program. She felt more insulated from the influences outside of the IB program because she was so close with the other 17 students in her IB cohort. She applied for the program in middle school and was accepted along with fifty or sixty others. However, throughout her high school career, the numbers dwindled to only 18 by graduation. Yet, those students had all classes together- and separate from the rest of their high school classmates- which created natural attachments within the group. Annie noted that among her IB cohort, “we all kind of shared the same views and values and academic values and morals and politics, like those kinds of things than people outside of that program.”

Her peers had similar educational expectations as well. Even outside of the IB program, Annie noted that most of her high school peers were planning on attending a four-year college, but that they were generally focused on one or two of the large state institutions. Within the IB program, though, she said that people’s choices were spread out more, both geographically and academically. Clearly, her school and those within the IB program had high expectations for IB students. Peers in the program had similar family backgrounds in that it was assumed that they would attend a four-year college directly after high school. In fact, applying to the IB program was generally considered a

pathway to competitive college acceptance. Yet, although the IB students were in the top academic echelon of her high school, Annie sometimes felt that she was on an unofficial lower tier of the IB program, as opposed to other students who were accepted to Ivy League institutions.

Although she originally thought she would apply to a large number of schools, she ultimately only applied to three: a midsized university considered highly prestigious in the south, a large flagship state school in her home state, and the small liberal arts college she ultimately chose to attend. Annie reflected on the perceived prestige of the midsized university and said she originally considered it her “dream school.” Throughout her interview, she brought up a number of institutions that her peers selected, specifically noting those considered highly prestigious by her peers and community. She said it was a “big deal” for her to turn down her dream school, which is considered a “southern Ivy” in favor of her current college:

It's a super prestigious school. It was insanely impressive that I made it in, but just something about [Sherman] made me want to go here more. That was a really hard conversation with my parents, even though they also absolutely love [Sherman]. But it just was odd for me to turn down that sort of college, especially whenever I worked insanely hard to get into it with my application.

Annie thought her acceptance to a prestigious institution was impressive to the people in and working with her IB cohort. While she felt that the expectations for all IB students were high, acceptance to the prestigious university was, for Annie, a demonstration to others that she was just as smart as the others in her cohort.

Washington High School

For Annie, the world of Washington High School revolved around the IB program which represents a small percentage of her roughly 400 fellow graduates. Washington High School is one of only two public high schools serving Annie's home county. The population of the high school is around 1600 and, in addition to offering the International Baccalaureate program, the school also offers a general college preparatory track along with a standard diploma track, with the IB program being the most rigorous of the three. Annie's IB cohort had a 100% pass rate for the IB diploma requirements. The school offers numerous Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors courses as well as dual enrollment options with a local college. The high school states that 82% of the graduates will go on to post-secondary education, with 59% of the graduates choosing a four-year college after high school.

The counseling staff at Washington High School consists of two social workers and four counselors. The social workers primarily focus on social and emotional needs, personal counseling and interventions across the high school, while each grade level has an additional counselor who handles academic concerns, course selection and scheduling, progress to graduation, and special academic plans. The 12th grade counselor helps support the college application process for seniors interested in pursuing higher education, but not for those in the IB program. The person who serves as the counselor for the junior class, Mrs. Appleton, also serves as the IB coordinator.

Students such as Annie who are in the IB program do not use the grade level counselors; they have the IB coordinator for all four years of high school, both as their

support in the IB program and in the college admissions process. Thus, although there is a team of support for students within the counseling office at Washington High School, students like Annie in the IB program not only remain with a cohort of students; they also remain with one counselor.

Outside influences and support

In terms of her immediate family, Annie shared that her parents put a strong emphasis on getting a college education and for her to push herself in high school to do her best. “Do the top of what you can, and do well in it.” is how Annie described her parents’ expectations for her education. While the expectations were high, so was the level of support. Annie noted that her parents “were really helpful going through the college process” even though “at times it could be overbearing.” She specifically mentioned that her father pushed her to seek out scholarships and that her mother liked to be involved in the process overall, including getting to know the admissions counselor from Sherman College. Again, she noted that “they're gonna want me to try and go to the best of the best, and then also get good scholarships from the best of the best,” but she also mentioned how the experience with her parents was supportive overall.

Annie’s sister was helpful with advice. Annie noted that her sister is “older and wiser” and so was able to provide advice and be available for questions. Interestingly, the age gap between them meant that Annie visited a college campus at an early age. Her sister attended college and graduate school at the same large, state university in Annie’s home state, so Annie made frequent trips to the campus with her family as a young girl. Later on, her sister began working in northern California, so Annie was able to tour

several west coast colleges on a visit to her sister, schools, Annie said, she might not have been able to tour otherwise. Much of this exposure to college felt like support to Annie, but it also contributed to the notion that she would attend a four-year institution after high school.

From both her sibling and her parents, Annie continually noted the support she received from her family, including her parents' assumption that they would pay for her college experience. Annie remarked on the financial status of her peers and how that affected her and her family's respective status in their community. When discussing her peers or her counselor, the topic of money came up repeatedly. She also noted that her parents pushed her to apply for and receive scholarships. However, she also pointed out that her parents intended to support her financially, saying "they pay for my college and they wouldn't have it any other way. They'd never would have expected me to try and pay for it, which is obviously very lucky." For Annie, the financial aspect of attending college was less about a dire financial need, but more about a desire for merit-based support. Although perceived prestige of institutions as an influence will be discussed further, it is worth noting that Annie mentioned a push from her father to seek out scholarships at two specific prestigious universities in which Annie was interested.

The interest in merit-based support extended to school-level expectations as well. Annie pointed out that she and her IB counterparts were required to report their scholarship offers to the school, saying "they count up all the scholarship offers from IB students to be able to say, ' ooh, we had like this many millions of dollars offered to our IB students this year.'" Although the majority of the students at Washington High School

do attend post-secondary education, Annie's estimation of the numbers was not accurate. She stated that most students attend a four-year institution, when in fact, the school profile notes that, for her graduation year, 59% attended a four-year institution and 23% attended a two-year institution.

Notably, the school does promote its students' scholarship offers as she said; however, it is not limited to the IB students but rather presented as a reflection of the school overall. The school lists on its profile the dollar amount of academic, athletic, and arts scholarship money offered to graduates. Washington High also noted the number of students and percentage of students who received scholarship offers, as well as the percent of which were academic scholarships. The profile states that "Washington High School earned the most scholarship money amongst all public and private high schools" in the county. Interestingly, the school website phrased it as the school having earned the scholarships rather than its students, speaking to Annie's perception that the school likes to boast of students' accomplishments on the school's behalf.

College-level factors

For Annie, the college search process seemed to be a struggle between perceived prestige of an institution and the fit she found at Sherman College. As a student who had a good amount of exposure to schools through her childhood, most of that exposure was to institutions of higher perceived prestige. Partly because of her parents' expectations and partly because of the higher perception of the IB program at her school, Annie said she felt like she needed to "show complete interest in better schools that are more prestigious versus some others." When she ultimately made decisions on where to apply,

she applied early action to her first choice, a prestigious southern university. Although a non-binding decision, applying early action indicated that she had a first choice and that she was assuming she would attend that school if admitted.

On the other hand, Annie never mentioned that she enjoyed a visit to the school, that she was passionate about a particular program, or that she met people there with whom she connected. Of the various factors of fit that other students have discussed or were discussed in previous literature, she never discussed them about this institution which she described as her “dream school.” Conversely, when she talked about her application process at Sherman College, she said, “we had the absolute best interactions, and I think that's one of the reasons that I came here. My admissions counselor here we're actually still close with her.” When she toured Sherman, she felt like she belonged on the campus and there was “just something about Sherman” that made her want to attend.

Although she raved about her experience at Sherman, it was clear that the decision to attend was fraught. Annie talked about how difficult the conversation was with her parents to turn down the prestigious school, how it was such a big deal that she had been admitted, and how, as much as she loves Sherman, it is not on as high of a perceived tier as the other school. “It just was odd for me to turn down that sort of college, especially whenever I worked insanely hard to get into it with my application,” said Annie of her final choice. Even though Annie never expressed any reason for her initial passion for the more prestigious university, it is also noteworthy that she also never expressed any reason she did not want to attend either. She said, “I just ultimately decided that I didn't want to go there, which I didn't have a lot of reasons for.”

Instead of not wanting to attend her original first choice, it speaks to the importance of finding fit. She expressed that she made her final decision because “something about Sherman made me want to go her more.” When she thought back on her experience and expressed what advice she might have for another girl applying to college, she talked about how important it is to choose what feels right and to “follow your heart.” Although she was not able to express any particular reason for choosing one over the other, it was clear that she had a stronger connection to Sherman College, which she still feels today as a student.

Benefits of college counselor

Clearly, Annie did not view her college counselor, Mrs. Appleton, as a major part of her college admissions journey. She referred to her parents and her friends as her support system, but not her counselor. She also included her counselor in the group of people who she perceived as having money and a higher social standing in the community. However, she did also point out that the counselor was primarily working with the 18 remaining students of the IB program, so she did have some connection with her. That connection, Annie felt, was more a result of the investment in the IB program and the volume of time spent together rather than a deeper emotional connection. She stated,

it was still pretty personal to have closer relations with us than other students focusing on college with only 18 out of the entire senior class. And she was involved in she saw where we were applying to. She saw us go through high school, which I feel like always just helps with that; there's some sort of

attachment bound to form. And I think a part of it was also caring about the program itself, like these are the people in this established program.

None of the interactions described by Annie were particularly negative, but certainly there were not many overly positive interactions either.

In terms of assistance with Annie's college admissions process, Annie did say that she felt like Mrs. Appleton would complete the various tasks needed for Annie's applications. She wrote Annie's recommendation letters, for which Annie wrote a thank you note and brought her a gift card. The counselor visited various IB classes to check in with students and attempted to use that time to get to know students. Each student in the program did have various meetings with the counselor as well. All of the counselor assistance mentioned by Annie referred more to interactions or transactions, rather than relationships or support.

Although Annie was able to complete her applications with the assistance of Mrs. Appleton through transactions, and with the support of peers and family, it was clear that Annie wanted more. During the process, she was able to muddle through, but in looking back, Annie wished that she had received more support from her counselor, especially given the nature of the small IB program. She actually pointed out that she didn't realize that she had complaints until participating in this study. Originally, she felt like the counselor-student relationship was one of neutrality, but that looking back, she needed more of a relationship. This was reflected in Annie's statement that "right up around graduation, she was super excited and proud of all of us which felt really nice. And I feel like that was the most that I really got out of her was that sense of validation after I was

done.” Annie definitely sought validation as a perceived “lower” student in the IB program and as a student who ultimately chose Sherman College over a more well-known and higher “ranked” institution.

Ineffective college counselor

Although very few of the interactions Annie had with Mrs. Appleton were overtly negative, Annie maintained negative feelings towards those interactions. Upon reflection, she felt like she should have had a closer relationship with her counselor, especially given the intimate set up of the IB program. This was evident in Annie’s statement that “I mean, I really didn't talk to her as much as you would probably think I did.” This idea was reiterated in her statement “I didn't really have that many interactions with her where I felt close with her, really, which I feel like should have been a little different, considering she was working on college stuff with like 18 students as opposed to the other senior counselor who was working on college stuff with 500 students.”

By her own admission, Annie had a preconceived notion of her counselor. Mrs. Appleton’s daughter was in the same graduating class with Annie and she knew the counselor and her daughter from the community. Annie held a perception that the family was of higher status. Combined with Annie’s perception that she was viewed as a lower member of the IB cohort, it was unsurprising that Annie said she did not feel close to her counselor. Existing social barriers played a part in the negativity of the interactions. Whether or not this perception is valid, or reciprocated on the part of the counselor, Annie felt the rift and that it affected her college admissions process.

As far as seeking assistance for counseling, Annie projected a surface-level amount of trust for Mrs. Appleton. She did state that she had a basic trust that the counselor would get necessary tasks accomplished on Annie's behalf. Other students used the counselor for personal matters as well as college admissions assistance, but Annie stated, "I wouldn't necessarily trust her with actual counseling matters." In addition to a lack of assistance with personal matters, the counselor did not provide information about specific colleges, either generally or schools that might have been a good fit for particular students. The counselor wrote Annie a recommendation letter and sent transcripts and other required information to the colleges. However, in terms of actually searching for colleges or seeking a fit, the counselor did not provide any assistance.

Resources for college admission

As far as resources are concerned, Mrs. Appleton should have, theoretically, been a much more available and helpful counselor. Much of the research on counseling shows that a large caseload of counselors, the number of additional responsibilities, and lack of resources to connect with colleges are all barriers to a counselor's ability to provide strong college admissions counseling to students (Bryan et al., 2011; Corwin et al., 2004). As the IB counselor, Mrs. Appleton was primarily responsible for only 18 total students. She also works with juniors, but the college admissions counseling program at Washington High School does not begin in earnest until students are seniors. Thus, she would not have had more than 18 recommendation letters to write, transcripts to send, or student interests to learn. Additionally, much of the administrative work of college

counseling is automated or internet-based. The school's website lists detailed instructions for requesting transcripts, for example. Transmitting that information takes little more than a click of a button for the counselor.

However, in spite of the low case load of the counselor and the abundance of time spent with Annie and the IB cohort, Annie never felt a relationship with the counselor. Annie said she spoke with her counselor "a couple of times" about IB scheduling, but not anything related to college planning. The most striking feature of Annie's description of the resources provided is the lack of personalization, considering how much access Annie had to the counselor as an IB student. Annie mentioned that there were emails sent out about early decision and early action deadlines, for example. However, none of this information was directed to Annie or sent specifically about her search, even though she was an early action applicant to one school. The school did send out information about the Common Application as well as various scholarships and how to request a letter of recommendation.

Mrs. Appleton did write a letter of recommendation for Annie. On the high school website, there is a link to two separate forms to assist the counselors in this process. The first is a parent "brag sheet" to provide information about the students and her accomplishments. The second form is a student questionnaire that asks about interests and goals for after college. Although the website states that both of these forms should be submitted to the counselor with the request for a letter of recommendation, Annie did not mention whether or not she or her parents filled out these forms.

One programmatic element that was provided through the IB program was a workshop to help students work on writing good college essays. Annie was unsure of how that program came to be, but she thought it was sent to her through the IB program or counselor because the only participants were Annie and two other IB students. The details of the program were unclear in Annie's memory, but she thought it was only open to IB students because "if it were to [open] the whole school there would have been a lot more students participating in it." This program was one of only two specific resources that were actively provided to Annie. The other was a small college fair hosted by the school with representatives from various in-state schools and a handful of colleges from nearby states. Otherwise, the resources and information were more passively transmitted to students.

The school's website does have a robust counseling website, but most of the information related to college admissions planning is about financial aid, scholarships, or ACT test registration and preparation. The counseling office did not, to the best of Annie's memory, provide any online resources such as software or websites that assisted students in searching for particular colleges. The school did have visits from college admissions representatives who would set up tables during lunch, but there was not purposeful communication about those visits. Annie mentioned that there were occasionally posts on the wall in the counseling office about visits from colleges or other college admissions material, but this was all passive on the part of the counseling team, rather than active dissemination to students.

Girl's college admissions journey

Although she only applied to three schools, in spite of her original thought process of applying to twenty or more, Annie found the process of college admissions to be stressful, partly because of her busy IB school schedule. The IB program has specific requirements for the diploma distinction, and many of the deadlines coincided with college admissions deadlines. She said,

I think the process was so overwhelming because everybody else was also overwhelmed, and I'm also dealing with IB the senior year of IB college application season was during a super super duper busy, IB season. So it was just a lot at the same time.

Her counterparts in the IB program were also going through this process at the same time, which is in part how she learned about the Common Application, because “obviously, everybody used Common App.” Although she was busy with applications, her three applications all had different deadlines, which helped space things out.

Annie's description of the process as “overwhelming” also stemmed from her own expectations. Even though her original intention was to apply to numerous schools, she underestimated the work that went into applications. She thought it was more administrative, rather than labor-intensive, especially when it came to writing, saying “I thought it was going to be a lot easier, which I don't know why I thought that, but I thought it was name, transcript, test scores, maybe a paper. I didn't know that it was gonna be like some schools there's like 2300 word like just response questions.” She also continued to be focused on the prestige of the schools throughout the process, pointing

out that her participation in the essay writing program was “to get into prestigious schools that require a good college essay.”

A lack of support from her counselor also contributed to the feeling of the college process being stressful. Even researching colleges was difficult and from her counselor “it was never, ‘hey, you should check out this one specific college I think would be a good fit for you.’” Assistance with finding fit would have been a help to Annie in making the process less confusing, as she pointed out: “it's like the process is overwhelming with just how many colleges exist. It's like, how do you even choose where to apply to, and how come I can't apply to every single college ever?”

In spite of the “overwhelming” nature of the college admissions process, Annie had the qualities of a self-starter that helped her along the way. Although she heard about the Common Application, for example, she didn't know much about it, but said, “I just didn't know about it, so I'm sure I would have figured it out.” She was also the one who initially reached out and got in touch with a college admissions counselor from Sherman College. As part of her early action application to the more prestigious southern institution, she participated in several online seminars to express interest. She was quick to point out that she did not learn about this from her counselor. Rather, it was that she “signed up for emails. It was from [the university], I guess and not from a specific person. It was like an email list, and it was ‘we have this seminar tomorrow at 8,’ and on the website it says that your name being in this seminar does go towards the decision of your application.” She felt like she “relied on myself more than my counselor” and wishes she had had “help with a little bit more specific college information or even just a

quick email of if your counselor knows where you're looking at, just checking in on the process.”

Even though these factors contributed to the process feeling stressful, she did point out that “there wasn't much more to really help the overwhelming process be any less overwhelming.” In other words, the additional support from her counselor might have given her a clearer path to searching for and eventually choosing a particular topic. However, the process itself was still going to require essay-writing and scholarship research and it wouldn't change the overlap with the IB program deadlines, so it would have been a difficult process regardless. Ultimately, Annie felt like the process was worth it, both because she found a college she loves and because in hindsight it was exciting to consider her future. When the process was complete, she felt “relieved because that was a big thing off my plate. And it was like, ooh, exciting I did my college applications, you know, I'll go to one of these places.” Mostly, her feelings centered on her love for her current institution, which underscores the importance of fit in the process, when she pointed out “this was the right pick for me.”

Conclusion

Perhaps more than any of the students I interviewed, Annie focused more on the perceived prestige of colleges and universities throughout her process. This related to her viewpoints on the surrounding community, which included her high school counselor. As a hard worker in a competitive IB program, it is not surprising that Annie was focused on four-year colleges and had a degree of motivation on her own when it came to the college admissions process. Like many students, she found the process daunting and stressful, but

also rewarding because of the academic effort she put in during her high school years. For Annie, the stressful process as a result of her IB program almost seemed like a rite of passage among her peers. This is perhaps one reason it was so surprising to Annie, her family, and her peers that she turned down admission to a prestigious university in favor of Sherman College. Ultimately, though, Annie learned through her college search that institutional fit was of greater importance to her and she felt more connected to Sherman College.

During the process, Annie had access to highly individualized resources through her counselor. She entered the IB program in ninth grade and had one counselor throughout her four years. She also knew the counselor through the counselor's daughter. However, in spite of the access to the counselor, she did not feel a relationship with her. By later in high school, Annie's IB cohort had dwindled to 18 students, giving the counselor ample opportunity to get to know and develop a relationship with each student. Other than writing a recommendation letter for Annie, though, Annie did not feel like the counselor was helpful. She provided time and information and had a long-term relationship with Annie, but not a substantial or meaningful one.

In part, Annie perceived the counselor to be part of the elite community. Annie also felt that others perceived her as "lower" in the program. However, the resources provided were, although plentiful, not individualized. Sometimes, that was because the focus was on large state institutions that would appeal to a larger population of Washington High School. In other instances, though, the information was standardized messages for the masses or automated, such as transcript requests. Annie's self-motivated

nature and drive to succeed was what led her to find Sherman College, a place where she felt a personalized “fit” and where she received the individual attention from the college admissions counseling side.

Case 2: Bella

Bella is the oldest of four siblings from a small town about an hour outside of a major metropolitan city in the south; she has a younger sister and two younger brothers. Her parents both have four-year degrees from regional state schools and her mother is currently going back to school to earn a masters degree. Her town is in a more rural area, in spite of its relatively close proximity to a major city. The school district only has one high school and six schools in total. There is a large athletic presence at the high school and the Future Farmers of America is prominent, reflecting the rural surroundings.

Academically, Bella was a star student and described herself as having hung around the “smarter group of people.” She noted that her best friend was valedictorian and that her friends were the people who “push, who do a lot of homework.” At the same time, Bella was a four-sport athlete at her high school, but was a standout mostly in swimming and cross country. She also fit in with the swim team, which was “a whole bunch of different people put together to swim.” As a freshman at Sherman, she is competing on their Division III swim team, as she knew she wanted to do when she began her college search. Bella has joined a sorority and says she “wouldn’t trade her time [at Sherman].”

Originally, though, Bella was very unsure of where she wanted to go to college. Much of what she knew about was state schools in her home state or nearby states. She

was also familiar with the local branch of a community college, because she took dual enrollment courses there. As Bella honed her interests, she honed her college search process, with the support of her parents. As a swimmer, she originally thought about joining the Coast Guard, but eventually realized she did want a traditional college experience.

For Bella, she focused on swimming in her college application process. Because she was unsure about her major, she focused her research less on the academic offerings of potential schools and more on her ability to swim in college. She described the process that she created for herself:

I got all of the schools that had swim teams where I would be able to swim there. I put them in a doc, and then I went through every single one and I marked them off if I wasn't fast enough. And then once I went through all the swim stuff, I started going to the environment. I did research on them like, do they have a lot of sports teams? Does everyone go out and support people? Is it a community? How big is it? Where is it located? So, I did research on all of them until I got down to five, and then I showed them those five, and then I was like, this is the ones that I'm going to make a decision on.

Ultimately, she applied to Sherman College, two other small liberal arts colleges- one in her home state and one in Florida-, a mid-sized STEM-focused university in the south, and a small, regional state university in a rural area of a nearby southeastern state. All five schools are, per her parents' advice, more than an hour away from home.

Bella attended a high school in a nearby district during her freshman year of high school, but switched at the start to her sophomore year. Bella's sister has a dyslexia diagnosis, and the previous high school was not meeting the needs of her learning difference. Adams High School has a better program to support students with learning differences, including a dedicated coordinator for Individual Education Plans. Because her sister attended Adams High School, Bella was also able to transfer in, which their parents wanted as well because there is a better swim team at Adams for Bella. Bella's college search eventually centered around her desire to swim in college, so attendance at Adams High School benefitted both siblings, but for different reasons.

Adams High School

Adams High School is the only high school in the eponymous Adams Independent School District in the town of Adams. Serving 1000-1200 students approximately, the school offers everything from technical and career education courses, to the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program to AP courses to dual enrollment. Bella described her high school as a fairly typical high school environment. She mentioned various groups divided up by interest, such as the academically-minded students or various athletic groups. Most students, she recalled, had plans to attend four-year institutions after high school, which was different than her previous school where most people would not go on to higher education. Although data was not available on the percentage of students who do actually go on to higher education, the state education agency report show that over 96% graduate from high school in four-years, while only 52% of graduates are designated as college, career, or military ready.

At Adams High, though, students who were college-bound still focused mostly on large state institutions. Even if they began searching for a smaller or different type of institution, plans often changed. Bella said that one of her friends, “he committed to swim at a D3 school, changed his mind, went to a big school. And then same story for my, one of my other friends I graduated with me. She committed to go to a small school and then went to a big school.”

Core academic disciplines at Adams offer three pathways to graduation: on level, advanced, and college level. The on-level track fulfills basic graduation requirements or exceeds those credits through basic courses, while the advanced and college-level tracks offer a mix of advanced, AP, and dual credit courses. For example, the advanced level in English offers Advanced English in ninth and tenth grades followed by AP English in eleventh and twelfth grades. The college-level track also begins with Advanced English in ninth and tenth grades, but students can take dual enrollment college courses at a nearby community college for junior and senior years. The science curriculum has similar tracks, but the college-level track is a mix of AP and dual enrollment classes.

The counseling staff of Adams High School consists of three counselors who divide the student body up by last name, plus a Registrar. Each counselor works with the same group of students each year and has responsibilities ranging from personal counseling to academic planning to post-secondary planning. The school also assists with and monitors completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) due to a state law that requires all high school students to complete the FAFSA or a waiver. With an overall population of approximately 1000-1200, each counselor has an

annual caseload of approximately 350-400 students. Bella's counselor, Mr. Hamilton, worked with students with last names from A-G across all four grade levels. In addition, there was a counselor who supported the dual enrollment students, like Bella. In large part, Mr. Hamilton was Bella's support through the college admissions process, while the dual enrollment counselor helped her with those courses. She had positive relationships with both as the following sections will describe.

Outside influences and support

Bella did not express a pressure to attend college, but she did indicate that it was a natural progression for her after high school. In Bella's view, her parents' expectations were "just whatever will make us happy. They're not like 'you have to go to college.' They're like, whatever is going to fulfill you." When she described the advice from her parents, though, it was always about going to college. In spite of her brief thought that she might join the Coast Guard, it was clear from her remarks that both she and her parents expected college as the next step, but not as a forced expectation.

Her parents also did not have any expectations on prestige of an institution. Bella said that "their biggest advice was find somewhere that one, that'll make me be successful and or help me be successful and then also a place that I enjoy going because they didn't just want me to go to the smartest school, but not enjoy going there." She said that her parents just wanted her to be happy and to make the right choice for her. In the process, they let her "take the reins, they didn't the only requirement for them was I had to be an hour away from home. So that's what they said, because they didn't want me to be coming home every weekend. They wanted me to experience college without them right

there.” Her parent’s support was further shown in the high school choice for Bella and her siblings. Bella’s first high school was much smaller, with less competitive athletics, and a population that largely did not attend college.

Because her siblings are younger and have not yet experienced college admissions, they were not a source of guidance in the college search process, but they did provide further examples of how Bella’s parents were supportive of them. Like Bella, her parents expect that her brother will go to college but “he's definitely they can tell he'd be the type of person if they didn't push him to go, he probably just wouldn't go.” In other words, the overall feeling in the family was that the children will go to college, but the amount of involvement from the parents depended on the temperament of each child.

College-level factors

Bella’s desire to swim in college led her to reach out to colleges initially. She visited seven and narrowed down the list to five. On her visit, she was impressed by the effort that Sherman made to make her feel comfortable: “when I came to visit, after you do your visit, like your tour, you go back and you talk to the counselor and they walk you through what's the next step, your cost, stuff like that.” Those connections are ultimately what made her choose Sherman. Bella said, “I just felt like I liked the people here, so that's how I made my decision.”

Based on the expectation of Bella’s parents, she needed to be more than an hour away from home. Based on Bella’s expectation, she wanted to be somewhere that she could swim. While she did not directly express the desire for a personalized experience or for the “right fit” when she began her search, she did indicate that once she was in the

process, fit was an important factor in making her final decision. In particular, she liked the personalized aspect of Sherman College, saying “our admissions counselor would send us handwritten notes and stuff like that, and I thought that was really nice and helping me, convince me to go here because I was like “oh, it's personalized for me.”

Bella did not express many preconceived perceptions of colleges. She did express how uncommon it was for others at her school to choose a small, liberal arts college, but she did not express any perception that her choice was odd or less prestigious. In discussing her parents’ expectations, she already noted that the expectation was not about prestige, but rather what would make her happy. She reiterated this in talking about how she would pass along the same advice to others, saying, “it's not just always about the best academic school or the biggest.”

Benefits of college counselor

Bella had the benefit of speaking with two different counselors. In both cases, Bella’s experience was that they provided advice and assistance, but that they also were personable, caring, and created an environment of a positive relationship between student and staff. Bella said that she felt Mr. Hamilton “did care about like our well-being and mine specifically.” Informally, Bella noted that Mr. Hamilton was someone that she could also connect with outside of the official meetings, saying “our school is pretty small, so I'd like see him in the cafeteria, or he'd be the lunch monitor. So, we, we'd talk all the time when I'd see him in the hallways and all that.”

On a more formal basis, though, she remembers having three official meetings with him during her senior year, in which she says, “it was just like talk to [him] about

where I'm at college process wise, how we're going to get my transcripts there, where we're sending it to.” Bella also discussed her specific college options with Mr. Hamilton. She would present him a college that she researched to see if he had advice on her chances of admission. He would help her find out more about the standards of the college and what their SAT range is for admission and provide advice on her chances. Additionally, Bella noted that at her school, “we definitely worked on scheduling a lot, since it wasn't separate from college stuff.” Mr. Hamilton would check in with her about her search process and applications, as well as her dual credit classes. Lastly, he helped her with getting applications submitted for local scholarships.

With her dual credit counselor, she described a similar relationship of assistance and advice. At one point, one of Bella’s dual credit classes became an overbearing workload. However, she was concerned about what dropping the class might do to her schedule and her college application process. She and some of her classmates went to the dual credit counselor to discuss how to handle it. They showed the counselor the extent of their work and the counselor was able to help them navigate a discussion with the teacher to scale back the amount of work.

Bella described her relationship with both counselors as friendships. Of her dual credit counselor, she said,

I just talked to the dual credit counselor just not, not as her being my counselor, just because she was like my friend. So, I was asking her opinion and stuff like that. We talked to her. We’d tell her all of the drama. So, it was like I'd say she

was the person that I would talk to the most as far as just a friendship, but a teacher, obviously.

Of Mr. Hamilton, she expressed a similar sentiment: “I’d say we were friends I think that I liked to go in and talk to him. I felt like there wasn’t a barrier between us. He got my jokes and stuff like that. So, I think we would be...I think we are close.” Both in informal and more formal interactions, Bella seemed to feel that the relationship was professional and provided a helpful service, which being personable and individualized.

Ineffective college counselor

Although Bella’s experience with her counselors was an overall positive one, she did note two areas in particular in which she wished she had had more resources provided. First, no counselor ever spoke with her about any specific college or helped her learn what kind of school might be a good fit for her. She did say “They would send out about SAT and ACT. But they wouldn’t tell us when deadlines for specific colleges were or anything like that.” Although Mr. Hamilton was helpful with the tasks that she had, her advice would be that counselors should “be open to listening to what [students] want out of their college.” Because she did not get advice in this area, Bella mostly found colleges that fit her for herself.

The second resource she wished she had was greater access to information about out-of-state schools. She felt like the counselors would only talk about in-state options. As was noted earlier in this chapter, most of the college-bound students were planning on large state schools, most of which were in state, but Bella’s family expected her to go farther from home. She also mentioned that “they would talk about in-state colleges,

which makes sense if you're going to a public school because of the in-state tuition. But I would have liked to hear more about out of state options, too.” The distance of her high school from so many options made her feel more disconnected from the information that was out there: “If I feel like I would have been near them, I would have heard about them.”

Resources for college admission

Remarkably, Bella feels like she had such positive counselor interactions, given the large caseloads of the counselors. In addition to the large caseloads, each counselor was also responsible for scheduling; Adams did not have a counselor just for college counseling. Chapter Two discussed how the large caseloads and additional responsibilities are two of the major hinderances to building relationships with students. Even though Bella did say she wished she had heard more information about other college options, she also said that it was unreasonable for the counselors to keep up with so much information about specific colleges, such as application deadlines, because of how many there were and how the counselors had so many responsibilities.

The information provided by counselors was also an important resource for Bella. One resource provided by the school was a program in which current college students from the nearby regional state university volunteered to help with applications. Although Bella was unclear on all the details, the general idea was that Adams High students could take their admissions applications to college students who would look through the paperwork and offer advice or help check for errors. The counseling staff also arranged visits from college admissions counselors who would set up display tables during the

lunch period with information about their schools. That, however, was the only resource Bella could remember where she was able to get information about specific colleges. She did not remember there being announcements or other ways of connecting with those visiting colleges; it was merely a chance that a college she might have been interested in was present on a particular day.

The physical space of the counseling office is also considered a resource, although it does not appear to be a factor in relationship building. Bella did view the space as a resource. The office had college information that “showed where they were, and then their application deadline.” On the other hand, the office space was not highly accessible to students. The office was past the front desk of the school, so students essentially had to leave the main part of the building to get there. The space was more of a passive resource for students.

Girl’s college admissions journey

Considering the lack of resources provided about specific schools and the application process, Bella was very positive about her college admissions experience, saying “I’m so excited. It’s like a test that I know the answers to. But so right before I was like, I don’t want to have to do all that work; it’s so much effort. But once I got started, I was like, oh, my gosh, I love it; it’s so fun!” She did have difficulty narrowing her options down. She said, “I was interested in doing everything, and I was like there’s not one thing that I really want to do. I just want to try everything.” In the end, she felt “content with all the effort.” Like many students, though, once it was done, she felt a sense of relief and that she could wait on the next step of her journey.

Because she did not have as many resources from the college office about specific schools, Bella found herself doing more of her own research and creating her own process. Compared to her peers, she says she “definitely put more effort into finding a school that I liked than they did.” Once she narrowed down her list, she visited seven schools, and eventually applied to five. In each case, she reached out to the admission counselor at the college and to plan her visits. When it came time to make the actual decision, she did not talk to Mr. Hamilton about her visits, not because she did not trust him, but because she wanted to make the decision for herself of how she felt about it. Overall, the process involved a lot of research on Bella’s part because she was “adamant to find a place that I really liked, and I guess I knew exactly what I was looking for.” That desire, though, also led her to complete the applications on her own, essentially being self-taught at this entire process.

Conclusion

Bella’s desire to swim in college was a large motivator in her college admissions search. With her parents’ support to look farther from home, she instituted her own college search process using swimming websites. As a self-starter, she researched on her own, planned her own college tours, and narrowed her list down to five applications. She found the process daunting at times, but was also very excited about her future and proud of herself for taking the process into her own hands. She also wanted to find a college that would be a good fit for her, not just academically or athletically, but socially and mentally. Like many girls, the “feeling” of fit was important to her, as were the personal

connections she made with the Sherman College admissions staff, one of the motivating factors for her attending.

The counseling staff of Adams High School does not provide many resources for college admission to its students. In part because there are a number of students who are not college-bound, there is also a focus on career-readiness or technical education programs. The location of the high school does not make it a popular stop for many college and university admissions counselors traveling to visit high schools. The counseling staff does offer a website of resources and one annual college admissions program, but very little in the way of information about specific colleges. However, the main reason the counselors, like Mr. Hamilton, are not able to provide a high level of resources is the large caseload and multiple responsibilities.

Although she did not meet as much with Mr. Hamilton until her senior year, one advantage Bella had was that Mr. Hamilton was her counselor because of her last name, so she did not change each year. Additionally, she had further support from her dual enrollment counselor. In both instances, she felt a strong, positive relationship. In her college search process, she had guidance along the way from her counselor Mr. Hamilton. Most interactions with Mr. Hamilton relating to Bella's college process were informal. The conversations were more about Bella communicating how she was doing with her own self-created process, rather than getting specific assistance from Mr. Hamilton. Although he was happy to help when needed, he provided more conversational guidance and completing transactions than truly counseling her through the process. However, Bella felt supported throughout. She felt a friendly relationship and that Mr.

Hamilton was personable, which seems to have been the most important factor in their relationship.

Case 3: Claire

Claire is from a midsize city in a southeastern state; her home city is not the largest in the state or the hub of most commerce or industry in the state, but it is the state capital. Her mother originally attended a four-year institution, but did not graduate and entered a career that did not require a two or four-year degree. Within the last few years, though, she went back to school and got her associates degree. Claire's father attended three different institutions- a community college, a historically black college, and a regional state university, before earning his bachelors degree. Claire has one younger brother in elementary school and an older brother preparing to graduate from the same regional state university attended by their father.

Since she was a young girl, Claire decided that she wanted to attend the large, regional university in an urban area about an hour from her home city. She knew the school had a good pre-med and pre-health science programs, which had long been an interest of hers. So, for many years, she considered that school to be her first choice. She also knew she didn't want to go too far from home. As a high school student, though, she attended a college fair downtown in her city, and it was there that she met representatives from several different colleges. As she began to learn more about different schools, it became apparent to her that what she wanted was not necessarily a great pre-med program at the expense of a small, more personal atmosphere and a traditional campus feel.

Ultimately, Claire applied to the large state university of her childhood dreams, although in her descriptions of the process, she was never truly interested in it after her childhood. Additionally, she applied to three, possibly four, small liberal arts colleges in her home state. One she was interested in, but couldn't remember if she had actually applied. Two of them she really liked, one of which was Sherman College, and the third she "applied there just to apply." Last, she applied to a highly prestigious university in the southeast, which she learned about from a local information session.

Jefferson High School

Jefferson High School is a relatively new school, having been established as a magnet school for grades 9-12 in the late 1990s. Its first graduating class was 2002. The focus of Jefferson as a magnet program is to implement technology into the classroom throughout all courses at all levels. The school currently offers eight AP courses in addition to its technology-based magnet program, in which students choose a focused area of study in addition to core courses. The options for areas of study are primarily STEM based. Beyond the regular diploma, earned by satisfying core requirements, students can earn an Advanced Endorsement by taking two years of a foreign language, which is not otherwise required. Jefferson requires an admissions application and admits students based on previous grades, attendance, and behavior. The school's population is relatively small, with only about 550 students and the school is highly ranked as a public school in the state. Jefferson's status as a magnet school allows the administration to maintain relatively small class sizes.

The high expectations of this rigorous environment were reflected in Claire's comment that the principal's favorite saying is "keep it classy." She explained that "we were a magnet school, and so they say magnet students are supposed to be at a higher level than public school students and so you would see the behaviors that the students have at other schools, and they expected our behavior to either not be like that at all, or much better than public schools." As far as the level of academics, Claire said that "class-wise the teachers, certain teachers, were rigorous, some were not. They were more lenient with students. But overall, I will say you get a good education there." Socially, Claire described the school as typical with people "having their own groups."

In terms of her classmates, Claire said that they planned on going to college, the military, or the workforce, but that "most went to college, even if they didn't want to go." Many of her peers seem to have ended up attending college by default. She said,

some wanted to go to college because they want to be STEM majors. They want to be things that require a degree, but others, they didn't want to go. I mean they're in college now, but that wasn't in their best interests. They really didn't want to go, and they would say that. But they didn't want to go to the military, and they didn't want to work. So, they just ended up going to college.

Being at a magnet school equated, in Claire's mind, to the expectation that students at Jefferson would achieve a level of prestigiousness compared to other public schools.

The counseling staff at Jefferson High consists of two counselors and an aide. In Claire's memory, "there was a main one that all the seniors went to, and she helped them with college applications and things like that. And then there was one personal one, but

really all of them, all of their jobs, they all did everything. So, you could go to anyone for any questions you had.” According to the school’s website, though, the aide serves in a primarily administrative capacity, while one counselor serves the ninth-grade population to ensure a smooth transition and solid academic planning for the magnet program. The main counselor, Ms. Hancock, serves the remaining three grades. Overall, the counseling staff is responsible for academic scheduling, personal counseling, academic support, college entrance test preparation and registration, as well as the college admissions process. With a large caseload, it is perhaps not surprising that Claire did not have a close relationship with the counseling staff, but the availability of counselors was not the main problem.

Outside influences and support

Although Claire did not feel that the expectation to attend college was forced upon her, she did feel like her parents’ expectations were high and that it was expected she and her brother would attend college. She said, “I think it was just understood that we were both gonna go because we both wanted to go, so they didn't really have to ask us if we were going to college or not, because we both wanted to go.” She did not, however, feel like there would be consequences or that it was demanded of her to attend college. Her father is a teacher, which she thought contributed to the expectations that she would do well in school and attend college after high school. Her parents especially expected her to do well when it came to math and other STEM subjects, which was her focus at Jefferson High School.

When it came time to search for a college, expectations were similar, in that her parents were clear that they had specific expectations and desires for Claire, but those were never presented to Claire in a harsh or demanding way. Claire stated that, “they were very supportive with me making my own decisions about what I wanted to do, and where I wanted to go. They never pushed a certain place on me.” In particular, her dad wanted her to continue her STEM studies and therefore, did not want her to play a sport in college in case that commitment detracted from her studies. Claire did choose to continue in STEM fields in college, but is also running track for Sherman College.

Claire’s mother wanted her to find a similar community to the “family” that she found at Jefferson High School, so she told Claire “to find a community, a college with a great community and the size that [Claire] wanted. Her mother also told her not to worry about the cost of college, because “they (her parents) can handle that.” She mentioned that she looked at state schools, but that her parents never pushed that option on her. Although she did ultimately choose a private college, Claire did speak about scholarships that helped. Claire “wasn't sure of going to a university or not, because [Jefferson] is really small.” She didn’t want to attend a large state school like her brother and father because she was used to the smaller environment of Jefferson High, which is in part what led her to Sherman College.

College-level factors

Most of Claire’s connections to colleges came through previous knowledge or because a representative visited her hometown. From a young age, she envisioned attending a large, regional state institution about an hour from her hometown. However,

when she began actually searching for a school, her plans changed. First, she became connected with a mid-sized, prestigious southern university that hosted an information session in her hometown. Following that event, she said, “that's when I changed my mind and decided that's where I wanted to go.” Ultimately, she felt like the connections with that university did not continue after the information session. Additionally, after attending a college fair, she collected applications to several liberal arts colleges in her home state as well and had good conversations with those representatives.

The relationships she developed during the process were important. Claire had a good connection with the counselor from Sherman College. Yet, she also talked about another small liberal arts college whose “admissions counselor was really friendly” she said he even “gave me his personal cell number if I needed any information about the college or scholarships.”

Since she was young, Claire had dreamed of attending the large, regional state university about an hour from her hometown. Yet, when she visited, she did not feel that it was a fit. She said of her tour, “They really only showed us one building, so it wasn't really personable, and I could not see myself there. So, I wasn't really feeling like this is it- this is my new home, like some people do when they tour colleges.” She did acknowledge that the tour was short, and largely only outside the buildings due to COVID. However, she still felt strongly about the fit when she toured Sherman College, saying that “It was really nice. People were really personable, made me see myself at the college.”

Claire's search was fairly narrow. She knew she did not want to go far from home, so she only looked at schools in her home state or close by. She had very few criteria when starting out. She stated, "I wasn't really sure what other schools I wanted to go to, but I did know that I wanted to go to a school with a good medical program, a good pre-health science program." Claire did not have many preconceived notions of colleges, other than her childhood dream school, and had, in fact, not heard of some of the ones in her own home state.

Benefits of college counselor

Overwhelmingly, Claire attributed her positive counselor interactions with the college admissions professionals she met from different colleges and universities. As far as her high school college admissions counselor was concerned, she mostly described a transactional relationship. On the other hand, she described the counselors from Sherman and other schools as being "personal" and "sending friendly messages." Claire understood that this was a method of recruitment, but she was still impressed by the personal touch.

On the other hand, her interactions with Ms. Hancock were described mostly as task-oriented or if she had a specific question. For example, Claire said,

Well, we talked about how I would send my applications in which they use the Common App now, or you can do the applications online. So, we talked about that. Those are the type of questions I asked and about if I should send my ACT scores in or not, because at that time it was ACT optional. And so my ACT scores were not as high as I would have liked them to have been. So, we talked about

that and, and just about the different colleges in general, that I, that might interest me and about personal essays and reflection writing for applications.

Although she did go to Ms. Hancock with questions, it is important to note that these were surface level interactions in Claire's view. She did not describe these conversations as supportive or caring. This is evidenced when she was asked if she trusted her counselor and she replied plainly, "I trusted her to do her job."

Because of this, the assistance Claire received from Ms. Hancock was perceived to be task-oriented, rather than relationship based. Claire said, "when we would go to her for things that she had to do because it was her job, she would do them." In describing other forms of counselor assistance, she said, "When we had to send our transcripts to the different colleges, she would call us in and let us know where she would be sending them." Interestingly, Claire did mention informal counselor interactions. For example, she said she would sometimes just stop by Ms. Hancock's office to ask a question or "anytime you had a question or anything you could go in there when she was there and ask about any college information."

Ineffective college counselor

The lack of relationship stemmed from the belief that Ms. Hancock had an unapproachable demeanor. Claire described Ms. Hancock as "disinterested in helping us" and said that other than remembering Claire's name, she did not try to get to know students at all. Even though Claire said that she could pop into ask questions or go by the office to see if the counselor was there, it was clear that the pervasive feeling on Claire's behalf was one of negative interactions. In other words, just because she could stop in

and see the counselor did not mean it would be a positive encounter. When asked why, she said, “I really didn't have many encounters with her during my senior year, during my college process. I will say that not many people really had a relationship with her because she was kind of unapproachable.”

Claire said that the counselor's personality was one reason for this and that “she wasn't really a bubbly person.” Continuing that theme, Claire said “she walked around as if she had an attitude. She might not have had one, but that's how she portrayed herself, and so that's why I said she was unapproachable.” When it came time to actually provide assistance, Claire felt it wasn't provided out of genuine concern or desire for support and that “we would ask her to do things, and she just seemed as if she didn't want to do it.” Again, Claire tellingly used the plural when she was asked if she felt like the counselor cared about her, saying “Not really. I don't think any of us did.

Perhaps this perception was a result of the fact that generally, Ms. Hancock would speak to the students in large group, rather than personal settings. In terms of specific assistance, Claire felt that it was minimal: “She was telling me that personal essays that colleges look at those. That was pretty much it. It's not much.” When Claire visited a school, she did not talk to Ms. Hancock about it before or after. When Claire was accepted to a college, she also did not notify the counselor, nor did she notify her when she made the decision to attend Sherman. Until she was required to do so for a senior celebration event where the college decisions were announced, Claire did not speak to the counselor about the specifics of her college admissions process. Had she had more

assistance, she would have spoken more with the counselor. When asked what she did not get from her counselor that she needed, she responded,

An actual relationship, like her actually caring that we were going to college, and we needed her help. Most of the time she wasn't there when we needed her to be there and so when I needed to go talk to her, or if I needed to get something from her office, and she wasn't there, I couldn't do that. I would have to wait. And then it would slow me down with my college application process. So, if she was more, she was there more and more approachable, I feel like it would have been a little bit better.

A helpful counselor relationship would have benefitted Claire in her process, as she noted that it would have helped for the counselor to “have the time for somebody to sit down and have a conversation with them about something they're really passionate about.”

What is clear about her needs, though, is that without the approachability, the assistance with tasks was still not beneficial, as she said that “having the right attitude will make someone open up to you.”

Resources for college admission

As was mentioned before, Claire felt like Ms. Hancock was frequently unavailable for assistance, making the process more difficult. Like many high schools, Jefferson’s counseling staff is responsible for a multitude of tasks and a hefty caseload of students. Claire said about the counselors,

They did everything. They did college stuff. There was a main one that all the seniors went to, and she helped them with college applications and things like

that. And then there was one personal one, but really all of them, all of their jobs, they all did everything. So, you could go to anyone for any questions you had. Though it might appear as though the college admissions focused counselor would be more available, the reality of counseling jobs in many high schools is that the staff wears many hats (MacAllum et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2018; Radford et al., 2016; Zinth, 2014). The same was certainly true of Claire's counselor, giving each student less time and attention than would have been helpful, in Claire's view.

The one resource that Claire mentioned was scholarship information. She did say that Ms. Hancock was good about sending out information on deadlines and applications for various scholarship opportunities. That is primarily a passive resource since it was information emailed out rather than provided personally. Otherwise, Claire did not recall any other information provided by the counseling office, either in print or online, either in the office itself, or to the greater school community.

What was perhaps surprising given Claire's description of the lack of personal counseling and the lack of resources is that she really appreciated the physical office space. She described the space as "homey" and said there were "lots of decorations up." Claire said "The things she had in her office made you feel like you were at home. You know, some spaces are like you can't get in it because you feel uncomfortable, but her office was comfortable." She did not have specifics about the space that made it comfortable, and she did not describe it as a beneficial resource, but it is interesting that she had such positive descriptions of the space, given the circumstances.

Girl's college admissions journey

One interesting note about Claire's statement on the counselor's lack of availability was when she said, "it would slow me down with my college application process." It is telling that she used the words "me" and "my" in describing the process. Claire took the initiative to attend the university information session in her hometown and who went to speak to college admissions counselors at the college fair. Similarly, she described herself in this process as "just kind of going with the flow, getting my list together."

Based on the list she got together, she applied to each college on her list using the Common Application. Like other students, that process was daunting and although Claire said she was "pretty excited to be thinking about going to college and doing my applications" it also became overwhelming at some point." Even with the Common Application, she had to write different essays and apply for various scholarships and financial aid.

Although she talked about her own personal process, apart from the help of a counselor, she did use other resources. She noted, "I got help with my personal essays from my teachers, and also my peers. Because we were really doing the process all together. So, we were helping each other out." Whereas her friends felt rushed, she felt less pressure because she knew sooner than others where she wanted to attend.

Conclusion

Claire began her college search process with one school in mind, so it is interesting that her final choice differed so drastically from her original "dream school."

Yet this change happened almost entirely on the merits of Claire's own efforts to research and apply to colleges, rather than through assistance from a counselor. Although not pressured by her family, Claire did note that her father is a teacher, which was in part, why she expected to attend college. At the same time, Claire also felt an innate desire to attend a four-year college and assumed based on her acceptance to a magnet school that this was her path. She also was a hard worker in her STEM program in high school, which drove her to seek out pre-medicine and pre-health programs. Once she began doing her research, though, she learned that the large, regional university she originally preferred was not her only option. By taking the initiative to speak to college admissions counselors, she found that she enjoyed the more personal and individualized feel of schools like Sherman College.

Although there were some resources provided by the counselors of Jefferson High School, they were not abundant. However, Jefferson High School did not face the same large caseloads that many urban public high schools do. Because it is a magnet school, the population is smaller, but there is only one counselor for tenth through twelfth grade, and she has many different responsibilities. For this reason, most of the resources provided to students were distributed or announced in large groups. For any individual attention, Claire had to take the initiative to talk to the counselor and often found that she wasn't available.

Had Claire's counselor been able to provide plentiful resources or offer her time, it is unclear if that would have made a difference to Claire. The counselor was, in Claire's view, unapproachable and uninvested in building relationships with students. She

definitely did not have availability for the students, according to Claire, but even with that, the assertion that the counselor “had an attitude” likely would have resulted in similar feelings on Claire’s part. There was no perceived effort by the counselor to build trust, get to know students personally, or to become emotionally invested in the students’ plans. To students, especially someone like Claire who wanted an environment of individual attention, this led to little more than a series of college admissions transactions.

Case 4: Dara

Dara’s blended family is also a blended mix of educational experiences. Her mother has a two-year degree and her father did not attend college. Dara has two half siblings, an older brother and sister, who are much older, neither of whom attended college, although her sister did start college. Dara also has a younger brother who is currently in high school. Although her older half siblings did not complete degrees, Dara said that for her and her younger brother, “it’s definitely been an expectation to go to college, but we’ve never been expected to really excel.” She said her parents “thing was pass and go to college.”

The location of the nearby university made that an attractive choice for Dara, in her parents’ opinions, partly because of familiarity and partly because of the proximity to home. However, one of Dara’s uncles attended Sherman College many years ago, so it was also familiar. Outside of that, both Dara and her parents were very open to exploring college options. Dara was a high school lacrosse player and was interested in continuing to play in college, although she was not looking to be recruited by Division I schools.

Dara did eventually apply to the local university, but described it as a fallback. As a lacrosse athlete, she also considered schools where she could play lacrosse at the Division II or Division III level, including three small liberal arts colleges, one in the southeast, one in the rural Midwest, and one in the mid-Atlantic. She did a recruiting visit to two of those schools plus a recruiting visit to Sherman College. In addition to those schools, she also explored highly prestigious schools in the northeast and southeast, a selective flagship state university in the Midwest, as well as selective liberal arts colleges from the northeast through the south and on the west coast. All in all, she applied to approximately twenty colleges and universities and admits, "I had no idea at all, because I've always been like, I really want as many options as possible." She listed many of them, but was unable to remember the entire list; it was literally and figuratively all over the map.

Madison High School

Dara's hometown of Madison shares the name of her high school and the nearby state university. Madison is a small city, whose primary business is the flagship university in the city, also named Madison. Her high school's campus borders the university campus. The crossover of mascots, colors, and traditions is hard to miss. Dara noted the parallels between the two institutions:

My high school is really big. I graduated with about 700 people, and I would say, from what I've seen of [Madison] University, I feel like [Madison] High School was like a little version of that. There was- it was definitely really cliquey socially. Everybody kind of had their groups.

Even though the campus is so close in proximity and culture to the university, she said that “nobody is that concerned about it as kids” and that when it came to college, she and her peers “were all just so excited to be wherever we were going, and excited that we're all going to be in sororities and we're all going to go to football games.”

Aside from the social dynamics, Dara felt that her high school could be potentially academically competitive, but “there were also classes that you could kind of just coast by in.” Dara was a member of the IB program, which at Madison, was the IB diploma program in which students had two years of all IB classes, but the ninth and tenth grades were standard courses. Dara’s cohort for IB was roughly 20 other students, who all applied as sophomores and then had their final two years of coursework together for every class.

As for her peers, Dara said that most of them did go on to four-year universities, but mainly the two large flagship state institutions. She said she did “know some people that went to technical schools or trade schools, but I think it was a minority of us that went to smaller liberal art schools.” Many of her comments echoed the difference between her plans and those of her peers, especially as compared to those outside of the IB program. Within the program, she said

It was really competitive, I think, and it was kind of like a mark of status about which schools you were able to get into. So, I know when decisions started coming out, everyone was running around telling everybody what schools they got into, and then you would see those kids just sitting quietly, and you knew they didn't get in where they wanted to. So, I think for a lot of us it was really

competitive, but for the people maybe not as academically competitive as we were.

Although the peer expectations may have been high, she felt that the school and the counselor expected the students to go to college, especially those in the IB program, but that they did not have “any expectations as far as what kind of college.” Many of the people in the IB cohort eventually chose one of the large state schools, and “a couple” went to the local community college.

Dara expressed that she thought most people in her graduating class went to four-year college, but the high school reports that 58% attended a four-year institution, while 35% attended a two-year institution. Another 2% were reported as joining the military and 5% went directly to the workforce. The school is large- Dara’s graduating class was almost 700 students- and offers a wide-ranging curriculum. Madison High offers not only the IB diploma program, but a range of over 20 AP courses. To graduate, students can earn a standard or IB diploma. Students pursuing a standard diploma can also take courses to earn a variety of endorsements, including Advanced Academic, general Career-Technical, and Advanced Career-Technical. Students can pursue dual enrollment courses at the nearby community college or at Madison University.

The counseling staff reflects the large and diverse student body. There are six counselors in total, plus two Registrars, a career coach and AP Coordinator, and a department secretary. Four of the counselors serve the entire student body and divide the four grades up by last name. One of the counselors is an interventionist. The sixth counselor is the dedicated college counseling coordinator and IB program coordinator,

Mr. Franklin. Mr. Franklin served as Dara's primary contact throughout her college search process, mostly because of his role as her IB coordinator.

Outside influences and support

Although expectations seemed low to Dara, she also noted that she had "gotten a lot of support" from her parents. In terms of where she chose to go, she said, "it's definitely been an expectation that I was going to go to college but whatever I did in college has kind of been up to me." Dara's parents helped by completing the FAFSA for her and by helping her research schools. Dara's father

would go on a news website and stuff, and would literally just Google the college's name, and read all of the news articles about them and basically tell me fun facts about this school. And so that's where I got a lot of my information like the US News rankings and stuff like that, he would find them and see where they are on the list. So that's where a lot of their opinions about schools came from.

In spite of the research from US News and World Report, her parents did not take great stock in the rankings systems, rather they just gathered information from there. Their requirements for Dara were to "make sure that it was accredited, and it wasn't too expensive." The financial aspect ended up being very important to Dara, but her parents helped her by completing her financial aid paperwork. She did express that her parents did not "really [understand] how difficult it was going to be or how I wasn't going to be able to get into some colleges I simply like, my grades weren't going to be good enough for that, and how, even if your grades are perfect, you're still not going to get into every

college.” Given the expectations set forth, it is unlikely this was a result of pressure to succeed, but rather a lack of understanding about current trends in college admission.

As a member of the IB program, Dara put in a tremendous amount of effort in high school. She felt that for others “there were also classes that you could kind of just coast by in.” She compared her IB classmates to the rest of the school and noted that most of the school was focused on the two large state universities, while for others in the IB program, college admissions was “really competitive.” For her non-IB peers, the expectation was to attend college, but for the IB students, Dara said “I don’t think you took that program if you weren’t trying to get into a competitive college.” She did not have any sense, though, that the school expected any particular college or type of college from her.

College-level factors

When it came time to make a college decision, finances were important, but Dara did eventually decide that the personal connections she had at colleges were more important than admission to highly prestigious universities. In particular, she noted that at Sherman College, the admissions office connected her with a professor in charge of her future major. She noted he was “really personable” and spent time on a Zoom call with her answering questions and discussing the academic program, which ended up being “one of the biggest influences” in her final decision. She also appreciated the handwritten postcards she received from smaller schools “that felt very individual and personalized.” Although she did numerous tours at different schools, she found that those experiences yielded “the standard admissions counselor information session, followed by the tour and

the follow up email.” More personally, when she attended a scholarship event at Sherman, she met the Vice President of Enrollment who knew her name and welcomed her to Sherman.

Because Dara applied to so many different types of schools, she had a difficult time deciding and did get swayed by prestige at first. She said, “I feel like it's kind of easy to get caught up in the excitement of getting into a hard to get into school and make a decision that you might regret. So, I think I probably would have regretted going [there], because the environment is, I think, a lot more competitive.” Notably, when Dara spoke of her college choices, she referred to some of them as “big” schools. However, the ones she mentioned are not large in population; she used “big” to refer to prestige. In reality, Dara wanted a “tight knit campus community” regardless of prestige.

As was mentioned before, Dara’s IB peers were more focused on prestige while the school faculty and staff did not push prestigious schools. The counselor Mr. Franklin reminded her, for example, that Dara did not want a cold climate when she was leaning towards an expensive, out of state university that is highly prestigious but in a northern state. Ultimately, Dara’s financial and mental wellbeing won out and she is happy with her decision to attend Sherman.

So I did not make my decision until kind of the very last minute when scholarship stuff came out, and it really did come down to the scholarship because I really wanted to go to a fancy liberal arts college. But I realized, I, it kind of dawned on me that it was gonna be probably \$70,000, a year, and once I got those financial aid packages and realized I was not going to be receiving a lot of aid or really any

merit based scholarships from those schools. I thought about the fact that I want to go to law school. and I don't want to be in super huge debt.

It did take her some time to come to terms with the decision, as she saw her other friends attending Ivy Leagues or, as she said “big” schools. She described being “nervous” about her decision at first because of that, but has had a great experience at Sherman thus far.

Benefits of college counselor

To say that Dara had a positive experience with her high school counselor is an understatement. As this section will show, her comments were glowing and the relationship meant a great deal to her. Dara did have a counselor for her ninth and tenth grade years, but transitioned to working with Mr. Franklin when she entered the IB program. In our conversation, I noted that most questions would likely relate to her work with Mr. Franklin, she said, “My hero. I love him.” Due to the structure of the IB program, many of the interactions between Mr. Franklin and Dara were part of a specific guidance program. Dara said,

He had a very consistently great track record with college admissions. I know a lot of upperclassmen that went to really incredible schools, and they all said, ‘I don't know if I could have done it without Franklin.’ He always was super organized. He had a file for all of us, with all of our information in it, and when you came to a meeting, he was always prepared beforehand He always knew everything that you talked about at the last meeting three months ago. And he knew what you wanted to come in there and talk to him about based on your email. So yeah, I really trusted him.

Although the meetings themselves were structured, they were not required. As far as Dara could remember, the only required meeting was at the beginning of junior year to set the plan for the IB coursework. From Dara's recollection, there was also a mid-junior year, an end of junior year meeting, and an end of senior year meeting. The college meetings were not required, according to Dara, but it was assumed that the IB students would have them because of their focus on competitive college admissions.

In those meetings, Mr. Franklin provided consistent advice throughout Dara's search. Dara actually said she "enjoyed" the meetings because Mr. Franklin "felt like a friend that was gonna have my back through the process instead of like a teacher that I was trying to impress." Her interactions were "really helpful, really positive." For example, in her search for a prestigious university, she said "I remember asking him about Ivy Leagues and those single digit acceptance rates. And I was like, is that even a possibility for me? And he was always like 'yes, absolutely.'" He also advised her to try and increase her ACT score to improve her chances of admission and was "very encouraging about that."

He supported Dara in choosing the school that was best for her as well as what made financial sense. She frequently discussed her college options with Mr. Franklin and said that it felt like he was keeping a "mental file" of her process. Based on her financial needs, he even discussed with her the possibility of spending two years at the local community college and then transferring somewhere. On the other hand, he knew she had other interests and followed her lead in researching and selecting colleges; she noted "it was always where I directed the conversation." Having said that, he would remind her of

her priorities, such as talking about the cold when she looked at a northern school, for example, or the large size of institutions when she had previously said she wanted a small, liberal arts college. At one point, she toured a prestigious southern university, but said it was “too much walking, really spread out” and he said, “okay, file that one away.”

While Dara and her peers did choose to have structured meetings with Mr. Franklin, most of Dara’s glowing comments related to the frequent informal counselor connections that she and her IB cohort made during their junior and senior years. Dara described this by saying “his office door was always open” and “he wanted you to be comfortable when you were in there.” Dara said that “Mr. Franklin’s office was on the same hall with all of our classes, and so his office was like, he had a couch and everything, so we would all just go sit in there during lunch, and people would take naps on his couch. I talked to him a lot.” Mr. Franklin felt to Dara like a “favorite teacher” and that he “was a really good sounding board for anything.”

In addition to the group spending much of their lunch and free time in Mr. Franklin’s office, she said that she would see him at lunch or in the hall and let him know how things were going, such as when she was planning a tour to a college. What was also important to Dara was that he was excited for her and that he would remember it later. When it came time for decisions being sent to students, he would get notifications on Dara’s college admission through the Common Application website. Dara said “I would walk by his office, and he’d quietly gesture me into his office, and he would be like ‘congratulations’ and tell me how great it was, and how few students got in.” When students made a decision on college attendance, an unofficial- and not required- tradition

was to give Mr. Franklin a small gift from the chosen school. During our conversation, Dara said she had recently gotten a picture from Mr. Franklin of him wearing the Sherman College sweatshirt she had given him.

Because the informal counselor interactions with Mr. Franklin were so frequent, it was almost difficult for Dara to differentiate between unofficial guidance and clear assistance. Each IB student had an optional initial college preparation meeting about halfway through their junior year. During that meeting, Mr. Franklin and the student brainstormed colleges that might be of interest, and they would discuss academic fit in terms of GPA and ACT scores. At the end of Dara's junior year, Mr. Franklin worked with her to decide on where she wanted to apply and "established a college admissions team" for her. He took care of contacting the teachers for her recommendations. For her essays, he proofread them multiple times.

When researching colleges, Dara asked about numerous colleges and Mr. Franklin would go to the schools' websites during their meetings to try and find an answer. Dara acknowledged that she could have researched it herself, but "would have had to struggle a little bit, so he kind of did it for me and basically tell me about grad school acceptance rates, different rankings." With so much on her plate, she really appreciated the extra effort Mr. Franklin put in to make the process a little easier for her.

With the complicated logistics of college admissions- especially since Dara applied to approximately 20 schools- Mr. Franklin gave consistent help with applications. In one meeting with Dara and her parents, Mr. Franklin "introduced me to the Common App, and showed me the different sections, and he was connected to my Common App.

So, when I had teacher recommendation letters, they would go to him, and he would input most of those. I had one for my coach that he had to show me how to input myself. But he walked me through all of it.” Dara said that it was “hard to figure out how to put in the teacher recommendations and everything” on the Common Application website, but that she “could have texted [Mr. Franklin] and asked him, ‘hey, how do I upload this to the Common App website,’ and at home at ten o'clock at night he would have texted me the answer.” Similarly, he would assist with applications for the schools that did not use the Common Application by walking her through the process on his computer. Dara said, “it was really nice not to have to navigate all of that by myself,” echoing the sentiments of other students who commented on the difficulty of the process. When it came time to make a decision, he helped her as needed with decision making. He also helped counsel Dara and her parents on financial and “would tell us about which schools were most likely to give me a good financial aid package for my grades.”

Dara clearly expressed her understanding that Mr. Franklin worked diligently on behalf of his students and cultivated relationships.

He put in a lot of time outside of, I think, what was required of him. He very easily could have shut the door, closed the blinds, and had his lunch hour to himself. But I think he was really genuinely interested in what was happening in our lives and that was really nice to have someone that felt like he was on our team all the time.

In describing him as “consistently available” she also said that he was available for non-IB students. While all students in the school were required to meet with their counselor

about college admissions at least once, according to Dara, he said that any students who were not in the IB program sometimes wanted to talk to him and he was willing to meet with them as well. Recognizing that this took a lot of time, Dara said that what she found most valuable from a “practical meeting standpoint” was walking her through the details of the applications and scholarship portals. However, when asked what was most helpful overall, she said, “I think it was the emotional support that was my favorite thing.”

Ineffective college counselor

Perhaps not surprisingly, Dara did not have any experiences of negative counselor interactions throughout her work with Mr. Franklin. She could not immediately come up with an answer for something she needed that she did not get, but did say that “maybe the only thing was I could have done with a little bit more help, as far as my scholarship applications were concerned, because that was after the whole process.” As has been shown earlier in this case, Dara did have wide ranging options, so her process was often confusing for her. She suggested that counselors have students “write down a list of values they have in their college that they are really passionate about.” That is something she would have done in hindsight, or would have liked Mr. Franklin to do, but she never indicated that this was a lack on his part, rather just a suggestion for the future.

Resources for college admission

Given that Dara had no ineffective counseling experiences, she did note time as a scarce resource. Mr. Franklin does have responsibilities outside of counseling the IB students, and as Dara already noted, Mr. Franklin gives freely of his time at school. Other students outside of the IB program did meet about post-high school plans with their

respective counselors, but each of those counselors also had additional duties, such as dual enrollment and internship counseling. Thus, each counselor was extremely busy with many responsibilities on their plates.

The resources provided by Mr. Franklin mirrored the interactions that Dara had with him, in that some were more structured and geared towards specific help and some were more informal. Formal and structured resources included an information session for the entire school and school websites with college admissions resources. The information session was publicized throughout the school, not just to the IB students and was “college admissions 101 [Mr. Franklin] talked about absolutely everything, and he gave us these big packets, leather bound packets full of financial information and deadlines.” The deadlines and other university-specific information in those packets was for the two large state universities chosen by a large number of students.

The counseling staff also focused on the two state universities because each had a scholarship program for any in-state student meeting specific academic and test score requirements (although Dara could not remember if these programs are ongoing). Any counselor could assist with those scholarships. The counseling office has a robust website of resources for scholarship applications, ACT testing, and college admissions, including help with the Common Application. Much of it is financially focused or details information about state schools, but there are numerous links to guide students to research other schools.

When she described this, Dara said that the way to access the website was to click on Mr. Franklin’s name and get to “his” website. In reality, when I researched this, the

information is actually available through the counseling office and can be located through any of the counselors' names- or not through a counselor at all. She did say that the website would direct students for who to talk to in the counseling office, especially for counselors to sign off on scholarship applications. However, this focus on Mr. Franklin further speaks to Dara's perception of their positive relationship and the resources he provided.

Informally, Mr. Franklin again provided resources. He gave Dara several websites to research that were scholarship finders. What was really impactful, though, was that he gave Dara a copy of *Colleges That Change Lives*, a book of 40 colleges that are perhaps less well-known than some larger, prestigious institutions. These schools were selected by the author for being more engaged with individualized student learning and for producing high level outcomes of student success. One of these 40 colleges is Sherman College, which Dara said, "was actually kind of what drew me to Sherman, because I found them in that book."

An earlier description of students eating lunch and hanging out in Mr. Franklin's office clearly shows that the physical space was a consistent, positive resource. Outside of their level of comfort with Mr. Franklin, he also had a highly decorated space with college pennants and posters, where students had a visible representation of the many college options available. The space had a rack of college brochures on display as another resource. Of course, for Dara, the most important part was that "the space as a whole was very just homey" and "a very relaxed area." Again, Dara attributed the entire counseling office to Mr. Franklin, although other counselors shared the entire suite. Dara did not

differentiate between the whole counseling office and Mr. Franklin's specific office, because to her, the comfort level she felt was more of a result of her relationship with Mr. Franklin.

Girl's college admissions journey

Dara echoed feelings of stress during the college process, but also said that she had been originally excited about college for a long time. Since ninth grade, she said, "I have been compiling my list for a really long time, and crossing stuff out and coming up with new things." She recognized that her personality is someone who "wants as many options as possible" which she says is why she took the difficulty IB coursework and why she applied to 20 colleges. She felt she was more stressed out than the average high school student because of her IB coursework and because she applied to so many places.

Yet, she still maintained her level of excitement, perhaps to a fault. She described her feelings before the process by saying,

You see, like on YouTube, people get their college decisions back and will film a video of themselves getting them. And I always was really excited about it, because you see those videos of people getting into their dream school, and screaming and crying and hugging their parents. So, I was really excited for that kind of moment. But I don't think I really realized how much work goes into it until I actually started doing it.

She did say she knew it would be difficult because she had older friends in the IB program who had gone through the process. Because she described herself as a perfectionist, though, she wanted "each of my 20 schools to get the absolute best version

of me that they can get.” Multiple times, she mentioned that she did several revisions of her essays and have teachers and Mr. Franklin review them. In the end, though, she said “it was also really cool to know that all that work I was putting in was going to have such a big impact on my future.”

In addition to being a perfectionist, Dara also described herself as a self-starter. That was one reason she took it upon herself to apply to 20 colleges. However, she also had a lot of assistance from Mr. Franklin in the process. Dara did take the initiative to plan and schedule all of her visits to colleges and did the majority of her initial research into her list of options. She especially took the initiative to look beyond the large state universities that were so often the focus of her peers and other counselors. For Dara, the entire process was drawn out over two years of research, applications, visits, and decisions. While she had support from Mr. Franklin, she was motivated enough to make college admissions a regular part of her life for almost two years.

Conclusion

After a stressful two years in the IB program and a daunting college admissions process, one might think that Dara would look back upon that time with relief. While she does, she also feels a strong amount of gratitude for her high school and college counseling experience. During her junior and senior years, she balanced a rigorous course schedule with extracurricular activities, especially lacrosse, and her college admissions process. Along with others in her IB cohort, she sometimes was caught up in the perceived prestige of certain colleges and universities. This led to a wide-ranging college application process, both geographically and in terms of the institutional characteristics.

Initially, some of her options were based mainly on prestige, while others were based on where she could play lacrosse. As she considered colleges more, she learned that the small, liberal arts schools were better fits for her. She also had positive experiences with the college admissions counselors at Sherman College. Combined with financial considerations, she ultimately came to realize that she did want to be caught up in prestige of attending a “big” college only to not actually enjoy her experience.

Dara also exhibited traits of a self-starter in terms of the college admissions process and wanting to play lacrosse. Certainly, her work in the IB program demonstrated that she is a highly motivated and successful student. The difference is that she did not feel like she had to do the process on her own. Dara said the emotional support from Mr. Franklin was what she “most valued, because I had someone in my corner who understood what I was doing.” Whether through formal meetings or informal interactions, Mr. Franklin demonstrated to Dara that he wanted to get to know her personally. By remembering details about her, he helped cultivate the relationship.

Not only that, but Dara felt that he was able to give her the precious resource of his time, even when it did not seem like he had time. She did have the benefit of being in the IB program, which meant that Mr. Franklin had a smaller caseload of students (although he did have responsibilities outside of the IB program). The counseling staff as a whole was larger than that of other schools of a similar population. They each collaborated to provide online and in person resources. None of that, though, trumped that Dara felt like he was “on her team” and “actively trying” to get Dara into college.

Case 5: Eliza

Eliza hails from what is technically a small town in the southeast, but is, in effect, a suburb of a midsized city. The city is home to major industry and boasts an international and highly educated population compared to the rest of the state. What was once a sleepy town near a larger city is now a bustling area of shops, restaurants, and housing developments typical of a sprawling southern suburb. Eliza's family is one of the many who was transplanted due to the career opportunities in the city's growing technology fields.

Eliza is the middle of three children and the only girl. Her older brother graduated this spring from a large, regional state university in her home state and her younger brother is currently a student at her former high school, Monroe High School. Eliza's father has an undergraduate degree from a regional state university in a different southeastern state as well as a masters degree from a highly selective private university in the southeast. Eliza's mother has a four-year degree from the same regional state university as Eliza's father.

Interestingly, Eliza was the only participant who brought up the impact of COVID on her high school career. Eliza's ninth grade year went as planned, but quarantine happened in March of her sophomore year and most of her junior year was done virtually or in a hybrid format. For her senior year, she was back in person, but decided to graduate early because she was either uninterested in her course options or no longer needed credits. She did walk in the spring 2022 commencement ceremony, but was finished in December of 2021. During her semester after high school and before college, she took

one course at the local regional state university in her town, but otherwise, she worked full time to save for college. She expressed repeatedly that she did not begin college early because she did not want to lose freshman status that might hurt her chances of getting a scholarship.

When it came time to begin her college search process, Eliza felt like she struggled more than her peers because she didn't know where she wanted to go. She also was not interested in the state institutions favored by many of her peers. She had a strong interest in schools in Virginia and the Washington D.C. area. She also toured two in-state universities, but did not feel a sense of fit. On that same day, she also toured Sherman College on a whim because she was nearby. Ultimately, she remembers applying to five schools: three liberal arts colleges, including Sherman and two schools from her mid-Atlantic college tour, as well as the large, in-state flagship and a highly selective large, in-state flagship in a different southern state.

Monroe High School

Eliza's first description of her high school was that it is huge. Because of that size, she noted, and because of the nearby international industries, she felt like her high school was diverse and that she was "exposed to a lot of different perspectives and different people from different backgrounds, just because of the area brings in all kinds of people." The school is a large public school, with just over 534 graduates in 2022.

The diversity of the school equated to a variety of opportunities for Eliza and other students. She stated, "I think it's a diverse school, and there's also a lot of

opportunities. I would say they, they push you for exploring things you're interested in.”

The academic diversity of the school is wide ranging. Eliza stated that,

It's definitely heavily oriented towards college. Everybody was pushed toward a four-year degree, but then I would say it's become more focused on...like my little brother right now is in some welding class, and they, they talk to him a lot about the programs that at the community college for getting certified in welding. And there's I think there's a lot of that if you look for it. I would say that I never really sought out programs like that, because I was, I was doing my own thing with the courses that I needed. But it's, it's oriented toward college. There's a lot of- what do they call them- academies, I think. And there's a medical academy there's an engineering academy, and they're focused on getting you to that program in college.

Actually, the academies she mentioned are for career readiness, but she is correct that there are numerous opportunities at Monroe High School, while still maintaining rigorous college preparatory options for students. The school profile gives the entire list of college matriculation for the Class of 2022, and it is a highly diverse list, ranging from all four service academies to statewide community colleges to Ivy League schools, historically Black colleges and universities, Christian colleges, mid-sized universities, small liberal arts colleges, and numerous state institutions of all types.

Within this diverse range of academic achievement was a selective tier of top students taking college preparatory courses. There are 35 Honors or Advanced courses plus 33 AP courses offered for students, along with options for dual enrollment at the

local community college or university. In Eliza's senior year, there were 18 National Merit Semi-Finalists and 7 National Merit Commended Scholars. Eliza seemed to feel like everyone was college bound or at least pushed in that direction. Certainly, the percentage of college-bound students is high compared to other public schools. During her senior year 82% of graduates enrolled at in post-secondary education; among the seniors 65% attended a four-year institution while 17% attended a two-year institution. Much like Washington High School, Monroe High boasts of its students' academic achievements, pointing out on the profile that 314 graduates from the Class of 2022 were offered scholarships, totaling just under 30 million dollars.

In spite of the wide range of college choices from Eliza's senior year, she noted that most people chose their colleges very early on because "they knew where they were going." She felt like most of her peers had already settled on one of the three major in-state universities or perhaps a large, state university from a nearby state. In her view, family influences were prevalent in her peer's choices, especially if a friend's parents were graduates of a particular school and/or fans of a particular football team.

Eliza's memory is that her high school had one college admissions counselor and four additional counselors, with freshmen split by last name. She was mostly accurate in this. There is one counselor dedicated to college admissions as well as career counseling, Mrs. Mason. There are three other counselors, one for sophomores, one for juniors, and one for seniors. Each of those three also splits the freshman class by last name. Those counselors are responsible for academic planning, personal counseling, social and emotional development, and working with students on special programs like the school's

Co-Op program. In addition, there is a counselor specifically devoted to mental health therapy. Lastly, there is a counselor who splits time between Monroe High and another local high school; she works solely with a statewide virtual learning program.

Outside influences and support

Eliza believed her parents expected her not only to attend a four-year college, but to also maintain A and B grades along the way. Similarly, her peers were also focused on four-year institutions. Eliza felt that her main surroundings were all oriented towards four-year institutions, but that more recently, both her high school and her family were more open towards career-oriented options. She noticed that shift, but she felt as though the focus was “mostly college” stating that, “I know a few people who focused on the community college to four-year college route, which is smart, and then, but I don't know a ton of people who are like, I'm just not doing it at all.”

Eliza did have a brief period when she considered not attending college or going to college abroad, but she said she was “really never very serious” about that. Deep down she knew she wanted a traditional college environment and said her considering another path was most likely a result of not wanting to deal with college applications. Her parents supported her throughout but said that “growing up, I remember it was always, ‘you're gonna go to college, pick where you want to go.’” Her parents supported her by taking her on a number of college tours in the Virginia and Washington, D.C. areas. Although her parents preferred an in-state option for financial reasons, she felt very supported by going on tours “kind of far away” that Eliza “didn't think [she'd] get to go on.” In fact, her dad often encouraged her to do different visits even if it was a school Eliza was not

originally considering. Her mother would push her to meet with the counselor, Mrs. Mason, with any questions. Ultimately, if the financial aspects worked out, Eliza's parents supported her going farther away to Virginia or D.C.

Eliza's high school peers were also in similarly rigorous courses. Although she took a heavy load of AP courses, whereas others did not, she described the school as being "definitely heavily oriented towards college everybody was pushed toward a four-year degree." She described the academies as another reason her high school was focused on college. On the other hand, she said she saw a trend towards community college and career programs, such as a class her brother took in welding. Because her friends were more four-year college focused, though, she used that as a resource in her own college process.

College-level factors

Like other girls, Eliza also valued the personalized feel of her experience at Sherman College. She emphasized the tour and said, "how the tour goes is how I picked my school." Although she applied to several schools, her search eventually came down to Sherman College and another small, liberal arts college in a small Virginia town. As previously noted, she wanted to go to school in Virginia, so she emailed with the admissions counselors the most of any of her options. In particular, because she could not visit easily, she had a lot of online contact with them, especially about scholarships. She did have personal connections with Sherman College, too, but her focus was not on Sherman until the end of her process. On the other hand, her experience with the admissions office at the large state university to which she applied was "not personal at

all.” Eliza described that communication as more transactional and always initiated by her if she was concerned about a deadline.

When she learned more about small, liberal arts schools, Eliza had somewhat of a “light bulb moment.” She said she felt like “This is it! That must be where I want to go, because everywhere else makes me feel like I don't want to go to college.” Again emphasizing the importance of the tour, when she visited the large, state university, she said she could not see herself there. When she toured a large, regional university, her response was “never, not in a million years.” Even though her hometown is about two hours from Sherman College, she had never heard of it, but felt an immediate sense of fit when she visited.

She also learned a lot about her interest in particular types of schools on the “spree of tours” she and her parents went on in Virginia and Washington D.C. On that tour, she visited a large urban campus, a large suburban campus, a mid-sized university in a small town and a small liberal arts college. She said of the tours, “I needed to go and see it. It was more about the feeling for me.” She did not have the same focus on prestige that some other students have. Eliza said, “I just wanted to know that [Sherman] had a reputation, and it does.” In other words, she differentiated between good and prestigious reputations.

Benefits of college counselor

Even though Eliza finished her high school coursework early, she still utilized the college counselor, Mrs. Mason. Most of the interactions Eliza described were transactional in nature. Mrs. Mason was able to answer Eliza’s questions, although most

interaction were initiated by Eliza. For example, Eliza said, “I think every time that we met, I was like ‘I need to meet with you,’ because I would have all these questions in my brain, and I would be like, I need to just ask them each one at a time and write down the answer. So, if you emailed her with a question, she would answer it in an email. And then you could ask to meet with her.” Most of Eliza’s questions were about the specifics of the application process, such as deadlines or scholarship applications. Eliza said Mrs. Mason was always helpful and “she would give me tips about the schools that I had on my list.”

Meetings were quick, according to Eliza, but Mrs. Mason was “always informed.” If she wasn’t, or if Eliza’s question required research on a specific school, Mrs. Mason would get back to Eliza later with an answer, but “most of the time she could answer it pretty well.” At the beginning of Eliza’s process, Mrs. Mason had her complete a “brag sheet” of her academic and extracurricular accomplishments as well as her personality. Then, Mrs. Mason met with Eliza to go over the brag sheet and they “had an interview to make sure she knew who I was and what I was doing, and that was a longer meeting.”

Other than the mostly transactional interactions, Mrs. Mason did provide some assistance with researching specific schools and helping Eliza decide. When she wanted to ensure that Sherman had a good reputation and it “started to look more serious” that Eliza might attend there, she asked Mrs. Mason about Sherman. She “talked very highly of it” which was reassuring to Eliza. Eliza had a similar experience with the college in Virginia. Mrs. Mason did not know much about the college but had heard of it. Eliza did tell Mrs. Mason how much she did not like her tour experiences at the larger schools.

We had a conversation one day. I met with her, or I ran into her in the hallway or something. And then I was just like, “I’m not loving these schools that I’m touring.” I don’t want to go to the [large, regional school], and then I was like, ‘and everybody says it’s because it’s not a campus.’ But then I toured the [large flagship school], and I didn’t want to go there, and she just told me basically that she thinks I was looking at a smaller school. I needed to look somewhere smaller, and that’s it. It ended up being right. But that’s all I remember her saying.

Although Eliza did not feel like Mrs. Mason knew her well, other than what was on the brag sheet, she felt like Mrs. Mason was at least paying attention to Eliza and her admissions process when she spoke.

Interestingly, Eliza described her relationship with Mrs. Mason as “very matter of fact” and that Mrs. Mason was there to provide Eliza specific information. While Mrs. Mason was helpful, Eliza said “it was very surface level, just professional.” However, recently, Eliza needed another counselor recommendation for a different application process. She emailed Mrs. Mason who helped with the letter. Eliza said, “Wow, it meant a lot to me that she remembered me and remembered my letter and still had it for me. So, then I would say she is helpful; it made me realize that she did care about it.”

Other than her interactions with Mrs. Mason, Eliza did have connections with the other grade level counselors during her freshman and sophomore years. Normally, the interaction would have been basic, such as switching a class, but because of COVID, there was an increase in communication. Eliza used the counselors for help when grades were frozen during quarantine and figuring out how to proceed with classes the following

year. As a junior, she communicated with the other counselors about a co-op program that she did, as well as a dual enrollment class. Senior year, though, is when most of her communication happened. Again, she worked out scheduling her courses and dual enrollment registration. One of the counselors helped Eliza figure out how she could graduate early based on her existing credits.

Once her college admissions process ramped up, Eliza relied more heavily on Mrs. Mason. They continued to communicate about Eliza's early graduation to ensure that potential scholarships would not be affected. Eliza had a number of scholarship questions and Mrs. Mason frequently was able to answer the questions. Based on the brag sheet Eliza had completed, Mrs. Mason wrote the counselor recommendation that was required for some of the colleges. Eliza said it was helpful because, "she had us fill out those forms, and so we knew that we were getting specific letters that related to us."

Aside from the individual assistance, Mrs. Mason would provide information to students en masse. For example, Monroe High School had an advisory period every Monday, so she would have forms like the FAFSA that were made widely available during that time. Mrs. Mason also distributed general announcements about deadlines. Eliza remembers an announcement from Mrs. Mason that students should "have everything done by Halloween," which Eliza felt like was inaccurate. If a form was truly late or missing, Eliza said "they hunted us down, and we did it" indicating that Mrs. Mason was again trying to help.

Ineffective college counselor

As helpful as Mrs. Mason often was with information or with tasks, Eliza never felt like there was a positive relationship with her. Eliza said, “she wasn't ever very emotionally invested in our college choices. I would say it was more just like, here's the facts and this is the answer to what you need to know.” In fact, more than once, Eliza repeated that Mrs. Mason was not invested in the students. She did not try to get to know students beyond the brag sheets or what Eliza said, “we wanted her to know about us.”

Eliza questioned the level of trust she had in Mrs. Mason. On the surface, it seemed like there was trust there, because Mrs. Mason did help with tasks and did have information to provide. But as Eliza reflected on trust, it became apparent that the surface level trust she described was due to a lack of relationship.

I trusted her to write that counselor recommendation. But maybe just because I was told to. Because I didn't know her. And there are, there are counselors at my school that I did know, and teachers that I really knew, and so I would have definitely selected a recommendation from one of them over her, because I had never interacted with her until I had to.

Outside of the one conversation Eliza could remember in detail about choosing a smaller school, Eliza did not talk to Mrs. Mason outside of meetings. Thus, Mrs. Mason was never kept posted or attempted to stay up to date on Eliza's process.

Much of the assistance came via email. Eliza acknowledged that she would choose to initiate contact via email, if possible. She also did not interact with Mrs. Mason prior to senior year. None of the meetings with Mrs. Mason were ever required; they

were always initiated by the students. Eliza said she knew “probably ten people in my whole graduating class, my huge graduating class ever even talked to her.” Eliza noted that when she provided information, it was always indirect through email or through advisory; Mrs. Mason never came into the classrooms or advisory personally.

The lack of assistance Eliza felt was primarily in trying to research colleges that would be a good fit for her. She used the BigFuture website from the College Board to learn more about schools she might like with potential majors she was considering. “What I needed was a list of schools that I would like,” said Eliza of what was lacking in her college search. She expressed frustration, saying, “it was hard, because I remember, not knowing where to look. Where do I find these other schools that everybody is talking about? I know there's so many. Where are they? And how do I know if I fit them?” Eliza recognized that the college process was “individual and different for everyone” and therefore felt like the process with Mrs. Mason should have been the same.

Resources for college admission

Perhaps it was expected that students would not interact with the college counselor until senior year, given that Mrs. Mason was the only one for that purpose and each senior class is very large. Among the remaining counselors, each grade’s specific counselor is also managing a large caseload and multiple responsibilities. Eliza acknowledged that it was “difficult to kind of wrangle everyone.” The school would send out emails to the seniors to remind them that Mrs. Mason was available for questions, another example of the student-driven nature of Eliza’s experience.

Because so many of the students were planning to attend one of the large state universities, most of the college resources provided by Mrs. Mason were geared towards those three large schools. Eliza described it as “not a lot of variety” among the college choices. Eliza also pointed out that these three universities and the local university are already generally well-known to students, so it did not feel to Eliza as educational. Mrs. Mason did organize a number of visits from college admissions representatives who would visit Monroe High School during lunch. Even in discussing that, Eliza only mentioned the same three large state universities and one large university from a neighboring state.

As for resources specific to Eliza and her college search, she said she did not “remember ever getting any information from her that I didn't specifically request. My family either.” She used resources she found via the College Board, but that was not provided by Mrs. Mason; Eliza found that on her own because she took AP courses. When asked about how she learned about certain schools or the Common Application, she did not remember, but assumed it was word of mouth or having figured it out from older friends. This underscores the earlier sections that demonstrate Mrs. Mason was helpful with information when asked, but that it was more of a one-way communication, with Eliza initiating the conversation.

Mrs. Mason’s space was not a particularly noteworthy office for Eliza. For one, Eliza felt like she would drop by to ask a question and Mrs. Mason usually was not there. As far as other physical resources, Eliza remembered that there were college brochures in the office space. The school also provided TV screens with announcements, which were

often from Mrs. Mason, such as a reminder to set up the Common Application. Other than that, Eliza did not find the physical space to be memorable or having helpful information.

Girl's college admissions journey

As mentioned previously, Eliza briefly considered not attending college, but mostly because of her view that the application process was stressful. What also made it stressful was her perception that most other students knew where they wanted to go because of the focus on the main state schools. In hindsight, she realized many students were probably still stressed about the process, but not the decision itself, as she was. Eliza started out the process being “very turned off to the whole thing, I was nervous about it, and so I didn't know where to look. I didn't know what to apply to.” Later in the process, her stress was in difficulty of making a choice. She continued to feel like she had “limited knowledge” of where to go. That made it intimidating to her. She did say that she is not a person who gets “very excited about big life changing events” so she felt like “this is something I have to do and it's looming.” She also described feeling “detached” from the process like it was something she did not want to do, but had to do it, so she did. As the choice came down to Sherman and the college in Virginia, she was able to visit Sherman several times. She wanted to choose the school in Virginia, because it was slightly larger and in a “cool place.” Once she finally chose Sherman, she was “content” and said, “I was just happy to be done with it I was like, I've picked, and now I can enjoy it.”

For her initial search, Eliza reiterated that the process was very student driven. “As far as the searching,” she said, “I just did it.” Even with her co-op program, dual

enrollment, and early graduation, she said she did not initially set out to do those programs, she was “doing [her] own thing with the courses [she] needed.” Interestingly, even though she expressed frequently that she wished Mrs. Mason would have provided more guidance to “different” schools, her advice to others in her situation was that “if you want to branch out, you’re gonna have to do a little bit of work to find out what your options are.”

As far as her application process was concerned, she described her motivation and effort to complete it as “a me thing.” She managed the process on her own and completed and submitted applications on her own. Even the Common Application website, she said she was never specifically told about it or how to use it. She “had just heard about it from everyone” so she figured “that’s how you do college admissions.” She created a process for herself wherein she would look at applications that were “uninvolved” or used the Common Application. She said, if “I didn’t have to do anything extra, and so I was like, ‘well, let me just apply now and get it out of the way.’” Multiple times she reiterated the idea of students taking initiative for touring, researching, and applying to colleges. Eliza was resigned to the lack of individualized assistance from Mrs. Mason or Monroe High School.

Conclusion

Eliza was clear in that she did not enjoy the college admissions process, but she almost described it as annoying rather than stressful. She was clearly organized and took it upon herself to figure everything out that she needed to learn. Early on, Eliza realized that she wanted a small, liberal arts college with a personal feel. She knew from visiting

two large state schools that she did not want that experience. Once she figured that out, she was heavily reliant on tours to give her the “feeling of fit.” She also valued the personal connections and individualized attention from college admissions counselors, some of which occurred on tours and some of which occurred through follow-up communication.

What was perhaps most interesting about Eliza’s case was her perception of the resources and relationship with Mrs. Mason. In reality, Mrs. Mason provided a level of individual assistance to Eliza. She used the brag sheet to write a personal recommendation, and she had knowledge of college admissions and was often able to answer Eliza’s questions. When she did not have the knowledge, she researched and got back to Eliza with an answer. As the sole college counselor for the senior class, Mrs. Mason had a very large caseload, which is why most resources were sent out to large groups. However, Eliza herself said that most students she knew did not go to meet with Mrs. Mason. By that logic, Eliza would have been one of the few seniors Mrs. Mason spent more time with. Mrs. Mason would have known more about Eliza’s search process.

That is irrelevant, though, because of Eliza’s perception. What Eliza needed was personalized help with finding college options, which she did not get from Mrs. Mason. Eliza felt that the relationship with surface-level. Her descriptions of the interactions were transactional. Eliza did not feel that Mrs. Mason tried to get to know her or develop a meaningful relationship. Moreover, Eliza did not feel she wanted to. Having said that, the initial perception changed slightly after Eliza reached back out this year to Mrs.

Mason for an additional recommendation. Perhaps hindsight has changed Eliza's mind, but again, that did not negate Eliza's original experience with Mrs. Mason.

Summary

Chapter Four presented the findings of the qualitative data from five female undergraduate students at a small, liberal arts college. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews. A description of each participant and her high school was presented, which included biographical information of the participant, family educational background, and a description of the high school environment, especially as it relates to college admissions counseling and students' post-secondary plans. The five students interviewed each attended a different public high school in different towns and cities, yet all chose the same undergraduate college. Each had a variety of experiences with her high school college admissions counselor and her high school, in general. These interviews yielded a variety of findings related to the six themes which were the focus of this analysis: outside influences and support, college-level factors, benefits of college counselor, ineffective college counselor, resources for college admission, and girl's college admissions journey

Chapter Five concludes the study with a discussion of how girls viewed the support and resources provided by their high school college admissions counselor and their lived experiences of the college admissions process. Implications for high school college admissions counselors will be presented. The chapter will conclude with opportunities for future research based on the findings of this study as well as the reflections of the researcher.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through qualitative narrative inquiry, this study examined the influences of high school college admission counselors on girls throughout their college admissions process. Chapter Four presented findings from interview data from five female undergraduate students at a small, liberal arts college in the southeast. Six themes were illustrated through the data: outside influences and support, college-level factors, benefits of the college counselor, ineffective college counselor, resources for college admission, and girl's college admissions journey. The findings through six themes answered the study's following research questions:

1. How do girls describe their interactions with their high school college admissions counselor?
2. How do girls describe the support they received from the high school college counseling office?
3. What are girls' lived experiences of the college search process?

Chapter Five discusses girls' interactions with and support from the college counselor and their lived experiences through Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice introduced in Chapter Two. Then, the chapter illustrates implications for high school college admissions counselors. Opportunities for future research based on the results of this study will be presented. Finally, the reflections of the researcher will conclude the chapter.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the lived experiences of girls' college admissions process and the support and resources they received from their high school college admissions counselor. Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model of student college choice provided a theoretical framework through which to view how counselor relationships and resources influenced girls' college choice. The lived experience of these girls reflected three of Perna's layers in the model, while the support and resources they received from their counselors was reflected in the second layer of the model. The focus of the study was primarily on habitus (layer one), school and community context (layer two), and higher education context (layer three). Perna found that varying factors in higher layers built upon lower layers to ultimately inform college choice (Perna, 2006)

The findings of this study affirm portions of Perna's model of student college choice, but would add emotional support to layer two and layer one. The study found that understanding the lived experiences of these girls' college admissions process through the lens of Perna's model required understanding the level of support and resources each girl received from her counselor. For these participants, the counselor relationship and counselor resources were independent of each other and the extent of each affected each girl's experience of the college admissions process. Some of the participants attended high schools with greater resources, while others did not. However, some students experienced higher levels of support while others did not.

Two students, Annie and Dara, had more direct connection with their counselor due to participation in the school's IB program, while one student, Eliza, was the only participant whose school had a counselor dedicated to college admissions. Annie and Dara were able to have more personal connections with the counselor and have more time dedicated to them as individuals. Annie and Eliza both said that they received personalized letters of recommendation from the counselor. Dara repeatedly talked about the frequent informal interactions that she had with Mr. Franklin. Although Eliza's counselor had a large caseload, unlike Annie and Dara's, Mrs. Mason, the counselor at Monroe High School, disseminated more information to the seniors as a whole and did offer one-on-one meetings as needed.

Bella and Claire's high schools actually have the lowest counselor to student ratios in the study, but because of Annie and Dara's participation in the IB program, they had more individualized access to a counselor. Bella did, however, have access to two separate counselors, one that she spoke with about her dual enrollment courses. In spite of that, the counselors at Adams High School did not have as many resources to dedicate to college counseling, nor was there any staff member who focused on seniors or the college admissions process. At Jefferson High School, Claire did have one counselor who was for seniors, but with multiple additional duties, there was no dedicated college admissions support.

Regardless of resources available, the level of support each girl received was a major factor in her satisfaction with her counselor. Like Dara, Bella frequently mentioned the informal interactions she had with Mr. Hamilton during her college search. Even

though he had such a large caseload and was not dedicated to college counseling, Bella expressed happiness with the support she received from him. For her it was about feeling comfortable and like Mr. Hamilton was personable and easy to talk to. Dara was effusive in her praise of Mr. Franklin's emotional support and willingness to talk. His demeanor suggested that he "genuinely cared" about the students' lives. Eliza's explanation was interesting in that she did not feel a level of support until a year later, when she contacted Mrs. Mason again and felt heartened by her personal recognition.

In addition to the low resources provided to Claire at Jefferson High, she strongly expressed that she did not feel supported by her counselor. Using words like "unapproachable" or "attitude," made it clear that Claire did not feel a personal relationship or any emotional investment on the part of the counselor. Conversely, Annie had much more frequent contact with her counselor, yet still did not feel a sense of personal connection with the counselor. Interestingly, the students who felt an average to high level of personal relationship, Bella, Dara, and Eliza, were the only three participants who directly addressed their counselors by name during our interviews.

Although all of the participants in the study were satisfied with their final college choice, the students who expressed the greatest levels of satisfaction with their college counselor and with the college admissions process were those who had higher levels of support from the counselors, regardless of the level of resources. Dara, who had the highest level of resources and support, expressed the greatest level of satisfaction. Bella, who had high levels of support, but lower resources was the also satisfied with her counselors. Annie and Eliza both had high levels of resources, but lower perceived levels

of supports, although Eliza's opinion changed somewhat in hindsight. Finally, Claire had both low levels of support and resources and was least satisfied with her counseling experience. Table 4 illustrates the comparison across participants of resources and perceived support compared to the perception of their overall counseling experience.

While all five participants may not have had equal levels of support and resources, they all expressed a desire for both. Because they all found the process of college admissions stressful to some extent, and often confusing, they all indicated that they needed help at some point during the process. They also all indicated that their schools focused primarily on large state institutions in or near their home states. Most of the publicity about specific colleges or counselor knowledge about specific colleges was focused on a similar set of schools. Yet, each of these students expressed a desire for a different experience and frustration with difficulty in learning more about other options. Finally, they all expressed the importance of feeling a personal connection with the counselor. This affirms the research of Gilfillan (2017), (2015), and Zinth (2014) who showed that counselors attempting to get to know students was important. This also supports the research of Rayle (2006b) who asserts that a feeling of mattering is critical to counseling, especially for girls. Findings from this study which support the important of resources as well as support include outside influences and support, college-level factors, benefits of college counselors, ineffective college counselors, resources for college admissions, and girls' college admissions journeys.

Table 4. Resources and Support compared to satisfaction

	Family Support	Peer Support	Counselor Support	School Resources	Personal Resources	Counseling Experience
Annie	High	High	Low	High	High	Negative counselor relationship
Bella	High	High	High	Low	Low	Positive counselor relationship
Claire	High	High	Low	Low	Low	Negative counselor relationship
Dara	High	High	High	High	High	Positive counselor relationship
Eliza	High	High	Low	High	Low	Initially negative, but became more positive in hindsight

Outside influences and support

Each of the participants expressed an expectation she would attend a four-year college. The degree to which families expected college attendance differed, but overall, it was assumed that a four-year college was the next step after high school. Of the four participants with older siblings, three have attended or are currently attending four-year colleges. Dara has half-siblings who did not complete college, but says that her younger brother with whom she shares both parents, is likewise expected to attend college. This is similar to research which shows that there is an increasing expectation of college attendance on the part of students and their families (McKillip et al., 2012; Page et al., 2014).

Being surrounded by those who have or are planning to attend college is an important factor in this expectation. Four of the participants had at least one parent who graduated from a four-year institution. Dara's mother completed a two-year degree and Claire's mother in recent years had gone back to complete her two-year degree. Eliza's father has a masters degree. This is in line with earlier research finding which say that parents educational attainment is a key factor in children's own pursuit of college (Averett & Burton, 1996; Kleinjans, 2010; Roderick et al., 2011). Similarly, each participant said that the majority of their high school classmates was planning to attend college. Of the three high schools that report college attendance numbers, approximately two thirds of the graduates go on to four-year colleges just after high school. Research finds that students surrounded by college-bound peers are also more likely to attend college and have a college-bound mindset (Andrew & Flashman, 2017; Averett &

Burton, 1996; Radford et al., 2016; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Moreover, not only did each participant say that her classmates were college-bound, but that her peer group of friends was also focused on college. For example, two of the students were in an IB program which they said equated to having college focused peers and Bella said that she was friends with academically-focused students.

Outside of educational attainment, the college process requires a great deal of support, as each girl described it as stressful. All five of the participants said that their parents were very supportive throughout the college process, from helping with financial aid to taking them on tours, to supporting their final choice. Research shows that emotional support (Kim et al., 2017; Radford et al., 2016) and moral support (Meece et al., 2014) are incredibly important during the college application process. However, some research also suggests that the role and support of the mother is more important for girls during the college search process (Kleinjans, 2010; Smyth & Banks, 2012). None of the five participants focused on their mother as the more supportive parent, although Annie did say that her mom was very “involved.” In fact, Claire spoke more about her dad in the process, but overall, there was no real differentiation in the way the participants talked about their parents’ support.

Of the five participants, four have at least one older sibling and three have an older sibling who attended a four-year college or was attending one at the time of our interview. However, Annie was the only one who spoke about the closeness she feels with her sibling in terms of the college application process. At one point, she even toured schools in California near where her sister now lives in hopes of living with her sister

during college. This differs from the research which suggests that siblings can also play a supportive role in the college search process (Ceja, 2006).

Cost continues to be one of the highest ranked considerations by girls in choosing a college (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Johnson et al., 1991; Mansfield & Warwick, 2006). Two of the girls in the study, Annie and Claire, said that their parents had assured them that they would pay for or figure out how to pay for college costs. In other words, their parents were explicit that the financial aspects of attending college should not be a consideration. However, both of them also mentioned scholarship applications and applying for various scholarships. Bella did not mention her parents' views on college costs or their needs for scholarships, but she did say that she applied for some local scholarships. Dara and Eliza both expressed a need for financial aid or scholarships and the expectation from their parents that, while they were supportive of a wide college search, money would be a factor. Dara and Eliza both received generous scholarships from Sherman College, but did not say that scholarships factored into their final decisions.

College-level factors

The results of this study reflect, to some extent, existing research on the important college-level factors that girls use in making a college choice. Previous research shows that girls prioritize academics- primarily either in reputation or availability of academic program- when making a college decision (Moogan & Baron, 2003; Sax & Harper, 2007). However, the five girls interviewed for this study mostly discussed the “fit” and “feel” of the college. Fit could pertain to academic reputation or academic program as

well. Annie and Dara both mentioned institutional reputation, as did Eliza, although not to the same extent. Academic reputation was a top factor in previous research from Sax (2009), Beck (2005), and Johnson (1991) although Beck differentiated between academic and overall reputation, while Johnson differentiated between academic and faculty reputations.

The participants' comments on "feeling" at the campus were more vague, but are still in line with similar findings from research. For example, friendly atmosphere and social climate were highly ranked factors of college choice in previous studies (Beck & Fleischer, 2005; Mansfield & Warwick, 2006). All five of the girls also talked about friendliness and connections with friendly admissions counselors, which is not explicitly mentioned in previous research, but could be connected to the high emphasis on "friendly atmosphere" (Mansfield & Warwick, 2006).

The admission counselor connections are important in part because the campus visit is a highly important factor to girls' college choice (Sax et al., 2009). This underscores the importance of the role of the high school college admissions counselor as well. Campus visits are highly important to girls, but at the same time, students are more likely to visit a campus when they have already talked with their admissions counselor (Radford et al., 2016). Counselors should discuss campus visits and college fit (Nora, 2004), but none of the students mentioned discussing campus visits prior to the visits themselves.

Finally, it is noteworthy is that all of the studies featured in Table 1 in Chapter Two were based on survey data. There are factors of college choice that girls in this study

mentioned that were not options on each of these previous studies. For example, both Bella and Dara discussed finding a college where they could continue to play their sport.

Benefits of college counselor

The study found that most girls did not interact with their counselor much prior to junior or senior year. For those who did, it was predominantly about course scheduling or other tasks unrelated to college admissions counseling. Eliza is the one exception who mentioned that she interacted with her counselors more as a ninth and tenth grader, but primarily due to confusion about processes during the COVID pandemic. Otherwise, these findings are in line with research that says most early discussion with counselors, if it happens at all, is not about college admissions (Cooper & Liou, 2007). However, the research shows that girls benefit from early discussion with counselors by gaining social capital (Bryan et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Riegle-Crumb, 2010) and gaining confidence (Archard, 2013a).

All five of the participants noted that, at some point during the process, they needed assistance understanding how to complete applications, write essays, or other application related task. For example, Annie and Dara both talked about needing help with writing essays or having them proofread. Four of the girls talked about using the Common Application website and having questions about the steps to complete it. This idea is supported by previous research that says providing assistance in figuring out the college admissions process is important to students (MacAllum et al., 2007).

In terms of the benefits of a college counselor, the relationship with that person was the most critical factor. Annie and Eliza both talked about completing a “brag sheet”

type survey for the counselor to get to know them better. Bella and Dara both focused on informal interactions with the counselor, although Dara had many more structured interactions with her counselor as well. According to research, it is important for counselors to be caring and to get to know their students (Gilfillan, 2017; Royster et al., 2015; Zinth, 2014). However, research also says that how much this occurs is site specific (Radford et al., 2016), such as in schools with lower counselor-student ratios or a focus on mentoring, but that was not entirely the case in this study. As this chapter has shown, Annie did have a greater opportunity for one-on-one counselor contact, while Bella's counselor had a larger caseload, yet Bella was much more satisfied with her counselor relationship than Annie. Lack of one-on-one counseling implies difficulty in forming a relationship (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008) but that was not necessarily the case in this study, nor did substantial one-on-one time equate to a positive relationship.

Instead, the feeling of mattering and the understanding of each individual was more important than time. Bella said she felt known in part because the counselor "got her jokes," while Eliza felt, in hindsight, remembered because the counselor still had her letter of recommendation. Dara clearly felt known as an individual. The ability for counselors to form the individual relationship can help students find a college fit, according to previous research (Dale & Krueger, 2002). This was true for two of the students, Bella and Dara, although Eliza had one memorable and positive conversation with Mrs. Mason about institutional fit. The ability to know students as individuals is important to counselors in writing recommendations, as was the case for Annie and Eliza

who specifically discussed recommendations. Additionally, high school college admissions counselors have said that helping students find a good institutional fit is one of their primary concerns (MacAllum et al., 2007). Most importantly, though, the feeling of mattering to the counselor was important to each girl in this study, which reflects previous research that shows mattering is important, especially to girls (Rayle, 2005, 2006a, 2006b).

Ineffective college counselor

In this study, Annie and Claire both expressed feeling like their counselor did not care about them or value them. To an extent, Eliza felt the same. This reflects previously mentioned research that shows caring is important to girls, but other research says that when students perceive a lack of care from the counselor, they believe it equates to a lack of support for attending college (Alon, 2009; Corwin et al., 2004). All five of the girls in this study said that they thought their counselor expected them to go to college. However, Bella and Dara, who had the best relationships with their respective counselors, automatically felt that the counselor expected them to attend college. Eliza felt like her counselor did not have preconceived expectations until she met with Mrs. Mason, who saw Eliza's high grades and test scores. Annie said that her counselor definitely expected her to go to college but felt like the counselor had lower "tier" expectations of her as compared to the other IB students. Lastly, Claire's response was non-personal; she simply said that the counselor expected "seniors" to go to college.

This study showed that all five of the participants wanted a positive relationship with the counselor, but only Bella and Dara had one, with Eliza slightly changing her

mind later on. This is similar to research which says that students want a counselor relationship but often say the counselors are not helpful (Gibbons et al., 2006). For example, research shows that many students face difficulty accessing help with application materials (Corwin et al., 2004). However, this study differentiates between a lack of relationship with the counselor and counselor assistance. For example, Annie did receive counselor assistance with her application, but did not have a strong relationship. Bella received less counselor assistance, but did have a positive relationship.

Resources for college admission

As noted on Table 3, the counselor to student ratios for each of the schools represented in this study is well above the recommended ratio of 1:250, with the exception of Jefferson High School. Yet, time that the counselor had available for Claire was clearly still a barrier to her developing a relationship and feeling like she had the resources to be supported. Each counselor had some additional responsibility, except Mrs. Mason, which is in line with research that says counselors are often overloaded with multiple duties (Gilfillan, 2017; Ilic & Rosenbaum, 2019; O'Connor, 2018; Zinth, 2014). Research has shown that junior and senior students receive most of the time and attention from counselors (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Corwin et al., 2004), which was true for these students as well. It is also noteworthy that all of these students, except Claire, self-identified as being a high academic achiever in her class, which supports earlier findings that suggest counselors spend more time on students who are high achieving or most disruptive (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). However, one difference from the research is that the time available because of a high or low counselor to student ratio did not serve as a

great detriment to the relationship, as previous research suggests (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). Rather, the extent to which counselors worked to establish meaningful relationships was more important than the time available.

Of the many informational resources that could be available to students, each participant in this study expressed that she wanted additional information about specific college and university options or having some level of confusion about the many options available. Eliza and Dara, in particular, saw their counselor as a resource for this type of information, although Dara was satisfied with this, whereas Eliza was not. This supports previous findings that say students view their counselor as the primary resource for information about colleges (Paolini, 2019). This study found that all of the counselors at these schools did provide some level of general information, be it on a website or via mass communication, which is similar to previous findings (Zinth, 2014). Also similar to research was the finding that the counselors were not, except in the case of Dara and Eliza, providing information about colleges that met specific student interests (Okerson, 2016; Paolini, 2019). Even in those cases, though, much of the information was reactive after visits or applications had been complete. The girls' search processes mostly happened as a result of their own initiative.

None of the students mentioned anything about counselor connections to colleges, other than mentioning that the counselor set up visits. All personal connections made between the students and the colleges came from the girls reaching out themselves. Yet, research shows that connections to colleges can be an important factor in college admissions (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2017; MacAllum, 2007; Stevens 2009;

Zinth 2014). Information like marketing materials is important to research and choice (Radford et al., 2016) and counselors are a big part of that by being a conduit (Bryan et al., 2017; Cigrand et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), but none of the girls mentioned using these resources in the college spaces, even though several mentioned they were available.

Girl's college admissions journey

When asked about their feelings on the college admissions process, Bella and Dara both talked about being excited about it. The overwhelming response, though, was that the process was stressful and overwhelming. Even though they were excited, Bella and Dara echoed those statements. Girls in particular are stressed about whether or not they will be admitted to colleges (Moogan & Baron, 2003) and frequently report feeling overwhelmed (Sax & Harper, 2007).

This chapter has shown that the influence of peers is important in the college admissions process (Averett & Burton, 1996; Radford et al., 2016; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). By extension, the information that girls learned word-of-mouth or by watching older peers go through the college admissions process was also invaluable to their own experience. Annie and Eliza both talked about how they learned about the Common Application just by hearing about it from other peers. One of the repeated statements that came up in participant interviews was about the girl's "own process." Each of them mentioned that she took it upon herself to do some part of the research or application phase. All of the connections to college admissions counselors were made by the girls themselves. This was not accounted for in previous research, except that girls are more

likely to seek out their counselors (Bryan et al., 2009; Riegle-Crumb, 2010) and spend more time searching during the process and considering their options (Moogan & Baron, 2003).

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, there are implications for high school college admissions counselors as well as policymakers and, to an extent, college admissions counselors. Counselors continue to be a critical conduit of information and source of support for students in the college admissions process. However, more often than not, counselors find themselves overwhelmed with large caseloads and additional responsibilities. Regardless, the ability to demonstrate care and concern can exist. The results of this study found that overall, many counselors are currently unable to meet the needs of students in terms of resources. However, every counselor should have the ability to meet the relational needs of students. As counselors continue to serve an important role, the implications for habitus and school and community context must be addressed, as should the implications for higher education context.

Habitus

Social capital is an important factor in girls' decisions to attend college (Hardie, 2015; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Girls have specific reasons for choosing to attend college in general and for selecting a particular college. Social capital includes both the knowledge of college processes and the support provided in the process. For girls, this social capital is found in relationships with others, both out of the school context and within school. This means that counselors need to be aware of their role in

girls' social capital as it pertains to information about college and assistance with college processes. This also means that counselors need to be aware of the differences in girls as it pertains to the factors they prioritize in college choice.

Financial aid is another major factor in habitus affecting girls' college choice (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Mansfield & Warwick, 2006). This is another area for counselors to be aware of. They need to maintain an appropriate knowledge base and ability to support the applications for financial aid. The findings of this study suggested that this is one area where the counselors were more adept. Bella's state has a statewide requirement that all graduating seniors complete the FAFSA or a waiver for the form. At Eliza's school, completing the FAFSA was also required. Although the results do not suggest that the FAFSA should be a requirement, it does suggest the value of counselor knowledge in supporting students in their processes.

Admissions professionals would also be well-served by greater awareness of factors affecting student habitus. However, research suggests that admissions professionals are focused on these factors already to some extent, due to their role as recruiters (Stevens, 2009). The issue is that admissions counselors are more focused on the backgrounds of some students, rather than looking at underrepresented populations.

School and community context

The school and community context consists of availability and types of resources as well as structural supports and barriers. Research has shown that although socioeconomic status (SES) is a major predictor of students' chances of college attendance, school-based practices and a college-going culture can mitigate effects of low

SES (Belasco, 2013; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Royster et al., 2015). Although the SES of the participants was not discussed, each girl did express a strong college-going culture at her school or among her peers. Also, each girl expressed an assumption on her part and that of her family that four-year college was the next step after high school. Counselors should take heed and promote the college-going culture to improve access.

Access, though, does not necessarily equate to students feeling like they have enough resources or a positive counselor relationship. Counselors need to ensure that they are making the effort to connect with students and to make them feel like they matter. In particular, counselors need to consider girls' relational needs. The feeling of mattering is important to girls (Rayle, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) suggesting that mattering is one of the structural supports that exists in the school and community context. Counselors should consider the various roles they play as a support for girls; the list of codes within the benefits of college counselor theme provides a starting point to consider how, for example, advice and support of a counselor differ. By considering these various factors, counselors could better address the needs of girls to feel like they matter.

To broaden college searches, counselors should consider providing greater access to and promotion of materials from schools other than the large flagship or regional institutions. They should also familiarize themselves with scholarship opportunities at various colleges. Both Dara and Eliza received full merit-based scholarships to Sherman College, which, of course, made college significantly less expensive than an in-state public option. Given the relatively easy and inexpensive digital options, it would be relatively easy to disseminate resources or to research additional college options.

Policymakers must also take note of the importance of the counselor in providing resources and support. A more modest counselor to student ratio has a positive impact on students' decisions to broaden their college searches (Bryan et al., 2011). Only one of the schools, Jefferson High School, had a ratio lower than what is recommended. Only Monroe High School had a counselor specifically dedicated to college admissions counseling. Chapter Two also showed that a large number of counselors may be trained in personal counseling, but lack knowledge of trends in college admissions, college options, or the application process. Policymakers should focus on dedicating resources to dedicated college counselors in high schools. At a minimum, policy should be put in place to support training for existing counselors on college admissions.

Higher education context

This layer of Perna's model includes marketing and recruitment, location, and institutional characteristics as factors impacting college choice. Obviously, colleges and universities cannot change their locations, nor do they need to alter institutional characteristics. However, to better serve students, they should consider the implications of their marketing and recruitment efforts. Similar to the opportunities for college counselors, they can take advantage of free digital resources and online communication. Stevens (2009) discussed in his book how colleges spend more time on travel to large, urban areas or to areas with higher SES populations. By using more and varied resources that students are craving, they can reach a wider variety of students. Annie indicated this was a helpful resource to her; she participated in numerous webinars with her "dream school" (although she did not ultimately attend). She also expressed that the school was

up front that attending these webinars was part of the demonstrated interest in the institution, which was a factor in the admissions decision. Students who lack access to other resources could gain an advantage in admissions by being knowledgeable of, and attending, similar programs.

In particular, admissions counselors should also consider the relational needs of girls. Small, liberal arts colleges should continue their personal and individualized recruiting practices. Large or mid-sized institutions would also be well-served to take a cue from these smaller schools and make an attempt to recruit using personalized contact, especially as they attempt to attract students from underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

This study found that counselors who lack resources of time and knowledge were less able to assist and support girls in their college admissions process. However, the more significant finding was that the counselor's ability to form a meaningful relationship was a larger factor in satisfaction with the counselor. Regardless of the support or relationship, the girls found the process stressful. However, the process could have been easier with either greater resources from the counselor, a better relationship with the counselor, or both (Dale & Krueger, 2002). Therefore, the narratives of girls regarding the support and resources they received will add to the literature through the stories who have experienced counselor relationships with varying degrees of satisfaction.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for future research were considered. This study was delimited to girls attending one small, moderately-selective liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. A future study might expand the selection of sites to include different types of institutions, such as a mid-sized university or a large state institution. The future study might also consider comparing responses from students at different types of institutions about their experiences with high school college admissions counselors. Examining students who ultimately select different types of institutions might assist counselors in better understanding the different reasons their students have for college choice and help broaden college options for future students.

Additionally, because this study focused on girls' experiences of their college admissions process, future research could include male students as well as trans or nonbinary students. Because research shows that males and females report different perceptions of mattering in school and in relationships (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009; Rayle & Chung, 2007), studying males also merits consideration. Characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status should also be considered in future research, especially since the framework used in this study is conducive to examining groups of people. Each girl in this study also attended a different type of high school in a different geographical area. Future research might ask students at one high school about their experiences of their counselors and the high school college admissions process to see if there are differences among groups within each high school. The perceptions of

other students' post-secondary plans would also merit further study, as the participants in this study were not always accurate about their peers' college attendance.

Perna (2008) discusses varied state policies and the impact on college choice, but all of the girls except Bella were from the same state. A future study could consider if local policy rather than state policy is relevant to impacting decisions about college counseling resource allocation. This could also be compared to findings from other high schools to see if, for example, students from a school with a dedicated college counselor had different experiences than students at a school with counselors who "do it all." Similarly, the satisfaction of the relationships students have with counselors should be further considered in future research about college choice.

Much of the research in Chapter Two illustrates how relationships and resources impact and increase the likelihood of students going to college. As was also evident in Chapter Two, the focus on college attendance is increasing as is the assumption that college is the next step after high school. All five of the participants in this study echoed that. Therefore, more qualitative research is recommended on college choice, especially as it pertains to relational factors among girls and why they choose a particular college. Conversely, future studies should also examine college choice of students who do not have clear expectations to attend college. The studies of girls' college choice factors feature in Chapter Two were all quantitative based on survey data. The students either had to rank and/or select from a list of choice factors. Especially given the emphasis girls in this study placed on "feeling," it would be important to learn more qualitatively about

what “feeling” means to girls in their college choice. Qualitative research would provide a better understanding of the reasons for girls choosing a particular college.

Reflections of the Researcher

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to examine the lived experiences of girls in their college admissions process as well as the support and resources they received from their college admissions counselors in that process. The study used Perna’s proposed conceptual model of student college choice as a theoretical framework. In particular, this study was interested in how the high school college admissions counselor was an influence in girls’ college admissions process. Thus, the framework helped focus in on the counselor influence while also examining the other factors in girls’ college choice throughout their admissions experience.

Although the girls and their high school backgrounds were different, they all had several things in common. First, they all expressed some degree of self-motivation to complete the process with or without assistance. They also expressed some degree of wanting something “different” than what they saw their peers doing. Even though Annie and Dara focused on prestige of an institution as compared to their peers, they still experienced some sort of “gut feeling” that drove them to Sherman College. All five were interested in a more personal experience and said that they purposefully eschewed the large state institutions favored by some of their peers. Yet, each of them also applied to a large state institution. Whether the reason was for a safe admission or for financial reasons, I found that they all discussed the state option as an afterthought in their process, like something they just had to do, rather than something of interest.

Ultimately, they all loved the feeling they got from visiting Sherman College. To some extent, finances may have influenced the final decision to attend Sherman based on scholarship or financial aid, but they all had glowing comments about their choice. Sherman met their needs for a close, relational experience. Even though the girls all talked about their parents being supportive and/or involved in the process, none of them mentioned their parents as an influence in their final decision.

Nor, for that matter, did they mention the counselor as part of the decision. This part is key. An essential finding of this study was not that the counselor should influence a girl's decision about where to attend college, but rather that the counselor should be a helpful and supportive guide through a daunting process and should provide plentiful information throughout the search. There was clear demand not for counselor influence on the specific choice of a college, but for counselor influence on the ease of the process. Although time and information matter, the resources offered are not necessarily in relation to how girls felt about the counselor relationship throughout the admissions process. Girls want to be valued, known, and heard and want a personable counselor who makes them feel that way.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

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Appendix B

Interview Protocol Document

Research Questions

1. How do girls describe their interactions with their high school college admissions counselor?
2. How do girls describe the support they received from the high school college counseling office?
3. What are girls' lived experiences of the college search process?

Background questions to research prior to interview

1. High school name and location
2. Student attendance numbers
3. Does the school offer Honors, AP, or IB courses?
4. Information available about college attendance (% of students who do attend; 2 year vs 4 year; list of college acceptances)
5. How many counselors are on staff at the high school?
6. How many counselors are primarily dedicated to college admissions counseling? Are there other responsibilities that the counselors had outside of college admissions counseling?

Interview Questions

1. Describe the educational experiences of your immediate family. (RQ3)
 - What do you think your parents expected of you and your siblings in terms of your education?
 - How would you describe the support and advice you received from your parents and siblings about your plans for after high school?
 - How would you describe the support you received from your parents about the college application process?
2. Describe your high school environment and the people at your high school. (RQ3)
 - What were the plans for other people in your high school after graduation?
 - How did your friends feel about attending college? How did your friends feel about the college application process?
3. Describe the history of your interactions with your counselor. (RQ1)
 - How did you end up meeting with that particular counselor (if there was more than one)? If you chose one, how/why did you choose that person?
 - To what extent were your meetings required versus your choice to meet with him/her?
4. What were some of the questions you had for your counselor and how did he/she answer them? (RQ1)
 - What do you think your counselor expected of you? What makes you think that?
 - How would you describe the conversations you and your counselor had about your college process?
 - What was the most helpful advice that your counselor gave you?

5. How would you describe your relationship with the counselor overall? (RQ1)
 - Did you feel like your counselor cared about you? Why or why not?
 - How did your counselor get to know you?
 - Did you trust your counselor? Why or why not?
6. Describe any helpful resources provided to you and your family about the college admissions process. (RQ2)
 - To what extent did your high school counseling office provide any online resources to help with the college search?
 - To what extent did your high school counseling office have any communication that went out to students and families about the college application process or deadlines?
 - To what extent did your high school counseling office provide guidebooks or other materials in the office?
7. Describe any helpful resources provided to you and your family about any specific colleges. (RQ2)
 - If there were resources provided about a specific college or colleges, why that/those college(s)?
8. Describe any interactions you had with college admissions counselors or visits to college campuses and how those came about for you. (RQ2)
 - What conversations did you have either before or after with your high school counselor?
9. If I were talking with other girls, what might I tell them to make this process easier for girls? Alternatively, if I were talking to counselors, what might I tell them so that they could make this process easier for girls? (RQ3)
10. If you could go back, what would you change about the relationship with the counselor that might serve a better purpose for you? (RQ3)
 - What advice do you wish they had given you?
11. Was there anything I should have asked to better understand the relationship between you and your high school college admissions counselor? (RQ3)

Appendix C

Girls' College Admissions Process

1. Girls' interactions with counselor? 2. Support received from counselor? 3. Girls' lived experiences of process?

- A. Outside influences and support
 B. College-level factors
 C. Benefits of college counselor
 D. Ineffective college counselor
 E. Resources for college admission
 F. Girls college admissions journey

Variables related to girls' college admissions process

- | | | |
|--|------------------------------------|---|
| A. Family influences/support | B. Girls perceptions of colleges | E. Time as a resource |
| A. School-level influences/support (non-counselor) | C. Positive counselor interactions | E. Information as a resource |
| A. Financial influences | C. Counselor assistance | E. Physical space as a resource |
| B. Connections to colleges | D. Negative counselor interactions | F. Girls' feelings on admissions process |
| B. Finding college "fit" | D. Lack of assistance | F. Girls work on their admissions process |

Initial codes by variable then participant

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| A1. College bound peers | A2. Parent involvement | A5. Sibling degrees |
| A2. College bound peers | A3. Parent involvement | A1. Sibling support |
| A3. College bound peers | A4. Parent involvement | A1. Socio-economic status |
| A4. College bound peers | A5. Parent involvement | A3. Teacher support |
| A1. Cultural capital | A1. Parent support | |
| A1. Financial support | A2. Parent support | B1. Admissions counselor relationship |
| A3. Financial support | A3. Parent support | B2. Admissions counselor relationship |
| A4. Financial support | A4. Parent support | B3. Admissions counselor relationship |
| A5. High school academics | A5. Parent support | B1. College fit |
| A1. Parent degrees | A1. Peer support | B2. College fit |
| A2. Parent degrees | A3. Peer support | B3. College fit |
| A3. Parent degrees | A5. Peer support | B4. College fit |
| A4. Parent degrees | A1. School expectations | B5. College fit |
| A5. Parent degrees | A2. School expectations | B4. Connections with colleges |
| A1. Parent expectations | A3. School expectations | B1. Feeling of finding fit |
| A2. Parent expectations | A4. School expectations | B1. Importance of finding fit |
| A3. Parent expectations | A5. School expectations | B2. Importance of finding fit |
| A4. Parent expectations | A1. Sibling degrees | |
| A5. Parent expectations | A3. Sibling degrees | |
| A1. Parent involvement | A4. Sibling degrees | |

B3. Importance of finding fit	D4. Counselor did not discuss fit	E1. Resources and education provided by counselor
B4. Importance of finding fit	D5. Counselor did not discuss fit	E2. Resources and education provided by counselor
B5. Importance of finding fit	D1. Impersonal counselor	E3. Resources and education provided by counselor
B3. Institution location	D3. Impersonal counselor	E4. Resources and education provided by counselor
B1. Perceived prestige	D1. Lack of communication	E1. Resources that were available
B4. Perceived prestige	D2. Lack of communication	E2. Resources that were available
B5. Perceived prestige	D3. Lack of communication	E3. Resources that were available
B1. Tour experience	D5. Lack of communication	E4. Resources that were available
B2. Tour experience	D1. Lack of counselor relationship	E1. Resources that were available
B3. Tour experience	D3. Lack of counselor relationship	E2. Resources that were available
B4. Tour experience	D5. Lack of counselor relationship	E3. Resources that were available
C1. Caring counselor	D2. Need for individual attention	E4. Resources that were available
C2. Caring counselor	D3. Need for individual attention	E5. Resources that were available
C3. Caring counselor	D5. Need for individual attention	E1. Resources that were communicated
C4. Caring counselor	D3. surface level trust	E2. Resources that were communicated
C1. Counselor interactions	D5. surface level trust	E3. Resources that were communicated
C2. Counselor interactions	E3. Comfortable space	E5. Resources that were communicated
C3. Counselor interactions	E4. Comfortable space	E1. Scholarship questions
C4. Counselor interactions	E3. Lack of availability	E2. Scholarship questions
C5. Counselor interactions	E5. Lack of availability	E3. Scholarship questions
C1. Counselor relationship	E1. Lack of resources	E4. Scholarship questions
C2. Counselor relationship	E2. Lack of resources	E5. Scholarship questions
C4. Counselor relationship	E3. Lack of resources	E3. Scholarships and financial aid
C5. Counselor relationship	E5. Lack of resources	E4. Scholarships and financial aid
C2. Counselor support	E1. Large caseload	E5. Scholarships and financial aid
C4. Counselor support	E2. Large caseload	E1. Small caseload
C1. Counselor transactions	E4. Large caseload	E1. State schools
C3. Counselor transactions	E5. Large caseload	E2. State schools
C4. Counselor transactions	E1. Other counseling duties	E3. State schools
C5. Counselor transactions	E2. Other counseling duties	E4. State schools
C4. Counselor advice	E3. Other counseling duties	E5. State schools
C5. Counselor advice	E4. Other counseling duties	E5. Word of mouth knowledge
C2. Helpful counselor	E5. Questions about specific college	F4. Confused on picking colleges
C3. Helpful counselor	E1. Recommendation letters	F1. Difficulty of finding and choosing college
C4. Helpful counselor	E5. Recommendation letters	
C5. Helpful counselor	E1. Required meetings	
C2. Informal counselor connections		
C3. Informal counselor connections		
C4. Informal counselor connections		
C3. Personable counselor		
C4. Personable counselor		
D1. Counselor did not discuss fit		

F2. Difficulty of finding and choosing college
 F3. Difficulty of finding and choosing college
 F4. Difficulty of finding and choosing college
 F5. Difficulty of finding and choosing college
 F1. Excited thinking about future
 F2. Excited thinking about future
 F4. Excited thinking about future
 F1. Girls create their own process

F2. Girls create their own process
 F3. Girls create their own process
 F5. Girls create their own process
 F1. Personal expectations
 F2. Personal expectations
 F4. Personal expectations
 F5. Personal expectations
 F1. Relief after admissions process
 F2. Relief after admissions process
 F5. Relief after admissions process
 F2. Seek help when it's missing

F3. Seek help when it's missing
 F1. Self-starter
 F2. Self-starter
 F3. Self-starter
 F4. Self-starter
 F5. Self-starter
 F1. Stressful or daunting process
 F2. Stressful or daunting process
 F3. Stressful or daunting process
 F4. Stressful or daunting process
 F5. Stressful or daunting process

1. Annie 2. Bella 3. Claire. 4. Dara. 5. Eliza

VITA

Jordan McCarter serves as a History and Social Sciences Instructor at Girls Preparatory School in Chattanooga, Tennessee as well as the Dean of the Eighth Grade. Her work in teaching was preceded by a career in Higher Education, having formerly served in student affairs roles at Texas Christian University, Southern Methodist University, and Vanderbilt University. Throughout her career, Jordan has served in numerous institutional service roles and was selected to the New and Emerging Leaders Institute in 2018 through the Tennessee Association of Independent Schools.

Jordan will receive her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education from the University of Tennessee in December 2023. Previously, Jordan earned her Bachelor of Arts in History in History from Tufts University in May 2000. She went on to earn a Master of Education degree from Vanderbilt University in 2004 with a dual concentration in Student College Personnel and Institutional Advancement.

A native Tennessean, Jordan lives in Chattanooga with her husband, Keith; mother, Susan; and most importantly, her son, Charlie.