HIGH ACADEMICALLY ACHIEVING RURAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCES ON THEIR COLLEGE CHOICE DECISIONS

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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my wife, Tara, and my three children, who put up with me and my passion and at times obsession with the educational opportunities that are both available and unavailable to rural high school students.

My daughter, Jesse, was the original inspiration for this research, as she graduated from a small, rural high school in North Carolina, and chose to attend the University of Pennsylvania for her undergraduate studies. My sons, Wesley and Noah, put up with my endless questions and discussions of colleges and never once told me that I was crazy or to just leave them alone. And my wife, Tara, my best friend, who supported and encouraged me through all of this. She gave me the gift of letting me follow my own dreams. I can only hope that this research provides opportunities for others who live in rural areas of our country to follow their dreams as well, whether it is at home or elsewhere.
Conducting this research and writing this dissertation has been a journey of successes and failures but has always been a journey of learning that has made me a better educator, a better researcher, and a better person. It has taught me to not only examine my own thinking and beliefs, but to do so critically, with an eye towards identifying the reasons I believe what I believe and the data that supports or contradicts those beliefs. It has also taught me to present information as both a researcher and as a storyteller. I owe all of that learning to Dr. Joni Finney, who pushed me, questioned me, and guided me throughout this process as my dissertation chair. I am also grateful to my dissertation committee members, Dr. H. Gerald Campano, and Dr. Jen Botzojorns, who both gave willingly of their time, knowledge, and experiences during this process. Dr. Campano recognized that I had a story to tell and encouraged me during his class to tell it. He was always available to give advice and encouragement when I needed it. Dr. Botzojorns was gracious enough to take time away from her position as the superintendent of a rural school system in Vermont to travel to Philadelphia throughout my dissertation process and offered encouragement and advice to me along the way. I am grateful to all three of my dissertation committee members for their efforts, time, and invaluable advice and guidance.

I could not have made it through this process without the love and support of the greatest cohort to ever travel through the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational and Organizational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of
Education. Their support, advice, and friendship throughout the three years we spent together as classmates was invaluable to me as I struggled with completing class assignments, conducting research, and holding on to my sanity at times. We made it through together.

I must also recognize and thank my colleagues in the Surry County School System of Northwest North Carolina, who were always there for me when I needed anything. Paige Badgett, Celia Hodges, and Lorrie Sawyers welcomed me into their high schools, gave me access to their students, and provided all the information that I needed when conducting the pilot study in advance of the study from which this dissertation was written. My assistant principal, Dr. Shelley Goins, and my best friend in the school system, Dr. Tracey Lewis, supported me and encouraged me when I began thinking about returning to graduate school, and helped me wherever they could along the way.

Finally, and most importantly, I will never be able to thank my family enough for allowing me to dream this dream. My wife, Tara, is the best thing that ever happened to me. Throughout my coursework at Penn, the conducting of this research, and the writing of this dissertation, she has always helped me in any way that I have asked. She has been my sounding board, advisor, editor, and more. My children; Jesse, Wesley, and Noah, have supported me, encouraged me, and put up with me and loved me through it all, just as I love them. They were the inspiration for this research, and the inspiration for my dream of helping other students who live in rural areas of our country.
Research on college choice decisions of high school students has increased over the past forty years but has generally centered on demographic characteristics such as race, gender, or socio-economic status of students. There has been little research on the influences on the college choice decisions of high academically achieving students from rural areas. Nationally, 27% of rural high school students attend four-year colleges, compared to 37% of students who come from urban or suburban areas. In addition, 73% of students choose to attend college within their home state. However, preliminary data from one rural school system in North Carolina showed that over a two-year period, 96.45% of students who attend high school in that county school system remained in the state of North Carolina for college. This data implies that rural high school students remain in state for college at a higher rate than students from urban and suburban areas and do not seek admission to highly prestigious colleges around the United States to which they may be attractive candidates for admission.
Seven to nine students and the faculty member or members who works most closely with students during their college search were interviewed from one rural high school each in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia to determine their perceptions of the influences on their college choice processes. Focus group sessions were held with the student participants at each of the high schools to insure the accuracy and understanding of data and to expand on themes identified during the coding of data.

This study found that rural students face a variety of barriers in their college search processes. These barriers, both real and perceived, worked to lead rural students to choose in state colleges that were in proximity to their homes. Rural students and the high school faculty who work with them often work with incomplete or inaccurate information of the opportunities available to students outside of their own states of residence.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Researcher Context

My daughter Jesse, now an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, graduated in 2015 as the valedictorian of her class from East Surry High School, in rural Surry County, North Carolina. Upon graduation from high school, Jesse applied to local colleges and universities, as well as several highly selective institutions located in the eastern half of the United States. Jesse was accepted at several schools, placed on the wait list of a few schools, and denied admission by two of the highly selective colleges to which she applied. One of the schools that accepted Jesse was the University of Pennsylvania, which she chose as the school that she would attend as an undergraduate. During the various meetings that I attended in my role as principal in the Surry County Schools, I spoke with the Superintendent of the Surry County School System, all three assistant superintendents, all four high school principals, and numerous other district level administrators in the Surry County School System. When discussing Jesse’s decision to attend the University of Pennsylvania with school and district-level administrators in her school system, I asked the question, “Who else from Surry County has been accepted to and attended an Ivy League University upon graduating from high school?” No one could remember a single other high school graduate from Surry County. In our discussions, only one student (who also attended East Surry High School) was mentioned; a male student who had left Surry County, graduated from North Carolina State University, and then was accepted to graduate school at Cornell University. He was not a high school graduate of a Surry County high school, however, leaving Surry County
after his tenth-grade year to attend the School of Science and Math in Durham, North Carolina, a school run by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for students who are academically gifted in those subject areas.

As I attended Jesse’s high school graduation and various other academic celebrations involving local high schools, I heard each student’s name called as well as the name of the college that they would be attending as an undergraduate. I was struck by the fact that very few of those students were leaving the state of North Carolina for college, even though Surry County borders Virginia and the students in Surry County often travel in Virginia, both with their schools and with family and friends. Those discussions and observations led me to begin informally asking questions about why this happened, as there have been other students who would have been attractive candidates to Ivy League schools or other highly selective colleges and universities in the United States (colleges and universities will hereafter be referred to as “college” or “colleges”). Yet the students had not sought admission to those colleges.

Having served as principal in the Surry County School System for twelve years, with experience as a principal in all three attendance zones in the school system, I have developed many contacts with parents of students in all areas of Surry County. I spoke with several parents of high-achieving students at Meadowview Magnet Middle School, where I served as principal from 2012 until 2016, and with parents of other high-achieving students in Surry County who attended the three high schools. None of the parents or school officials that I spoke with knew of any students who were planning to apply to highly selective colleges. Location of the school of choice and its proximity to
home were strong factors cited by the students and parents that I spoke with for being interested in colleges or choosing to attend a college.

In 2014, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 73% of first-time college students in the United States remained in their state of residence for college. Of the first-time college students whose state of residence was North Carolina, 80% remained in state, which ranks North Carolina tenth in the country for highest percentage of students staying in state for college (Snyder & Dillow, 2016a). In Surry County, a rural county in Northwest North Carolina, of the students who graduated in the same year as Jesse or the year after she graduated and attended college, 96.45% attended colleges in North Carolina.

**Statement of the Problem**

The National Center for Education Statistics classifies school systems as city, town, suburban, or rural. Rural areas are all areas that are not identified as urban (having a population of 50,000 or more) or urban cluster (having a population of 2,500 or more). All school systems that participated in this study are classified as rural school systems by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2016). For the purposes of this study, any student who attends a school system classified as rural is considered a rural student (NCES, 2016).

Rural areas around the country struggle in many ways, but the most damaging area may be in lack of educational attainment because of its connection to other social outcomes, such as employment, income, civic participation, and dependence or non-
dependence on public assistance programs (Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012). Only 27% of rural students are enrolled in four-year colleges around the country, versus 37% of urban and suburban students, making rural students an under-represented segment of the college-going population (Provasnik et al., 2007). Additionally, using data from a diverse group of post-secondary institutions, Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) found that students at less selective colleges were more likely than those from highly selective colleges to come from small towns and rural areas. Students from small town and rural areas were also more likely to attend public colleges versus private ones, due to proximity, familiarity, and perceived cost differences (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

Many students who apply to college appear to base their choice of schools on factors that are not directly related to the quality of education that they will receive. These factors include such things as the amenities in the student union, the availability of wireless internet service in the dormitories, and the win/loss record of the basketball team (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Geography is also a prominent factor, as most students choose to attend college within proximity of their home and work place (Hillman, 2016). However, the decisions that high school students make about where to attend college have long term ramifications for the development of their human capital, their stock of knowledge and skills that contributes to their productivity (Garibaldi, 2006). The costs and benefits of attendance can differ across institutions offering the same degrees, resulting in unequal development of individual student’s human capital (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).
The benefits of education are more than just economic, however. Individuals with higher levels of education are healthier overall, less likely to depend on assistance programs, and more likely to have children who are better prepared for school and achieve higher academically once enrolled (Baum & Payea, 2005). These facts are mutually beneficial to the individual and society.

Simply enrolling in college, although a key factor in increasing an individual’s human capital, does not guarantee that every student will make equal gains in human capital in the form of future economic opportunities (Arum et al, 2007). Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) studied enrollment and withdrawal data from 68 public institutions around the country that differed in size and selectivity and concluded that where a student attends college matters regarding persistence in pursuing their degree, likelihood of graduating, and future earnings. Post-secondary students who pay more to attend a highly selective college receive a measurable return on their investment. When considering the academic qualifications of the students at specific colleges, the authors found that every 100-point increase in a student body’s average SAT score was associated with 3 to 7 percent higher earnings for its graduates over the course of their lifetimes (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Witteveen and Attewell (2017), in examining studies using survey responses from graduates of various post-secondary institutions, found that 1993 graduates of most and highly selective colleges earned 17% more than graduates of very selective colleges ten years after graduation and 37% more than graduates of non-selective colleges. An additional study by Witteveen and Attewell (2017) found that 2008 graduates of most and highly selective colleges earned 17% more
than graduates of very selective colleges and 24% more than graduates of non-selective colleges four years after graduation. These studies were controlled for all variables other than type of college attended, including level of educational attainment (Witteveen & Attewell, 2017).

In addition to economic benefits, there are many non-tangible benefits of attending a college that is more academically prestigious and more highly selective, such as developing professional and social networks (Behrman et al., 1998). However, many students are unwilling to make the initial investment in highly selective colleges with high academic reputations (Kane, 1998).

There are several studies available that show academic reputation to be one of the top indicators of choice for high-achieving high school students (Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Goenner & Snaith, 2004). Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) found that students with high academic ability are more likely than their peers to apply to out-of-state and to highly selective colleges. In an examination of studies, Litten (1991) found that high academic ability showed a greater positive correlation with students’ applying to highly selective institutions than any other characteristic or demographic statistic. Hoxby and Avery (2004) agreed but did note that students from families with high incomes paid less attention to financial aid packages than those from families without high incomes when making their college choice decisions. However, there is little research on why many high achieving rural high school students choose to attend less prestigious colleges.
Every year, high school students in the Surry County School System of Northwest North Carolina graduate and matriculate to various colleges of higher learning, typically within the state of North Carolina. Based on data gained from the school counselors at the three high schools in Surry County, shown in table 1 below, 96.46% of Surry County High Schools students from the graduating classes of 2015 and 2016 who attended college did so within the state of North Carolina, which is noticeably higher than the state average of 80% and the national average of 73%. Since Surry County is designated as a rural area by the National Center for Educational Statistics, all three high schools in Surry County are likewise designated as rural high schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Graduates Who Attended College</th>
<th>Graduates Who Attended College in State</th>
<th>Graduates Who Attended College Out of State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS 1</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS 2</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>96.46%</td>
<td>3.54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The percentage of Surry County Schools Seniors from the classes of 2015 and 2016 who attended in-state and out-of-state colleges.

Even though high academically achieving students graduate every year from the Surry County Schools, a remarkably small number apply to highly selective colleges that
are outside of North Carolina. There are many possible influences on their decision-making processes, but those influences and their degree of importance to those students are unclear. This study sought to collect data that would reveal which colleges high academically achieving rural students in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia are choosing for attendance, the influences of local environment on those decisions, and the influences of rural high schools on those decisions.

Significance of the Study

For high school students, the selection of a specific college to attend for their undergraduate degree is often the first defining life decision that they must make. Many high achieving students begin thinking about this decision and gathering information on prospective colleges beginning with their freshman year of high school (Hossler et al., 1999). The information readily available to students and their parents comes from websites, college fairs, recruiter visits, and numerous college ranking services that not only judge the academic reputation and rigor of specific degree programs, but also the relative worth of a degree from specific colleges (U.S. News and World Report, 2015; Princeton Review, 2017; Forbes, 2015).

As Perna (2006) stated, recent research includes a focus on the college-choice processes of groups, generally defined by demographic characteristics such as race or socioeconomic status. College choice must continue to be a focus in research, in policy making, and in the practices of colleges as gaps between disadvantaged groups of students still exist (Perna, 2006). Making sure that all students have equal access to all
colleges, including the most highly selective colleges, is crucial to maximizing the personal and societal benefits of a highly-educated citizenry. Projected demographic changes and current trends in higher-education finance further underscore the need for continued attention to theory and research on college choice (Perna, 2006).

The geographic location of colleges is one of the most basic and obvious dimensions of opportunity for high school students, yet researchers often study demographic characteristics of students and overlook how place shapes students’ educational destinations. Today, it is easy to dismiss the importance of geography because of advances in transportation and communication over the past several decades. Individuals in our society are more mobile and more in contact with each other than ever before, given the lowering costs of long distance travel and the advances in communication technology as compared to 30 years ago. The natural assumption may be that students are more able and willing to travel long distances for college if they see it as an advantage for them to do so (Hoxby, 2009; Long, 2004). However, this is not true of all students, as evidenced by the data from the Surry County Schools in North Carolina. This study will collect data from one rural high school in each of three rural school systems—North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia—to determine if the data support the idea that students from rural areas remain in state for their post-secondary careers at higher rates than students from other areas of their states. The study will also attempt to identify students’ perceptions of the influences on their college choice decisions.

Students from rural areas have a history of lower educational attainment at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels, yet this population remains understudied. Although extensive research has been done on the educational access of many underrepresented
groups, rural students have received relatively little attention. To truly understand students’ college choices, we must understand the environment in which their choices occur (Hillman, 2016). This study seeks to add to the existing body of research on college choice by examining college choice decisions for students from non-metropolitan counties (Koricich, 2014) by focusing on their own local contexts and the organizational contexts of their high schools. The overall research question to be addressed in this study is determining how high academically achieving students perceive the influences on their college choice decisions. Each of the students who participated in this study attended a rural high school in North Carolina, South Carolina, or Virginia and was a member in the National Honor Society or the National Beta Club. All National Honor Society members, regardless of location, are required to have a minimum grade point average 3.0 in their high school careers. Nationwide, over one million students are members of National Honor Society chapters in all 50 states (National Honor Society, 2017). Additionally, the National Beta Club has 500,000 members in 8,750 chapters across the United States and abroad (National Beta Club, 2017). National Beta Club chapters establish their own requirements for membership. The high schools in North Carolina and Virginia that participated in this study have chapters of the National Honor Society, and Carolina High School in East County, South Carolina, has a chapter of the National Beta Club. Carolina High School requires its members to maintain a 3.5 unweighted grade point average for membership in the Beta Club.
The following questions will further guide this study:

1. What colleges do academically high-achieving students in rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia choose for their post-secondary studies?

2. How do high academically achieving rural students’ perceptions of local environment affect their college choice decision-making processes?

3. How do high academically achieving rural students’ perceptions of the influences of their high schools affect their college decision-making processes?

The results of this study can be used to inform school system employees working closely with high school students as to how they may be better resources to students in the college selection process. This study can also aid district-level administrators in both identifying and addressing areas of weakness regarding schools’ involvement in the college selection process, which could in turn directly benefit students by aiding those students in gaining admission to the best possible colleges for their undergraduate degrees. It would additionally benefit the school system itself if students applied to, were accepted to, and subsequently attended highly selective colleges in the United States. The school system would be able to build upon these successes for students in the future, by developing a bank of marketable success stories in a climate of ever-increasing competitiveness in public education.

An additional benefit is that this study can provide information to high school students and high school staff members concerning the influences that are at work in students’ decision-making processes, particularly cost of attendance, financial aid, and other external influences that factor into their decisions. This additional information
could lead to better decision-making and the opportunity to gain acceptance to highly selective colleges more attainable.

**Definition of Key Terms**

For the purposes of this study, any student who has been offered membership in the National Honor Society or the National Beta Club will be considered a high achieving student and will be included as a participant in the study. All National Honor Society Members, regardless of the location of the National Honor Society Chapter, are required to have a minimum grade point average 3.0 in their high school careers. Carolina High School requires its Beta Club members to maintain a 3.5 unweighted grade point average for membership. Chapters of either the National Honor Society or the National Beta Club are available in each of the high schools that participated in this study.

In this study, “college” will refer to any four-year post-secondary college or university within the United States, regardless of the selectivity of the college during the application and admissions process. Various publications and organizations define selectivity in different ways, and with varying terminology. For example, US News and World Report (US News and World Report, 2015) uses the percentage of applicants accepted to define selectivity among colleges. On the other hand, Barron’s (Barron’s, 2017) publishes lists of colleges that are classified by varying degrees of admissions competitiveness each year, but states that their rankings are to be used as a guideline only and includes a disclaimer that the list may be incomplete. Additionally, colleges such as North Carolina State University that admit nearly half of their applicants are included in the list as highly competitive. Drawing on these publications, and for the purposes of this
study, a “highly selective college” will be defined as a college that is identified as most or highly competitive by Barron’s (2017) and admits no more than 25% of its applicants.

Fifty-five colleges in the United States fit these criteria and are included in the appendices of this report. Appendix A lists those colleges by their acceptance rates, from low to high. Appendix B lists those colleges by the average grade point average of their most recent freshman class, from low to high. Appendix C lists colleges by the average SAT score of their most recent freshman class, from low to high, and Appendix D lists colleges by the average ACT score of their most recent freshman class, from low to high.

There are two such colleges located in North Carolina: Duke University and Davidson College. There are no colleges that are defined as highly selective for this study located in the states of South Carolina or Virginia.

The National Center for Education Statistics classifies school systems as city, town, suburban, or rural. Rural areas are all areas that are not identified as urban (having a population of 50,000 or more) or urban cluster (having a population of 2,500 or more). All school systems that participated in this study are classified as rural school systems by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2016). High Schools that are in rural school systems are classified as rural high schools for the purposes of this study. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, any student who attends a high school within a school system that is classified as rural is considered a rural student (NCES, 2016).
CHAPTER 2:
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Colleges across the country are seeking to attract the best and brightest students possible to their campuses. High academically achieving students, regardless of geographical location, are the type of students that colleges across the country are recruiting, yet 85% of high school students in South Carolina, 83% of high school students in North Carolina, and 74% of high school students in Virginia are staying in state for college compared to 73% of students throughout the United States. Of the 15 states that keep more than 80% of their high school seniors in state for college, eleven are Southern states (Snyder & Dillow, 2013).

This study examined high school seniors in three rural school systems in three different states in the south and the factors that influenced their college choice processes. In a broader sense, it specifically sought to identify those factors that could be identified as unique to students who reside in and attend public high schools in rural areas and are considered high academically achieving high school students. The study further sought to uncover influences that guided rural students to attend colleges within the borders of their home states versus seeking admission to colleges throughout the United States and abroad.

Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) and Paulsen (1990) agreed that there are two theoretical perspectives common in designing research studies on college choice: an economic model that argues that investment in higher education is an investment in
increasing human capital, and a sociological model based on the idea that individuals gain status in society by attending college. Conceptual models that draw on both backgrounds have been examined in creating the conceptual framework that will be used for this study. Many models, such as Perna’s model of college choice (2006) contain components that reflect both approaches to the study of college choice. Research on internal influences and external influences, as defined by Chapman (1981) was examined to further inform the theoretical framework of the study. Specific internal influences researched were participants’ academic achievement, family influences, and socioeconomic status. External influences that were examined for this study were location/proximity to home of colleges and universities, costs and benefits of attending college, parents’ influences on students’ college choices, high school faculty members’ influence on students’ college choices, and high school environment for students in the college choice decision-making process.

**Economic Theories of College Choice**

Economists ask three questions when studying a decision maker’s behavior in the college choice process:

1) Who is the decision maker?

2) What goal is the decision maker trying to achieve?

3) What are the decision maker’s constraints? (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016)

Economists work with the assumption that decision makers act in ways that are rational, or in their own best interests. In other words, economists assume that decision makers consider the costs and benefits of their choices and then make the choice that
results in the greatest return on their investment. This does not mean that economists believe that all decision makers do the exact same thing; rather, it means that individuals and organizations engage in systematic, purposeful, goal-directed behavior, making decisions in ways that maximize their benefits relative to costs, and do so in a way that is consistent with their perceptions, preferences, and goals. Decisions may be made with incomplete or inaccurate information, but they are made with the information available at the time of the decision and are therefore considered to be rational. Economists adopt the point of view that differences in college choice decisions are explained by the amount and type of information available to a student, or their individual characteristics, such as personal preference or ambition. They accept the conditions that lead to differences in the college choice decisions of individuals as given and do not seek to explain them (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

**Human Capital and the Rise of Economics of Higher Education**

The idea that human beings have capital, or value, in and of themselves is one that dates to the early writings on which modern economic theory is based. The most basic concepts of economics originate in ancient Greece as Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers debated the nature of wealth and related concepts (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). However, it was not until the late sixteenth and seventeenth century that academics such as Sir William Petty, Sir James Steuart, Jeremy Bentham and others began discussing ideas of economic reasoning, leading to the recognition of economics as an accepted field of study in academia (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Petty made one of the first attempts to estimate the monetary value of a human being in 1691. His method
was based on the estimated future earnings of an individual but made no allowance for cost of living or other personal expenses in the future. His work, for the first time, established the notion that humans had monetary value in relation to their productivity as workers (Kiker, 1966).

Originally published in 1776, Adam Smith’s (Smith, 2005) *Wealth of Nations* is considered the basis of modern-day economics, and is the reason that Smith is referred to as the father of economics (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Smith did not refer to the term “human capital” as a means of identifying the intrinsic value of human beings, but he did reference the relationship of human productivity to future earnings in the workplace.

In 1853, William Farr introduced the first scientific procedure that attempted to find the net value of a human being. He calculated the value of a human being as that person’s lifetime earnings minus the person’s future living expenses. His work was like Petty’s in that he was attempting to establish a monetary value for a human being, but his work included the losses that the person would incur over the course of a lifetime, namely living expenses (Kiker, 1966). Theodore Wittstein later adapted Farr’s work to the insurance business as he sought to place a value on humans as a basis for compensation if a worker lost his life (Kiker, 1966).

The idea of education as human capital was further defined and explored around the early 1900s, most notably by Alfred Marshall, who published *Principles of Economics* (Marshall, 1890), which is considered the first economics textbook and introduced the use of mathematical formulas and graphs to the study of economics (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). One of the first scientific studies on the effects of
education on the earnings of a worker occurred in 1935, when J.R. Walsh compared the earnings of workers with bachelor’s degrees to the cost of their education. He concluded that a bachelor’s degree was a positive investment for those entering the workforce, but that graduate degrees were a negative investment (Walsh, 1935). This study and others like them were the first research on the idea of human capital investments, specifically investments in higher education as a means of increasing human capital.

In 1958, Jacob Mincer completed a landmark study of education as an investment in human capital. In his study, Mincer argued that because training (or education) involved direct and indirect costs, individuals who received training would require higher salaries to compensate them for their financial investment, or costs, in that training. Mincer established the basic methods of estimating return on investment for those who sought to increase their own human capital that are still in use today. While acknowledging that education was a major avenue through which individuals could increase their human capital, Mincer (1958) also realized that individuals increase their human capital in many other ways, such as the life and work experiences gained every day. However, higher education is a means through which human capital can be increased to a great degree, as it is valued by those in charge of hiring and setting salaries for workers.

Although economics was an accepted field of study, and the economics of education was receiving much discussion by economists, the sub-field of higher-education economics did not itself become an accepted area of study until the late 1950s and early 1960s (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). In his 1961 address to the American Economic Association, Theodore Shultz declared that:
The failure to treat human resources explicitly as a form of capital, as a produced means of production, as the product of investment, has fostered the retention of the classical notion of labor as a capacity to manual work requiring little knowledge and skill, a capacity with which, per this notion, laborers are endowed about equally. This notion of labor was wrong in the classical period and is patently wrong now. (Schultz, 1961)

Gary Becker (1964) extended the idea that investing in education was an investment in human capital by calculating the benefit of a high school and college degree. He found that a college degree greatly raises a person's income, even after accounting for direct and indirect costs of schooling, and after adjusting for the family backgrounds, greater skills, and increased abilities of more educated people.

In the 50-plus years since, economists have continued to be very interested in studying and estimating the rate of return on investment in higher education. The return on the investment of attending college and other levels of higher education are important to potential students and their families as they make the decision to attend college and as they choose the specific institution that they will attend (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

**Costs and Benefits**

The foundation of the economic approach to college choice is the idea of cost versus benefit and the importance of both factors in the final decision that students make when choosing a college. When an individual is considering any action or decision, economists emphasize the importance of both the benefits of the action and the costs of the action in deciding what to do. In general, the benefits must exceed the costs to make the action worthwhile and for the decision to make sense or be considered rational.

College attendance involves different kinds of costs to the students who attend
and to their families. These costs can be broken into two categories: direct and indirect. The most obvious are direct costs, or those costs that would not have occurred for the student if he or she had chosen not to attend college. Tuition and fees are the largest examples of direct costs of higher education since they would not have been incurred if the student had entered the workforce or the military after graduating from high school. Room and board would not be considered direct costs because this expense would be incurred regardless of whether the student went to college or chose another path after graduating from high school. Other direct costs of postsecondary education include textbooks and other books required for college, as well as other supplies for college, and travel expenses to and from college (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

Researchers also cite indirect costs as an important factor to consider when choosing a college or university. The income lost during the time it takes for a student to earn a degree can be large depending on the job opportunity that is foregone. This loss is mitigated if the student can work during their attendance of college, but that income is typically used to offset the costs of attendance and is therefore generally accounted for by students and their families as they plan to attend an institution (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). To further complicate matters, students and their families often do not know the actual direct and indirect costs of attending an institution at the time that they make the decision, as those costs fluctuate over the period of attendance. Travel costs are dependent on the time of year during which travel takes place, as well as other economic factors at play, including market forces, inflation, etc. (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

In general, public, in-state schools are most cost effective for students according to the 2016 College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on
Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania (2016), when considering only the financial resources of a student or their family regarding the percentage of their income that will be used to finance the student’s college education.

Financial aid is the main method that students and their families can use to reduce the direct costs associated with attending college; however, many students and their families are unaware of financial aid opportunities available at individual institutions or may not be able to correctly interpret the information if they have access to it (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

The benefits of attending college can be broken into market or non-market categories. These categories can be thought of as economic and social benefits, much as the study of college choice can be conceptualized from an economic or sociological standpoint. The most easily observable benefit of attending college for a student is a market benefit, the potential gain in lifetime earnings for the individual upon graduation from college. In 2003, average lifetime earnings were 73% higher for individuals who attained a bachelor’s degree than for individuals who attained only a high school diploma (Baum & Payea, 2005). By 2008, that figure had fallen to 66% (Baum et al, 2010), and by 2012, the most recent figures available, it was 65% (Baum et al, 2013). Students who earn a master’s degree earn 158% more, students who earn a doctoral degree earn 258% more, and students who earn a professional degree earn 274% more than a high school graduate (Baum et al., 2010). It should be noted, however, that the United States was amid a major economic recession during this time, which may have lessened the economic value of many jobs. However, there is still a clear financial benefit to be gained from attending and graduating from college and a large financial penalty for those who
do not attend. The market, or economic benefits to the student who attends college vary from individual to individual based on the characteristics and preferences of the students themselves. Academic ability, choice of major, and career preference all influence the long-term return on investment for the student, particularly those students who choose careers that require post-secondary education (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

Because college graduates are assumed to have gained skills and knowledge that will make them more productive workers through the education that they received, they can expect to earn higher wages than those workers who did not receive that education. Although this is asserted as the main economic benefit of higher education (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016), economists have also suggested that higher education acts as a screening tool for employers. Colleges and universities sort students based on their abilities and give employers an inexpensive screening tool for use in hiring prospective employees.

There are many ways in which students may benefit from going to college that are not related to future earnings. Students may see value in taking part in extracurricular activities while in college, making friends and forming relationships, taking advantage of opportunities and services while at college that may not be available to them without enrolling, such as tutoring services, on-campus health and physical fitness facilities, and inexpensive dining options. They may also value the ability to mature and gain independence before entering the workforce. Students also see benefit to their lives upon graduation from college as they have a life-long relationship with the friends they made in college and with their alma mater. Many students simply value learning and the opportunity to learn. These benefits do not have a clear monetary value, but they are
valuable nonetheless to students who wish to attend college.

Additional non-market benefits of attending college include realizing a better understanding of the world and the satisfaction that is gained from that understanding. They include the acquisition of better personal practices, which in turn lead to better quality of life through improved health care and improved life decisions. Additionally, access to college improves access to events, friends, and relationships that further improve the quality of life of the student. Those benefits continue even after the student retires from the marketplace in the form of higher retirement benefits, continued better health, and longer life span (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

Sociological Theories of College Choice

While economic theories are beneficial in understanding the costs and benefits of the college choice process, when a high school student makes their decision of where to attend college for their post-secondary career, their choice cannot be understood without considering the context in which it is made (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Lin, 2002). While studies that are grounded from an economics framework are typically quantitative in nature, sociological approaches to studying college choice are generally qualitative in nature and are useful for understanding the ways in which students’ individual contexts influence their perspectives and preferences towards colleges and universities. Those contexts contain both barriers and opportunities that may or may not be unique to each student’s context. Each student’s thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs, regardless of their accuracy, are influenced by their immediate environment, including their family, community, high school, and local culture of that environment. Perna (2006) defines this
as habitus, and a student’s habitus informs a student’s college-related expectations, attitudes, and experiences. Perna (2006) further describes habitus as the internalized set of dispositions and preferences that is derived from one’s surroundings and that subconsciously define what constitutes a “reasonable” action. Habitus reflects the internalization of structural boundaries and constraints and determines what is possible for an individual (Horvat, 2001). In addition, those barriers and opportunities may be real or imagined, but all play an important role in the ultimate decisions that students make. Sociological approaches are useful for studying those individual contexts and are useful in exploring differences across various groups of students as they make their college decisions (Horvat, 2001).

Sociological frameworks used for studying the college choice decisions of students rely on the notion of cultural capital, a term that has become increasingly popular over the past 40 years (Winkler-Wagner, 2010). The notion of cultural capital arises from the work of Pierre Bourdieu in the 1960s and later. Bourdieu is commonly classified as a conflict theorist, being greatly influenced by the works of Karl Marx. Marx argued that no one could transcend the limits of their own mind, and the fact that one accepts their position in life makes it a barrier to their ability to move away from it. Bourdieu explained this idea by stating that a person’s worldview or belief that someone’s place in the world is proper and expected may further unequal conditions for themselves (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Cultural capital is the term that Bourdieu used to refer to the less tangible or less immediately visible inequalities. He defined the term as the culturally relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences, or norms that act as a form of currency in the social realm
(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Cultural capital should be thought of as the culturally-based resources that a person possesses that serve as a form of capital in the sense that they have value to the person as they exist in society. Those resources include the ideas of cultural awareness, knowledge about educational institutions, academic achievement, and aesthetic preferences (such as taste in music, art, or food) (Swartz, 1997). Cultural capital also includes the skills, abilities, or mannerisms that are products of an individual’s context and allow them to function within their immediate environment.

Cultural capital may provide students with access to resources that would increase their likelihood to attend college and to investigate a wider range of colleges in the decision-making process. Students who possess cultural capital will also more likely consider a greater range of institutions to attend, whether the college is in-state or out-of-state, private, and/or highly selective in making their decision to apply to and attend college (McDonough, 1997).

Cultural capital is important for understanding the differences across groups of students’ college decision-making processes that are not accounted for by economic or human capital models. Social and cultural capital models reveal the differences in various students and groups of students’ expectations, preferences, tastes, and certainty about higher education investment decisions. Perna (2004) found that measures of social and cultural capital improved the explanatory power of a traditional economic model of college enrollment that only considered gender, race, financial resources, and academic preparation and achievement. Additionally, Perna (2004) found that an examination of students’ social and cultural capital played an important role in explaining the college choice decisions of groups of students considered to be disadvantaged during the process.
Perna (2006), in reviewing literature around college choice, identified African-Americans and Hispanics as particular groups of interests in support of her model because these groups of students, regardless of academic ability, often choose colleges without adequate access to resources and information. Similarly, students who reside in rural communities in the South could be considered disadvantaged in their college decision-making processes, as only 27% percent of rural students attend college compared to 37% of urban and suburban students (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Students, regardless of their context, who attain the types of cultural knowledge that dominant classes see as valuable will most likely have greater access to more and better information in their college choice process. These students will engage with a wider range of adults and institutions in their decision-making process, moving beyond family members to teachers, school counselors, community members, and representatives of the different institutions in which they are interested (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985).

**College Choice Models**

In reviewing the literature on college choice, multiple models were identified as landmark models in research into high school students’ college choice processes. Four of the models identified are somewhat dated (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hanson and Litten, 1982), as they were first published in the 1980s, but all four remain influential models and serve as the basis of much of the research being conducted on the subject today. More recent models have been proposed by Perna (2006) and Toutkoushian and Paulsen (2016). The Toutkoushian and Paulsen model (2016) is based on an economics framework, while Perna’s (2006) model blends the economic and
sociological frameworks to account for differences in individual students’ college choices.

**Chapman Model**

Chapman (1981) noted that there are both internal influences and external influences at work as students make their choice of college or university. Internal influences are defined as those influences that the student brings with them as part of their identity, such as race, sex, socioeconomic background, family dynamics, and high school academic achievement, among others. Chapman defines external influences as those that exist outside of the student’s identity, such as parent preference, peer preference, teacher and school counselor guidance, level of communication on the part of colleges and universities, campus visits, cost of attendance, and distance or proximity to home. The notion of internal influences is particularly significant to this study as it will involve the highest academically achieving students in the high schools being identified as participants in the study. Although internal influences are particularly significant in identifying the participants of the study, external influences such as location of campus and the influence of parents, school counselors, and teachers on the students’ decision-making process will be examined as well. Chapman’s model will be used in combination with Perna’s model, which will be described later in this section, as part of the conceptual framework for this study.
Figure 1: Chapman Model of College Choice

Jackson’s Model

Jackson (1982) developed a different model of college choice loosely based on a chronological process which is considered another landmark model for this area of research. His model included three distinct steps in the college choice process: preference, exclusion, and evaluation, although they often overlapped as institutions were identified, assessed, and eliminated. He defined “preference” as the initial information collection stage of the process. This information-gathering process led naturally to the exclusion stage, as students eliminated potential choices based on varied criteria, such as cost, distance, availability of programs of study, etc. A final evaluation process from a list...
of finalists led to the decision of students to attend a specific college or university. A weakness of this model is that there is no clear explanation offered as to how the final decisions of students were made. An interesting component of his model that has implications for this study, however, is the fact that Jackson (1982) used sociological evidence to show that students who perform at a high scholastic level in high school will naturally widen aspirations to further their education at a postsecondary institution.

Figure 2: The Jackson Combined Model of College Choice.

**Hansen and Litten Model**

Hansen and Litten (1982) proposed a multi-step process that students implement when making their college choice decisions. The model begins with the student first becoming aware of a desire to attend college and may occur at any time. The process then incorporates four additional stages: beginning the search process for suitable college choices, gathering information on all possible choices in which the student has an interest, applying to specific colleges, and making the final choice among the schools to
which a student is accepted and enrolling in that institution. This model is attractive because it follows a well-defined, linear process, but provides little detail on specific influences and how those may rank in similarity or importance.

![Diagram of Hansen and Litten Model of College Choice](image)

**Figure 3: The Hansen and Litten Model of College Choice**

**Hossler and Gallagher Model**

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) presented a model of college choice that also revolved around a chronological process consisting of three stages: predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition stage is defined as the actual decision of the student to attend a post-secondary institution, and generally occurs early in the student’s high school career. The search stage is the process that the student utilizes to identify
potential institutions to attend. During this stage, students collect information and begin to analyze the benefits of attending specific institutions and the opportunities that will be provided to them upon graduation. Factors such as cost, financial aid, and academic reputation are among those considered at this stage of the process. Choice is the actual selection of the institution that will be attended.

![Diagram of the Hoseller and Gallagher Model of College Choice](image)

**Figure 4. The Hoseller and Gallagher Model of College Choice.**

**Perna Model**

Perna’s (2006) model of the college choice decision-making process argues that each student makes their decision based on an economic analysis of the costs and benefits of enrolling in a college based on the sociological perspectives that the student brings to the college choice decision-making process. Perna (2006) notes that individual students may make different interpretations of each college being considered because they are influenced by four contextual layers: 1) the individual’s habitus, 2) school and community context, 3) the higher education context, and 4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. Perna (2006) explains that a student’s habitus consists of an individual’s demographic characteristics, particularly gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, but also includes cultural and social capital. This notion of habitus is particularly significant for this study.

The school and community contexts recognize the role that social structures and resources play in encouraging or obstructing a student’s decision to attend college.
Stanton-Salazar (1997) argued that school representatives, such as teachers, counselors, and a student’s peers provide information and resources to individual students about the opportunities available to them. Students also gain help with filling out admission applications and negotiating financial aid information from their interactions with school faculty and peers.

The higher education context recognizes the role that higher education institutions play in shaping student college choice. This may involve direct involvement such as advertisements, promotional mail and email, recruitment opportunities, admissions tours, and information sessions for prospective undergraduates. It may also involve indirect involvement, such as geographical location, academic reputation, or academic program availability. The social, economic, and policy context recognizes that college choice is also influenced by changes in social forces such as population migration, economic conditions such as unemployment or increase in family income, or public policies such as the existence or absence of need-based, or merit-based financial aid.

In arguing for the acceptance of her model, Perna (2006) says that by basing the model on constructs from both human capital and sociological approaches, the conceptual model is more comprehensive in understanding and explaining student college choice. It recognizes each individual student’s multiple layers of context that overlap and influence each other so that everyone’s college choice decision is unique to them. Even if two students make the decision to attend the same college, they arrive at that decision in very different ways and with very different processes. This line of thinking ultimately focuses on how two students with outwardly the same characteristics make decisions that would seem to be at odds with one another. Perna argues that this allowance for difference and
variation among students is a key strength of this model. Perna’s model will be incorporated into the conceptual framework of this study.

Figure 5: The Perna Model of College Choice.
**Toutkoushian and Paulsen Model**

The most recent model of college choice found in the literature is an economic model of college choice presented by Toutkoushian and Paulsen (2016). Toutkoushian and Paulsen (2016) present a five-stage model of the college choice decision-making process that is based on the idea that an increase of human capital for the student is the motivation for attending college and subsequently choosing a college for attendance. In the first stage, the predisposition stage, students begin taking college prep courses in high school, taking standardized admissions tests such as the ACT or the SAT, and saving money for use during their college years, whether for direct or indirect costs. In the second stage, the initial search stage, students begin formulating a list of colleges that they are interested in attending. During this stage, students seek information about the colleges that they have identified and begin analyzing the costs and benefits of attending each institution. They may also submit their standardized test scores to the institutions for evaluation. They may visit the colleges that they are interested in attending and participate in admissions events on those campuses. The third stage in the model is the application stage. During this stage, students conduct a more detailed analysis of the costs and benefits of the institutions identified during the initial search stage, paying closer attention to the major or program of study that interests them. The prestige of the college in their field of interest is of importance to students during this stage of the process. Students apply to a set of colleges that is typically a sub-set of the colleges that were identified during the initial search stage.

The next stage in the model is the admission stage, the period during which colleges make their decisions as to whether to offer a student admission and is the only
stage in the model that is not student-driven. Finally, students make the decision to enroll in a specific institution from the list of colleges to which they have gained admittance.

Figure 6: The Toutkoushian and Paulsen Model of College Choice.

**High Achieving Students**

Research has shown that students who take the highest level, or most rigorous academic courses available to them during their high school years are the students most likely to apply to and enroll in college, and in fact is one of the most important predictors of this outcome (Perna, 2004). They are also more likely to enroll in more highly selective, higher-cost colleges versus less selective, lower-cost colleges (Hearn, 1988). In addition, students who perform at the highest level in those courses are the students who are most likely to continue their college careers for higher degrees once they have graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree (Hossler & Stage, 1992).

Although test scores are used to indicate high achieving students in some studies
and high school grades are used to identify high achieving students in other studies (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2004, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001), other researchers argue that the best measure of the rigor of a student’s academic preparation is to examine the highest level of coursework within each academic area and determine a student’s level of performance (Adelman, 1999). Mathematics is the most common subject used to identify high achieving students because of a clearly defined sequence of courses in mathematics and the fact that the sequence of courses becomes increasingly difficult as a student moves through their coursework (Horn, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2004, 2005).

Hossler, et al. (1989) and Paulsen (1990) state that students of high socioeconomic status and high academic achievement, and whose parents are highly educated are more likely to be interested in, apply for admission to, and attend institutions that are more expensive, are located further from home, and are the most highly selective of colleges. In addition, high-achieving students are more likely to attend more highly selective colleges and out-of-state colleges than students with low or average achievement levels (Braxton, 1990). However, an increasing number of high achieving students are choosing less selective institutions for their post-secondary careers (Litten, 1991).

**Local Culture**

Beck (2012) defines “culture” as the shared values, beliefs, and material creations that define a society and distinguish one society from another. His definition captures the
essence of what ties a group of people together, making them part of a collective whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, but is not helpful in describing what sets southern culture apart from other cultures. Marvin Bower’s (2003) definition of culture as “the way we do things around here,” is much more in keeping with the easygoing, simply-stated nature of rural areas and their culture.

Just as definitions vary in defining “culture,” definitions of “rural” vary among those defining the term as well, depending on their life experiences and their own local context. Rural is not the same as farm, as many people who live in rural areas of the United States no longer live and/or work on farms. They live in small towns and communities but are still considered rural because of the lack of population density (Coburn et al, 2007).

Rural culture is generally associated with traditional value systems that are based on some combination of religious adherence, respect for elders, women, and visitors, the importance of the family, a strong sense of community and suspicion of those things seen as outside of the local community (Hoggart, 1987). Characteristics of rural culture include local focus of individual and family activities, a local base of power and control, an economy based on few entities such as farming or local businesses with direct contact with work products, and a strong sense of community with close-knit social networks (Cloke, 1985).

**Location/Proximity to Home**

Research shows that the current generation of college-bound high school students is much more likely to attend college out-of-state than were previous generations. A
study by Hoxby (1997) found that in 1949, 93% of all undergraduates attended college in their home states. However, by 2011, the percentage of students attending college in their own state dropped to 73% (O’Shaughnessy, 2008). Students are more likely to attend college outside of their local market area when they are male, when they belong to a higher socioeconomic status, when their parents have higher education levels, and when they have high academic abilities and educational aspirations (Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Paulsen, 1990).

Parents

Many studies have found that high school students identify their parents as the primary influence on the college decision-making process, both in the initial identification of potential colleges and in the final selection process. Parents exert their influence in a variety of ways. Because they are in regular contact with their students, their opinions are voiced often and those opinions help guide a student’s perception of individual colleges. Parents also influence their children by their willingness to invest available time to investigating and visiting college campuses with and for their children. Likewise, parents exert influence on the final decision of the student in the same way, voicing their opinions and providing additional experiences and contact with potential institutions of choice, as well as providing guidance and advice on financial aid offered. Finally, in most cases, it is the parents who are paying either the full or partial cost of attendance and their financial commitment to specific colleges and universities is a determining factor in many cases (Flint, 1992).
High Schools

An important but often overlooked part of students’ habitus as they are making their college choice decisions is the students’ high schools and how they influence the students’ decisions. High schools must be examined to understand how they reinforce the local culture regarding college attendance, whatever that culture may be. McDonough (1997) defines this notion as organizational habitus. Organizational habitus often shapes college choice by offering a class-based perspective on the process, thereby narrowing the range of possible options. Specifically, McDonough (1997) shows that college choices are narrowed by a student’s personal circumstances, as well as the characteristics of the school attended, especially the organization and structure of guidance counseling at the school. Her analyses revealed differences across schools, especially in the amount of time and resources that school counselors have available for college counseling, the types and levels of colleges with which counselors are familiar and therefore advance to their students, and whether school counselors are reactive or proactive when it comes to advising students about their options for college. McDonough (1997), in a study of a working-class public high school, an upper-middle class public high school, a private preparatory school, and a private Catholic high school in a suburban setting, found that the differences in organization and structure of school counseling between schools were often related to the socioeconomic status of the communities in which the schools were located.

College-going culture is an important part of the habitus of a high school. In their examination of high schools and their success in preparing students to attend and succeed
in college, Corwin and Tierney (2007) describe a high school with a college-going
culture as one with hallway decorations that promote colleges and celebrate students who
have been accepted to and plan to attend college, with evidence of the celebration of
academic successes, and with clear processes in place to support students through every
stage of the college choice process. Corwin and Tierney (2007) further stated that high
schools should be proactive in providing information and services to students and their
families.

**School Counselors**

It is interesting to note in the literature that guidance counselors, despite being an
influence on the college choice process of some students, often attempt to minimize their
involvement in the process to solely that of obtaining and providing information to
students (Rosenbaum et al, 1996; Teranishi & Behringer, 2008). Guidance counselors
have reported that they do not want to discourage students, diminish self-esteem, or incur
the anger of parents about a students’ future, which limits the guidance provided
(Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Additionally, nationwide, the student-to-school counselor ratio
is 491 to 1, which further limits the influence that counselors may have on individual
student college choice decisions (Schoolcounselor.org, 2015). In many cases, students do
not believe they receive adequate help from guidance counselors (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987;
Reid & Moore, 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

However, there is additional research that shows that many students consider high
school counselors to be important in the process of gathering information about specific
colleges (Bradshaw, et al., 2001; Gonzalez, et al., 2003). MacAllum, et al. (2007) found that high school counselors were especially influential with students whose parents had little or no educational background and who came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Teachers**

As with guidance counselors, research on the influence of teachers on the college decision-making processes of high school students provides conflicting results. Ray (1992) found that conferences between students and classroom teachers where the subject was the student’s future and college choice were seen by the students to be the least helpful resource they encountered in the decision-making process. In fact, the role of teachers has been shown to be confused by many students with the influence of school counselors, as students often refer to them interchangeably when discussing their decision-making processes (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Stage, 1992).

McDonough and Antonio (1996), however, suggest that teacher influence in student college choice varies among racial and ethnic groups. They suggest that students from different ethnic or racial backgrounds value teachers in different ways, with some placing a greater importance on the advice that they receive from teachers. Students, in general, valued the advice of teachers who shared their own ethnicity over the advice of teachers who did not (McDonough & Antonio, 1996).

**Conceptual Framework**

In designing the conceptual framework for this study, both economic and
sociological frameworks and models were examined and considered. While economic frameworks are useful in determining the general influences in students’ college choice decisions, they are most useful when studying large groups of students who are defined by one identifying characteristic. Studies of the college choice decision-making process that are based on an economic framework are typically quantitative in nature or utilize mixed methods of research with quantitative methods playing a prominent role in the study. Although there are a few studies that make use of both qualitative and quantitative methods, such as Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), most studies opt for either a qualitative or quantitative approach. As Creswell (2003) observes, mixed-method designs involve additional challenges, including the time required for collecting and analyzing the data and expertise on the part of the researcher.

Qualitative approaches are especially useful for developing a deep understanding of the college choice decisions of individual students, as well as understanding the influence of the context or setting on student college choice (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In her qualitative case studies of the college choice processes of students at four high schools in California, McDonough (1997) showed how students’ choices were influenced by both the students’ local environment and their own high schools. This study sought to do the same for rural students in different states within the Southern region of the United States.

Sociological frameworks are crucial for understanding an individual’s local context, and this study focused specifically on the local contexts of the students who participated. This study sought to determine the influence of the local environment, as well as the influence of students’ high schools and their faculties, on the decisions that
students make regarding whether to enroll in colleges that are local or out-of-state, public or private, and/or highly selective.

Perna’s (2006) model, though not the most recent of the six models of students’ college choice decision-making process to be examined, is more nuanced and comprehensive. Additionally, her model’s focus is the individual student, rather than groups of students in which common characteristics and influences are being sought. Because it combines the human capital approach of economists with the cultural capital approach of sociologists, it is the most appropriate model for use in this study and will allow for higher quality data analysis. Perna’s (2006) model assumes that there is no one universal course that students follow in deciding on a college but that the number of potential routes to a college choice decision are as numerous as the number of students making the decision. Each student’s context includes both cultural capital realities for the student during the decision-making process and human capital expectations for the future. Perna’s (2006) model assumes that college enrollment decisions reflect each individual’s “situated context.”

Chapman’s (1981) model provides insight into the decision-making process of academically high achieving students and provides clear labels for factors that influence students’ college choice. Chapman’s (1981) model is comprehensive and has the additional benefit of classifying the influences on students’ college choice decision-making process as internal or external, an easily understood classification system. The focus of this study was on specific influences that are defined as internal or external, specifically local environment, the influence of the students’ high school, and the students’ personal experiences within that environment. The notion of internal and
external influences fits well within the multiple layers of influence described by Perna (2006). Chapman’s (1981) model, in combination with Perna’s (2006) model will be used as major pieces of the theoretical framework of this study.

The specific internal influence used to identify the participants of the study was high academic achievement during the students’ high school careers. Other influences studied were the effects of local community and the students’ habitus on the students’ decision-making processes, as well as the influence of the local high schools’ habitus on the students’ decision-making processes.

Research has shown that students who take the highest level, or most rigorous academic courses available to them during their high school years are the students who are also the most likely to apply to and enroll in college (Hearn, 1988), and also tend to be attracted to highly selective colleges and universities when making their college decisions (Hossler, et al., 1989; Paulsen 1990). Rigor of high school course load is in fact one of the most important predictors of a student enrolling in college (Perna, 2004). These are the students who will have the most options in their college choice processes. In addition, students who perform at the highest level in those courses are the students who are most likely to continue their college careers for higher degrees once they have graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree (Hossler & Stage, 1992).

Research also supports the finding that college-bound students in general are leaving their home states in increasing numbers (Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Paulsen, 1990), but this is not the case for the students of the high schools that were chosen as sites for this study. Very few rural students are applying to highly selective colleges, especially those colleges that are located outside of their own states. This is true regardless of the
academic ability of the students in the schools that were chosen as sites for this study.

There was much research to be found on factors that influence the decisions made by high school students and how those influences shape their decision-making processes. However, little research was found that seeks to explain the processes used by students in specific areas of the country, particularly rural areas. The students who participated in this study were all residents of North Carolina, South Carolina, or Virginia, living in rural areas.

Both Perna (2006) and Hillman (2016) stated that further research was needed to better understand the college choice decisions of those students. Therefore, this review of the literature leads to the preliminary conclusion that there is a gap in the literature that could be filled by research that focuses on the college choice process of high achieving rural students. This study attempts to add to the existing body of research on college choice decisions by providing answers to research questions that focus on rural students, specifically those of high academic ability. Such information will be useful to students, parents, teachers, school counselors, and administrators in high schools, as well as college admissions officers and higher education policy makers.

In summary, the conceptual model assumes that, although college choice is ultimately based on a comparison of the benefits and costs of enrolling, assessments of the benefits and costs are shaped not only by the demand for higher education and supply of resources to pay the costs but also by an individual’s local context and, directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy contexts. It specifically focuses on local environment and students’ personal experiences and social history, as well as the influence of high school
faculty, which are central themes of this study.

By drawing on constructs from sociological approaches, the conceptual model that guided this study generates a more comprehensive understanding of student college choice of high academically achieving rural students.

Figure 7: Conceptual Framework for the Study
CHAPTER 3:
METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to determine students’ perceived influences on their college choice decision-making process, focusing first on the decisions of the students themselves and paying specific attention to the influences of local culture and environment, as well as the influences of the local high schools that they attended. The overall research question addressed in this study was determining high academically achieving students’ perceptions of the influences on their college choice decisions. The following questions further guided this study:

1. What colleges do academically high-achieving students in rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia choose for their post-secondary studies?

2. How do students’ perceptions of local environment affect high academically achieving rural high school students’ college decision-making processes?

3. How do students’ perceptions of the influences of their high schools affect the college-choice decision-making processes of academically high-achieving students in rural school systems?

Qualitative research is inductive and lends itself to the discovery and development of themes, ideas, and explanations of behaviors and social interactions in natural settings. Those social interactions are crucial in understanding the influences on college choice
decisions of high school students, no matter the demographic characteristics that define them. Data gained from qualitative research, such as observations, field notes, and quotations from interviews and focus groups, allow the researcher to explore a topic in detail and allow for the development of the type of rich data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) considered necessary in drawing valid conclusions about the behaviors of groups or individuals (Patton, 2002).

In qualitative research, the primary focus is to discover meanings that groups or individuals form about a topic or experience in their lives (Merriam, 1998). Patton said that qualitative researchers seek to understand situations and interactions in their context (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of the participants’ society and culture to gain an understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the participants, in this case the experiences of rural high school students in accessing higher education (Merriam, 1998). College choice decisions can be influenced by contextual factors such as significant persons in a student’s life, organizational characteristics, or local culture and norms (Chapman, 1981). Additionally, qualitative methods are useful in helping understand the barriers to college enrollment of underrepresented groups (Perna, 2006). As this was an exploratory study intent on exploring the participants’ perceptions of their society and culture, qualitative methods were most appropriate (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative exploration of college access for high academically achieving, rural high school students helps students, parents, and policy makers understand college choice decisions from a contextual standpoint and informs future research in this area.
Case study methodology is appropriate when the researcher seeks to explore the characteristics of life events (Yin, 1984), such as students’ college choice processes. Merriam (2002) defines the term “case study” as the intensive study of an event or social unit, such as groups or individuals. Gerring (2006) defines a case study as the intensive study of a single case, where the purpose of the study is to shed light on a larger class of cases, or a population. The first requirement of case study research per Yin (2013) addresses the nature of the case or cases while the second addresses the matter of evidence and the collecting of it. Yin (2013) states that a case study is: 1) an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly defined, and 2) case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points and a result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with the data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion. It also benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (pp. 16-17). A cross-case study is the examination of many cases (Gerring, 2006). When one is including examination within cases as well as across cases within the research design, then the method is said to be comparative (Gerring, 2006).

This study fits the description of case study provided by Yin (2009) as containing multiple variables of interest and multiple sources of data, as it will seek to examine distinct cases, students of one rural high school in three different states, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. The examination and resulting data analysis will include both in-case and cross-case comparison of the data collected. Because of this, case study
methodology is most appropriate for this study, and the study will be classified as a comparative cross-case study.

**Site and Participant Selection**

North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia were identified as the three states in which the study would take place and are the only identifying names in this study that were not changed. All names in this study relating to study sites or study participants were changed before the publishing of this research report. Three school systems that are identified as rural by the National Center for Educational Statistics were chosen for participation in this study, with one school system located in each of the states identified. East County School District in South Carolina, Hokie County Schools in Virginia, and Pack County Schools in North Carolina were chosen as sites for this study because of my past experiences in those communities. All data collected during this study, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, are real.

Because the focus of this study was on understanding the college choice influences for academically high-achieving students, the student participants were selected from the highest achieving students at one high school in the East County School District in South Carolina, at one high school in the Hokie County School System in Virginia, and at one high school from the Pack County School System in North Carolina. Membership in the National Honor Society or the National Beta Club was the criterion for selection, as it allowed the identification of high academically achieving students without the need for gaining access to private student records, such as grade point average or class ranking. Cavalier High School, in the Hokie County School System of
Virginia, and Red Wolf High School, in the Pack County School System of North Carolina, have chapters of the National Honor Society. Carolina High School, in East County, South Carolina, has a chapter of the National Beta Club.

In selecting individual participants for this study, permission was gained from the superintendents of the districts chosen to participate in the study. A sample letter sent to superintendents is included in this research report as Appendix H. Additionally, permission was gained from the principals of the high schools involved in the study to contact the sponsors of the National Honor Society or Beta Club chapters at each school. The sponsors were contacted individually, and a time was agreed upon to speak to the Honor Society chapter or Beta Club chapter student members at each high school. At those meetings, all aspects of the study were presented to the students, including the research questions, the goals of the study, the risks associated with the study, the time commitments for the participants, and the possible need for interviews to be conducted after school hours. Student assent forms and parent permission and consent forms were required of all students who participated in this study, regardless of the age of the student participant. Once the pool of student volunteers was identified, the students were examined, and students were chosen in a manner that was reflective of the demographics of the school regarding race and gender.

Additionally, because a focus of this study is on the perceived influence of the high school on individual student’s college choice process, at least one staff member from each high school was identified to participate in the study. At the meetings with the principals of the high schools involved in the study, the person or persons who worked most closely with students in their college decision-making process within the high
school were identified. Two faculty members at Cavalier High School were identified as working most closely with students during their college choice decision-making processes: the college advisor who worked with students who were considering attendance at four-year colleges, and the college liaison, who worked with students who were planning to attend a two-year college after graduation from Cavalier High School. Faculty members with identical titles and roles to the identified faculty members at Cavalier High School in Virginia were identified at Red Wolf High School in the Pack County School System of North Carolina. The school counselor at Carolina High School in the East County School District of South Carolina was identified as the faculty member who worked most closely with students at Carolina High School during their college decision-making process.

A meeting was set with each person identified in discussions with the principals at the three high schools chosen as sites for this study to gain that person or persons’ consent for participation in this study and to schedule a time for an interview about their role in students’ decision-making processes. During interviews with student participants at Cavalier High School, an additional person was identified who worked with students from Cavalier High School during their college choice decision-making processes. Mark Bryant works for the state of Virginia as a college counselor in the region that includes Cavalier High School. He was contacted for a meeting to discuss this study and agreed to participate in this study. A sample informed consent form is included in this research report as Appendix I. Sample interview and focus group protocols for the student and faculty participants are included in this research report as Appendices E-G.
Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method used for collecting data was individual, semi-structured interviews held with each of the students and faculty members who participated in the study. Rubin and Rubin (1995) assert that interviews allow researchers to explore in detail the experiences, opinions, emotions, and attitudes of participants. They allow the researcher to experience events in which they were not involved and to gain a fuller understanding of the participants’ thought processes related to the study. Additionally, a focus group session was conducted at each high school site with students who had participated in the individual interviews for this study and were able to attend. More than half of the student participants at each high school site participated in the focus group sessions at each high school.

At the initial meeting with each of the chapters of the National Honor Society or National Beta Club, students were questioned about the types of information that they would like to gain from the study. Student suggestions were incorporated into the interview protocols used with the participants of the study. In addition to student suggestions, the interview protocols were developed based on the conceptual framework and the research questions that guided this study.

A total of 24 students participated in the study: seven students from Carolina High School in South Carolina, eight students from Cavalier High School in Virginia, and nine student participants from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina. Individual interviews were scheduled with each student participant during the spring of 2017. A mock interview was held with a peer to check for clarity of the questions and to estimate the amount of time needed for each interview. The dates and times of the interviews were
held at a time mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the student participant and each interview lasted between 25 minutes and one hour. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, in that each participant was asked a set of predetermined questions designed to focus on the experiences and perceptions of the participants as they reflected on their decision-making processes. In addition, probes and follow-up questions were asked of each participant as questions were answered that allowed for clarification, explanation, or emphasis on points of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). During the interviews, handwritten notes were taken to record data that could not be audio-recorded. Examples of this type of data included gestures and facial expressions made by the participant, and probes and follow-up questions around issues that needed to be revisited.

Each of the interviews were recorded using the Rev application on both an iPhone and an iPad. All recordings were immediately sent to Rev for transcription and were returned to the researcher in less than 24 hours. As soon as a transcript was returned, it was checked twice for accuracy against the recordings and verified as accurate by the researcher. This process was implemented to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data that Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe as essential to the validity and quality of a good qualitative research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Each of the student participants interviewed was in their senior year of high school and had already made their college choice decision. The timing of the interviews allowed for the data that was collected to be reflective of the entire decision-making process. Additionally, a total of six faculty members from the three high schools that were chosen as sites for this study were interviewed in the same manner to collect data on
the resources available to students in each high school and their perceptions of the college choice decision-making processes of their students.

After the conclusion of interviews at each high school, a follow-up focus group meeting was held with the groups of student participants in the study to allow the participants to react to the study findings along with the researcher to clarify misunderstandings or misinterpretations. These meetings also afforded an opportunity to make sure that the data was factual and to collect additional reflections from the participants. A follow-up meeting with each staff member identified in the school to participate in study was also held for the same purpose. This final step was taken to ensure the accuracy of the data and conclusions as well as to ensure internal validity in the study (Anderson et al., 2007).

In addition to the interviews that were conducted with student and faculty participants at each high school, documents were collected from each of the faculty participants in this study that were reflective of the resources available to those faculty members and students and the processes that were in place at each high school to guide students through the college choice decision-making process. During the visits to each high school for all meetings and interview sessions, observations were made, and field notes were kept regarding the resources available to students during their college choice decision-making processes as well as to the college-going culture in place at each high school.
A research journal was kept throughout the research process, including the selection of participants, the collection of data, the analysis of the findings, and the writing of this report to ensure the development of deep thinking and rich data that are crucial to an effective qualitative study. Because a journal is ongoing and is written in close time proximity to the events being recorded, it is a valuable tool for capturing not only the actions and words of the participants, but also the reactions of the researcher to those events as they are happening. The research journal allows the researcher to easily access data and allows for the data to be placed in context with other data and in context along a timeline of events (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Research memos were also kept throughout the study to reflect upon and explore thoughts, ideas, and themes that emerged from the study. Memos allow for systematic researcher reflection and development of connections between thoughts, ideas, and data collected (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012).

The initial coding of the data began with the review of the transcriptions for accuracy. As the transcripts were read, a focused coding system (Emerson et. al, 2011) was used as specific responses were noted that reflected students’ perceptions of the influences on the college choice decision-making process outlined in the research questions that guided this study, specifically responses that were indicative of cultural, environmental, or high school-related influences. After the initial coding of the data, a second coding of the data took place in which common responses among the participants were noted and common themes were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These themes became the source of the findings of the study, which will be detailed in the final section.
of the research report. The development of codes was an iterative process, as the list was
refined continually as new themes emerged from the data.

**Rigor and Validity**

Ravitch and Carl (2016) assert that, because qualitative research is by its nature
subjective and therefore susceptible to researcher bias, multiple actions must be taken by
the researcher to ensure the rigor and validity of a study. These steps were taken to
establish credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability within a study.

Triangulation is a key component to ensuring the validity of a study (Ravitch &
Carl, 2016). This study ensured the triangulation of methodology by utilizing multiple
methods of data collection, including research journals, research memos, participant
involvement in instrument development and data collection tools, as well as the
additional data collection methods of individual interviews and focus groups. The final
focus group meetings of each group of students were held after the individual interviews
and the preliminary analysis of the data collected from those interviews to allow for the
participants to examine the conclusions drawn from the analysis. Participants could
discuss and clarify their own thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of the college
selection process and the resources available to students in their high schools.

Methods of data collection were strategically sequenced to collect the data that
was most meaningful to the researcher as well as the participants of the study (Ravitch &
Carl, 2016). An initial meeting was held with each chapter of the National Honor Society
or Beta Club from which the participants of the study were selected. During these
meetings, participants were asked what they would like to learn from the study, and the
responses given during those meetings were used to design the interview protocols for individual student and school faculty member interviews.

After the interviews, the initial coding of the data occurred, and preliminary findings were identified. To check for accuracy of the data, and the accuracy of the findings, an additional focus group session was held with each group of students who participated in the study. These meetings served as participant checks of the analysis of the data and the findings of the study. Finally, dialogic engagement with two colleagues occurred at different times during the study to point out potential bias on the part of the researcher, to strengthen the development of the interview and focus group protocols, and to confirm or dispute the analysis of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Limitations

This study is limited based on the scope of its sample and sample selection. By using a single, small rural system in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, the research is limited to understanding the students that attend high schools within those districts. The study employs two primary qualitative research techniques, focus group and individual interviews, which may also limit the data. In addition to focus group sessions and interviews, additional data were collected through observations conducted and field notes taken during the visits to the high schools that participated in this study.

Documents were also collected from the faculty participants in this study relating to the college choice processes of the students that attended those high schools, but the data were still limited to the three participant high school sites.
In addition, this study is potentially limited by the researcher’s (my own) biases and experiences. I formulated the ideas and research questions for this study based on personal experience with the college decision-making process of my own daughter, as she collected information about various schools, submitted multiple applications to highly selective colleges, and was ultimately accepted and chose to attend the University of Pennsylvania.

There is the further possibility for researcher bias since I, as the researcher in the study, also attend the University of Pennsylvania, and have long held the goal of attending an Ivy League institution. That personal goal could potentially influence my own judgments on the decisions of the participants in the study.

An additional threat to the validity of the study is my own familiarity with the schools and students in the three school systems who are involved in the study as participants. To counteract this potential bias, I enlisted the advice of colleagues and peers in the selection of individual participants.

**Conclusion**

This study arises from a genuine interest in the topic of college choice, which resulted from the personal experiences of the researcher. Because of this, additional attention will be paid to issues that could potentially affect the validity of this study. This study involves the use of triangulation of methods, participant member checks, peer dialogues, and researcher journals and memos, all of which will focus on the potential biases of the researcher. Thus, the validity of this study is strengthened. In addition, the use of semi-rigid interviews and focus groups ensured the type of rich data that leads to a
deeper analysis and understanding of the influences on the college choice decisions of the students in the rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia who participated in this study.
CHAPTER 4:
SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina has 81 public school systems in 46 counties (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). East County is a rural county in South Carolina that borders North Carolina, thus allowing students who attend high school in East County the opportunity to travel frequently in another state during their daily lives. East County consists primarily of flat farmland, but there is also a large land area that is intersected by a major river, providing wetlands in various areas of the county. The primary occupations in East County are agricultural in nature, including farming, farm supply, agricultural markets, and the transportation of produce. The primary crops for farmers in East County are soybeans, cotton, and tobacco (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012).

East County

East County contains two public school systems: a large county system and a smaller city school system. At the time of this study, the larger, county school system served 4,144 students in grades P-K through twelve. The smaller, city school system served 1,656 students in grades P-K through twelve. In addition, there is one private, Christian school in East County that serves 307 students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017a).

As of July 2016, East County had a population of 30,858 living in 407 square miles (population density of 75.8 people per square mile). Whites make up 47.9 percent
of the population of East County, while 46.9% of the population is African-American, 2.9% of the population is Native American, 2.7% of the population is Latino, 0.4% of the population is Asian, and 2% of the population is multiracial. The total exceeds 100% due to rounding and because the United States Census Bureau states that Latinos may be members of any race, and as such are counted in other categories of race in addition to the Latino category. Between the years of 2010 and 2016, the population of East County declined by 3.8% (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

As seen in table 2, East County is a county in which a large percentage of the residents are poor. The median income in East County is $30,995, compared to the South Carolina state-wide median income of $46,360 (Short, 2016). Slightly over a quarter of the population, at 25.6% of the residents of East County, live in poverty, compared to the South Carolina statewide average of 15.3% (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Additionally, according to the US Census Bureau as of 2016, 16.5% of residents under the age of 65 do not possess health insurance, compared to 9% of the overall population of South Carolina (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>South Carolina</th>
<th>South County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>4,961,000</td>
<td>30,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$46,360</td>
<td>$30,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Living in Poverty</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Residents Under Age 65 Without Health Insurance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Poverty Statistics for East County, South Carolina

In addition to high rates of poverty, the citizens of East County are also less educated when compared to South Carolina statewide statistics as well as national
statistics. Referring to table 3, in 2016, only 9.6% of the adults aged 25 and older living in East County held at least a bachelor’s degree, while nationally, 33.4% of adults 25 and older held a bachelor’s degree or higher. In South Carolina, 26.5% of adults aged 25 and older held a bachelor’s degree or higher. Also, referencing table 3 below, in East County, 72.8% of adults aged 25 or older held a high school diploma or GED, far below the South Carolina average of 86% and the national average of 88% (US Census Bureau, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>South Carolina</th>
<th>East County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of Adults 25 and Older Who</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>72.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold a High School Diploma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or GED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Adults 25 and Older Who</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold a Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Higher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: *Educational Attainment Levels for Citizens of East County, South Carolina*

These statistics hold true for the parents and family members of the students at Carolina High School who participated in this study. Referencing table 4 below, only one student, Madison, had a parent with a bachelor’s degree. Madison was also the only student participant at Carolina High School who had a member of her family besides a parent who held a bachelor’s degree, her grandmother. Fred’s mother earned an associate’s degree before beginning work and was the only family member of any of the student participants at Carolina High School to have earned a two-year college degree. George had an older brother who was a junior at South Carolina State University at the time of this study, but he, along with four other of the seven student participants at Carolina High, did not have a family member who had completed a college degree. Of
the student participants at Carolina High School, 71.4% will be first-generation college students upon their enrollment in college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>1 Semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Current College Junior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1 Semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>1 Day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Educational Attainment Levels of Student Participants’ Family Members – Carolina High School, South Carolina

Carolina High School

Carolina High School sits within the town limits of Sandlapper, the smallest incorporated town in East County. Sandlapper has a total area of 1.7 square miles and a population of 783 as of 2016. The population is 64.8% White, 33.0% African-American, 1.5% Latino, 0.4% Native American, 0.2% Multi-racial, and 0.1% Asian. In Sandlapper, there is one stoplight and two convenience stores, one of which has a grill that serves basic food during the day. There are no other restaurants in Sandlapper. The main remaining business in town is a farmer’s supply store, which has been in operation since 1973. The only grocery store in town closed in the year before the conducting of this study. In addition to Sandlapper, the attendance zone for Carolina High School includes
the land immediately surrounding Sandlapper. The land surrounding the town that makes up the attendance area for Carolina High School is made up of farmland and swampland.

Carolina High School draws its student population from the town of Sandlapper as well as the rural farmland that surrounds Sandlapper on all sides, which is roughly 80 square miles. The town limits are two miles from the border with North Carolina, and as a result, some families who reside in North Carolina elect to pay the East County public school system K-12 tuition for out-of-state students (the South Carolina per pupil allotment) and send their children to Sandlapper for part or all their public-school education. In the 2017 graduating class of Carolina High School, there were two seniors who lived in North Carolina. They attended public school in Sandlapper, South Carolina for their entire K-12 careers, and their parents paid tuition to East County schools for them to be able to do so.

Carolina High School is one of the smallest high schools in South Carolina and currently has a student population of 459 in grades six through twelve, of which 52% are male and 48% are female. The student population is 48% white, 43% African-American, 2% Native American, 3% Latino, and 4% two or more races. Carolina High School is well known in South Carolina for both its athletic and academic successes, having won numerous state championships in multiple sports over the past 40 years, and having also won numerous state-level academic competitions in the more recent past.

Carolina High School has a chapter of the National Beta Club, which requires student members to maintain a minimum grade point average of 3.5, identifying the
members of the National Beta Club at Carolina High School as high academic achievers. Of the members of the National Beta Club at Carolina High School, 14 were seniors. All 14 seniors were invited to participate in the study at an initial explanatory meeting, and from that meeting, seven students volunteered to participate in this study. Two of the students who volunteered to participate in this study were female and five of the students were male. Four students were African-American, and three students were white.

Six of the students who participated in this study self-reported their grade point average on a weighted scale, with regular courses worth four points, honors classes worth five points, and college credit and AP courses worth six points. Referring to table 5 below, the participants’ grade point averages ranged from 4.01-4.954. One other student participant chose to report that he had a 3.90 grade point average on an unweighted, 4.0 scale even though he also took the honors, college credit, and AP classes that the other participants took.

All student participants had taken the ACT for college admission purposes, and self-reported scores ranging from 19-25, on a scale from 1-36. One student reported that he had taken the SAT for college admission and would share the score with me during his interview. He self-reported that he had scored a 1240 on the SAT, on a scale of 400-1600. Three students reported that they had not taken the SAT, one student reported that he had not received his SAT score, one student reported that she had forgotten her SAT score because she had taken it so long ago, and one student would not share his SAT score with me during his interview. All seven students had been accepted to and planned to attend a four-year college within the state of South Carolina.
In her interview, Mrs. Goins, the school counselor, reported that 46 of 62 seniors at Carolina High School had indicated to her that they planned to attend some type of college the next year, and all 46 of those seniors were planning to attend either a two-year community college or a four-year college in their home state, including the two students at Carolina High School who lived in North Carolina (they chose to attend colleges in North Carolina). All students who volunteered to participate in this study at Carolina High School were residents of South Carolina.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name (Student Chosen Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>ACT Score (Self-Reported)</th>
<th>SAT Score (Self-Reported)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Didn’t take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4.954</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Had not received scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.9/4.0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Didn’t take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.383</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Didn’t take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Forgot Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Would not give score</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Demographics of Student Participants at Carolina High School, South Carolina

**Student Participants’ Perceptions of Themselves as Students**

Students who participated in this study thought of themselves as good students who were academically successful in their high school and recognized that their admission into the Beta Club chapter was recognition of their academic achievements. They described themselves collectively as an identifiable group within Carolina High School because of their enrollments in the highest level of classes available to students.
They also recognized that many of the students at Carolina High School were not as successful academically as their group, but attributed their own achievements to drive, ambition, and work ethic more than they did to intellect, and they likewise attributed the lack of success by other students as attributable to those students lacking the same characteristics. They considered all students at Carolina High School to be equals socially, personally experiencing constant interactions within and among all students as well as among all faculty members. They did not see themselves as privileged within Carolina High School and did not feel that there was resentment within the students who were not enrolled in higher level classes or were not members of the Beta Club.

The student participants, although they did not attribute their success to intellect, did describe high school as easy for them. Three students mentioned that they believed that the classes that they took in high school could have been tougher but were not for a variety of reasons. Due to the small size of the high school and the resulting small size of the faculty, there were limited choices available to students at Carolina High School. This was mitigated somewhat by the availability of courses at the local technical college and the availability of a few courses through virtual and online options, but students believed that they needed more opportunities to learn higher level topics within subject areas. Two students mentioned that the highest level of mathematics to which they had access during their high school careers was pre-calculus due to a teacher shortage in the mathematics department. Only one student participant reported that they studied more than one hour a day on average for the courses that they were taking, as they perceived that their classes were easy and did not need to study.
Where Are They Going?

The students that participated in this study at Carolina High School made 26 applications to colleges for their post-secondary careers, for an average of 3.71 applications made to colleges for admission per student. Twenty-one of those applications were made to schools within the state of South Carolina, and four applications were made to colleges in North Carolina. Six of the seven student participants applied to Coastal Carolina University for admission and three of the seven students applied to Francis Marion University for admission. Coastal Carolina University and Francis Marion University are the colleges in South Carolina that are closest to Sandlapper, the location of Carolina High School.

For the purposes of this research report, colleges will by identified by the types of institutions utilized by the Carnegie Classification System maintained and updated by the Indiana Center for Post-Secondary Research at Indiana University (Indiana Center for Post-Secondary Research, 2015). Referring to table 6 below, student participants applied to a mix of public and private colleges, as well as a mix of doctoral universities, master’s universities, and baccalaureate colleges during the application phase of their college choice process. Both Coastal Carolina University and Francis Marion University, the colleges most applied to for admission by the students who participated in this study, are state-supported, public, master’s universities that are not a part of the South Carolina University System and are located within an hour driving distance from Sandlapper (Coastal Carolina University, 2017; Francis Marion University, 2017). Ashley proved to be the most active in applying to colleges, making six applications to colleges for
admission, including three outside of South Carolina. The only other student to apply to a college outside of South Carolina was Fred, who applied to North Carolina State University for admission to their aeronautical engineering program. However, when the student participants chose a college for attendance, all seven student participants chose to attend college in South Carolina. Josh and George chose to attend doctoral universities in deciding to attend Clemson University and South Carolina State University, and a single student, Fred, chose a baccalaureate college in deciding to attend Newberry College. Each of the other four student participants chose master’s universities within two-and-a-half hours driving distance of Sandlapper. Six of the seven student participants chose to attend a public institution, which according to the 2016 College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania (2018) remains the most affordable option for South Carolina Residents, regardless of income level. Fred was the lone student to choose a private college, as he chose to attend Newberry College on an athletic scholarship, which reduced his net cost of attendance. Madison and Ashley chose to attend Francis Marion University, Josh chose to attend Clemson University, Bobby chose to attend Coastal Carolina University, and Robert chose to attend the College of Charleston.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Applied to For Admission</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Students Applying</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Type of College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charleston Southern University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clemson University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal Carolina University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Charleston</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia College</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis Marion University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newberry College</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina A&amp;T</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina State University</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Greenville University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina State University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNC Pembroke</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of South Carolina</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingate University</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winthrop University</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wofford College</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Locations and types of schools to which student participants at Carolina High School, South Carolina, applied to for admission

Three students expressed their interest in colleges outside of South Carolina in addition to the ones applied to for admission in North Carolina, including Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, and various other states around the United States, but ultimately chose not to apply to those colleges for admission. This will be addressed in detail in the discussion of the influences on their decisions. It is also evident that the students involved...
in this study did not have physical access to colleges, as they visited very few colleges and only two college representatives made visits to Carolina High School before the student participants began submitting applications to the colleges that they chose to apply to for admission. Fred was the only student to visit a college outside of South Carolina, as he visited North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. It is notable that Fred was the lone recruited athlete among the participants at Carolina High School and had more access to college visits because of his status as a recruited athlete. Fred visited the most colleges of any of the student participants at Carolina High School, a total of seven colleges before accepting an athletic scholarship to Newberry College. Three of the students, including Fred, who participated in the study stated that it was their perception that athletes at Carolina High School received more help from the faculty of Carolina High School and had more access to colleges than regular students during their college choice processes.

Ashley planned to attend Francis Marion University, which is located within a one-hour drive from her home but had not visited the campus or any other colleges before applying to and deciding to attend Francis Marion. Robert visited one college with another student’s family, the University of South Carolina, but chose to attend the College of Charleston because he liked the way the traffic and people of Charleston reminded him of New York City, where his mother lived. He stated this despite never visiting the College of Charleston. Josh had made many trips to Clemson with his family for athletic events and made no visits to other colleges before applying to and deciding to attend Clemson.
Most Important Factors and Most Important Influences

During the focus group session that was held at Carolina High School, students were asked as a group what the most important factor was in determining the college that they would attend for their post-secondary careers. They provided a variety of answers, including scholarship money, the environment of the college, and the major that they were interested in pursuing, but the most common answer, mentioned by four of the seven student participants as the most important factor for them in choosing a college, was distance from home. Two other students mentioned distance as something that they considered in making their college choice decision, but that it was not the most important factor. Fred was the only student who stated that distance was not a factor in his choice of college, but he also stated that his mother was thinking about finding a job and moving closer to him when he enrolled at Newberry College.

During their individual interviews, the student participants spoke repeatedly of how they wanted to be close to their families during their college careers. It became clear during the analysis of the data that distance was important to them in that sense, that they did not want to be far from their families and needed proximity as a safety net if things were not going well for them at college. This concept is supported by the fact that all seven students identified in their individual interviews their family or a specific member of their family as the most important influence on their choice of college. Four of the seven students chose to attend college less than two hours driving distance from their homes. Another, George, chose a college that is a two-and-a-half hour driving distance from his home, but where his brother was already enrolled as an undergraduate student.
Fred, who chose to attend Newberry College, stated in his interview that his mother was planning to move their entire family to be close to him in college no matter which college he chose to attend. Additionally, Josh, who chose to attend Clemson, stated in his interview that his father had attended Clemson for a short time before returning to Sandlapper, and that he would be able to see his family regularly since they often traveled to Clemson for athletic events throughout the year. It is clear from talking with the student participants at Carolina High School that family is the most important thing in their lives, and that their choice of college to attend was heavily influenced by their families.

As was stated previously, each of the student participants said that their family or a family member was the greatest influence on their college choice decision. Families and family members exerted their influence in a variety of ways, including by means both the students and their families may not have been aware of. Those influences involved both verbal and nonverbal means of communication. Mrs. Goins, in discussing her meetings with students and parents, mentioned repeatedly that, in her opinion, family ties keep most of the students at Carolina High School close to home for their college careers. Some live on their chosen college campus, but many make the daily commute to Francis Marion University or Coastal Carolina University. She said that she often hears parents tell their children in those meetings that they are not going too far away for college. The students themselves mentioned that their parents said different things to them, such as “Go somewhere that there are people like you, you’re not going to a party school, you’re not going to a big city where there are gangs, and make sure you go somewhere that you
will fit in, make sure you go to a college where there are people like you.” Although it may not have been the intention of the family members, each of those statements reinforced the idea that the students should remain close to home, so that they will have support from family and friends while at college.

Additionally, very few of the students had traveled with family during their childhoods. The families stayed closed to home, and when they did travel, it was to the beach, to the closest city, or occasionally to Columbia, the state capital, which is less than three hours away. When students had traveled out-of-state, it was primarily to destinations in other Southern states, such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Biggest Influence in the Choice of College</th>
<th>Most Important Factor(s) in Choosing a College</th>
<th>College Choice for Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Grandma</td>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>Francis Marion University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>“Family”</td>
<td>Athletics and Major</td>
<td>Newberry College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>Clemson University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>“Family”</td>
<td>Scholarship and Brother already attends</td>
<td>South Carolina State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>“Family”</td>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>Coastal Carolina University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Francis Marion University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Myself</td>
<td>Distance and Scholarship Money</td>
<td>College of Charleston</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Most Important Influences and Most Important Factors in the College Choice Decisions of Student Participants at Carolina High School, South Carolina
Access to Information on Colleges

The first ideas of attending college for each student participant originated within their families as the students reported that at an early age their parents or other family members began talking to them about the idea of attending college after high school. Each of the students reported that their perception was that their parents wanted them to attend college so that they could have a better life than the parents themselves had experienced. Others said that family members talked about college in response to things that the students said at an early age. For example, Robert reported that his family introduced him to the idea of college at a very young age when he announced that he wanted to be a surgeon. Josh stated that he had not really thought about college until the previous year, and that when he did, his dad brought up the idea of attending Clemson immediately. All students reported that attending college was necessary to achieve the goals that they had set for themselves for the future. However, none of the student participants other than Josh, whose dad briefly attended Clemson, and George, whose brother currently attends South Carolina State University, reported gaining information regarding specific colleges from their family members or from activities that the family participated in while growing up.

The students who participated in this study had little access to any type of information on colleges outside of the processes set up by the guidance counselor at Carolina High School, Mrs. Goins, to guide them through their high school careers or through their own individual initiatives. They had little interactions with colleges and college representatives. Two students mentioned that college representatives stopped by
their high schools, but they learned of the representatives being on campus through emails from the guidance counselor and stated that it was completely voluntary for the students as to whether they wished to meet with the representatives. It was not clear as to whether they received the emails in a timely manner to speak with the representatives. Only one student stated that they gained direct information from colleges, and that was through the mailings that they received during their sophomore and junior years. A few students mentioned that they asked faculty members questions about the colleges that the faculty members had attended, but there was no commonality among the names of the faculty members consulted except for that of Mrs. Goins, and again, that was through their own initiative. During their college choice processes, no one advised them as to the academic standing or prestige of individual colleges and no one advised them on a strategy for applying to colleges, such as applying to at least one safe school, at least one match school, and at least one reach school (Fortenbury, 2014) or similarly, applying to at least one each of a safety school, a target school, and a dream school (Princeton Review, 2017). This is advice given in various resources available to high school students who are applying for admission to college (College Confidential, 2017; Princeton Review, 2017; USA Today College, 2017).

At the beginning of their ninth-grade year in high school, every student at Carolina High School had a meeting with Mrs. Goins to outline the courses that they would need to take during their four years at Carolina High School to meet graduation requirements. Those meetings were held with the student and their parents, but those meetings were the only mention of the high school engaging parents in the college choice
processes that their children were involved in. One meeting each school year was held with seniors to aid them in filling out their FAFSA. An additional workshop was held for students to prepare them for the ACT college admissions test. Mrs. Goins stated that these meetings were open to anyone who wanted to attend, whether it was students, parents, or even community members, but no invitations were sent to anyone other than the students through email. The students stated that those meetings were held during the school day.

As part of the discussions of the requirements for high school, students were asked about their plans for high school and beyond so that their coursework during high school could be planned accordingly. Students were advised on which courses they needed to take if they were planning to attend college and how to access them, as some of those classes were offered off-campus or virtually. Each of the students who participated in this study reported that there was no discussion of individual colleges at those meetings—all discussions were geared towards the question of whether the student would or would not attend college, in the general sense. Mrs. Goins followed up with individual students during their senior year to offer help with various applications and to remind students of deadlines as they approached. However, she stated in her interview that she believed that it was not her job or place to advise students on specific colleges or what course of study to pursue for their majors while attending college.

Student participants were provided with specific information on colleges through their own research and their own networks, which consisted mainly of conducting internet searches on specific colleges and programs of study or through interactions with
other students. The conversations with other students involved discussing what each student had learned about different colleges through their own research and what each student had learned about individual colleges through speaking with others about individual colleges. The student participants did not provide information as to the sources of the information that they learned from other students. Additionally, all seven of the student participants reported that the application process was easy for them, as they believed that they possessed all the information that they needed to apply to colleges, or they knew whom to ask for help.

The student participants at Carolina High School reported that they made, on average, three visits to colleges during their college choice process. As mentioned previously, Fred visited seven colleges, the most college visits made by any of the student participants at Carolina High School. Three students—Josh, Ashley, and Robert—visited one college during their college choice processes. Josh had made many visits to Clemson with his family before choosing to attend Clemson University. However, Ashley, who chose to attend Francis Marion University, and Robert, who chose to attend the College of Charleston, had not visited those colleges before choosing to attend those institutions. Ashley and Robert chose not to attend the one college that they had visited during their college choice process. Students made very few visits to colleges for information sessions or campus tours.

There was no information gained by the student participants regarding the quality or prestige of various colleges, and that factor was not mentioned by any of the student participants in the study as an influence on their college choice. All information sought
by the student participants was information regarding colleges within the state of South Carolina except for Fred, who was interested in the aeronautical engineering program at North Carolina State University and used internet searches to gain information about that specific college and program of study.

**Influence of the Community**

Each of the student participants perceived that members of the community were pushing for them to attend college and consequently influenced them to go to college on some level. However, the student participants believed that the influence that the community exerted on them was non-pressuring. They stated that community members would express their expectations for them to attend college by asking them questions or making statements to them related to those expectations, such as “You’re going to college, right?” and then following that question with, “Where are you going?” or simply skipping the first question assuming the answer to be yes and moving to the second. These influences, along with similar influences from family members, shaped their initial desires to attend college after graduation from high school.

Although, in general, the questions community members asked were not pressuring, there were a few instances of community members attempting to directly influence the college choices of the student participants. One student stated that her youth director attempted to influence her to attend the same college that the youth director had attended, telling her it would be a good place for her. Another student, Fred, said that a
neighbor had pushed him to attend Clemson University, but believed that it had more to do with the success of the football team than knowledge of the university itself. Robert also stated that a community member had pushed him to attend Clemson, and another advised him to attend Coastal Carolina University.

It was notable that only one student, Ashley, spoke of a community member as a role model, someone who was looked up to and sought out for advice. During her interview, Ashley said,

I think she’s a women empowerment person. She’s done a lot for the community and she’s done a lot, I don’t want to say globally, because I don’t know if she’s been everywhere, but mostly the east coast, she’s been everywhere. She’s done a lot and it’s her work. She pushes hard to do things, and that’s what I want to be. I want to have that, not motivation, but that drive to do anything that I know I can. (Ashley, personal interview, May 22, 2017).

While Ashley admires this woman in her community and looks up to her as a college graduate who has achieved things in her life outside of Sandlapper, those examples are few. No other student participant spoke of a community member in this way. Such examples would help students understand the possibilities outside of Sandlapper, East County, and South Carolina, to which they currently seem to be unaware.

During the focus group session, student participants stated that they believed that they received the same subtle pressure to stay close to home from community members that they received from their families. They heard comments from community members about coming back to Sandlapper after college to help make Sandlapper a better place. The students believed that their community members wanted them to do great things and
saw the value in community members hoping for students to succeed and come back to their hometowns to improve them, especially because Sandlapper exists in such an economically depressed area of South Carolina. The students said that they appreciated those comments because they seemed to indicate that community members thought a lot of them and their potential to be successful in the future, both individually and possibly within their community.

**Influence of Carolina High School**

Much like the influences exerted by members of the community, the student participants at Carolina High School believed that the influences from faculty members at Carolina High School were non-pressuring as they made their college decisions. During the focus group session, student participants stated that they believed that faculty members at Carolina High School were supportive and encouraging throughout their high school careers and especially as they chose the colleges that they would attend. Although the student participants believed that their teachers cared about them and were willing to talk with them about any part of their college choice process, no student mentioned any faculty members attempting to push them to a specific college. Students occasionally asked faculty members for information on colleges that they had attended, but all those occasions were initiated by the students. These revelations by the student participants in this study show that the faculty at Carolina High School do not see it as their role to advise students on specific colleges, or their role to encourage them to attend college at
all. According to Mrs. Goins, the guidance counselor at Carolina High School, that is the student’s and the family’s decision.

**Influence of Individual Faculty Members**

Four of the seven student participants at Carolina High School identified Mrs. Goins as someone that they could trust and could turn to if they needed help or assistance during their college choice process, and as the one person on the faculty at Carolina High School who was proactive in offering help. She did this through emails, through meetings that she set up with them, and by initiating contact with them in the hallways or classrooms of Carolina High School. Mrs. Goins estimated that she dedicates about 40% of her time each year to helping seniors work through the college choice process by helping them with various components of their applications.

The student participants consistently talked of their teachers as caring and concerned with their well-being, both while in high school and during their college careers. They gave multiple examples of how faculty members expressed this. Madison, in describing her interactions with a teacher while she was struggling with her decision between Coastal Carolina University and Francis Marion University, said,

Mr. James was, because senior year, this year was the most hectic year ever. From the day we started school, you had to start getting your stuff ready for college, and I had Mr. James for digital video and he would ask us what colleges we would think about, and I told him it was either between Coastal or Francis Marion, and he came to my computer and we would talk about it, and he would tell me pros and cons of both of them, like the stuff that may happen, and the decision I made, he was content with it. He gave me the names of professors to talk to, to see stuff,
and to see how they do their work and everything. I would say he was one of the ones that really helped me make my decision. (Madison, personal interview, May 17, 2017).

The student participants also believed that faculty members were available and willing to talk to them about any aspect of applying to college or about college life after they graduated from Carolina High School. The student participants spoke of faculty members who collected information on scholarships and provided it to the students, if they knew that students would have a hard time paying for college. This was an especially important point for students, as four of them mentioned that access to more scholarships was a resource that they believed was needed at Carolina High School.

**Evidence of College-Going Culture**

In their examination of high schools and their success in preparing students to attend and succeed in college, Corwin and Tierney (2007) describe a high school with a college-going culture as one that decorates the hallways with promotions for colleges, celebrates students who have been accepted to and plan to attend college, provides evidence of academic successes, and has clear processes in place to support students through every stage of the college choice process. Corwin and Tierney (2007) further state that high schools should be proactive in providing information and services to students and their families.

In her interview for this study, Mrs. Goins stated that approximately 75% of the graduates from Carolina High School each year plan to attend either a two-year or four-
year college after graduation. Of the graduating class of 2017 at Carolina High School, the graduating class of which the student participants in this study were members, 46 of 62 graduates, or 74.2% had indicated that they planned to attend some type of college, which is consistent with her assertion. This rate of matriculation to college by the seniors at Carolina High School is slightly higher than the South Carolina rate of 68.1% in 2014 and the national rate of 69.2% in 2015 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Statements by the student participants during their individual interviews and during the focus group session support the idea that that Carolina High School and its faculty expect students to attend college and give assistance to them as they are applying to colleges. Such statistics and personal experiences would seem to indicate that there is a college-going culture in place at Carolina High School; however, the evidence within the high school to support such an assumption was not visible to an observer, and tangible evidence is a key component of a college-going culture (Corwin and Tierney, 2007). It was notable that there were no displays of college information of any type at Carolina High School, whether in the form of college pennants on the walls, statistical information regarding various college admissions data, or recognitions of students who had been accepted to attend college with their college of attendance evident to visitors. In addition to the lack of physical evidence of a college-going culture, Carolina High School did not actively provide access to colleges for its students. The student participants reported that the only visit that they had made to a college that was supported by their high school was to a football game to watch a former student play. Robert, in his interview, stated that as the senior class president, he wanted more access to colleges for his classmates. He asked an administrator at Carolina High School to sponsor a trip to a college for any student
who was interested in attending and was told that it was something that Carolina High School didn’t do. It became clear from the collection of data for this study that the college-going culture in place at Carolina High School is supported and driven by actions of faculty members and community members but is not supported by the high school as an organization through the commitment of resources.

**Barriers Faced**

The students at Carolina High School face multiple barriers in their college choice decision processes. Their access to colleges or information on colleges is limited in a variety of ways, whether those limits are imposed by their families, their communities, or their high school. These students were successful in overcoming those limitations as evidenced by the fact that each of them had successfully applied to and been admitted to college following their graduation from Carolina High School, but the options that they considered were few and almost exclusively bounded by the borders of South Carolina. This fact also supports the lack of or the existence of a weak college-going culture at Carolina High School.

**Financial Limitations and Scholarships**

Although students did not provide information on the socioeconomic status of their families, it has been established previously in this chapter that Sandlapper is the
most economically depressed area of East County, which is likewise an economically depressed area of South Carolina (Poverty USA, 2017). As such, the town faces more financial limitations than other areas of East County. Mrs. Goins, in her interview, identified lack of money as the biggest obstacle that students and their families face in attending college, or in selecting a college out-of-state. Five of the student participants also identified the need for financial resources and scholarships as a major consideration in the identification of colleges that they would apply to and ultimately attend after leaving Carolina High School. The literature on college affordability confirms that college is a stretch financially for the students of Carolina High School. The College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on Higher Education by the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania shows that families in South Carolina whose incomes fall between $30,000 and $48,000 spend $13,657, or 35%, of their income each year to attend a public, four-year, non-doctoral institution, based on in-state tuition rates. As was shown in table 1, the median family income in East County is $30,995, at the lower end of this income range. This would mean that families in this income range in East County would spend 44.1% of their income each year for a student to attend such a college. Coastal Carolina University, Francis Marion University, and the College of Charleston fall in this category of colleges. The net cost for a family whose student is attending a public research college, such as Clemson University, is slightly higher at $14,148 per year based on in-state tuition, or 45.6% of their income each year. The College Affordability Diagnosis also states that students would have to work 41 hours per week to attend a public, non-doctoral four-year college in South Carolina and 48 hours per week to attend a public research institution in South Carolina.
in order pay for the cost of attendance at such colleges (Penn Institute for Research in Higher Education, 2016).

Closely tied to financial limitations, the need for additional scholarship money was mentioned repeatedly by the participants in this study during the focus group session at Carolina High School. In addition to the focus group discussion, five of the seven student participants, along with Mrs. Goins, the guidance counselor at Carolina High school, referred to the need for scholarships during their individual interviews. Because East County is economically depressed, with high rates of poverty, this is a major concern for many students who attend high school in East County. The College Affordability Diagnosis referenced above ranks South Carolina 44th in the United States in the affordability of attendance at a post-secondary institution (Penn Institute for Research in Higher Education, 2016).

To provide access to college for all residents of South Carolina, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education awards scholarships annually to residents of South Carolina based on both need and merit (South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2017). In addition, the Commission also awards enhancements to those scholarships to students who plan to major in certain areas, such as mathematics or the sciences (South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2017). The most awarded of these scholarships, and the only such scholarships mentioned by the participants of this study at Carolina High School, are the Life and Hope Scholarships.
The Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence (LIFE) Scholarship is a merit-based scholarship program through each eligible public and private college, including community colleges and technical schools in South Carolina. The program provides $5,000 per academic year toward the cost of attendance at an eligible four-year college in South Carolina and up to the cost of tuition plus a $300 book allowance for attendance at an eligible two-year public or technical college in South Carolina. The LIFE Scholarship may be used towards the attendance cost by any student who is attending college for the first time as an undergraduate and is renewable for up to four years (South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2017).

The SC HOPE Scholarship Program (South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2017), was established under the SC Education Lottery Act approved by the General Assembly during the 2001 legislative session (South Carolina Legislature, 2013). The program is a merit-based scholarship that awards up to $2,800 to students attending a four-year college in the state of South Carolina who do not qualify for the LIFE Scholarship. The HOPE scholarship is available to students during their freshman year only.

Such merit-based state-sponsored scholarships guarantee high academically achieving students money for college if they meet certain academic criteria, thereby creating opportunities for students to attend college who may not otherwise be able to do so. However, these scholarships can also be an obstacle to some students and families who limit the range of colleges that they consider, focusing on in-state public colleges and ignoring in-state private institutions and all types of out-of-state colleges. While the
amount of financial aid available to students attending out-of-state public or private colleges varies greatly among institutions, there are highly selective colleges, such as University of Southern California (Need Based Financial Aid, 2017), Rice University (Office of Financial Aid, 2017), and Duke University (Undergraduate Applicants, 2017) that promise prospective students that they will meet the full demonstrated need of applicants up to the full cost of attendance for accepted students. They often promise to do so without having the student incur any loan debt during their undergraduate career. Schools that promise to meet demonstrated financial need without having the student incur loan debt include the University of Pennsylvania (How Aid is Determined, 2017), Vanderbilt University (Affordability, 2017) and Davidson College (Financial Aid, 2017), which is less than a three-hour drive from the home of any student who participated in this study.

Access to such colleges and financial aid programs is limited to a small percentage of applicants each year. Appendix D shows that the University of Pennsylvania admits only 10% of total applicants each year, that Vanderbilt University admits only 12% of total applicants each year, and that Davidson College admits only 22% of total applicants each year. Additionally, the literature on college admissions shows that highly selective colleges show preference in their college admissions processes for students who can pay the full cost of attendance over those that will need financial aid from the college. One such study showed that three quarters of the students at the most competitive colleges in the United States come from families in the wealthiest twenty-five percent of the population (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). However, though
limited, there are opportunities to attend highly selective schools. None of the participants in this study at Carolina High School demonstrated any awareness of this possibility during their individual interviews.

In addition to the possibility of the types of financial aid discussed above, some public colleges in the United States will grant all or a portion of out-of-state students’ tuition rates that match the tuition rate for in-state students. South Carolina is one of 13 Southern states that have entered a compact which allows out-of-state students from any of the thirteen-member states to apply for in-state tuition rates (Pitsker, 2016). Other colleges across the country offer in-state tuition to out-of-state students, both with and without limits on the ways that students can achieve the in-state tuition rate. Such limits may include restricting the tuition benefits to certain majors or academic departments (Sheehy, 2013). Clemson University offers out-of-state residents additional aid in the form of grants and scholarships to students who meet academic requirements. Although Clemson is in South Carolina, making the students at Carolina High School who participated in this study ineligible for these programs, Clemson University is just one example within their own state that illustrates the existence of such programs. Fred was the only student participant who demonstrated knowledge of this possibility when speaking of his interest in attending Oklahoma State University and being offered in-state tuition by the admissions and financial aid office if he chose to do so.
High School Rigor

During the focus group session held with the student participants, the students talked at length of how they were worried that high school had been too easy for them and that they were not prepared for college. The student participants expressed their belief that they did not really know how to study and did not know how to address lesser academic success if they struggled with courses during their college careers. The student participants in the focus group also talked about the fact that they had not studied much together or worked together in groups and teams during their high school careers and did not know how to do those things if required in college. In addition to these comments about themselves, they expressed that, from their point of view, they did not always have capable teachers in their classes, and that in some classes, things occurred regularly that inhibited their learning. Although they expressed confidence in their abilities as students, that confidence was limited to their immediate, local context as high school students at Carolina High School. They exhibited little confidence in themselves as college students. Josh described his fear that he was not ready for college during his interview by saying,

Because a lot of the classes and a lot of the situations that go on in the classroom do not happen in the college classroom, or in a college setting. Does not prepare me for college. It didn’t prepare us education-wise. Not to down anybody, but we don’t have the greatest teachers, and not the greatest learning environment (Josh, personal interview, May 22, 2017).

This fear that they are not prepared to be successful in college is well-founded, according to information gathered by Mrs. Goins. Each year, Mrs. Goins receives a college freshman report on each of the students who graduated from Carolina High School during the previous year. She then must compile her own report on all those
students and submit information as to their academic standing to the South Carolina Department of Education to verify continuing eligibility for South Carolina Commission on Higher Education sponsored scholarships. She described getting those reports from college each year as “heartbreaking,” because many of their graduates fail to earn the grades necessary for continued eligibility. She further confided that she fears that students will leave college and never finish because of their loss of scholarship, a barrier created by state-sponsored scholarships in addition to the barriers discussed above.

**Lack of Examples at Home and in the Community**

As was mentioned previously, only 9.6% of adults aged 25 and older in East County hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. This is a strikingly small percentage when compared to the percentages of such adults across the state of South Carolina and the nation, which means that the student participants had few examples of successful college graduates to whom they could turn for valid information on college and the challenges that they might face as college students. In addition, because so few adults in their community hold bachelor’s degrees, it is notable that each of the student participants believed that they needed to attend and graduate from college to be successful throughout their lives.

Referring to table 3 earlier in this chapter, the percentage of student participants with family members who held bachelor’s degrees was consistent with that of East County, as only one of the seven, or 14.3%, had a family member who held a bachelor’s
degree. Madison, in fact, had two family members with bachelor’s degrees, as both her father and grandmother had completed their degrees at four-year colleges. Each of those family members had a clear influence on her college choice of attending Francis Marion University and completing a degree in nursing, as her father received his bachelor’s degree from Francis Marion University and her grandmother received her bachelor’s degree in nursing. Fred was the only other student with a family member who held any type of degree, as his mother completed an associate’s degree from the local community college to become a radiological technician. Each of the other student participants had one family member who had attended or was attending college, but none had completed a bachelor’s degree. George had a brother who was currently enrolled in college and was on track to graduate. The family members of each of the other four student participants had dropped out of college and returned home in less than a year. Robert’s grandfather dropped out of college after one day on campus.

In addition to the lack of examples of college success among their family members, there is a lack of positive examples within the community of successful college graduates as well, especially beyond the faculty of Carolina High School. When student participants were asked to talk about members of the community who influenced them to go to college or influenced them in any way during their college choice processes, only Ashley identified a member of the community who was a successful college graduate as an example of someone who had inspired her to attend and finish college.
CHAPTER 5:

VIRGINIA

Virginia contains 137 school systems in 95 counties across the state (Education V. D., 2017). Since the adoption of a new state constitution in 1870, cities in Virginia are separate governmental entities from the counties in which they lie. Because of this, cities and counties in Virginia have separate school systems, often with the city school system surrounded by the existing county public school system (Pettit, 2017). This is true in Hokie County Virginia, which has two school systems. The city system serves 2,300 students in grades P-K through twelve and has one high school. The county school system has 13 schools, including two high schools, and serves 5,572 students (Public School Review, 2017). Hokie County, Virginia is a rural county in Southwestern Virginia that borders another state, and the students who attend high school in Hokie County frequently travel to the nearest city in the state bordering Hokie County as it is less than 30 miles away and is the nearest major city to their homes.

Hokie County

Hokie County, Virginia consists mainly of rolling farmland, but the largest occupation in Hokie County is manufacturing. As of January 2017, 5.6% of the population is unemployed, which is higher than the Virginia state-wide unemployment rates and the United States national unemployment rates. The Hokie County School Board is the largest single employer in Hokie County (Virginia Employment Commission, 2017). Referring to table 8, as of July 2016, Hokie County had a population
of 51,455, a 5.1% decrease in population since the 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The residents of Hokie County are primarily white, making up 74.7% of the population. African-Americans make up 22.4% of the population, Latinos make up 3.4% of the population, 0.6% of the population is Asian, 0.3% are American Indians, and 1.9% are identified as two or more races. The US Census Bureau states that Latinos can be members of any race and are therefore counted both separately and as members of specific races, which leads to a total percentage greater than 100 (US Census Bureau, 2017). A large percentage of the residents of Hokie County are poor—the median household income is $34,992, compared the Virginia state-wide average median household income of $61,486 (Short, 2016).

Although the percentage of residents of Hokie County living in poverty is lower than that of the other sites that participated in this study at 18.4% (table 8, below), it is significantly higher than the Virginia state-wide rate of 11% (Poverty USA, 2017). Additionally, according to the US Census Bureau, as of 2016, 14.1% of the population under the age of 65 does not possess health insurance, compared to 10.7% of all residents of Virginia who are under the age of 65 (Virginia Health Care Foundation, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>Hokie County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>8,001,024</td>
<td>51,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$61,486</td>
<td>$34,992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Living in Poverty</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Residents Under Age 65 Without Health Insurance</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Poverty Statistics for Hokie County, Virginia
In addition to experiencing high poverty rates, the residents of Hokie County are less educated than the population of Virginia as well as the overall population of the United States. Referencing the table below, in 2016, 11.6% of the adults aged 25 or older in Hokie County held a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 36.9% of the population of Virginia aged 25 or older and 33.4% of the population nationwide aged 25 or older. Additionally, 79.2% of the population of Hokie County aged 25 or older held a high school diploma or GED, compared to 88.6% of the residents of Virginia aged 25 or older and 88% of the population nationwide aged 25 or older (US Census Bureau, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>Hokie County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of Adults 25 and Older Who Hold a High School Diploma or GED</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Adults 25 and Older Who Hold a Bachelor's Degree or Higher</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Educational Attainment Levels for Citizens of Hokie County, Virginia

Family members of the student participants at Cavalier High School are educated at higher levels than the overall population of Hokie County. Referencing table 10 below, four of the eight student participants at Cavalier High School have family members who have graduated from college with at least a bachelor’s degree. Additionally, Linda Sue’s mother attended a four-year college but did not graduate, and Claire’s father and Zach’s mother completed associate’s degrees at the local community college. Victoria was the only student participant at Cavalier High School who did not have a family member who had participated in some type of post-secondary education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Sue</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Attended, Did Not Finish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liliana</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>College Degree in Mexico</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Educational Attainment Levels of Family Members of Student Participants at Cavalier High School, Virginia

**Cavalier High School**

Cavalier High school is in a rural location, five miles from the closest town of Middleway (not the main city in Hokie County) and four miles from the border with North Carolina. Middleway is just under one square mile, measuring 568 acres, and has a population of 697. Because it sits adjacent to a major highway between the main city in Hokie County and the larger city in the neighboring state, Middleway contains several businesses associated with major highways, such as convenience stores, restaurants, and a grocery store in addition to businesses involved in manufacturing, the main occupation in Hokie County.

Cavalier High School draws its student population from the Southern half of Hokie County. There are 1,011 students in grades nine through twelve at Cavalier High
School, of which 51% are male and 49% are female. The student population during the
time of this study was 59% white, 28% African American, 9% Latino, and 4% who
identify as two or more races. Cavalier High School is well known in Virginia for its
athletic programs, having recently won consecutive state championships in football and
having won state championships in other sports in the last 50 years. Of the graduating
class of 2016, 70% of 230 graduating seniors attended a two-year or four-year college,
with 5.1% of those graduating seniors attending college out-of-state. Of the graduating
class of 2017, 78% of the students indicated that they planned to attend a two-year or
four-year college, with 9% indicating that they planned to attend college out-of-state.
The percentage of students who attend college out-of-state or plan to attend college out-
of-state is well below the Virginia statewide average of 26%.

Cavalier High School has a chapter of the National Honor Society, which requires
student members to maintain a minimum GPA of 3.0, as well as requiring members to
provide service and leadership to their school and community (National Honor Society,
2017). These characteristics identify the members of the National Honor Society at
Cavalier High School as high academically achieving students. In addition to identifying
National Honor Society members as high academically achieving students through the
GPA requirement, the chapter at Cavalier High School ensures that members have
qualities and experiences in leadership and community service, both of which are sought
by highly selective colleges in the United States (Taylor, 2017). Of the 21 members of
the National Honor Society at Cavalier High School who attended the initial explanatory
and recruitment meeting to explain the study and its purposes, eight volunteered to
participate in this study. All eight participants in the study from Cavalier High School planned to attend college within the state of Virginia but were aware of a few other students in their graduating class who had plans to attend college out-of-state for a variety of reasons. Referring to table 11 below, five of the participants were female and three were male. The participants in the study from Cavalier High School were somewhat representative of the demographics of the total school population, as five were white, two were African-American, and one was Latino.

Two of the student participants reported their grade point averages as 4.06 and 4.2 on a weighted scale in which AP and college-level courses counted for five points while all other classes counted for four points. Five of the participants self-reported their grade point averages on an unweighted four-point scale. Their self-reported GPAs ranged from 3.7 to 4.0. Seven of the students reported taking the SAT for college admission and self-reported their scores to me. Those scores ranged from 980 to 1240 on a scale of 400-1600. Four of the students reported taking the ACT for college admissions purposes and self-reported their scores to me. Those scores ranged from 21-26 on a scale of 1-36. One student did not wish to share their grade point average or any college admissions test scores. Seven of the eight participants had been accepted to and planned to attend a four-year college, while one student planned to attend a two-year community college in a neighboring county to pursue an associate’s degree in x-ray technology. She also planned to continue working towards a second associate’s degree in ultrasound technology. The community college in Hokie County did not offer the programs of study that the student was interested in pursuing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name (Student-Chosen Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>GPA (Self-reported)</th>
<th>ACT (Self-Reported)</th>
<th>SAT (Self-Reported)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Sue</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>4/4.0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3.9/4.0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.9/4.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liliana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>3.7/4.0</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>3.9/4.0</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
<td>1180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Did not report</td>
<td>Did not report</td>
<td>Did not report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Demographic Information of Student Participants at Cavalier High School, Virginia

**Student Participants’ Perceptions of Themselves as Students**

Each of the student participants at Cavalier High School described themselves as a good student and stated that they had enjoyed success in high school. The students reported that they recognized their membership in the National Honor Society as an achievement that reflected their standing as high-achieving students. Madison described herself this way: “I describe myself as diligent and hard-working. I always put in my best effort” (Madison, personal interview, May 16, 2017). Additionally, Josh stated in his interview,

I always strive for the A. So, if I get, well this is gonna sound bad, I was gonna say if I got anything like lower than A it would be disappointing, you know. I’m definitely involved. I’m always here after school. Like you can catch me up and down the hallway. (Josh, personal interview, May 16, 2017)
The statements of Madison and Josh were representative of the answers of the other student participants. Each of the student participants attributed their own academic successes to a variety of character traits, such as completing schoolwork ahead of due dates and deadlines, working hard, staying organized, being driven, and staying humble when they didn’t understand something so that they were unafraid to ask questions. As seen in the statement by Josh, they also defined being a good student in ways other than achieving academic success. All eight students mentioned that they were active in at least one extracurricular activity at Cavalier High School, such as athletics, band, clubs, academic competition teams, and attending high school events after school. Student participants stated that being a good student involved balancing academics with other parts of high school life.

**Where Are They Going?**

The student participants in this study at Cavalier High School made 34 applications to 19 different colleges for their post-secondary careers, for an average of 4.25 applications made to colleges for admission per student. All 34 of those applications were made to colleges within the state of Virginia. Referring to table 12 below, student participants applied to a mix of public and private colleges, with 22 applications being made to eleven different public colleges and twelve applications being made to eight different private colleges for admission. The student participants at Cavalier High School also made applications to a mix of doctoral/research colleges, master’s colleges, and baccalaureate colleges. One student, Madison, applied to Patrick Henry Community
College, an associate’s college in another county that had the academic program she planned to complete to meet her plans for a career in the medical field.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Applied to For Admission</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Students Applying</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Type of College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Averett University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluefield College</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgewater College</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of William and Mary</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrum College</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampton University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Madison University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longwood University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Dominion University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Henry Community College</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Associate’s College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radford University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randolph College</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roanoke College</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Mary Washington</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Richmond</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Baccalaureate College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Virginia</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Commonwealth University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Tech University</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Locations and Types of Colleges Applied to for Admission by Student Participants at Cavalier High School, Virginia

There was no clear college of choice among the applicants, as four students made an application for admission to James Madison University, four students made an
application for admission to Virginia Tech University, three students made an application for admission to Roanoke College, and three students made an application for admission to the University of Virginia. James Madison University, Virginia Tech University, and the University of Virginia are doctoral/research universities, according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, which is updated and maintained by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University (Indiana Center for Post-Secondary Research, 2015). Roanoke College is a liberal arts college classified as a baccalaureate college (Indiana Center for Post-Secondary Research, 2015). Although they are not the closest colleges to Cavalier High School, each of these colleges is located less than three hours driving distance from Cavalier High School. Averett University is the closest college to Cavalier High School, located less than one hour away by car.

There are several colleges located in North Carolina that are also an hour or less driving distance from Cavalier High, including North Carolina A&T University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, (both located in Greensboro), Elon University (located in Burlington), Wake Forest University, and Winston Salem State University (located in Winston-Salem). None of the student participants at Cavalier High School applied to any of these colleges for admission, despite their proximity to their homes and Cavalier High School.

Although students applied to Virginia colleges exclusively for admission, several students expressed interest in schools outside of Virginia, with all but one of those colleges being in North Carolina or South Carolina. Claire expressed an interest in North Carolina State University and Wake Forest University, Liliana expressed an interest in
North Carolina A&T University, Madison expressed an interest in Pfeiffer University, and Zach expressed an interest in Harvard University. He was the only student to express an interest in applying to a college outside of the Southern region of the United States, and he was also the only one to consider applying to a highly selective college.

In choosing their college for attendance, four students chose to attend doctoral/research universities. Johnny and Michael chose to attend Virginia Tech, Linda Sue chose to attend Virginia Commonwealth University, and Zach chose to attend William and Mary, a liberal arts college that is classified as a doctoral/research university by the Carnegie Classification System of Institutions of Higher Education (Indiana Center for Post-Secondary Research, 2015). Claire and Victoria chose to attend Averett University, a baccalaureate college and the college located closest to Cavalier High School. Both students planned to live at home and commute to college to lower the cost of attendance at Averett University. Liliana chose to attend James Madison University, a master’s university, and as previously mentioned, Madison chose to attend Patrick Henry Community College, an associate’s college. Six of the eight student participants chose to attend public colleges in Virginia, which, according to the 2016 College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania (2018) remain the most affordable option for Virginia residents across all income levels. Linda Sue chose to attend Virginia Commonwealth University, Liliana chose to attend James Madison University, and Michael and Johnny chose to attend Virginia Tech University. The two also planned to room together during their first year of college.
**Most Important Factors and Most Important Influences**

During the focus group session that was held at Cavalier High School, students were asked as a group what the most important factor was in determining the college that they would attend for their post-secondary careers. Referencing table 13 below, they provided many answers that reflected the concerns that they had over leaving their families and moving to a new place outside of their community. Their answers included cost of tuition and scholarship money, not being accepted by their first-choice colleges, distance from home, and needing a fresh start away from the current group of friends. The most common answer, however, was the environment of the college and their desire for a small, close knit community that felt like home. During their individual interviews, six student participants spoke repeatedly of community and wanting to be close to home. They not only wanted to be close to their families, but also to be near their community so that they could continue to be involved in community events and to be involved in performing service to their communities. Distance from home as a factor was explicitly mentioned only by Johnny, but answers from seven of the student participants had distance from family as a related or underlying factor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Biggest Influence in the Choice of College</th>
<th>Most Important Factor(s) in Choosing a College</th>
<th>College Choice for Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Sue</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Did not get accepted to first choice</td>
<td>Virginia Commonwealth University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Patrick Henry Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Small and close</td>
<td>Averett University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liliana</td>
<td>Fit her Personality</td>
<td>Fresh start</td>
<td>James Madison University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Feels like his community but with a college in it</td>
<td>Virginia Tech University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Cost, class size, home-like feel</td>
<td>College of William and Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Small and personable</td>
<td>Averett University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny</td>
<td>Sister’s experiences in college</td>
<td>Within 2 hours and major</td>
<td>Virginia Tech University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: *Most Important Influences and Most Important Factors in the College Choice Decisions of Student Participants at Cavalier High School, Virginia*

This concept is further supported in the data by the individual interviews with the student participants, in which seven of the eight participants cited family or family members as the most important influence on their college choice. All student participants except for Liliana said in their interviews that family members were very supportive of the decision to attend college and to attend a college close to home. Family members would ask them what they were thinking about for college, with the underlying assumption that the decision to attend college was a given for their children. Family members would also offer to take students to visit colleges, help them find information about specific colleges and academic programs, and would offer support and encouragement about their preparation for attending college (maintaining a high grade point average, college admissions test results, etc.).
As the only student to cite something other than family as the most important influence on her college choice, Liliana was an important outlier to consider. She stated that the need to remove herself from her current environment and her circle of friends in the community was the most important influence in her decision to attend college after graduating from high school, and to attend James Madison University specifically.

Liliana said that her perception was that her family was not supportive of her attending any college. She also said that her family continually tried to change her mind about attending college and didn’t want her to go away because they had always been with her. Liliana’s perceived her family’s actions and statements as reflective of their immigrant experiences. Because they came to the country from Mexico while she was still young, her parents continued to view the United States and the state of Virginia as strange and sometimes scary places. Through words and actions, Liliana’s family expressed a fear for her safety as well as a fear of losing the continuity of their family unit. This attitude on the part of Liliana’s family is especially notable since Liliana’s mother graduated from college in Mexico. She was, however, unable to use that degree in the United States. Her parents had personal experience with the difference in employment opportunities in the United States for college graduates and those without a college degree. Liliana perceived that the words and actions of her family members indirectly addressed the idea of attending a college that was not close to home and were related to their fears around the fact that Liliana would be leaving the family to attend any college and no longer living at home.
Families and family members of the other student participants at Cavalier High School reinforced the idea of distance both implicitly and explicitly. Early in the college choice process, family members encouraged students to attend local colleges because they considered them to be good schools. Victoria said that during her early years in high school, her father was in favor of her going farther away to a big school like the University of Virginia, but during her senior year began talking about how he considered Averett University to be a good school and that maybe she should attend Averett University instead. Victoria’s perception of this change was that her father initially liked the idea of her going farther away from home for college, but as the reality of her decision became clear to him, he wanted her to stay close to home and the family.

Family members of other student participants also talked about the dangers associated with living in a city or in a strange place. Student participants stated that parents voiced concerns over the cost of travel associated with attending a college that was located far from home. Four student participants stated in their individual interviews that their parents told them that they liked the college that they picked for attendance because it was close to home. Madison, Claire, and Victoria chose to attend college less than an hour driving distance from Cavalier High School. Michael and Johnny chose to attend Virginia Tech University, which is less than two hours driving distance from Cavalier High School, and Linda Sue chose to attend James Madison University, which is less than three hours driving distance from Cavalier High School. Even Liliana, who wanted to get away from her current circle of friends and their “drama,” as she described it, chose to attend Virginia Commonwealth University, which is three hours driving
distance from Cavalier High School. Only Zach, who chose to attend the College of William and Mary, will attend a college that is located more than four hours driving distance from Cavalier High School.

Johnny described the hardships that he believed that his sister and parents experienced while she attended Mary Washington University, which is a little over four hours from Cavalier High School:

I didn’t want to go too far away, so like four hours, that’s where my sister’s school was. It was pretty rough on her. So, I wanted to be within maybe two hours, and Virginia Tech is definitely within two hours. That’s a lot of driving, and not only that, but she wasn’t allowed to have her car the first year, so my parents had to go all the way up there and pick her up and bring her all the way back. And when it was time to go back, they had to do the same thing. So that was pretty rough. Plus, she liked being around the family, so not being able to come home as much as she would have liked was pretty rough. (Johnny, personal interview, May 16, 2017)

Johnny stated that he shared a lot of characteristics with his sister, and the struggles that she experienced that resulted from being four hours away from the family made a great impression on him as he identified colleges that he would like to attend after graduation.

Family members influenced the college choice decision-making processes of student participants in other ways. The first decisions to attend college for most students arose from an awareness of their parents’ and other family members’ education levels. Six of the eight student participants at Cavalier High School had family members who had graduated from some level of college with a degree. Linda Sue described the ways that her mother, who had attended community college but had not finished a degree program, would remind her that not finishing her degree was a mistake, and that she
should attend and finish college. Victoria mentioned similar conversations with her parents, neither of whom had attended college after graduation from high school. The career choices of family members also influenced the program of study of student participants, such as Madison, who planned to attend the local community college to become an x-ray technician. Her aunt, who works in the medical field, gave Madison information on the location and quality of degree programs at different colleges.

Community Service

Participation in community service was a defining characteristic of a good student to the student participants at Cavalier High School. In their interviews, seven of the eight student participants mentioned community service when describing themselves as good students and continually referred to their involvement in their community and specific community service activities throughout their interviews. The eighth, although she did not mention community service specifically, talked about how she hoped to be able to come back to Hokie County after graduation from college so that she could help to rebuild the community.

Linda Sue, Madison, and Victoria mentioned requirements for membership in certain organizations at Cavalier High School, such as the National Honor Society, as being the reason that they first became involved in community service, but all seven student participants who mentioned community service described it as something they enjoyed doing. Student participants described their service to Cavalier High School by
talking about working with and mentoring incoming freshmen on the things they would experience in high school, the dangers of drugs, academic tutoring within the high school, and volunteering at school events when they were asked.

In addition to their service to Cavalier High School, the student participants were extensively involved in community service within their greater community in Hokie County. Victoria described the importance and value that she placed on community service:

Well, I have over 50 hours of community service through the Virginia Museum of Natural History and I co-taught summer camps for children. So, definitely I don’t want to be an educator. I want to be a nurse. But the children, I love kids, I love helping kids so that was important. I also have 10-12 hours here and there helping with kids who are autistic or have special needs and they want to play soccer. So, it was called Top Soccer. And I would just be that person there to help them if they couldn’t, just help and encourage them and stuff. And then I’ve done a lot of odds and ends with National Honor Society. I mean being the president of the National Honor Society, I’ve probably done more as far as planning events because we do events for kids there too. (Victoria, personal interview, May 16, 2017)

Additionally, Zach stated that he had helped the poor and elderly by maintaining their yards and repairing their homes. Linda Sue stated that she was involved in recruiting poor and minority students to STEM activities at Cavalier High School and within the community, and Madison mentioned that she had helped hold fundraisers for community organizations that provide food and resources for those that cannot afford them. All eight student participants stated that they hoped to continue their involvement in service to the college communities that they became members of during their college years. Additionally, they stated that they hoped to remain involved in community service within Hokie County while attending college and after graduating from college.
Access to Information on Colleges

Most student participants in this study began thinking about college at an early age because their parents had attended some type of college and had graduated with an associate’s degree or a bachelor’s degree (table 10). Two of the female high school students did not have parents who graduated from college. Victoria, who had no family members that had attended college, and Linda Sue, whose mother attended community college but did not finish her degree program, had no examples of family members who had completed some type of degree program in college. Claire’s father and Zach’s mother both earned associate’s degrees at the local community college in Hokie County. Madison’s mother and Michael’s mother both earned bachelor’s degrees in college, and Michael’s father earned a master’s degree as well. Neither of Johnny’s parents had earned a college degree, but an older sister had earned a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree and was a teacher at a local middle school in Hokie County. All students except Liliana, whose mother had graduated from college in Mexico, mentioned that their parents had instilled in them at an early age the expectation that they would attend college one day and have better lives than they (the parents) had themselves experienced.

The student participants stated that they did not begin thinking about individual colleges, college attendance, or the college application process until sometime during their high school careers. Victoria stated that she began thinking about colleges during her freshman year because she knew that she needed to keep her grade point average high to get into the colleges that she was interested in attending, but most students said in their
interviews that they didn’t begin thinking about individual colleges until their junior year of high school.

All students at Cavalier High School have access to a wide variety of resources about colleges through the guidance department at the high school. In addition to four full-time school counselors, there is also a college liaison whose job is to assist students who are planning to attend a four-year college after graduation from Cavalier High School, and a college advisor, whose job is to assist students who are planning to attend a two-year community college or junior college after graduation from Cavalier High School. In addition to the guidance staff, some classes at Cavalier High School served as the catalyst for seeking information on colleges that students were interested in attending. In his Teachers for Tomorrow class, Michael said that he was given an assignment in which he had to gather information on five colleges and present them to the class. He used that assignment to begin identifying colleges that he was interested in attending. Liliana asked the college liaison for information on various colleges in Virginia.

Cavalier High School also pools their resources with the two other high schools in Hokie County to host college fairs for students. Those college fairs allow students to meet and talk with representatives from colleges that choose to attend the fair. Those representatives typically provide brochures on all aspects of life at their colleges, including academic programs, costs of attendance, meal plans, and housing. In addition to college fairs, the three high schools provide a limited amount of access to college campuses for students by conducting college visits, taken on weekends, to three local colleges during the school year. There is also a state of Virginia employee in the county
who provides college information and advice to students and their parents from all three high schools in the county. That advisor, Mark Bryant, in addition to the college liaison, Julia Davis, and college advisor, Amanda Black, at Cavalier High School, each volunteered to participate in this study.

Despite the availability of resources at Cavalier High School, five of the student participants in this study stated that they began thinking about possible colleges to attend independent of school resources and activities. Two students mentioned that they began thinking about individual colleges when they received letters and brochures in the mail from colleges in all areas of the country. Two other students stated that they began thinking about individual colleges at the time that they registered to take college entrance exams, as they had to decide which colleges would receive their exam scores. One student stated that she started thinking about which college to attend because her friends were discussing college options. Three student participants stated that they began thinking about attending college because of classroom activities or the efforts of the college liaison.

Additionally, all students except for Liliana reported that they did the research on individual colleges by searching for information on the internet, talking to friends, family, and community members, or by taking college visits with their families. While some students got help from Cavalier High School faculty members in filling out forms, writing essays, and searching for scholarships, each student participant conducted research on colleges on their own initiative, independently chose which colleges to apply
to for admission, and ultimately chose which college to attend without input from the faculty members at Cavalier High School.

**Influence of the Community**

Student participants at Cavalier High School believed that their community and its members were overwhelmingly supportive of their ambitions to attend college. They received encouragement and support from community members often, and in a variety of ways. Students perceived that community members were genuinely interested in their plans, both in relation to their choice of college and in their plans for their careers after college. Students stated that they were often asked directly where they were going to college and community members always expressed approval of their answers to those questions. Community members who were alumni of colleges that students were interested in applying to for admission also served as sources of information for student participants, provided opportunities for students to work in areas related to their future career choices, and helped them research colleges and academic programs when asked. In some cases, the jobs that student participants performed inspired their programs of study in college and their plans for their careers after graduation from college.

As mentioned previously, the student participants at Cavalier High School placed a great value on community service, or giving back to the community, and that idea was a clear influence on student participants’ decisions to attend college within driving distance from their homes. It was also clear from the interviews with the student participants that
the value that they place on community service arises from their concerns for their community. Students repeatedly referred to their perceptions that their community has declined over the past several years and is still in decline. Five of the student participants also mentioned that they hoped to return to the community to help improve the conditions after their graduation from college.

The student participants’ own fears for the community appeared to be genuine in their interviews, but they reported that those fears originated with, or were at least reinforced by, members of their community. During the focus group session at Cavalier High School, each of the student participants mentioned numerous times that they had received comments from community members about staying close to home for college so that they could return to the community after graduation and continue to work there. Student participants were told often that they were the next doctors, the next teachers in their high school, and the next contributors within their larger community.

**Influence of Cavalier High School**

The students who participated in this study all described Cavalier High School as academically and athletically oriented. They described teachers who were supportive of their efforts to apply to colleges for admission, even expecting it of them and making those expectations known in a variety of ways. There are college displays throughout Cavalier High School as well as events held throughout the school year that communicate
the expectation for students to attend college. These displays and events will be discussed in detail in the College-Going Culture section later in this chapter.

Student participants talked about teachers who questioned them often and were supportive of their decisions without advocating for specific colleges in those conversations. Michael and Zach stated that they viewed their teachers as pushing students to do their best in whatever they chose to do in high school. The conversations between faculty members and the students who participated in this study were initiated by both faculty members and the student participants themselves. However, the interviews with the students in this study, and the interviews with the three faculty representatives who participated in this study, show that faculty members perceived that it was not their job to suggest individual colleges for students.

**Influence of Individual Faculty Members**

Cavalier High School faculty are heavily involved in the college decision-making processes of their students. As mentioned previously, in addition to four guidance counselors on the faculty, Cavalier High School has a college liaison and a college advisor that work with students who are interested in attending a four-year college or a two-year community college after their graduation from high school. Ms. Davis, the college liaison, and Mr. Bryant, the college counselor who works with students from all three high schools in Hokie County, were the two persons most mentioned by the students at Cavalier High School who participated in this study as being especially
knowledgeable and helpful during their college choice processes. Ms. Davis was mentioned by five student participants and Mr. Bryant was mentioned by three student participants. In her interview, Ms. Davis estimated that she works with approximately 150 students each year at Cavalier High School, and in his interview, Mr. Bryant estimated that he advises approximately 100 families each year from the three high schools in Hokie County.

Ms. Davis provides a variety of resources and services to the students at Cavalier High School. She has information on the college admissions process, both in terms of general information relating to student financial aid, application processes, and specific resources for students to help them maximize the quality of their applications. Student participants mentioned that she would gather information on specific colleges if they requested. Liliana stated that Ms. Davis would research colleges and make phone calls to schools for information for her when she needed help. Johnny and Zach described Ms. Davis as being proactive in meeting with them about the college application process, emailing them, stopping them in the hallways, and calling them from class to meet with her to discuss anything that they needed help with completing. Student participants perceived Ms. Davis as an expert on “college” since she was a recent college graduate and knew about the things that they would experience and the things that they would need when they enrolled in college.

The students who participated in this study at Cavalier High School described Mr. Bryant as a “guru” among the people who advise students on colleges. Three student participants talked about their perception that he was the most knowledgeable and
experienced among the adults that they interacted with relating to their college choice processes. Mr. Bryant meets with students and their families at his office in Hokie County to discuss college plans and to provide information on specific colleges. Mr. Bryant acknowledged in his interview that he is rarely proactive in identifying students as parents must call him to make an advising appointment and must travel to his office for those meetings. Despite this, Zach identified Mr. Bryant as being especially influential in his college choice process because Mr. Bryant spoke with him at a college fair and invited him to have his mother make an appointment to work with him in identifying colleges that he might apply to for admission. Zach attributes his applying to, being admitted to, and deciding to attend the College of William and Mary to Mr. Bryant, who suggested that Zach apply there, among other prestigious academic institutions.

Madison and Michael also mentioned Mrs. Black, the college advisor who works with students interested in attending community college, as someone who was especially helpful to them during their college choice processes. Even though seven of the eight student participants planned to attend four-year colleges, Michael stated that Mrs. Black helped each of them choose courses available through the community college that might later transfer to their four-year college after their enrollment in those colleges. Mrs. Black pointed out to those students that taking such classes would satisfy their high school graduation requirements and could possibly lessen the number of classes that would be required for them to complete their college degree requirements. Mrs. Black also advises students on the possibility of completing their degrees in less than four years and the financial benefit that would result from doing so.
Other faculty members at Cavalier High School were mentioned by students as giving assignments in their classes that required students to conduct research on colleges, as being available and helpful if students asked them for information about the colleges that they attended, and for allowing students free time to meet with the college liaison and college advisor when needed. The student participants mentioned a few faculty members who advocated for specific colleges, but their perceptions were that those conversations were expressions of pride in their alma maters rather than sincere attempts to influence their decisions.

It is clear from the data collected in this study that the faculty at Cavalier High School possess resources that aid students during their college choice processes and are proactive in making those resources available to students. However, many of the resources available to students and the actions of the faculty members who serve them contribute to the idea that Cavalier High School students should attend a college within the state of Virginia. Data collected during this study support this conclusion. Each teacher at Cavalier High School posts information about their colleges of attendance outside their classroom doors. During the visits to Cavalier High School that were required for the implementation of this study, it was noted that four of the 67 teachers at Cavalier High School, or 6%, received their bachelor’s degrees from colleges outside the state of Virginia. Additionally, the resources and information on colleges that are available to students at Cavalier High School are heavily related to Virginia colleges. The guidance department keeps an annual catalog available to students that provides information on all two-year and four-year colleges in Virginia. Faculty members also
promote the use of Virginia Wizard, a tool that helps students prepare for college. However, the very name of the tool reinforces the idea that students should attend college within the state of Virginia.

Additionally, the student participants at Cavalier High School are very aware of the fact that the college liaison, Ms. Davis, is a recent graduate of the University of Virginia and is employed by the University of Virginia to advise students in a Virginia high school. One student mentioned this fact during the focus group session and recognized that there were a lot of college pennants on display in Ms. Davis’s office and in the common areas around Cavalier High School, but that all of them were pennants of Virginia colleges. The student participants at Cavalier High School are also aware of the fact that the college advisor, Mrs. Black, is employed by the local community college and has an office at the community college in addition to her office at Cavalier High School. The student participants, in the focus group session, discussed their perception that Ms. Davis and Mrs. Black are paid to get them to attend their colleges, or at least a college in Virginia.

**Evidence of a College-Going Culture**

As mentioned in chapter 4, in their examination of high schools and their success in preparing students to attend and succeed in college, Corwin and Tierney (2007) described a college-going culture as one that should be immediately evident when visitors or observers entered the high school campus. The building should have displays
throughout the halls that promote and celebrate colleges, while also celebrating individual student and team successes. The school also must have clear processes in place to support students through every stage of the college choice process. Schools should be proactive in providing information and services to students and their families. All aspects of a college-going culture as described by Corwin and Tierney (2007) are in place and evident to visitors at Cavalier High School.

When asked for information on college-going rates for seniors at Cavalier High School, Ms. Davis stated that 178 of 230, or 77.4%, of students in the graduating class for 2017 at Cavalier High School had indicated to her that they planned to enroll in some type of college after graduating from Cavalier High School. This rate is slightly higher than the Virginia state-wide rate of 71.9%, but is 14 percentage points, or 22%, higher than the average rate of 63.4% of all high schools in the Southwest Region of Virginia, the region of the state in which Cavalier High School is located (Commonwealth of Virginia, 2018). The college-going rate at Cavalier High School is also 8.2 percentage points, or 11.8% higher than the national college-going rate of high school seniors of 69.2% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Statements by the student participants during their individual interviews and during the focus group session support the idea that Cavalier High School and its faculty expect students to attend college and give assistance to them as they are applying to colleges. Such statistics and personal experiences would seem to indicate that there is a college-going culture in place at Cavalier High School, and visible evidence as well as documents and student data collected during the implementation of this study support that indication.
Throughout the building at Cavalier High School were numerous displays that promoted college attendance for the students. There were pennants for colleges throughout Virginia displayed in the main office, the guidance offices, the office of the college liaison, Ms. Davis, and the office of the college advisor, Mrs. Black. As previously mentioned, teachers displayed information about their alma maters in the hallways outside of their classrooms. Also, in the hallways, there were displays in various parts of the high school that provided students with information about upcoming events at the high school relating to college attendance. These events included a FAFSA night each December, three college fairs held throughout the school year, financial aid and scholarship information sessions each semester, one opportunity to visit college campuses each semester, recognition of students who had been admitted to colleges, and at the end of the year, a College Decision Day. College Decision Day is held in May as a method of celebrating and rewarding all students who had decided to attend any type of college, whether that college was a two-year institution or a four-year institution. At that celebration, the school provided hot dogs, hamburgers, and pizza, as well as a free t-shirt for all students who attended. The organizers of Decision Day held games for all students with college-related prizes given to the winners and provided door prizes related to attending college for students whose names were drawn in a lottery.

There were also clear processes in place to guide students through the college application and decision process. In addition to the events and workshops described above, the student participants at Cavalier High School indicated that Ms. Davis and Mrs. Black conducted classroom information and discussion sessions throughout their high
school careers. In addition, Ms. Davis and Mrs. Black held meetings with students regularly to discuss their individual plans and sent email reminders to them about upcoming meetings, events, and deadlines.

The meetings and events at Cavalier High School, along with the celebrations of students, and the processes in place to support students through their college-going processes, are evidence of a strong college-going culture. The high rates of enrollment in college by the students at Cavalier High School, especially when compared to college enrollment rates of similar, local high schools, strengthen this argument.

**Barriers Faced**

The students at Cavalier High School face a variety of barriers in their college choice decision processes. Their access to colleges or information on colleges is limited in variety of ways, whether those limits are imposed by themselves, their families, their communities, or their high school. These students were successful in overcoming those limitations as evidenced by the fact that each of them had successfully applied to and had been admitted to college following their graduation from Cavalier High School, but the options that they considered were few and almost exclusively bounded by the borders of Virginia. No student participant at Cavalier High School applied to any college outside of Virginia for admission, and only a few student participants expressed any interest in schools outside of Virginia. While there is evidence of a college-going culture at Cavalier High School, there is no evidence that Cavalier High School or its faculty members
offered any information on colleges outside of Virginia to the students who participated in this study, including highly selective colleges to which students were possibly candidates for admission had they submitted applications.

**Financial Limitations and Scholarships**

Although student participants did not provide information on the socioeconomic status of their families, it has been established previously in this chapter that Hokie County is an economically depressed area of Virginia (Poverty USA, 2017) and as such, faces more financial limitations than other areas within the state of Virginia. Even though students identify distance from home and being close to their families and the community as the most important factors in making their college choice decisions, all three faculty participants in this study, in interviews, identified lack of money as the biggest factor that influences students and their families in attending college. If students from Cavalier High School attend college, the faculty participants perceive that lack of money serves as a barrier for students and their families to choosing a college outside of Virginia. Four of the student participants also identified the need for financial resources and scholarships as a major consideration in the identification of colleges that they would apply to and ultimately attend after leaving Cavalier High School. As mentioned earlier, according to the 2016 College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania (2018), in-state, public colleges
generally remain the most affordable option for Virginia residents across all income levels.

The students who participated in this study are very aware of the financial situation of Hokie County and the need for financial assistance for college attendance. Several student participants cited a need for more scholarship money as a resource that they wished they had at Cavalier High School. However, it is also evident from the data that students are unaware of the scholarship opportunities available to them, wait too long to apply, or simply choose not to apply for all the scholarships that are available to them. Mrs. Black, in her interview, talked about local scholarship funds that she is aware of that many students do not apply for and then receive little or no financial aid towards college, even though Cavalier High School faculty attempt to provide information to students about the availability of financial aid.

**Perceived Distance and Cost**

Perceived distance from home was a barrier to student participants and their parents as the student participants worked through the college choice process. Mr. Bryant, the college advisor who had previously served as a guidance counselor at Cavalier High School but now works for the state of Virginia and advises students at all three high schools in Hokie County during their college choice decision processes, spoke at length about the issue of perceived distance as a barrier to students and their families during his interview:
Or there's this issue of perceived distance. So, a number of years ago I had a girl, I think she might have been valedictorian at Phillips County High School, her parents wanted her to go to the community college, and she wanted to go to Virginia Tech. I think she'd gotten into Virginia Tech. And her parents wanted her to go to the community college because Virginia Tech was too far away. Well actually when I did the Google Maps, Tech, because she lived in Patrick County, it was quicker to get to Virginia Tech than to the community college! Right? It was perceived distance, okay? (Mark Bryant, personal interview, May 18, 2017)

His perception of student and family member’s perceived distance being a barrier to students at Cavalier High School was supported by the data collected during the student participant interviews. Victoria, Linda Sue, and Johnny mentioned being interested in colleges that were several hours driving distance from their homes in Hokie County. However, when they discussed those colleges with their parents, their perception was that their parents were not in favor of applying to those colleges because they were too far away, even though the student participants said that their parents did not really know how far away from home those colleges were located. The parents only knew that they were not familiar with those colleges, so they concluded that they were too far away to be considered. In addition to parents, the student participants at Cavalier High School often did not know the actual distance from home that colleges were located. During the focus group session, students made repeated references to colleges that they considered to be too far away to be considered for their final choice of college yet were often unable to say how far away those colleges were, especially when discussing schools outside of Virginia. The exception to this was colleges located in Greensboro, North Carolina, which is the closest large city to Cavalier High School. The student participants’ lack of knowledge included colleges in Burlington, North Carolina and Winston-Salem, North
Carolina, which were both located one hour driving distance from Cavalier High School. All colleges outside of Virginia or Greensboro, North Carolina were dismissed as too far away.

In addition to misperceptions related to distance, one student also disclosed misperceptions relating to cost of attendance at out-of-state and private schools, confusing tuition charges, and believing that out-of-state tuition was higher for all out-of-state schools. When asked what colleges she had considered applying to for admission and why she ultimately chose not to apply to them, Claire answered,

Yes, often out-of-state. Like Wake Forest, I had thought of applying for. But their application was very complicated, I know that sounds bad. But it was very complicated, plus the out-of-state tuition is so much more than if you go somewhere in-state. Plus, I did find out that Averett was more fitting for me, so it worked out in the long run. (Claire, personal interview, May 15, 2017)

Through this statement, Claire displayed her own misconceptions about public and private college tuition, believing that even private schools such as Wake Forest charge higher tuition rates for out-of-state students. She stated this even though she had decided to enroll at Averett University, a private college located less than an hour from her home.

High School Rigor

During the focus group session held with the student participants, the students talked at some length of how they were worried that high school had been too easy for them and that they were not prepared for college. When asked why they believed this,
students responded with a variety of answers: lack of competitive pay to attract quality teachers, teachers who were too lenient on them as students by not challenging them or regularly extending deadlines for assignments, teachers who were more concerned with preparing students for end-of-year state tests rather than expanding subjects or allowing students to study topics more in depth, teaching to the middle rather than trying to raise students’ expectations for themselves. Although these were the reasons that students gave for their perceptions that Cavalier High School had not prepared them for college, their awareness that they may not be prepared was founded in two realizations that had been discussed by the student participants prior to their involvement in this study.

The first realization on the part of the student participants came with the first enrollments in dual-credit courses through the local community college and the New College Institute, an educational entity funded by the state of Virginia that provides bachelor’s and master’s degree programs through partnerships with two-year and four-year colleges (New College Institute, 2018). High school students can take college courses while in high school through the New College Institute. Johnny and Michael mentioned that they had to complete more work and harder work for the classes that they took through the New College Institute than the work that they were required to complete for their high school classes at Cavalier High School. Student participants agreed, in the focus group session, that there were only two teachers in the entire four years of attendance at Cavalier High School that came close to requiring as much of them as was required for their classes at New College Institute.
In addition to experiencing the rigor of college classes and comparing them to the rigor of their high school classes, students were also very aware that their college admissions test scores, and the test scores of all students from Southwest Virginia, were consistently below the Virginia state-wide and national averages. Mr. Bryant, though he did not blame the high schools for low college admissions test scores, cited those scores as one of the main reasons that he did not suggest out-of-state and highly selective colleges to students from Cavalier High School. The test scores of the participants in this study are evidence of this concept, as the participants in this study are among the highest achieving students at Cavalier High School, with the highest grade point averages among the students at the school. However, their college admissions test scores are well below the scores of the middle 50% of students accepted to the highly selective colleges referred to in Appendix D of this research report.
CHAPTER 6: NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina has 115 public school systems in 100 counties (North Carolina Public Schools, 2017a). Each county within North Carolina has one public school system that serves the entire county, but in addition, 15 towns and cities in various parts of North Carolina have separate school systems that define their attendance zones by the city limits of the towns in which they exist. These city school systems are holdovers from the period of Reconstruction immediately after the Civil War, during which the North Carolina legislature passed laws mandating public schools, but without funding from the state. Cities and towns across North Carolina levied taxes to create public schools, creating town and city school systems. However, rural areas of the state were often left without public schools other than one-room schoolhouses that faced many problems. One-room schoolhouses were often poorly equipped for instruction, were led by unprepared teachers, and served students who attended irregularly at best (Zimmerman, 2014). This began to change at the start of the twentieth century, as the legislature provided funding for counties and simultaneously consolidated many existing systems (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1993). Pack County, located in Northwest North Carolina, has two small city school systems within its borders in addition to the large, county school system that serves most of the residents in Pack County.
Pack County is a rural county in North Carolina that shares a border with the state of Virginia. The students from Pack County who participated in this study live an average of six miles from the border with Virginia, with one participant stating that they live less than one mile from the border. Thus, the student participants travel regularly between states as part of their daily lives. Pack County lies on the edge of the Appalachian Mountains, and its land is rolling farmland. The primary businesses in Pack County are agricultural businesses dedicated to both the production of crops and the raising of cattle and poultry. The primary crops grown in Pack County are tobacco and corn (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012).

As previously mentioned, Pack County has two small city school systems within its county in addition to the county school system. One city school system serves 1,169 students in grades P-K through twelve and the other city school system serves 1,572 students in grades P-K through twelve. Both city school systems have passed supplemental city taxes to provide greater funds for their school systems. However, the county school system regularly outperforms both city school systems in Pack County on North Carolina accountability measures. In addition to the three public school systems in Pack County, there are two charter schools, public schools that operate independently from any school system. The two charter schools in Pack County combined serve 937 students in grades K through twelve (North Carolina Public Schools, 2017).
As of 2016, Pack County had a population of 72,113 living in 536 square miles (population density of 134 people per square mile). Since the 2010 census, the population of Pack County has declined by 2.2%. Pack County’s population has the least diversity of any of the counties that served as sites for this study. Of the residents of Pack County, 93.4% are white, 10.6% are Latino, 4.1% are African-American, 0.7% are Asian, and 0.6% are American Indian. The US Census Bureau states that Latinos may be members of any race and are therefore counted both separately and as members of specific races, which leads to a total percentage greater than 100 (US Census Bureau, 2017).

As is the case with the counties in South Carolina and Virginia that served as sites for this study, the residents of Pack County are relatively poor and uneducated when compared to the total populations of North Carolina and the United States. Referring to table 14, the median income of households in Pack County is $37,345, compared to a median income of all households in North Carolina of $50,797. The percentage of people living in poverty in Pack County is 17%, compared to 15.4% of all North Carolina residents. The percentage of residents under the age of 65 without health insurance in Pack County is 15.9%, compared with the North Carolina state-wide rate of 10.4% of residents in the same age group (Galewitz, 2017). The poverty-level gap between residents of Pack County and all residents in North Carolina is smaller than the gaps between the residents of the counties in South Carolina and Virginia and the overall populations of those states, but the poverty rate in Pack County is still greater than that of the state of North Carolina.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>North Carolina</th>
<th>Pack County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>10,146,788</td>
<td>71,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$50,797</td>
<td>$37,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Living in Poverty</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Residents Under Age 65 Without Health Insurance</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Poverty Statistics for Pack County, North Carolina

Referencing table 15 below, of the residents of Pack County aged 25 or older, 15.3% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 29% of the residents of North Carolina aged 25 or older and 33.4% of the population of the United States in the same age group. Additionally, 77.6% of the population of Pack County aged 25 or older hold a high school diploma or the equivalent, compared to 86.3% of all North Carolina residents aged 25 or older and 88% of the population of the United States aged 25 or older (US Census Bureau, 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>North Carolina</th>
<th>Pack County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of adults 25 and older who hold a high school diploma or GED</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of adults 25 and older who hold a bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15: Educational Attainment Levels for Citizens of Pack County, North Carolina

These education levels of family members of the student participants at Red Wolf High School are slightly higher than the education levels of the citizens of Pack County, North Carolina. Referencing table 16 below, three student participants have parents who have earned bachelor’s degrees. For two of those students, John and Oscar, both parents hold bachelor’s degrees. Across all the student participants at Red Wolf High School,
five of the 18 parents hold bachelor’s degrees, or 27.8%, compared to 15.3% of all adults ages 25 and older in Pack County. Additionally, Lilian’s mother and Aaron’s mother have earned associate’s degrees, and Karen has a brother who is working towards completion of an associate’s degree at Pack Community College. Of the student participants at Red Wolf High School, six of the nine will be first-generation four-year college students upon their enrollment at a four-year college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lillian</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Attended community college; no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Culinary School</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Attending community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demetrius</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanara</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Educational Attainment Levels of Family Members of Student Participants, Red Wolf High School, North Carolina

**Red Wolf High School**

Red Wolf High School is in the small town of Riversson, the county seat of Pack County. Riversson sits beside an interstate highway six miles from the border with Virginia. This interstate is a main route of travel for people moving north and south along the east coast of the United States as well as those traveling to and from the mid-western
region of the United States. Riversson occupies 1.75 square miles and has a population of 1,590 (US Census Bureau, 2017). Riversson contains several businesses related to the raising, selling, and processing of poultry, as well as businesses associated with a major interstate, such as restaurants and convenience stores. Riversson contains one grocery store, as the other grocery store in Riversson closed two years prior to the implementation of this study due to lack of business.

Red Wolf High School is the largest of three high schools in the Pack County School System and draws its student population from the western half of Pack County. Red Wolf High School serves 801 students in grades nine through twelve, of whom 71% are white, 17% are Latino, and 12% are African-American (Public School Review, 2017a). From the Red Wolf High School graduating class of 2016, 71.9% of the students attended a two-year or four-year college. Four of those students attended college outside of North Carolina. From the 2017 graduating class, 54.1% of the students indicated that they planned to attend a two-year or four-year college after graduation. Six of those students indicated that they planned to attend a college outside of North Carolina. Two of those students who indicated that they planned to attend college outside of North Carolina participated in this study.

Red Wolf High School has a chapter of the National Honor Society, which requires student members to maintain a minimum GPA of 3.0, as well as requiring members to provide service and leadership to their school and community (National Honor Society, 2017). These qualifications identify the members of the National Honor Society at Red Wolf High School as high academically achieving students as well as
leaders in their school who participate in service activities and organizations, qualities that are looked for by highly selective colleges in the United States (Taylor, 2017). Of the 48 members of the National Honor Society at Red Wolf High School who attended the initial explanatory and recruitment meeting to explain the study and its purposes, nine volunteered to participate in this study. Seven of the nine participants in the study from Red Wolf High School planned to attend college within the state of North Carolina, while two students planned to attend college in neighboring states. All were aware of a few other students in their graduating class who had plans to attend college out-of-state for a variety of reasons. Five of the student participants were female and four were male. The participants in the study from Red Wolf High School were representative of the demographics of the total school population, as seven were white and two were Latino.

Referencing table 17 below, all nine participants reported their grade point averages. They ranged from 4.04 to 4.975 on a weighted scale, in which AP and college-level courses counted for six points, honors classes counted for five points, and all other classes counted for four points. Four of the students reported taking the SAT for college admission and would share their scores with me. Those scores ranged from 1210 to 1440 on a scale of 0-1600. All nine of the students who participated in the study reported taking the ACT for college admissions purposes and shared their scores with me. Those scores ranged from 20-31 on a scale of 0-36. Eight of the nine participants had been accepted to and planned to attend a four-year college, while one student planned to attend the two-year community college located in Riversson, Pack Community College.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name (Student-Chosen Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>GPA (Self-Reported)</th>
<th>ACT (Self-Reported)</th>
<th>SAT (Self-Reported)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lillian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.512</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demetrius</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.975</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Did not take</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17: *Demographic Information of Student Participants at Red Wolf High School, North Carolina*

### Student Participants’ Perceptions of Themselves as Students

Each of the students at Red Wolf High School described themselves as a good student, except for Jamie. Jamie stated that she initially struggled in school after arriving in the United States and entering first grade without being able to speak English. Those initial struggles impacted her view of herself as a good student throughout her high school career, even though she made very good grades at Red Wolf High School, graduating with a 4.4 grade point average on a weighted scale. Like each of the other eight student participants in this study at Red Wolf High School, however, she attributed her high school success to hard work, planning well to complete all assignments for all classes, paying attention in class, and asking questions when she felt that she didn’t understand the subject matter. All nine of the student participants also mentioned that they were involved in other activities at Red Wolf High School and felt those activities were an important part of being considered a good student. John stressed the importance of this involvement in extracurricular activities:
I'm a big planner. I always have a plan. I knew that I needed to get good grades, work as hard as I could in order to get into the college I wanted in order to fly, because it’s highly competitive. So, from freshman year, sophomore, junior, and then this year I’ve always worked hard. I’ve always been in honor classes or AP classes. I always made sure I had a full course load. I also wanted to make sure that I was active. I did indoor/outdoor track sophomore year, and then I swam last year junior year. But all of those years I did Raiders, which is our physical fitness competition team for ROTC.

So, I’ve always maintained. And then when I wasn’t doing schoolwork, I maintained something else to do like this research project or maintaining those public access points for the Mitchell River near my house. We maintain that, help keep that up. Or this year getting into all of the honor societies that I possibly could, that being the five and just so when I fill out college applications they know who I am, and they know that I’m a hard worker. That worked out and that paid off. (John, personal interview, June 1, 2017)

John, like the other student participants at Red Wolf High School, was involved in numerous activities at his high school and in his community throughout his high school career. All nine student participants recognized in their interviews that membership in the National Honor Society recognized their excellence in their high school courses.

Where Are They Going?

The students that participated in this study at Red Wolf High School made 28 applications to 20 different colleges for their post-secondary careers, for an average of 3.1 applications per student. This average is somewhat deceiving, however, as two of the students, Demetrius and Aaron, made only one application to college, while four students applied to only two colleges for admission. Shanara applied to seven colleges for admission, Charlotte applied to six colleges for admission, and Oscar applied to five colleges for admission. Those three students brought the average for all nine students
higher. Referring to table 18 below, the student participants at Red Wolf High School chose to apply to a mix of public and private colleges, with 21 applications being made to public colleges and seven applications being made to private colleges.

Twenty-two of those applications were made to schools in the state of North Carolina, while six applications were made to colleges outside of North Carolina. Of those six applications made to colleges outside of North Carolina, John made two applications (the only two applications he made to colleges for admission), and Oscar made three. Oscar and John were the only two students involved in this study at any high school site who chose to attend college outside of their own states, as John chose to attend Virginia Military Institute and Oscar chose to attend the University of South Carolina. It should be noted, however, that both John and Oscar stated in their interviews that their preference would have been to attend colleges in the state of North Carolina. John wanted to attend a military college so that he could later enter the military as an officer and attend flight school. There are no available military colleges in the state of North Carolina, so his only option was to attend school out-of-state. Additionally, Oscar stated in his interview that his first choice of college was the University of North Carolina, but he was not accepted for admission there. He chose to attend the University of South Carolina after visiting the school and learning that he could receive in-state tuition for attendance. Karen was the only other student to apply to a college outside of North Carolina, applying to Virginia Tech University for admission. Virginia Tech University, located 91 miles away, is closer to Red Wolf High School than many of the colleges in North Carolina to which the student participants at Red Wolf High School applied for admission.
Additionally, students applied to a mix of types of institutions, as classified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, which is updated and maintained by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University (Indiana Center for Post-Secondary Research, 2015). The student participants made applications to nine doctoral/research institutions, seven master’s colleges, four baccalaureate colleges, and one associate’s college.

There was no clear choice of college to apply to for admission among the student participants. Three student participants chose to apply to North Carolina State University, three student participants chose to apply to the University of North Carolina, and two student participants chose to apply to Appalachian State University, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. All these colleges are public colleges that are part of the University of North Carolina System. Appalachian State University is the only one of these colleges located within two hours driving distance from Red Wolf High School.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Applied to For Admission</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Students Applying</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Type of College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Appalachian State University</td>
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<td>Davidson College</td>
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<td>Pack Community College</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Associate’s College</td>
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<td>Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
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<td>Private</td>
<td>Master’s University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Carolina at Asheville</td>
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<td>University of North Carolina at Charlotte</td>
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<td>University of North Carolina at Wilmington</td>
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<td>University of South Carolina</td>
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<td>Virginia Military Institute</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>Public</td>
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<td>Wingate University</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Masters University</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 18: Types of Colleges Applied to for Admission by Student Participants at Red Wolf High School, North Carolina
In choosing their college for attendance, Shanara and Charlotte chose the University of North Carolina, Lillian chose to attend East Carolina University, and Karen chose to attend North Carolina State University, all public colleges in the University of North Carolina System. Aaron chose to attend Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary to enter the ministry after college. Jamie chose to attend Pack Community College, an associate’s college, and to later enroll at a four-year college. As previously mentioned, John chose to enroll at Virginia Military Institute and Oscar chose to enroll at the University of South Carolina. Demetrius, as a recruited athlete, chose to attend Davidson College, a highly selective private college, where he received an athletic scholarship and a need-based grant that combined to cover his entire cost of attendance. Demetrius is the only student who participated in this study who chose to attend a highly selective college, as previously defined in chapter 1 and listed in Appendices A-D.

Most Important Factors and Most Important Influences

During their individual interviews, the student participants at Red Wolf High School gave a variety of answers when asked to identify the most important factor in their choice of college for attendance. Referring to table 19, the most common answer given as the most important factor or one of the most important factors in choosing their college was cost, given by five of the nine student participants at Red Wolf High School. In general, public, in-state schools are most cost-effective for students, according to the 2016 College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania (2018). However, two students who stated that cost was the most important factor in their choice of college chose to attend private
colleges after graduation from Red Wolf High School. Demetrius stated that cost was the most important factor in his choice to attend Davidson College, as he received scholarships and grants to cover his full cost of attendance there. He did not apply to any other colleges for admission once he was offered a place on the cross-country team at Davidson College. Aaron also stated that cost was an important factor even though he chose a private college in choosing to attend Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Aaron’s cost of attendance, however, is limited by contributions from his church and the Southern Baptist Convention, which supports Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The other three students who stated that cost was an important factor chose to attend public colleges within North Carolina. Lillian chose to attend East Carolina University, Charlotte chose to attend the University of North Carolina, and Jamie chose to stay at home and attend Pack Community College.

Two students mentioned family in their answers. John identified family values as the most important factor in his choice of Virginia Military Institute, and Shanara stated that she wanted to be close to her family as the reason that she picked the University of North Carolina. John mentioned that he would always be part of the VMI family for the rest of his life. Shanara wanted to be close to her family so that she could return home whenever she chose to do so. It is interesting to note, however, that although the University of North Carolina is only a little over two hours driving distance from her home, of the seven colleges to which Shanara applied to for admission, only North Carolina State University was farther from her home than the University of North Carolina. In addition to the two students who identified family in some way as the most important factor in picking a college, three other students mentioned distance as one of
the most important factors. Each of these students stated that they did not want to go too far from home when asked to clarify their answers.

The data further support the argument that distance from family is the most important factor in student participants’ choice of college. During their individual interviews, six of the nine student participants at Red Wolf High School identified family as the most important influence on their choice of college. Additionally, in their individual interviews as the faculty members most involved in students’ college choice decisions, Mrs. Harris and Mr. Watson both identified parents as the biggest influence on student choice. Mr. Watson said, “100%. It’s parents, every time.” (Joe Watson, individual interview, May 12, 2017).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Biggest Influence in the Choice of College</th>
<th>Most Important Factor(s) in Choosing a College</th>
<th>College Choice for Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lillian</td>
<td>Availability of physical therapy program</td>
<td>Cost and academic program</td>
<td>East Carolina University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Respect for the military</td>
<td>Family values</td>
<td>Virginia Military Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Veterinary school reputation</td>
<td>North Carolina State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Distance and cost</td>
<td>Pack Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demetrius</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Distance and cost</td>
<td>Davidson College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanara</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Close to family (distance)</td>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Not accepted at first choice</td>
<td>University of South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Calling to be a minister</td>
<td>Distance and cost</td>
<td>Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 19: Most Important Influences and Most Important Factors in the College Choice Decisions of Student Participants at Red Wolf High School, North Carolina

Access to Information on Colleges

Of the student participants at Red Wolf High School, six stated that they began thinking about college at an early age because their parents had attended some type of college and expected them to do the same upon graduation from high school. John, Shanara, and Oscar have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree, and Karen, Lillian, and Aaron have parents or other family members who have earned associate’s degrees. Three students—Jamie, Demetrius, and Charlotte—have no family members who have earned any type of degree. Demetrius stated in his interview that he did not start thinking
about college until his junior year of high school, despite being ranked second in his class and scoring a 31 on the ACT, the highest ACT score of any student who participated in this study at all three high schools. He began thinking about college at the urging of his high school track coach, who took him to camps and introduced him to college coaches. Jamie also stated that she did not begin thinking about college until high school, and ultimately chose to stay at home and attend the local community college. Like Demetrius and Jamie, Charlotte did not begin thinking about college until her junior year, when the college advisor, Mr. Watson, suggested that she should begin looking for a college to attend. Charlotte stated in her interview that she began thinking about college because Mr. Watson said that she had potential. Charlotte began researching colleges and ultimately chose to attend the University of North Carolina.

All students at Red Wolf High School had access to a variety of resources through their college liaison and college advisor, as well as the guidance department. Students stated that those faculty members provided reminders for them as various deadlines were approaching and were available to answer questions when needed. Mr. Watson and Mrs. Harris also hosted one FAFSA information session in the fall of their senior year of high school, organized two college fairs each year, and provided field trips for students to visit Wake Forest University, Appalachian State University, the University of North Carolina, and North Carolina State University. In addition, students could use two school days during their junior and senior years of high school to visit colleges without being counted absent from school.

Despite these activities and events, the students who participated in the focus group session at Red Wolf High School stated that they got most of their information
about colleges through their own efforts. The students stated that they talked to friends and former students about the colleges that those students were attending and conducted research on the internet about the colleges that they were interested in applying to for admission. Shanara stated:

I really just gathered the information for myself. I would go on their websites and kind of check it out. And really just from hearing other people around me talk about the colleges and everything. (Shanara, personal interview, June 2, 2017)

The other students in the focus group agreed with her, except for Charlotte, who stated that she got most of her information from Mr. Watson when she went to him to ask for help.

**Influence of the Community**

The student participants at Red Wolf High School each stated that they received encouragement and support from members of the community throughout their high school years and during their college choice decision processes. Each of the participants stated that members of the community asked them often what colleges they were applying to for admission or where they were going to college, with the assumption being that they were. Each student also stated in their individual interviews that members of the community asked them about their plans after college, and whether they would return to Riversson after graduating from college. None of the student participants felt that community members were pressuring them when they asked those questions, however. They perceived the questions to be out of genuine interest in the student rather than fear for the community. However, two students stated in their individual interviews that members of the community questioned their interest in colleges outside of North
Carolina. Jamie, who considered applying to Clemson University for their nursing program early in her college search, stated that a member of the community asked her why she would go so far away when she could do that here. Oscar, who chose to attend the University of South Carolina after high school, also talked about members of the community and their reactions to his choice of college in his individual interview:

Everyone seems ... I think a lot of people were shocked that I was going out-of-state and that it was South Carolina. It seemed like such a random school to go to (to them). I think a lot of people thought I was going to go to Chapel Hill or Charlotte. (Oscar, individual interview, June 1, 2018)

Jamie, who ultimately chose to attend Pack Community College, and Oscar, both stated that community members perceived Clemson and the University of South Carolina to be too far away and that colleges in North Carolina were better than colleges in South Carolina.

With a few exceptions, the student participants stated that no members of the community had any direct influence on their choice of college. Three students stated that individual community members suggested their alma maters as places to attend, but they perceived those statements to be out of pride in their schools rather than attempts to influence them in their choices. All three students stated that they perceived those comments to have been made in a joking manner.

Jamie, however, stated that she had discussed her college plans with her doctor, and that he had discussed the pros and cons of attending a four-year college versus attending Pack Community College, located in Riversson. She stated in her individual interview that her doctor was the main influence in her decision to attend Pack Community College, and then possibly transfer to a four-year college to complete a
degree in nursing. Charlotte also reported in her individual interview that her boss at the restaurant in which she works as a waitress discussed the University of North Carolina with her on many different occasions. Even though he attended the University of South Carolina, other members of his family attended the University of North Carolina, and he advised her to enroll there if she was accepted. Along with Demetrius, who was influenced by his track coach, Jamie and Charlotte are the three student participants in this study from Red Wolf High School who do not have a family member who earned a college degree.

**Influence of Red Wolf High School**

The students who participated in this study at Red Wolf High School all described Red Wolf High School as academically oriented and focused on getting students into college after they graduated. The students described teachers and a school that supported their academic efforts and helped them identify and plan for possibilities for the future. All nine students stated that their teachers expected them to attend college and were available to help them or answer questions if they were needed. Jamie said in her individual interview that several teachers and the guidance counselors had pushed her to take certain classes during her four years at Red Wolf High School so that she would be accepted to colleges. In the focus group session, the students agreed that the faculty members at Red Wolf High School were supportive of their college choices and did not attempt to influence them to go to the faculty members’ alma maters or any other individual colleges. The individual interviews with Mr. Watson and Mrs. Harris confirmed that faculty members did not advocate for specific colleges, as each stated that
they felt that it was only their job to provide information to students, not to suggest
colleges or advocate for any specific college. They each stated that they believed that it
was the student’s decision, along with their families.

Five of the students were involved in athletics or mentioned athletics in their
individual interviews. However, those students mentioned athletics only in the sense that
athletic events were gathering opportunities for members of the community to support the
high school as well as socialize with one another. None of the students mentioned that
Red Wolf High School emphasized athletics and none of the student participants
mentioned instances of athletic success except for Demetrius, who stated that he was a
four-time individual state champion in distance running and cross-country competitions.
All nine of the students stated that they were involved in extracurricular activities at Red
Wolf High School. In addition to athletics, students mentioned band, robotics, the
National Honor Society, cheerleading, and academic clubs.

**Influence of Individual Faculty Members**

Each of the student participants said that faculty members at Red Wolf High
School were involved in their college choice decision-making processes in some way.
Red Wolf High School has two school counselors who help students with transcripts,
senior mid-year reports, and other information that students need in filling out college
applications. Additionally, Mr. Watson, the college liaison, works with students who plan
to attend a four-year college after graduating from high school and Mrs. Harris, the
college advisor, works with students who plan to attend a two-year college after
graduation. She also works with students who wish to take dual enrollment courses at
Pack Community College, which is adjacent to Red Wolf High School. Dual-enrollment courses allow students to take classes at Pack Community College that count for high school credit in addition to counting towards a two-year degree at Pack Community College or towards a degree at a four-year college. Courses that count towards a four-year degree are limited to introductory courses in various academic disciplines, such as sociology, English composition, mathematics, physical sciences, etc. Mr. Watson was the faculty member most mentioned by the student participants at Red Wolf High School as being involved in their college search and decision-making processes, as three students mentioned Mr. Watson by name. In his interview, Mr. Watson stated that he works with approximately 20-25% of the students in two high schools in Pack County.

Mr. Watson provides information to students on the college application process, both in general terms such as deadlines, components, and recommendations, and in providing specific information to individual students when they ask for information about a college that they are interested in applying to for admission. During the focus group session, students agreed that Mr. Watson was very helpful when they asked him for information, but that he rarely sought them out. Their perception of Mr. Watson was that they had to be proactive in finding opportunities to talk with him. The students agreed, however, that Mr. Watson did send them email reminders of events and deadlines as they were approaching.

Two students, Lilian and Aaron, also mentioned Mrs. Harris as being very supportive when they had questions about whether to attend a two-year or four-year college. Both students stated that Mrs. Harris told them that they should not worry about cost when applying, but to apply where they really wanted to go to college. She told them
to worry about finances later, and then make their decision. Both students have chosen to attend a four-year college after graduation from Red Wolf High School. Mrs. Harris stated that in addition to working with students who are going to attend Pack Community College, she also worked with 146 students who took dual-enrollment courses during the 2016-2017 school year, an increase from 28 students four years previously.

Two students mentioned Mr. Mason, a biology teacher at Red Wolf High School, as someone who wrote recommendations to colleges and was also supportive of their college plans as the National Honor Society faculty sponsor. Other students talked about faculty members in general, without using names, as being supportive and helpful during the application process, writing recommendations for them or helping them with other components of applications.

Jamie mentioned that her healthcare teacher at Red Wolf High School was very influential in her decision to attend Pack Community College. Along with her doctor, as previously mentioned, that teacher was the inspiration for Jamie’s desire to possibly pursue a career in nursing. She stated in her individual interview:

> Ever since I started High School, she’s the one who took us on those trips to colleges and she’s a nurse herself and she’s a teacher too. She taught us how her college pathway was. She went to Pack Community College and she went to nursing school and she got really close to us, like personally. She influenced me and gave me motivation I guess. (Jamie, individual interview, June 1, 2017)

Demetrius talked about his track coach throughout his interview as the person that helped him the most during his college search. He stated that his track coach took him to several colleges, including High Point University, the University of North Carolina, and Davidson College and introduced him to the track coaches at those colleges. He also stated that his coach was friends with a coach at Davidson, and that relationship was
instrumental in Davidson offering Demetrius a partial athletic scholarship to compete on their cross-country team. Through a combination of scholarships and grants, Demetrius received the full cost of attendance at Davidson. Jamie and Demetrius are the only two student participants at Red Wolf High School who stated that a faculty member influenced their final choice of college. The other seven students mentioned faculty members as performing supporting tasks during their college search and college choice processes.

The student participants at Red Wolf High School were very aware of the fact that Mr. Watson was a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina. Charlotte stated in her interview that Mr. Watson talked about the University of North Carolina with her repeatedly and suggested that she apply for a Covenant Scholarship at the University of North Carolina, a scholarship for low-income students that allows recipients to graduate from the university debt-free.

Evidence of College-Going Culture

As mentioned in chapters 4 and 5, in their examination of high schools and their success in preparing students to attend and succeed in college, Corwin and Tierney (2007) described a college-going culture as one that is immediately evident when visitors or observers enter a high school campus. The building should have displays throughout the halls that promote and celebrate colleges as well as student and team achievements, and the school must have clear processes in place to support students through every stage of the college choice process. Corwin and Tierney (2007) further stated that schools
should be proactive in providing information and services to students and their families. All aspects of a college-going culture as described by Corwin and Tierney (2007) are in place and evident to visitors at Red Wolf High School.

The school counselor, Mr. Cuthbertson, did not participate in the interviews for this study, but was able to provide requested documents and information relating to student demographics and college attendance statistics for graduating classes at Red Wolf High School. According to information that he provided, 706 students graduated from Red Wolf High School in the graduating classes of 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017. Of those 706 students, 137, or 21.2% indicated on exit surveys that they planned to attend a four-year college after graduation from Red Wolf High School. Additionally, 333 students indicated on exit surveys that they planned to attend a two-year college after graduation from Red Wolf High School. A total of 66.6% of the graduating seniors in the classes of 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 planned to attend either a two-year or four-year college after graduation from Red Wolf High School. Students’ aspirations were slightly higher than the 62.9 % of North Carolina high school seniors who went directly to college in 2014, the latest year for which information is available for North Carolina (National Information System for Higher Ed Management and Policy Making, 2016). However, that percentage is slightly lower than the national college-going rate of high school seniors of 69.2% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017).

Within Red Wolf High School, there are three rooms dedicated to providing students access and information on colleges. Mr. Watson, Mrs. Harris, a career explorations teacher, and a teacher assistant work with students in those rooms. Each
room, as well as the hallways of Red Wolf High School are decorated with college pennants, bulletin boards highlighting a college of the week, application information and deadlines, and information on the demographics and ACT score ranges of colleges.

Mrs. Harris and Mr. Watson also hold events throughout the year for students related to the college application and college choice processes. One FAFSA night is held during the fall of each year to help students with financial aid information and the completion of financial aid forms. Two college fairs are held each school year at Pack Community College for the students of all three high schools in Pack County to meet and talk with representatives of area colleges, and two field trips each year are sponsored by Mrs. Harris and Mr. Watson to allow students to visit in-state, public colleges. The most recent trips were to Appalachian State University, and to both the University of North Carolina and North Carolina State University, as they are located less than 30 miles from each other.

The meetings and events at Red Wolf High School and the processes in place to support students through their college-going processes are evidence of a strong college-going culture. However, it should be noted that over the past four years, the number of graduates from Red Wolf High School who attend a four-year college after graduation has steadily declined, from 24% in 2014 to 18% in 2017, while the number of students who planned to attend a two-year college after graduation has increased from 39% to 49%. It is unclear what percentage of the students who plan to attend a two-year college after graduation also plan to continue their education at a four-year college after completing an associate’s degree.
Barriers Faced

The students at Red Wolf High School face a variety of barriers in the college choice decision-making processes. Their access to information on colleges is limited by themselves, their families, their communities, and their high schools, which in turn limits their ability to make informed decisions about which colleges to include or exclude during the college search process. The students who participated in this study were able to overcome those barriers to some extent, as they were able to successfully apply to colleges for admission and be accepted to at least one college for attendance after graduation from Red Wolf High School. Two students, Oscar and John, chose to attend school outside of North Carolina. Those two students were the only two student participants at any site involved in this study who chose to attend college outside of their own state of residence. Only one other student participant at Red Wolf High School, Karen, chose to apply to a college outside of North Carolina, when she chose to apply to Virginia Tech University for admission. Aaron was the only other student participant who considered a college outside of North Carolina, but he chose to apply only to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina for admission.

Financial Limitations and Scholarships

Although student participants did not provide information on the socioeconomic statuses of their families, it has been established previously in this chapter that Pack County is an economically depressed area of North Carolina (Poverty USA, 2017). As
such, the region faces more financial limitations than other areas within the state. Five student participants mentioned cost as one of the most important factors they considered when choosing a college. Additionally, in her interview, Mrs. Harris stated that financial hardships were the biggest barrier to students at Red Wolf High School attending college after graduation. Demetrius did not apply to any colleges other than Davidson College because he received scholarships and grants that covered his full cost of attendance. In discussing his decision to attend Davidson College, Demetrius said:

My parents, well they want me to go to college, but they didn’t want me to go too far away. I’m first generation graduating and everything. They don’t really know how that is and they also didn’t plan to save for college. They didn’t really know, because they never graduated or anything like that. (Demetrius, individual interview, June 2, 2017)

Jamie chose Pack Community College because of cost and the fact that she could live at home with her family, further reducing the expense of attending college. Three students stated in their interviews that they chose to apply to only North Carolina public colleges because they were cheaper to attend than out-of-state or private colleges. This is generally true according to the 2016 College Affordability Diagnosis published by the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania (2018), which states that in-state, public colleges generally remain the most affordable option for North Carolina residents across all income levels.
Perceived Distance and Cost

Four of the student participants at Red Wolf High School stated that distance was one of the most important factors in their college choice decisions. Demetrius considered Stanford University in California but chose to apply only to Davidson College in North Carolina for admission. Jamie applied to Virginia Tech University for admission but chose to live at home and attend Pack Community College in Riverston. However, when the student participants were questioned about distance, two displayed perceptions of distance that possibly were not based on actual distance. Karen, in explaining why she chose North Carolina State University over Virginia Tech University, said in her interview:

I think I was probably influenced, at first, just because I’d heard people talk about it, because it’s close to home and everything. Like, in middle school and stuff, we’d always do projects whenever we had to research colleges and everything, and it always stood out to me, because, when you search about schools around you and stuff, that’s always what comes up first. I didn’t really want to be far away from home. That’s another reason I didn’t look into out-of-state. (Karen, individual interview, June 1, 2018)

North Carolina State University, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, is 144 miles, or two hours and fifteen minutes driving distance from Red Wolf High School. Virginia Tech University, located in Blacksburg, Virginia, is 91 miles, or one-and-a-half hours driving distance from Red Wolf High School.

Additionally, Shanara, in her interview, stated that she is a homebody, and didn’t want to go too far from home. She said that her cousin, who is a cheerleader at Limestone College, located in Gaffney, South Carolina, along with the cheerleading coach, wanted her to attend Limestone and join the cheerleading team. She said that distance from home
was the reason that she did not apply to Limestone College. While the University of North Carolina is closer than Limestone College to Red Wolf High School, the difference is fifteen miles. Depending on where Shanara lives in Red Wolf High School’s attendance zone, Limestone College is possibly closer to her home than the University of North Carolina. Shanara eventually applied to six colleges for admission, all within the state of North Carolina. However, of the schools that she applied to for admission, only North Carolina State University is farther from Red Wolf High School than the University of North Carolina. It is unclear if she thought that the University of North Carolina is closer than the other schools that she applied to for admission, or if other factors were more important in her decision than being close to her family, which she stated was the most important factor.

As already stated, it is generally true that in-state public colleges are the most affordable option for students. Five of the student participants at Red Wolf High School stated that they did not look at schools outside of North Carolina because the cost of tuition to attend an out-of-state school would be too high. There are also additional costs beyond tuition associated with attending school farther away from home, as Demetrius stated in his interview when discussing his decision not to apply to Stanford University. He stated that his parents could not afford plane tickets for him to travel to and from college during the school year. However, it is not always true that colleges cost more because they are located out-of-state. Oscar is planning to attend the University of South Carolina and has been given in-state tuition for the entire time that he attends. Another student at a different high school in Pack County who graduated in the class of 2017
chose to attend Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina, and received in-state tuition. The other student participants at Red Wolf High School as well as Mr. Watson and Mrs. Harris showed no knowledge of the possibility that students at Red Wolf High School could receive in-state tuition at out-of-state schools. Both stated that in-state public schools were cheaper for their students. While those tuition rate scholarships are sometimes competitive, in many cases they are open to all out-of-state students.

**High School Rigor**

During the focus group session at Red Wolf High School, the student participants were asked if high school was easy for them. Each of them said that it had been. During the discussion, the students identified three classes that were difficult for them during their four years at Red Wolf High School. The student participants also discussed the fact that their teachers were lenient and allowed them to turn in assignments late and receive full credit for the assignment or allowed them to complete assignments more than once to improve their grades on an assignment. The student participants were then asked if they thought that it would be that way in college. Each of the students responded no, and they felt that Red Wolf High School had not prepared them for college academics or college life in general. The student participants stated that they had been told by their friends who were already in college that it was going to be very hard. Potential problems in adjusting to college mentioned by the student participants in the focus group were tough classes, deadlines, getting up on time and on their own, studying more, and studying on their own. Jamie and Charlotte both said that friends of theirs had told them that they would
spend a lot of time crying as they adjusted to college. Demetrius stated that he needed to start training himself to get up early so that he would not be late for classes and early morning cross-country practices. While these fears may not become reality, the students recognized that they may not be ready for college and felt that Red Wolf High School had not adequately prepared them, both for the academic rigor of college and for college life in general.
CHAPTER 7
ANALYSIS, FINDINGS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview of Cross-Case Analysis

The goal of this study was to determine the influences on the college choice decisions of high academically achieving rural high school seniors, as they had already completed the process of choosing a college for their post-secondary careers. The primary research questions guiding this study were:

1. What colleges do academically high-achieving students in rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia choose for their post-secondary studies?
2. How do students’ perceptions of local environment and culture affect high academically achieving high school students’ college decision-making processes?
3. How do students’ perceptions of the influences of their high schools affect the college-choice decision-making processes of academically high-achieving students in rural Southern school systems?

Rural students attend four-year colleges at lower rates than students from urban and suburban school system (Provasnik et al., 2007). Additionally, rural students are more likely than students from urban and suburban areas to attend public versus private colleges and make up a smaller percentage of the student population at highly selective and prestigious colleges than the student populations of less prestigious colleges (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Rural students also face many barriers in their efforts towards higher education attainment, such as financial limitations, lack of resources, lack
of access to information on four-year colleges that interest them, lack of examples within their families and communities of individuals who have successfully completed a four-year bachelor’s degree or higher, and family and community norms that pressure students to stay close to home, regardless of their educational or career choices. Each of the school sites chosen for this study was in or near small communities with populations that were poorer and less educated than other areas of their states and the United States as a whole.

To answer the research questions, high academically achieving rural high school seniors were identified in three different states: South Carolina, Virginia, and North Carolina. Each of the sites was chosen not only for its rural location, but also because each school system was in a county that shared a border with another state, thus allowing each of the participants in this study regular opportunities to travel between states. High academically achieving students were chosen because such students would potentially be more attractive to a wide range of colleges, including highly selective colleges, and would thus potentially have more opportunities available to them for their post-secondary careers.

The three high school sites provided rich case studies in which to examine students’ perceptions of their families, their communities, and their high schools. Studying these sites also offered an opportunity to determine the influence of each of these contexts on the college choice decisions of high academically achieving rural students who also regularly visited other states and interacted with residents of other states. After providing background and analyzing each of the individual cases in the preceding three chapters, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify and discuss the similarities and differences among the individual cases, and to identify major themes that
were present across all three cases. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the cross-case analysis and to present the major themes that were identified during the study.

In examining the data from this study, it became clear that influences on the college choice decision of any individual student do not exist independently of one another. The influences on the college choice decisions of the students who participated in this study were both internal, residing within the personal thoughts, fears, and characteristics of the student making the decision, and external, originating outside of them, just as Chapman’s (1981) model of the college choice decision-making process describes. Additionally, the external factors that influenced the decisions of each student overlapped and were intertwined with the internal influences that each student experienced throughout their college search and college decision process. Thus, Perna’s model of college choice (2006) proved to be essential in identifying influences and modeling how those influences worked together to produce the final decision that student participants made for college attendance.

Perna’s model (2006) identifies and defines four levels of influence at work in students’ college choice decision processes: 1) habitus, or the area of influence in the closest relationship with the student, 2) school and community context, 3) higher education context, and 4) social, economic, and policy context. Within Perna’s model (2006), each layer is placed within other layers, and connections are drawn between and among each of the other layers, clearly depicting the interdependence of each layer of a student’s college choice decision. Layers 1 and 2, habitus and school and community context, were the areas of focus for this study, but the results could serve to inform layers 3 and 4, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context. Habitux
includes internal influences, such as gender, race, individual identity, and family characteristics, as well as external influences, such as cultural capital, social capital, and family influence. The school and community contexts include the influences of family members, community members, the high school faculty members, and other adults who work with and advise students during their college choice decision-making processes. Perna’s model of college choice (2006), combined with Chapman’s model (1981) of the college choice decision-making processes of students, proved to be a useful explanatory conceptual framework for this study.

Additionally, as both external and internal influences acted independently and in concert with one another, Chapman’s model of college choice (1981) was useful in the initial identification and classification of influences on students’ college choice decisions and the processes that each student experienced in arriving at their final choice. The notion that family can be listed as both internal and external illustrates both the complexity and the simplicity of the conceptual framework that guided this study. This conceptual framework proved to be useful in the analysis of the data collected across all three study sites.

**Where Are They Going?**

The first research question that guided this study was to determine what colleges rural students were planning to attend after graduation from high school. High academically achieving students were chosen as participants for the study because those students potentially had the most options available to them for their post-secondary careers. Of the student participants in this study, 22 of the 24, or 91.7%, chose to stay
within their state of residence for college. As shown in table 20, this percentage is comparable to the overall percentage of 93.1% of the total student population of all three high schools that served as sites for this study who planned to attend college after graduation from high school. It is, however, larger than the state percentages of students who live in South Carolina (84%), Virginia (74%), and North Carolina (83%), who stay in-state for college after graduating from high school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Graduates Who Planned to Attend Any Level College</th>
<th>Graduates Who Planned to Attend College In-State</th>
<th>Graduates Who Planned to Attend College Out-of-State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cavalier High School</td>
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<td>162</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Wolf High School</td>
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<td>89</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
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<td><strong>297</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>93.1%</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.9%</strong></td>
</tr>
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Table 20: Numbers of All Students from the Graduating Class of 2017 Who Plan to Attend College After Graduation from Participating High Schools in South Carolina, Virginia, and North Carolina

Among the student participants in this study, four students, or 16.6%, applied to a total of nine colleges outside of their state of residence. At Carolina High School in South Carolina, Ashley applied to North Carolina A&T University and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke in North Carolina for admission, and Fred applied to North Carolina State University. From Red Wolf High School, John applied to Virginia Military Institute and Norwich University, in Vermont, while Oscar applied to the University of South Carolina and Clemson University, in South Carolina, as well as James Madison
University in Virginia. None of the student participants at Cavalier High School chose to apply to a college outside of Virginia for admission.

John and Oscar, both attending Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, chose to attend college out-of-state. John chose to attend Virginia Military Institute and Oscar chose to attend the University of South Carolina. However, it should be noted that both students, in their interviews, stated that they would have preferred to attend college in North Carolina. John wished to attend a military college so that he could then begin a career in the military as a pilot, and there are no military colleges located in North Carolina. Oscar wished to attend the University of North Carolina but was denied admission. He then visited the University of South Carolina and was offered in-state tuition that would allow him to attend for the same rate he would pay at the other in-state school to which he applied, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Two student participants from this study, Jamie, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, and Madison, from Cavalier High School in Virginia, chose to attend a two-year community college near their homes. Both Jamie and Madison plan to enter academic programs in the medical field, with Jamie hoping to become a nurse and Madison planning to become an x-ray technician.

Student participants at all three high schools perceived a variety of influences on their choice to attend college within their own states from family members, community members, and faculty members at their high schools. Family members made multiple references to cost of in-state versus out-of-state colleges. Included in those discussions was not only the cost of tuition of in-state colleges, which was perceived as cheaper than tuition at out-of-state colleges, but also concerns about heightened travel expenses, which
would be true in most, but not all, cases of out-of-state schools. Several students chose to
attend a local college and live at home to help reduce those expenses, stating that the cost
of traveling each day to class would be less than paying for room and board at the
college. In addition to cost, environment was mentioned by students as an issue that their
parents discussed with them frequently. Ashley, when describing the conversations that
she had with her mother about college, summed up the perceptions of the student
participants at the three high schools that served as sites for this study:

Because she wanted me to go to a place that was best for me and to be around
good people that I really like being around. She’s just helped me along the way. All I
needed help with. Picking a college that’s going to be right for me, where I
would fit in and be around people like me. (Ashley, personal interview, May 22,
2017)

The student participants also perceived that community members expected them
to stay in-state for college. Several students stated that community members told them
that they needed to stay close so that they would come back and contribute to the
community after they graduated from college. Community members also expressed a
belief that in-state schools were better than out-of-state schools. When Jamie talked of
how she mentioned to a member of the community that she might apply to Clemson
University in South Carolina and major in nursing, she said that she was asked by the
community member why she wanted to do that because she could “do that here.” Jamie
ultimately decided to attend Pack Community College and then later transfer to a four-
year college to complete a nursing degree. To do that, she will have to transfer to an in-
state, public college to ensure that all the credits that she earns at Pack Community
College will transfer to the four-year college.
The faculty members of the high schools also influenced the college choices of the students who participated in this study. My daughter, Jesse, told me repeatedly during her college choice process that any time she mentioned to a faculty member of her high school that she was applying to colleges across the eastern half of the United States, the response she invariably received was, “Make sure you apply to a college in North Carolina.” When asked in their individual interviews if they had heard similar comments from faculty members at their high schools, every student replied that they had heard the same or similar comments (irrespective of their home state). Those comments, though possibly meant to encourage students to apply to safe colleges versus reach colleges as defined by Fortenbury (2014), deliver the message to students that high school faculty members believe that they should stay in-state for college.

In addition to those comments, the high schools and high school faculty members influence students to stay in-state for college in other ways. In observations at Cavalier High School in Virginia, and Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, college displays, billboards, and other materials associated with the college application process were almost exclusively related to attending schools in-state. Each of the faculty members at those two high schools had placed their own college of attendance outside of their classroom doors, and over 90% had attended college in their home state. In addition, of the college pennants on display in the school offices and hallways, only three were of schools outside of the state in which the high school was located. Displays of college data, such as grade point ranges and admission test score ranges for accepted students, application due dates, etc. featured only colleges inside the state in which the high school
was located. No information about highly selective schools was on display, including information about Duke University and Davidson College at Red Wolf High School in North Carolina. Duke University and Davidson College are the only two highly selective colleges within a state in which this study was conducted. Both Duke and Davidson are within three hours driving distance from all three high schools that served as sites for this study. Demetrius is the only student who applied to one of these schools but did so only because of a personal connection between his high school track coach and a coach for the cross-country team at Davidson. He applied to Davidson for admission and was accepted as a recruited athlete. Carolina High School, in South Carolina, did not have any college displays in evidence during the observations conducted at that site.

In addition to the college displays within the buildings of the North Carolina and Virginia high schools, Cavalier High School in Virginia and Red Wolf High School in North Carolina both have a college liaison and a college advisor. While the liaison works with students planning to attend a four-year college after graduation, the advisor works with students interested in dual-enrollment classes at the local community college and/or who are planning to attend a two-year college after graduation from high school. The college liaison at Cavalier High School, Ms. Davis, is a graduate of the University of Virginia and is paid by the University of Virginia. The college liaison at Red Wolf High School, Mr. Watson, is a graduate of the University of North Carolina and is paid by the University of North Carolina. While there is no clear evidence in the data that either Ms. Thames or Mr. Watson were actively recruiting for their own state university systems, their college of attendance was well known among the student participants at both
Cavalier High School and Red Wolf High School. Charlotte, a student participant at Red Wolf High School stated that Mr. Watson suggested that she apply for a Covenant Scholarship to the University of North Carolina, which provides a full scholarship to recipients. She applied for the scholarship, received it, and chose to attend the University of North Carolina.

Students and Parents are Uninformed

Mr. Watson, the college liaison at Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, was placed at Red Wolf High School to guide and advise rural students through the college search and decision-making processes. In describing the purpose of his position in his interview, he said:

So, the program sets itself in high schools, that even though you may have a student here who is not socioeconomically disadvantaged or does not come from a historically discriminated group, all of these students live in a rural area and so in general rural students, regardless of income, are less likely to go to college than a student who is lower income and possibly even lower GPA, lower test scores but grows up in a more metropolitan area. And so, it’s about closing the gap between rural and urban or rural and metropolitan and that’s where we get placed. (Joe Watson, individual interview, May 12, 2017)

Mr. Watson’s statement supports the work of Provasnik et al. (2007), which claims that only 27% of rural students attend four-year colleges versus 37% of urban and suburban students. The University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia, which placed Ms. Davis at Cavalier High School, recognize the lack of resources for rural students and the need for advisors to guide them through the college choice decision-making process, and have attempted to address that need.
Less than 10% of adults aged 25 and older in East County, South Carolina, where Carolina High School is located, hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. Less than 12% of adults aged 25 and older in Hokie County, Virginia, where Cavalier High School is located, hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. Slightly more than 15% of adults aged 25 and older in Pack County, North Carolina, where Red Wolf High School is located, hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. These numbers are significantly lower than the percentage of adults aged 25 and older in their respective states (26.5%, 36.9%, and 29%) and significantly lower than the 33% of all adults aged 25 and older in the United States who hold a bachelor’s degree. The numbers show that there are few members of the families of students at the high schools that participated in this survey and equally few members of the communities in which the high schools are located that offer students examples of successful, four-year college graduates. One conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that the student participants in this survey had little access to accurate and complete information on colleges from the members of their families or communities. Most people that these students encounter during their college choice decision-making processes who have graduated from college are the faculty members of their high schools.

As has been noted in previous chapters, Corwin and Tierney (2007) describe a high school with a college-going culture as one with hallway decorations that promote colleges and college acceptances, celebrate academic successes, and have clear processes in place to support students through every stage of the college choice process. Corwin and Tierney (2007) further state that high schools should be proactive in providing information and services to students and their families. There is evidence of a college-going culture at Cavalier High School in Virginia and at Red Wolf High School in North
Carolina. Although there is not a clear college-going culture in place at Carolina High School in South Carolina, some of the necessary components are visible. However, in each of these three high schools, the college-going culture is focused almost exclusively on in-state schools, regardless of the state in which the high school is located. Each high school that served as a participating site in this study is also missing valuable opportunities to expose their students to more colleges, both inside and outside their own states.

The student participants at Carolina High School in South Carolina stated in their focus group session and in their individual interviews that the only visit to a college that they had made with their high school was to watch a former student play in a college football game. Robert, who was also the senior class president at Carolina High School approached the high school administration and asked that Carolina High School sponsor a trip for juniors and seniors to colleges in South Carolina and was told that Carolina High School didn’t do that. However, the student participants at Carolina High School also talked about other trips that they had made with their high school to perform in extracurricular events, both athletic and academic. Student participants at Cavalier High School in Virginia and Red Wolf High School in North Carolina were offered trips to visit colleges in their own states by their high schools during their junior and senior years, but like the student participants at Carolina High School in South Carolina, also described additional trips with their high schools for athletic and academic extracurricular activities. Many of the events in which they were participants for these extracurricular activities were held on or near college campuses, both within their home states and in other states.
in the eastern half of the United States. These trips for extracurricular activities provided opportunities for students to attend additional campus information sessions and participate in campus tours, but their high schools did not recognize or take advantage of these opportunities.

Every faculty member who participated in this study stated in their interviews that it was not their job to pick colleges for their students, that they felt that it was the responsibility of the students and their parents. While it is not a responsibility of high school personnel to choose the college of attendance for their students, it is a responsibility of high school faculty members to ensure that students and their parents are knowledgeable of all their options, including options for college that are located both inside and outside their home state.

The only faculty participant in this study who said in their interview that he would suggest colleges to students and their parents was Mark Bryant, who advises students at Cavalier High School along with students from the other two high schools in Hokie County. In his interview, Mr. Bryant stated that although he would suggest schools within the state of Virginia to students and their parents, he had given up suggesting that students consider schools outside of Virginia because of multiple past experiences in which parents of students had rejected the idea without discussion. He stated this despite having grown up in Hokie County, graduating from high school in Hokie County, and then attending Yale University in Connecticut after graduation from high school. He did admit in his interview, however, that not suggesting students and families consider highly selective schools in other areas of the country was a failure on his part, since he knew that
some students each year were potentially attractive candidates for highly selective colleges throughout the United States.

Another area in which students and parents are uninformed is the cost of attendance. Students stated repeatedly in their interviews that they did not consider out-of-state or private schools because they believed them to be more expensive to attend. It is generally true that in-state, public schools are more affordable to students, especially when factoring in costs associated with college attendance besides tuition, fees, room, and board (Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania, 2016). There are additional costs, such as travel to and from colleges from greater distances, as Demetrius, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, recognized when he said in his interview that he chose Davidson College in North Carolina after considering applying to Stanford University in California. He chose not to apply to Stanford University because neither he nor his parents would be able to afford plane tickets for him to travel to and from California.

However, despite in-state, public colleges being generally more affordable than out-of-state or private colleges (University of Pennsylvania, 2018), there are opportunities to attend out-of-state or private colleges that are cost effective for students and their families. There are multiple compact agreements in the United States, in which member states agree to provide in-state tuition to out-of-state students or reduced out-of-state tuition to out-of-state students. North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia are members of such a 13-state compact (Pitsker, 2016). There are also colleges around the United States, such as Western Illinois University, that provide in-state tuition to any resident of the United States, regardless of their state of legal residence. Western Illinois
University further guarantees all students that the cost of attendance, room, board, tuition, and fees during their freshman year at Western Illinois will remain unchanged throughout their four-year undergraduate career. Of the 24 student participants and six high school faculty member participants in this study, only Fred, from Carolina High School in South Carolina, and Oscar, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, were knowledgeable of this possibility, and they gained that knowledge through their own research. Oscar enrolled at the University of South Carolina under that agreement and is paying in-state tuition, even though he is a legal resident of North Carolina. To be sure, true cost of attendance, including all financial aid awards, cannot be determined unless a student chooses to apply to a college, is accepted, and receives a financial aid package from that college. However, most of the student and faculty member participants in this study are unaware of the possibilities for students to attend out-of-state and/or private colleges at affordable rates for students and their families.

Students and parents need access to all information needed to make an informed decision when choosing colleges to apply to for admission and then in making their college choice decision. Most of the student participants at all three high schools in this study do not have parents with college degrees and must therefore turn to high school faculty members for their information. It is clear from the data collected in this study that they are not receiving accurate and complete information, as almost all students stated in their interviews and focus groups that they did most or all the research on colleges during their college choice decision-making processes.
Undercurrent of Fear

Throughout the interviews with student participants at the three high schools that participated in this study, feelings of fear were expressed as students discussed their college choice processes. These fears were both internal and external influences on their decisions, as described by Chapman’s (1981) model of college choice. Students described their own reservations about leaving home and going away to college, while also describing their perceptions of fear on the part of the family and community members that they interacted with during their decision-making processes.

Student participants expressed internal fears in that they felt that they were not prepared for college life in a variety of ways. Student participants from all three high schools focused primarily on academics in this regard, but still felt that they were not prepared for college coursework. During the focus group session at Carolina High School in South Carolina, the students discussed their perceptions that many of their teachers were not the best teachers and were not prepared or qualified to teach the subjects that they were teaching. The student participants at Carolina High School also noted that they were not able to take any math classes beyond pre-calculus because of a shortage of math teachers at their high school during their senior year. The student participants at Carolina High School also said that the classes that they took during their high school careers were not very challenging.

Likewise, the student participants at Cavalier High School in Virginia, in their focus group session, agreed that they had not been required to take rigorous classes during their high school careers. They identified only three classes that challenged them
outside of the classes that were taken through the New College Institute, a governmental agency in Hokie County that provided college-level classes for high school students in the county. Additionally, the student participants at Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, in their focus groups, stated that many of the teachers at Red Wolf High School gave them too many chances to make up assignments or turn assignments in late, which they perceived would not be the case when they entered college. They also discussed their perceptions that they did not have to work hard or study for most of their classes at Red Wolf High School.

The fear that student participants expressed when describing their readiness for college academics was subconsciously expressed when describing themselves as students. Although each of the student participants stated that they realized that their membership in the National Honor Society or the National Beta Club identified them as being among the top academically achieving students in their high schools, only one of the 24 student participants, Johnny, at Cavalier High School in Virginia, described themselves as smart. Their perceptions were that being involved in the school and community in extracurricular activities, being a constant presence at their high school, and mentoring and working with underclassmen were more important qualities of a good student than intelligence.

These feelings of academic inadequacy appear to be either supported or unfounded, depending on the measure of student performance being examined. Most colleges, including highly selective colleges in the United States, rely on SAT or ACT scores of students to some degree in the application process. Mr. Bryant, who advises students from Cavalier High School in Virginia, stated in his interview that low college
admissions test scores were the biggest barrier that students faced in gaining admission to highly selective colleges. However, he did not see the high schools as solely responsible for the gap. No one in the students’ lives, he said, whether in the family, the community, or the high school, provided the type of abstract thinking and conversation that the SAT and ACT measure.

Twenty of the 24 student participants in this study took the ACT during high school and reported their scores, while only twelve of the 24 student participants took the SAT and reported their scores for this study. The ACT scores of student participants are therefore most useful for discussion. In examining the ACT scores of the high-achieving student participants from all three high schools in this study, the range of ACT scores was 20-31. Of the 55 colleges identified as highly selective for the purposes of this study, listed in Appendices A-D, eleven have student populations whose average ACT score is 31 or lower. Only Demetrius, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, who scored 31 on the ACT, applied to and was accepted by one of the highly selective colleges listed in Appendices A-D.

Although colleges compare ACT scores of the students who apply for admission, Marcus and Krupnick (2017) report that rural students perform better on the National Assessment for Educational Progress in both twelfth-grade math and reading compared to urban and town students, and only slightly lower than suburban students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). The math and reading twelfth-grade results are consistent with NAEP test results in reading and mathematics at the fourth and eighth-grade levels, as rural students score higher on those tests than urban and town students and lower than suburban students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016).
According to national standards for twelfth graders, rural high school seniors are just as prepared academically as students from other areas, even though only 27% of rural students attend a four-year college compared to 37% of urban and suburban students and even though rural students are underrepresented in the student populations of highly selective colleges in the United States. Comparing the data on NAEP achievement to the data on ACT scores suggests that colleges value different measures of achievement and ability than those that public-school accountability assessments value.

Regardless of the data studied, student participants perceive that they are not prepared academically, and those perceptions serve as a barrier to highly selective colleges, as rural students tend to eliminate them from their lists during the initial stages of the college search processes. Oscar, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, summed up the feelings of the student participants when he stated in his interview that he had been interested in Harvard University, but did not follow through with his interest by applying there:

I don’t know. I wanted to be like Indiana Jones. I wanted to be an archeologist and I wanted to be a history professor at Harvard, and I was like might as well go to Harvard. Then I got up into middle school and started realizing Harvard is Harvard and I’m like that is very far-fetched. My choices became more realistic. More obtainable for being from around here. (Oscar, personal interview, June 1, 2017)

These feelings were not solely limited to feelings of academic preparation, as student participants at all three high schools, in their focus group sessions, stated that they were not ready to live on their own and be responsible for such things as getting up in the morning, getting to class on time, completing assignments for classes on time, and being successful in all areas of life as a college student. These internal fears were reinforced
and often compounded by their perceptions of fear on the parts of family and community members with whom they interacted during their college choice decision-making processes. Their perceptions of those fears caused guilt on the part of the student participants when they considered colleges farther away from home.

Family members expressed a variety of fears, but most focused on the safety of the student. Josh, from Cavalier High School in Virginia, said in his interview that his parents didn’t want him too far away because his sister went to college four hours from home and they were always worried that something would happen to her and they wouldn’t be able to get to her quickly. Other students in all three high school sites for this study said in their interviews that their parents had made similar statements. Two students, Fred, from Carolina High School in South Carolina, and Lillian, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, stated in their interviews that their parents had gone so far as to tell them that they would move with them when they left for college, even if it meant relocating and finding a new job after the move. Fred said in his interview that his mother still planned to move to Newberry to be near him while he attended college. Lillian’s mother ultimately allowed her to enroll at East Carolina University, four hours driving distance from her home, and did not choose to move with her.

An additional fear that parents and other family members expressed was the fear that the student would leave and never come back to the community. From Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, Lillian said in her interview that this was another reason that her mother had a “huge” problem with distance from home for her college choice. Shanara reported in her interview that her grandparents asked her constantly if she was planning to attend college close to home and told her that she could get a job “around
here.” Student participants at all three high schools that participated in this study reported similar statements from their parents or other family members. Mark Bryant, who works with students from Carolina High School said in his interview that one mother that he worked with went so far as to say that she would not allow her son to go very far to college:

I had another student a couple years ago who got into Carolina, UVA, University of Richmond, and William and Mary. So, this is a very strong student. He wanted to go to Carolina and his mom said, “Well no, that's too far away.” Well it was actually the closest of the schools he applied to. It was only an hour and a half from his house, but she perceived it as ... I don't know where she thought it was, but she perceived it as some very long distance from home, you know? So, some of it is perceived distance. (Mark Bryant, personal interview, May 18, 2017)

Amanda Black, the college advisor at Cavalier High School who works with students who are planning to attend Hokie Community College or another two-year college, stated in her interview that she had heard many parents say that they wanted their children to start at Hokie Community College. They were worried that if their child went far away from home for college that they would never come back, and they didn’t know if they could handle that.

Community members expressed this same fear that students would leave and not come back to the community. Instead of worrying about keeping the family intact, however, community members were worried about the health and survival of the community. This was especially prevalent in student participants’ interviews at Carolina High School in Sandlapper, South Carolina, a town of less than 800 people, and the most economically depressed area of East County where it is located. However, student participants at all three high schools that participated in this study expressed their
perceptions that community members were worried that they would not return to the community after graduating from college.

Each of the fears discussed on the part of students, family members, and community members could be a result of the isolation of rural communities. In discussing my research with Steven Cox, a school counselor at Red Wolf High School who was not interviewed for this study, Mr. Cox stated:

I think there is a reluctance on the part of the students here to go too far. And I think it is important to distinguish between being reluctant and not being able. They are just as able as any other student. Our students may go weeks without ever encountering a stranger. I think if you are constantly coming in contact with people you know all the time, it’s safer, so I think that asking our students to step out of that safety net may be more difficult than for students who come from an urban area. The venturing out may be more of a scary thing for them. They can do it, they just don’t realize that they can. (Steven Cox, personal communication, May 18, 2017)

Shanara, from Red Wolf High School, confirmed this statement. She said in her interview, “Because everybody likes to stay in your comfort zone. People around here don’t, in general, I don’t want to be like that, but in general, people don’t just travel.” (Shanara, personal interview, June 2, 2018). This isolation, and the fears that result from it, are additional barriers for students who may be interested in attending a college farther away from home.

**Perceptions of Distance versus Comfort Level**

Hillman (2016) argues that geography plays a major role in students’ college choice decisions, as most students choose to attend a college near their homes. He does not argue, however, that students choose to attend the closest college available to them.
This notion of close but not necessarily the closest option for college enrollment proved to be true in this study as 22 of the 24 student participants chose to attend a college within their own states. The two who chose to attend a college out-of-state, Oscar and John, still chose colleges within three hours driving distance from their homes, closer than many of the students who chose to attend colleges within their home states.

Distance from home was a theme that recurred repeatedly throughout this study. Student participants at all three high schools, in their individual interviews and in the focus group sessions, mentioned repeatedly that distance from home was a major factor in their choice of college. Thirteen of the 24 student participants identified distance from home as the most important or one of the most important factors considered when deciding on their college of attendance. In addition, “family” or “family members” was stated by 20 of the 24 student participants as the most important influence in their choice of college for attendance. Student participants spoke repeatedly of how they wanted to be close to their families during their college careers. It became clear during the analysis of the data that distance was important to them in that sense, that they needed proximity as a safety net if things were not going well for them at college.

However, in examining the data, it also became clear that individual students’ perceptions of what determined a college to be too far from home for consideration varied greatly. In many students’ minds, the state line created an invisible border beyond which they would not consider a college, even though each of the three high schools that participated in this study was less than ten miles from a border with a neighboring state. In fact, an out-of-state college was the closest college to both Carolina High School in South Carolina and Cavalier High School in Virginia. Only Red Wolf High School, in
North Carolina, had an in-state college as the closest college, as both Wake Forest University and Winston-Salem State University are located less than 40 miles from the school. However, no students from Red Wolf High School considered either of those colleges for attendance, despite five of the student participants stating in their interviews that distance was the most important or one of the most important factors in their choice of college.

Further evidence that perceptions of distance differed from student to student can be seen in the statements that student participants at each high school made in their interviews. Both Johnny and Linda Sue from Cavalier High School stated in their interviews that four hours was too far to go for college. Zach, however, chose to attend the College of William and Mary, saying that the four-hour drive to college was perfect. He said that he thought that it would be a very relaxing trip each time that he came home from college. Linda Sue said in her interview that she chose Virginia Commonwealth over Old Dominion University because Virginia Commonwealth University was only three hours away, which was fine with her. Johnny chose to attend Virginia Tech University, an hour-and-a-half driving distance from Cavalier High School.

The student participants at Carolina High School in South Carolina also displayed varied perceptions and misperceptions of distance. Robert stated in his interview that Clemson was a good school, but he had never been there, and it was too far away, while Josh chose Clemson University for his college of attendance because he had been there many times with his family and felt comfortable there. Ashley spoke of her interest in the University of North Carolina at Pembroke because she had heard from friends that it was a good college, but chose to attend Francis Marion University in Florence, South
Carolina, because she wanted to be close to her family. Francis Marion University is 34 miles from Carolina High School while the University of North Carolina at Pembroke is slightly closer to Carolina High School, located 31 miles away. Ashley also displayed a misperception of distance in her interview, saying that she was interested in the University of South Carolina, but did not apply for admission because it was too far away. She then admitted that she did not actually know how far away it was from her home. She said that she did not feel comfortable applying to the University of South Carolina, since she had never been to Columbia, the city where the university is located.

Varied perceptions and misperceptions of distance were also in evidence at Red Wolf High School in North Carolina. Karen applied to only two colleges for admission, Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia, and North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was accepted for admission by both colleges and said in her interview that she chose to attend North Carolina State University because she had heard a lot of people talk about it, knew other students from Red Wolf High School who were enrolled there, and because it was close to home. Virginia Tech University is 93 miles from Red Wolf High School while North Carolina State University is 144 miles away from Red Wolf High School, an additional hour of driving distance. In her interview, Charlotte talked of how she is a homebody and wanted to stay close to home for college. She also said in her interview that she chose to apply only to in-state colleges so that she could be closer to her family than she would be if she attended an out-of-state college. When she chose the University of North Carolina for attendance, however, she chose the college that was farther from home than all but one of the colleges that she applied to for admission. She chose the University of North Carolina because her college advisor, Mr.
Watson, had attended the same school and talked with her about all aspects of life as a student there, and helped her apply for scholarships that he had received as a student. She said in her interview that she learned all that she needed to know about her school of choice from those conversations.

Although distance from home was stated as a very important factor by most students who participated in this study, actual distance was often not real distance. Instead, their statements in their interviews revealed that the student participants saw closeness and distance as synonymous with comfort and discomfort. The more comfortable the student participants felt with a college, the closer it was to their homes from their perspectives.

**Perceived Distance Versus College Generation of the Student Participant**

It is suggestive of the data that the college going generation of the student participants influenced their perceptions of colleges as being acceptable for applications for admission and for college attendance. When discussing with my daughter Jesse her willingness to attend colleges throughout the eastern half of the United States, she stated,

I think that you and mom were stepping stones for me. You both attended colleges close to home when you went to college, so you knew all about colleges and weren’t really worried about me going so far away. At least you didn’t show it. I think it made it easier for me to look at colleges in Missouri, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. And you were willing to take me to those places (Jesse Barr, personal communication, March 28, 2018).

Student participants in this study who had parents who held an associate’s degrees or higher were more likely to consider colleges outside of their own states of residence for
applications for admission, and to choose colleges outside of their own states of residence or at larger distances from their homes within their own states for attendance after graduation from high school. Referring to Appendix K, both Oscar and John from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina chose to attend college outside of their states of residence. For each of these two student participants, both their mother and father hold a bachelor’s degree from a four-year college. Although, they will not have to travel as far for their college attendance as some of the other student participants who chose colleges within their own states of residence, as previously stated, colleges in states other than their own state of residence were perceived by student participants as being more distant from their homes than colleges within their own states of residence, regardless of the actual distance in miles.

In examining the distances of student participants’ college choices from their high schools, it was also evident that the students who attended colleges within their own state of residence that were located the most distant from their high schools also had family members who held an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree, and thus had some experience with the college choice process from personal experience. Lilliana, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina, chose to attend East Carolina University, located 230 miles from Red Wolf High School. Her mother holds an associate’s degree and her father had attended community college without completing a degree. Zach, from Cavalier High School in Virginia, chose to attend the College of William and Mary, located 222 miles from Cavalier High School. His mother also holds an associate’s degree. Fred, from Carolina High School in South Carolina, chose to attend Newberry College, located 162
miles from Carolina High School. His mother holds a bachelor’s degree and was also familiar with traveling to distant colleges as Fred was a recruited athlete.

The exception to this finding among the student participants was Josh, from Carolina High School in South Carolina, who chose to attend Clemson University, located 252 miles from Carolina High School. However, his father had attended Clemson University as an undergraduate before leaving without a degree and returning to East County to work as a building contractor. As noted previously, Josh’s entire family regularly traveled to Clemson to attend athletic events on campus and was familiar with the college. Josh’s family encouraged him to apply to Clemson for admission and to then attend Clemson once he was accepted.

Similarly, the student participants in this study who were first generation college students generally chose colleges very close to their high schools. Jamie chose to attend Pack Community College located next door to Red Wolf High School in Riversson. Demetrius considered applying to Stanford University in California, but ultimately chose to attend Davidson College, only 71 miles from Red Wolf High School. Charlotte chose to attend the University of North Carolina, located 120 miles from Red Wolf High School. All three of these students are first generation college students from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina. Victoria, a first-generation college student from Cavalier High School in Virginia, chose to live at home while attending Averett University, located 34 miles from Cavalier High School. George, Bobbly, Ashley, and Robert, who are all first-generation college students from Carolina High School in South Carolina,
each chose to attend a college located no more than 132 miles from Carolina High School.

**Individual versus Family Identity**

As has been discussed, family was the most important and valued influence on the students who participated in this study, not only during their college choice decision-making processes, but in every aspect of their lives in the communities in which they lived. Twenty of the 24 students who participated in this study stated that family or family members were the most important influence in their choice of college for attendance after graduation from high school and 13 of the 24 student participants stated in some way that being close to home and their families was the most important factor or one of the most important factors in choosing the college that they would attend. All student participants talked at length about their families in their individual interviews, describing the types and amounts of support that they received from their families during their early years, continuing through their years in school, and in choosing their college of attendance in the next school year. Some of this support was passive or neutral, but much of the support that the student participants described was active, in that families and family members wanted the student participants to choose a college for attendance that would not be very far away from home. They wanted the student participants to remain a constant and present part of the family.

Beyond just the importance of family involvement in making major decisions, such as which college to choose for attendance, student participants see family, or more accurately, the idea of family, present in everything that they do. When describing their
In all, 18 of the 24 student participants, and four of the six faculty members who participated in this study, repeatedly used the word “family” or metaphors for family to describe their schools and their communities. Family dominates the conscious and subconscious thinking of rural students and manifests itself in everything that they say and do.

For most, individual identity emerges from a person’s membership in the family, the first and strongest group to which most people belong during their lifetime. Family is
an active environment, influencing and shaping how a person feels about themselves and how a person views their own identity as they take their place in the world. A person’s position within their family deeply affects the process of individual identity development for all members of the family. This development of an individual identity typically begins in adolescence and continues throughout their lives (Scabini & Manzi, 2011). The data collected during this study suggest that rural students have not begun to develop individual identities separate from their identities as members of their families or separate from their family identities. In his interview, Mr. Bryant recalled a conversation with the mother of a male student from the previous year, in which he was discussing the student’s initial desire to attend North Carolina State University, located in North Carolina, but approximately two hours driving distance from his home in Hokie County:

I have another student who goes to VCU, Richmond, three hours away. And first generation, that whole model. And his mother said something really interesting. She said, “You’re gonna take my grandbabies away.” No, she said, “I’m not gonna let you take my grandbabies away and never come home.” So, she was already claiming his future children, okay? Well, what kind of message does that send, I’m not going to let you take my grandbabies away? Well now she’s introduced this paradigm, which is a weird one, you’re planning to take away children that don’t exist yet. And you’re claiming them to be your children. Okay? So that’s a huge barrier to overcome. (Mark Bryant, personal interview, May 18, 2017)

The mother was unable to see her son as an individual separate from the family and was unwilling to allow him to consider a college that would threaten her idea of the family, even though it was closer to their home than Virginia Commonwealth University, where he enrolled. It only mattered to her that he goes to school in Virginia, thus, in her mind, guaranteeing the safety of the family. Most of the student participants in this study were unable to make decisions for college attendance that might contradict their parents’
visions of the family. They had not been allowed to develop their own identities and to make those decisions for themselves. This concept of individual versus family identity is the clearest example present in the data from this study of the overlapping and interdependent nature of the influences on high school students’ college decision-making processes that are a hallmark of Perna’s Model of College Choice (2006).

**Implications for High Schools**

It was found in this study that students and their families frequently lack accurate information about colleges and complete knowledge of the processes in place for application, selection, and enrollment. Although much of that information is available to students and their parents via the internet in this digital age, students and their parents do not always know how to access it, or if they are able to access it, are not always able to interpret it. High schools and their faculty members need to be better informed themselves of the opportunities available to students and be willing to proactively share that information with students and their families.

This proactive sharing of information is one of the components of a college-going culture described by Corwin and Tierney (2007). Corwin and Tierney further describe a college-going culture as one with hallway decorations that promote colleges and college acceptances, celebrate academic successes, and have clear processes in place to support students through every stage of the college choice process. High schools should ensure that all elements of a college-going culture are in place, and once in place, ensure that the culture does not send the message that only in-state colleges should be considered by the students. High schools should also send the message that highly selective colleges are
attainable for their students, regardless of location, by including highly selective colleges in their college-themed displays throughout the building. ACT score ranges, GPA ranges, and application deadlines of highly selective colleges are a few examples of information that could be displayed within the school building and routinely shared with students and their families.

High schools should also be proactive in engaging the parents of their students in the college choice process. While faculty members at the three high schools that served as sites for this study stated that events such as FAFSA nights, college fairs, and college visits were open to family members and community members, the high schools did not extend an explicit invitation to family and community members to attend such events. Faculty members at each of the three high schools stated in their interviews that although they were welcome at the events, it was almost always up to the students to invite their family members or members of the community.

High schools and their faculty members could also actively look for and take advantage of opportunities for their students to visit college campuses, attend college information sessions, and participate in guided tours of college campuses, both within their home states and outside of their home states. Student participants at all three high schools that served as sites for this study mentioned that they often participated in extracurricular activities through their high school that were hosted on college campuses but did not consider those trips to be college visits because they did not participate in the college in any way other than attending the extracurricular event. Colleges, in this day of recruitment and competition for students, would most likely be willing to offer
information sessions and guided tours for groups of students who are visiting their campuses.

**Implications for Higher Education**

Over roughly the past 40 years, colleges have existed in increasingly competitive markets when seeking to sustain and increase their application and admissions numbers each year (Geiger, 2002). Students seeking college admission are in high demand, and an area of untapped potential are rural students in the United States (Provasnik et al, 2007). While a single study is insufficient to determine major changes of practice needed on the part of college recruitment and admissions offices, this study does provide some insight into the areas on which college recruitment and admissions officers could focus additional attention when seeking to attract rural high school students, particularly high academically achieving rural students. Gaining insight into the thinking of rural students during their college choice decision-making processes could be worth small changes in the practices of colleges.

Colleges could draw the attention of potential rural student applicants during the college choice decision-making process in a variety of ways. Schools could highlight characteristics that potentially tap into rural students’ affinity for family and community, as reflected by the physical campus, the student body, alumni organizations active in students’ home areas, and other aspects of college life that give evidence of family and community atmospheres. Similar attention could be paid by college recruitment and
admissions officials to their marketing strategies for reaching all students, and rural students specifically.

Distance has been identified in the literature as a major factor in where rural students attend college (Hillman, 2016). The findings of this study support Hillman’s (2016) assertion, as it was shown to be a major factor in the college choice decisions of the high academically achieving students who participated in this study. As such, colleges could focus their recruitment efforts on high academically achieving rural students living near their campuses, with the knowledge that their overall student body will benefit from the addition of those students.

Additionally, colleges could adjust their recruiting practices to encourage and provide more personal interactions with rural students. Student participants in all three high schools that were involved in this study cited a lack of opportunities to visit college campuses or to interact with college representatives. Most of the student participants in this survey collected all or most of their information on colleges that they were interested in attending through their own efforts or the efforts of their families. Colleges could pay more attention to the instances in which high school students are on or near their campuses for high school-related activities and proactively extend offers of information sessions and tours of their campuses. At the same time, colleges could increase the amount of time that their representatives spend in high schools, creating personal connections with students.

As an alternative to having college recruitment officials spend more time in high schools, colleges could identify alumni who might be willing to serve as contact points for students in rural areas of the country and then encourage potential students to reach
out to them. Such interactions with a member of their community, or with someone whom students and parents identify as being like themselves, could also create personal connections between the college and rural students.

Implications for Further Research

Research on students living in rural areas is lacking in the literature on college choice (Perna, 2006; Hillman, 2016) and could be continued to understand the underrepresentation of rural students in higher education at all types of colleges, including those that are highly selective (Provasnik et al, 2007; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Similarly, research on high academically achieving students is lacking, as researchers have assumed that such students are attending college after high school. However, additional research on such students is needed to confirm this theory and to identify the influences that lead some high academically achieving students to choose to attend two-year colleges versus four-year colleges, or to choose not to attend any type of college after graduation from high school. While all the student participants in this study chose to attend some type of college, two high academically achieving students who chose to attend a two-year college instead of a four-year college were identified. The rationale behind their choices was identified as well, a specific career path and the education needed to attain a career in their chosen field.

Additional research should be conducted to determine the generalizability of the findings of this study and to uncover differences in the influences on the college choice decision-making processes of students outside of the Southern region of the United
States. Future research studies could be designed similarly to this one, locating each study in multiple states within a specific geographic region of the United States, such as the Midwest, Southwest, Northeast, etc. Such studies would add to the literature on the college choice decisions of rural students, particularly high academically achieving rural students who potentially are afforded the most opportunities for their post-secondary careers. Expanding the literature would create a better understanding of the barriers to college attainment for high school students living in rural areas of the United States.

The data in this study supports the assertion by Hillman (2016) that rural students, in general, remain in proximity to their homes when attending college. Twenty-two of the twenty-four student participants in this study chose to remain in the state of their residence for college attendance. The two students from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina who chose to leave North Carolina for college enrolled in, and are attending colleges in South Carolina and Virginia, `neighboring states to North Carolina. Both students expressed their preference to remain in the state of North Carolina for college and both of their choices are located closer to their homes than many of the student participants in this study who chose to remain in the state of their residence for college. Because of nature of the data collected during this study, it was not possible to examine and explore the influences on the college choice decisions of students who chose colleges whose location, by some definition, were located some distance from their homes. The influences on students who chose colleges defined as being distant from their homes should be studied by identifying such students from rural high schools and designing a study that would uncover those influences, as well as determining how those influences
were stronger than the multiple barriers to such choices that were presented in the findings of this study.

Additionally, the data from this study, though limited, suggests that students who participate in athletics and often travel to sporting events in states other than their state of residence may be more open to attending colleges distant from their homes. Fred, from Carolina High School in South Carolina, and Demetrius, from Red Wolf High School in North Carolina were the only recruited athlete who participated in this study, but such students could also be identified and studied along with their college choice decisions to determine if those students attend colleges in proximity to their homes at the same or differing rates compared to the overall rates of rural students.

Another area that could be explored through further study is Bourdieu’s theory of educational sociology as the science of the relations between social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973). As both high schools and institutions of higher education are integral to the college choice decision making processes of all high school students, research could be conducted that incorporates Bourdieu’s theories on cultural and social reproduction in the conceptual framework. Such a study could seek to determine the degree to which the fears and biases of students’ families, communities, and high schools work together to reproduce and hold constant the amount of social and cultural capital available to students. This could be studied in the context of rural students to determine the degree to which rural culture and those immersed in rural culture seek to reproduce and maintain that culture and to maintain the social classes of its members. As Bourdieu’s theory on Social Reproduction and Cultural Reproduction was not included in
the conceptual framework in this study, interview questions were not designed to produce data related to answering these questions.

Finally, attention to student participants’ demographic characteristics was not an emphasis in identifying the influences on the college choice decisions of the students in this study. Further research could be conducted on the influences on the college choice decision-making processes of high academically achieving rural students that focused on demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other identifying characteristics.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study revealed that the student participants in this study had access to similar resources and faced similar barriers across all three high schools that participated as sites for data collection. At all three high schools, parents, faculty members, and community members were supportive and encouraging of student participants’ efforts to gain college acceptance and attend college after high school, while simultaneously limiting their choices to in-state colleges. Only two of the 24 students who participated in this survey chose to attend college out-of-state and both stated that they would have remained in-state for college as a first choice.

The students at Carolina High School in South Carolina had access to fewer resources, as only one faculty member was dedicated to working with students through the college choice decision-making process. The student participants also did not have access to college visits through their high school, and their high school did not have an
evident college-going culture. They did, however, access information in the same ways as student participants at Cavalier High School in Virginia and Red Wolf High School in North Carolina. At all three high schools, available information and resources explicitly and implicitly influenced students to attend in-state schools.

There were several additional barriers to attendance at out-of-state colleges for the student participants of this study. Such barriers included their own internal fears as well as external fears of their family members and community members, perceptions of distance that were influenced by students’ emotional reactions to colleges, incomplete or inaccurate information on costs of college attendance, and student participants’ inability to separate themselves from their families. Student participants were unable to begin forming individual identities distinct from their identities as family members. Each of these internal and external influences work together to create many of the barriers that rural students face in choosing colleges for attendance.

The findings of this study support the research of others who have found that rural students attend in-state, public, less prestigious colleges than students from urban and suburban areas of the United States. It could be argued, from the results of this study, that where a student lives determines where he or she will attend college. Location determines access to resources, experiences, cultural and social capital, as well as introducing specific the barriers that students face in their college choice decision-making processes. Additional research needs to be conducted in other geographic areas of the United States to determine if the conclusions of this study are generalizable to all rural students in this country.
Finally, the results of this study are not meant to imply that colleges located outside of the student’s state of residence are superior to colleges within a student’s state of residence when students make their college choice decisions. Neither is this study meant to imply that private colleges are superior to public colleges. There are many fine colleges across the United States, both public and private that may best fit the needs of any individual student. Those colleges are located inside of the three states that were the focus of this study and outside of those three states. This study argues that students will make the best decision for themselves and their futures when the student and their family have the most complete and accurate information available to them at the time of the college choice decision.
## APPENDIX A:
HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGE BY ACCEPTANCE RATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly Selective College</th>
<th>Acceptance Rate</th>
<th>Average Incoming Weighted GPA</th>
<th>Average Incoming SAT Score</th>
<th>Average Incoming ACT Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>1419</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1406</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1422</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton University</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1433</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>1423</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Institute of Technology</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1433</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Chicago</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>1414</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown University</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1418</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>9%</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1470</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Naval Academy</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1332</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomona College</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>1373</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Military Academy</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>1373</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>1405</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claremont McKenna College</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dartmouth College</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>1405</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke University</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1396</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swarthmore College</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1417</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt University</td>
<td>12%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Cooper Union</td>
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<td>1363</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
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<td>Harvey Mudd College</td>
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<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
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</tr>
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HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGE BY AVERAGE INCOMING STUDENT WEIGHTED GRADE POINT AVERAGE

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HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGE BY AVERAGE INCOMING STUDENT SAT SCORE

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# APPENDIX D: HIGHLY SELECTIVE COLLEGE BY AVERAGE INCOMING STUDENT ACT SCORE

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APPENDIX E:
SAMPLE STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Interview Protocol

1-hour interview

1-hour focus group session for students at the end of the student interviews
Consent forms
Parent permission required regardless of the age of the participant

Interview Questions:

What colleges do academically high-achieving students in rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia choose for their post-secondary studies?

1. Tell me about yourself. What is important to you? What do you want to do after college?
2. How would you describe yourself as a student?
3. How would you describe your high school? The other students here?
4. When did you first start thinking about college?
5. What is the ideal college in your opinion?
6. Have you decided where you are going to go to college? Why did you pick that school? What was the most important thing(s) about that school for you?
7. How did you find information about colleges? Did you visit colleges? Tell me about those trips.
8. What other colleges did you apply to? Why did you choose them to apply to? Were you accepted at all of them?
9. Were there any other schools that you were very interested in that you chose not to apply to? Why did you decide not to apply?

How do students’ perceptions of local environment and culture affect high academically achieving high school students’ college decision-making processes?

10. Tell me about your family. Did your parents, brothers, sisters, go to college? Where? Why did they choose those schools?
11. How has your family influenced your choice of college? Tell me about some of the conversations that you have had with your family about college and where to go.
12. What family factors (cost, location, etc.) did you discuss with your family before picking a college?
13. Did you talk with your family about going to school out-of-state? Tell me about that conversation.
14. What fears does your family have about you going to college?
15. Tell me about your community.
16. Have you lived here your whole life?
17. Tell me some stories about growing up here.
18. Do you hear people around you talk about other places? How often? Tell me about it.
19. How much have you traveled to other places? Where have you been? Whom did you go with?
20. Were there any members of your community that had a great influence on your college plans? How?
21. How do members of your community feel about your college choice? Tell me some of the things that you have heard when you talk about your college choice.
22. Do you think they would have been supportive of a choice that was out-of-state? Explain that to me.

How do students’ perceptions of the influences of their high schools affect the college choice decision-making processes of academically high-achieving students in rural Southern school systems?

23. Tell me about your high school.
24. Describe the students to me.
25. Do most of them plan to go to college?
26. Where are they going to college? How do faculty members feel about their choices?
27. How have people at your high school helped you in picking your college? Describe your conversations with them.
28. Has any person at your high school influenced you in picking your college? Tell me how. Explain it to me.
29. What resources are available to you from your high school?
30. Were there any resources that you wish your high school had that it didn’t?
31. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about choosing a college that I may have missed?
APPENDIX F:
SAMPLE STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Student Focus Group Protocol

Each question in this protocol was developed after the individual interviews with student participants.

In turn, each of you please answer these questions and explain your answer.

1. Who was the most influential person in your college choice?
2. What was the most important factor in your college choice?
3. Do you consider high school to be easy? Do you feel that you are ready for college?
4. How did the high school involve your family in its activities?

Please discuss your reactions to the statements below.

5. Family is the most important thing to you, both real and community.
6. Most of the travel in your life has been school related.
7. Concerned with the community.
8. Your community supports your college choice.
9. Your community is worried about you coming back after college. How does that make you feel?
10. You are worried about your community and want to come back after college. Going far away would have made that harder.
11. The main influences of people outside of your family on your college choice was in the form of advocating for “their” college.
12. Out-of-state schools are too far away.
13. Out-of-state schools cost more than in-state schools.
14. You know almost everyone that you encounter every day.
15. Virginia colleges are better than out-of-state colleges.
16. Being close to family was the most important part of your college decision.
17. You see your community and your high school as part of your family.
18. Most or all of your identity is tied to your family.
19. You did not have much help or many resources from your high school in your college choice process.
20. You were on your own during the college choice process.
21. You feel like you should go to school in Virginia as a show of support to your community and your state.
22. Your family is scared of you going far away to college.
23. Your community is scared of you going far away to college.
APPENDIX G:
SAMPLE HIGH SCHOOL FACULTY MEMBER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

School faculty member interview questions:

What colleges do academically high-achieving students in rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia choose for their post-secondary studies?

1. Describe your students to me. What do they do after high school?
2. Of the students who attend college, how do they choose the college?
3. Who influences their decisions? How do they do that?
4. Do you have any data that show where students go to college after graduation? Can you share the percentages with me, no names?

How do students’ perceptions of local environment and culture affect high academically achieving high school students’ college decision-making processes?

5. Describe the culture of your community to me. Give me some examples of what you are talking about.
6. How do students’ families generally feel about students staying local for college?
7. Tell me about barriers that students face from their families as they apply to college, and when they are choosing a college to attend.
8. Describe the community to me.
9. How do community members feel about students staying local for college?
10. Tell me about barriers that students face from the community as they apply to college, and when they are choosing a college to attend.

How do students’ perceptions of the influences of their high schools affect the college-choice decision-making processes of academically high-achieving students in rural school systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia?

11. How do you interact with students who are applying to college? Give me some examples.
12. How do you work with parents of students as they are applying to college? Tell me about that.
13. What resources does your high school have for students who are applying to college?
14. What kinds of activities does the school sponsor that helps students choose a college? Describe them to me.
15. Are activities open to anyone who is interested?
16. What are the activities that the high school sponsors for family members of students as they choose a college?
17. Do you think it is your role to help students choose a college? Why or why not?
18. Do most students seek you out for advice when choosing colleges to apply to? To attend? Tell me about some of those students without naming them.
19. What concerns do you have about students who apply for college at your school?
20. Describe the barriers to college choice that students face when they are deciding on a college.
21. Are there resources that you wish you had as you help students apply to college and choose a college to attend?
22. Is there anything else that you can tell me about your students’ college choices that I may have missed?
APPENDIX H:
SAMPLE LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENTS

April 28, 2017

Mr. Whitmore, Superintendent
Grayson County Schools
412 East Main Street
Independence, Virginia 24346

Dear Mr. Whitmore:

I am writing to ask for your assistance with a research study that I am conducting in partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Education degree in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the college decision making process of high academically achieving high school students who attend rural high schools. I am specifically interested in how students perceive the influences of their local environment, local culture, and local high school on their decision-making processes. Students who attend rural high schools in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, as well as one faculty member at each high school will be will be asked to participate in this study. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants in the study and there are no risks associated with participation in the study.

After the study, I will provide a report of my findings to you as the superintendent of Grayson County Schools in the hopes that it may be beneficial in the future as school system members assist students in their college choice process.

I am interested in learning more about your school system and discussing the details about this study further with you and would like to meet with you at your convenience. I am also happy to answer any questions that you may have about the study. If that would be possible, I can be contacted at 336-368-7732 or at dtjwnbarr5@gmail.com.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of this study.

Sincerely,

Denny H. Barr
University of Pennsylvania
APPENDIX I:
SAMPLE CONSENT FORM

Determining the Perceptions of High Academically Achieving Seniors in Rural High Schools of the Influences on their College Choice Decisions

A Research Study Conducted by Denny Barr

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

TO PARTICIPANT:

1. Invitation to Participate and Description of the Project. I am Denny Barr and I am currently in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. One of my major assignments is to complete an original research study leading to the writing and publishing of a dissertation. I am conducting a study that I hope will help to improve the services rural high school students receive. My study will focus on the college choice decision making process of high academically achieving students in the rural high schools in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. You are being asked to participate in this study.

Your participation in the research study is voluntary. You will not face or be at risk for receiving any consequence from the school system for being part of the study. Before agreeing to be part of this study, you should please read the following information carefully. Feel free to ask questions if you do not understand something.

2. Description of Procedure. If you participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one focus groups and one individual interview. The focus group sessions will be audio and video recorded and transcribed. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Focus groups and all interviews will be conducted on the high school campus that the student attends.

3. Risks and Inconveniences. The names of participants and all data collected during the study will be kept password protected in digital files on the investigator’s computer and will not be shared with school system employees. Pseudonyms will be used in the publishing of the report. However, we cannot promise complete privacy and confidentiality of things you say in the focus groups and interviews.
4. **Benefits.** This study was designed to foster an understanding of how educators rural school systems can work towards serving the needs of students in their high school as they make their decisions about where to attend college.

5. **Financial (or other) considerations.** You will not be compensated monetarily for your participation.

6. **Confidentiality.** Your name will not be shared with anyone at any point. You will not be identified individually in any way because of your participation in this research. Non-identifying data collected may be used as part of publications and presentations related to discipline and education.

7. **Voluntary Participation.** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this research. Such refusal will not have any negative consequences for you. If you begin to participate in the research, you may at any time, for any reason, discontinue your participation without any negative consequences.

8. **Other considerations and questions.** Feel free to call me, Denny Barr, if you have any questions. I can be reached at 336-366-7732. You can also email me at dtjwnbarr5@gmail.com.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of participant</th>
<th>Signature of participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Please enter your contact information below:

Phone number:

Address:

High School:
### APPENDIX J:
#### CODE LIST FOR DATA ANALYSIS

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<th>Code</th>
<th>Code Title</th>
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<td>How the student describes their ideal college or the college that they chose to attend Evidences of a college-going culture in the high school site</td>
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<td>CGC</td>
<td>College-Going Culture</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of the influence of the community on their college choice decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>Community Influence</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of the community in which they live</td>
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<td>CP</td>
<td>Community Perception</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of the importance of community service</td>
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<td>CS</td>
<td>Community Service</td>
<td>Visits that students made to colleges during the college choice process The fears that the student perceived on the part of community members in the college choice process</td>
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<td>CV</td>
<td>College Visit</td>
<td>The fears that the student perceived on the part of community members in the college choice process</td>
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<td>FC</td>
<td>Fear Community</td>
<td>The level of education that family members have attained</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEL</td>
<td>Family Education Level</td>
<td>The fears that family members expressed to students about their college choice process and college choice Participants’ perceptions of their family members’ influences on their college choice process</td>
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<td>FF</td>
<td>Fear Family</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of the family members’ influences on their college choice process</td>
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<td>FI</td>
<td>Family Influence</td>
<td>Participants’ perceptions of their family relationships</td>
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<td>FP</td>
<td>Family Perception of their Family</td>
<td>The fears that students expressed about their college choice process and college choice Students’ perceptions of their high school and high school environment on their college choice decision</td>
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<td>FS</td>
<td>Fear Student</td>
<td>Engagement of student participants’ families by the high school relating to college choice decisions</td>
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<td>HIS</td>
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<td>Resources available to students from their high school during their college choice process</td>
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<td>HSE</td>
<td>High School Engagement</td>
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<td>HSR</td>
<td>High School Resources for College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>HSRI</td>
<td>High School Rigor</td>
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<td>ID</td>
<td>Ideal College</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>Most Important to Student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIF</td>
<td>Most Important Factor</td>
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<td>MII</td>
<td>Most Important Influence</td>
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<tr>
<td>MF</td>
<td>Metaphors for Family</td>
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<td>O</td>
<td>Obstacles</td>
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<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Perceived Cost</td>
<td></td>
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<td>PD</td>
<td>Perceived Distance</td>
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<td>PFF</td>
<td>Plans for Future</td>
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<td>PFR</td>
<td>Perceived Faculty Role</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTS</td>
<td>Perception of Themselves as Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSC</td>
<td>Perceptions of In-State Colleges</td>
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<td>RD</td>
<td>Real Distance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>Schools Applied to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Schools Interested in</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Student Perception of the High School</td>
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</table>

Participants’ perceptions of the rigor of their high school in preparing them for college.
Participants’ perceptions of the factors that make a college ideal for them.
Participants’ perception of the things that are most important to them as a person and as a student.
Participants’ perceptions of loss felt by their family or community because of the participants’ college choice.
The factor(s) that students perceive as the most important in their lives.
The factor that the participant perceives as the most important influence on their college choice decision.
Students’ use of family as a metaphor.
Obstacles that students face during their college choice processes.
Students’ perceptions of the cost of attending a college.
Participants’ perception of the distance from home to a college.
Participants’ perceptions of the future for themselves, family, and community.
The role that faculty members feel they should play or do play in participants’ college choice processes.
Participants’ perceptions of the quality of the schools within their state.
How students perceive themselves as students, whether academics, involvement, etc.
Actual distance for the student to travel from home to a college.
The colleges that students applied to for admission.
The colleges that students were interested in but did not apply to for admission.
Participants’ perception of the high school that they attend.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>TF</td>
<td>Student Travel with Family</td>
<td>Places and distances that students have traveled with their families during their lives</td>
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<td>TFP</td>
<td>Purpose of Student Travel with Family</td>
<td>Reason for student travel with their family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TS</td>
<td>Student Travel with School</td>
<td>Places and distances that students have traveled with their high school during their high school careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSP</td>
<td>Purpose of Student Travel with School</td>
<td>Reasons for student travel with their high school during their high school career</td>
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## APPENDIX K:
STUDENT PARTICIPANTS DISTANCE FROM COLLEGE WITH FAMILY MEMBERS’ EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>State of Residence</th>
<th>College of Choice</th>
<th>Distance in Miles from Student’s High School to Their College of Choice</th>
<th>Family Member Attending College</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
<th>Level of Educational Attainment by Family Member</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lillian</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>East Carolina University</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Virginia Military Institute</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>NC State</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Culinary School</td>
<td>Brother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Pack Community College</td>
<td>Next Door to Red Wolf High School</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demetrius</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Davidson College</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shanara</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>University of South Carolina</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linda Sue</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>Virginia Commonwealth University</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Attended, Did Not Finish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>Patrick Henry Community College</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>Averett University</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liliana</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>James Madison University</td>
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<td>College Degree in Mexico</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>Virginia Tech University</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Father</td>
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<td>Mother</td>
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<td>Zach</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>College of William and Mary</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>Johnny</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>Virginia Tech University</td>
<td>83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Francis Marion University</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Newberry College</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate's Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Clemson University</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>1 Semester</td>
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<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>South Carolina State University</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Current College Junior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bobby</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Coastal Carolina University</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Francis Marion University</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1 Year</td>
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<td>Robert</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>College of Charleston</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>Grandfather</td>
<td>1 Day</td>
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</table>
REFERENCES


Avery, C., & Hoxby, C. M. (2004). Do and should financial aid packages affect students' college choices? In College choices: The economics of where to go, when to go, and how to pay for it (pp. 239-302). University of Chicago Press.


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