COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHOICE AND THE ROLE OF UNDERMATCHING

IN THE LIVES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Kimberly M. Lowry

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2014

APPROVED:

Amy Fann, Committee Chair

Beverly Bower, Committee Member

V. Barbara Bush, Committee Member

J. Luke Wood, Committee Member

Janice Holden, Chair of the Department of
Counseling and Higher Education

Jerry Thomas, Dean of the College of
Education

Mark Wardell, Dean of the Toulouse
Graduate School

Lowry, Kimberly M. *Community College Choice and the Role of Undermatching in the Lives of African Americans*. Doctor of Philosophy (Higher Education), August 2014, 232 pp., 5 tables, 6 illustrations, references, 165 titles.

This study explored why academically qualified African American students, those eligible to attend four-year institutions, choose to attend community colleges and are, thereby, undermatched. This qualitative study investigated how these students navigated the college choice process, what influenced their decision to attend a community college, what their experience at a community college was like, and their aspirations to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Purposeful sampling was used to gather a sample of 19 African American students attending community college in Dallas, Texas. The sample included 14 females and five males. Data were collected through 40-60 minute semi-structured interviews and a brief demographic survey. The conceptual frameworks for this study included Kassie Freeman's predetermination model that includes cultural considerations in college choice and the Somers et al. model that addresses factors that increase the likelihood of a student choosing to attend a community college. This integrated framework captures the role that family and culture play in African American community college choice.

Findings suggest that the community college choice influences for academically eligible African American students vary from traditional college choice models. Whereas factors such as cost, location, and the role of peers played somewhat of a role in their choice, participants were also heavily influenced by sports, self-perceptions of maturity, and the perceptions of their families. Another key finding was that the effects of undermatching vary. All of the participants in this study felt that attending a community college fostered transfer preparedness, supported

personal development, and promoted their academic success. However, some of the participants also felt that attending a community college hindered their sense of autonomy and limited their social engagement. This variation leads to the conclusion that undermatching effects vary and are dependent upon a variety of contextual factors. Policy and practice recommendations are provided for parents, teachers, counselors, and higher education professionals.

Copyright 2014

by

Kimberly M. Lowry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to thank God for the opportunity he has given me to pursue this degree not only for myself but for my family, friends and my community. I am grateful for his unconditional love, grace and faithfulness and know that it is through him that I have accomplished things I could have only dreamed of. Next I would like to thank my entire dissertation committee for providing me with guidance and support. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Amy Fann for her leadership and dedication to aspiring scholars, like myself, and to higher education as a whole. Dr. Fann you are truly amazing and thank you again for everything.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge my parents and grandparents for every prayer they made on behalf of me and my future. It is because of them that I am who I am today and for that I am truly thankful. My other support systems include my brother, friends (SSA), family, mentors, mentees and of course the participants in this study. All of you have helped me in ways that I cannot even describe. Thank you for your love and support. Last, but definitely not least, I would like to thank my husband, Jesse N. Lowry Jr. for supporting and encouraging me through this entire process. There were times when we did not talk or spend time together because I was busy “writing”. This accomplishment is just as much yours as it is mine and we have so much to celebrate and be thankful for.

During this process I leaned on Jeremiah 29:11, a scripture shared with me by one of my mentors years ago. It reminds me that I am destined to have a future no matter how challenging a situation is. Now I also lean on Luke 12:48 and understand that while achieving this degree is a great accomplishment, there is still more work to be done. Carpe Diem.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
IT’S MY DECISION: AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHOICE	1
Introduction	1
Methods.....	7
Results.....	11
Discussion.....	23
References	25
Appendices	
A. EXTENDED INTRODUCTION.....	32
B. EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW.....	42
C. DETAILED METHODOLOGY	84
D. COMPLETE/UNABRIDGED RESULTS.....	106
E. SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	173
F. INVITATION EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS	206
G. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE	208
H. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	211
COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE LIST	214

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
1. Participant Profile.....	9
C.1. Fall 2012 Campus Statistics for Southern College (NCES, 2013)	90
C.2. Participant Profile (Table 1 repeat)	93
D.1. Additional Participant Demographics	108
D.2. Additional Demographic Data	145

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
B.1 Degrees conferred during 1989-1990 (NCES, 2011, Tables 297, 303, 306)	45
B.2 Degrees conferred during 2009-2010 (NCES, 2012-045, Indicator 47)	46
B.3 African American enrollment 2008 (NCES, 2012-045, Indicator 47)	48
B.4 Hossler and Gallagher model of college student choice	77
B.5 Freeman's model of predetermination	80
B.6 Community college choice model.....	81

IT'S MY DECISION: AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHOICE

Introduction

The important role of the community college in fostering postsecondary access and success for underserved students cannot be overstated. Nettles and Millet (2000) referred to it as “one of the most important innovations for higher education in the 20th century” (p. 1). For students of color, community colleges serve as an important path for entering higher education; in 2011, students of color represented 48% of students enrolled at community colleges (AACC, 2013). Comparatively, in 2011, students of color made up 27-30% of the student population in four-year institutions (Reyes, 2011). As with other students, community colleges serve as a primary pathway into postsecondary education for African American students. For instance, in 2008 more African Americans chose to attend two-year colleges (41%) when compared to for-profit institutions (33%) or four-year universities (26%) (NCES, 2011); again highlighting the role that community colleges plays in the academic career of African Americans. These statistics demonstrate the importance of community colleges in the U.S. higher education system as a whole and to minority student populations specifically.

Community colleges are significant to higher education for various reasons. For example, they provide a pathway to the baccalaureate through programs such as dual credit, transfer initiatives, and basic skill development. No longer home to only the less affluent or academically underprepared (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), community colleges also serve as the first college of choice to students who will become future lawyers, doctors, scientists, and engineers (Townsend, 2009). Prevalent reasons that students choose to attend community colleges include proximity and course scheduling flexibility as well as college preparation and

cost of attendance (Kurlaender, 2006; Somers et al., 2006; Townsend, 2009). Scholars also suggest that students may choose to attend a community college as a result of an educational system that prepares students for destinations that match their family background (Hallinan, 2000; Kurlaender, 2006).

College choice is a complex process that includes myriad factors that influence the decision to go to college as well as the choice of which college to attend. Most college choice research has focused on traditional students, and more recently first generation students and students of color (Bergerson, 2009; Chapman, 1981; Freeman, 1998, 2005; Hearn, 1991; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Maxey, 1995; McDonough, 1997). This research has helped to explain the college choice process and access as well as the stages that students may experience when choosing which college to attend. Whereas this research has been helpful, a gap in research regarding community college choice among African Americans remains (Bers & Galowich, 2002; Somers et al., 2006; Townsend, 2007). This study begins to fill the gap in college choice literature by focusing on African American students who were academically qualified to attend a four-year institution, but chose instead to attend a community college; a phenomenon known as “undermatching” (Roderick et al., 2008).

Undermatching occurs when students attend a college that is less selective than one that they are academically qualified to attend (Roderick et al., 2008). Bearing the aforementioned in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore why academically qualified African American students, defined in this study by virtue of having completed required high school curriculum and obtaining appropriate standardized test scores, choose to attend community colleges. This research sought to understand what happens during the college

choice process for these African Americans students. As such, one overarching question guided this inquiry, why do academically qualified African American students, who are eligible to attend four-year universities, choose to start higher education at community colleges? The goal of this research is to extend discourse on the African American college choice process while highlighting the factors that influence academically qualified African Americans to attend community colleges.

Relevant Literature

Past college choice research has contributed to the understanding of the college choice process for students who choose to attend four-year institutions (Bergerson, 2009; Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Chapman, 1981, 1984; Hossler & Gallagher 1987; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982). More recently there has been an increase in the literature regarding students who choose to attend a Historically Black College and University instead of a Predominately White Institution as well as students who choose to attend a public university rather than a private one (Freeman, 1998, 2005; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Gasman et al., 2010; Maxey, 1995; McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). Researchers have also investigated college choice factors for students who chose to attend community colleges (Christie & Hutcheson, 2003; McCullough, 2010; Santos, 2004; Townsend, 2007, 2009), and why high achieving students chose to attend selective four-year colleges and universities (Callahan, 2003; Dale, 2010; Kinzie et al., 2004; Schoenherr, 2009; Sztam, 2003). However, there are few empirical studies regarding college choice factors related to academically qualified students attending community colleges (Filter, 2010; Schoenherr, 2009). In addition, scholars have considered how college enrollment decision-making factors differ based upon racial/ethnic

affiliation (Kurlaendar, 2006; Perna, 2000) but have yet to consider race and academic achievement collectively.

Along with the need to study community college choice, several scholars have called for the examination of within-group differences among African American collegians (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Wood, 2013). With such a small volume of literature available on the college choice decisions of African American students, understanding the factors that influence their college choice decision making process will enable parents, teachers, counselors and higher education professionals to better serve this population in making the right college decision. This research helps us to understand African American college choice in general and their reasons for community college choice in particular. More specifically, it answers the research call made by Strayhorn and Terrell (2010) to “unpack the within-group heterogeneity that exists among Black student populations” (p. 209) by examining the college choice process of academically qualified African Americans who begin their careers at community colleges.

College Choice Models

College choice literature has been around for decades and has focused on the process that students’ transition through to ultimately make a decision on what institution to attend for their postsecondary education. The college choice process includes having college aspirations, starting the search process, gathering information, applying to an institution, and ultimately enrolling. Various frameworks and models exist that describe this process. One of the most widely used models is Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model of college choice. Within this

model, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) group the college choice process into three distinct stages: predisposition, search, and choice.

During the predisposition stage, students make the decision to go to college instead of alternative paths like work or the military (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997). They also begin to focus on becoming academically aware and are intentional about selecting appropriate coursework while in secondary school (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Once a student has determined that they will attend college they move into the search stage. It is within this stage that a student begins to gather information from prospective institutions while preparing for admission requirements by following specific high school curriculum, through college admissions test, and earning a college-eligible grade point average (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997). In the college search phase, a traditional student creates a list of prospective institutions. This phase is followed by the choice stage where the student applies to specific institutions and decides on which to enroll; this stage culminates the student's college-choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997).

Although these stages have traditionally been used to describe college choice, it is important to recognize that past research on college choice has focused on traditional aged, middle class, male students who choose to attend four-year institutions (Freeman, 2005). Recently, more attention has been given to different student populations including women and African Americans (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997) which as a result has increased our understanding of the college choices of historically underrepresented student groups.

Since their inception, community colleges have served a diverse pool of students. Founded in the early 1900s to provide equal access to postsecondary education, the core mission of community colleges is access and transfer (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Today they remain the most financially, geographically, and academically accessible route to a higher education for minorities, women, first generation and rural students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Gumport, 2007; Townsend, 2009). The common misconception is that students who choose two-year schools do so because they are academically deficient or price conscious (Somers et al., 2006) even though the community colleges are home to competitive technical and medical programs, academic honors programs and honor societies. Despite the large number of students who attend community colleges, except for unpublished dissertations and recent studies by scholars like Bers and Galowich (2002), Horton, 2009, Kurlaender (2006), Somers et al. (2006) and Stokes and Somers (2004) there has been little research done on why students choose to attend a two-year college.

Conceptual Framework

This study looked at the college choice process using a conceptual framework developed by Freeman (2005) and Somers et al. (2006). Freeman's model of predetermination (2005) considers cultural characteristics in college choice. Acknowledging the impact that family (both immediate and extended), culture, history, and environmental factors play in the decision for African Americans to attend college at all, the Freeman model also includes race and ethnicity as a prominent factor in college choice. The Somers et al. (2006) model offers a look into community college choice by revealing the factors that increase the likelihood of a student choosing to attend a community college. This framework suggests that encouragement from

family, support services, financial aid awarded, academic programs, access, location, aspirations, information and encouragement from friends are all deciding factors in community college choice.

Methods

This study explores the phenomenon of academically qualified African American students who are eligible to attend four-year institutions but choose to attend community colleges. Its exploratory nature is supported by a constructivist perspective (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2008) suggests qualitative research is “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4).

A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was employed to understand how academically qualified African American students, those eligible to attend four-year institutions, who chose to attend a community college made meaning of the college choice process and to explore what factors contribute to their decision. Whereas an ethnographic account studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting, a phenomenological account identifies the essence of human experiences as described by participants (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) describes this approach as a “strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (p. 13). Since this study sought to understand the perception of a specific participant group, a phenomenological approach was used to develop patterns and relationship of meanings in an attempt to better describe and understand this group of students.

Site Selection

Research was conducted at Southern College, a community college in an urban city in the southern region of the United States. According to its Carnegie classification, it is a public, urban-serving multi-campus institution. During the fall 2012 academic semester, the total student enrollment was 14,375, of which 2,700 were first time in college students. The student demographics were: 4,787 (32.9%) White, 3,706 (25.5%) African American, 5,355 (37.3%) Hispanic, and 527 (4.3%) other. Seventy-five percent attend part-time while 25% are enrolled full time. Female attendance outpaces male at 61% and 39% respectively; with a larger gender gap existing between African American males and females with females representing 70% of African American enrollment.

Sample

Considered the “method of choice for most qualitative research” (Merriam, 2009, p.77); purposeful sampling allows the researcher to solve qualitative problems such as discovering what occurs, its implications, and the relationships linking occurrences (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). For the purpose of the study, purposeful sampling was employed. The sample for this study included 19 currently enrolled, academically qualified, African American community college students; 17 of which were planning for the baccalaureate and two who were planning to enter the workforce with associate degrees. Academically qualified is defined in this study by virtue of having completed required high school curriculum, obtaining appropriate standardized test scores, and achieving an appropriate grade point average.

The final sample included 19 participants. Due to the depth of the data collected, it is important to provide a comprehensive report of the participants. Each graduated from high

school and followed the recommended high school curriculum that prepared them for minimum admission to a four-year university. Seven participants graduated in the top quarter of their class and two graduated in the top 10 percent. Every participant had spent at least a full semester at a community college and four were in their final semester before graduation. The average age of the participant was 20, the youngest participant was 18, while the oldest was 25. Sixteen of the nineteen participants still lived at home with at least one parent and all of the participants lived 30 miles or less from the community college that they attended with seven living less than 10 miles away. Nine participants were first generation, defined as neither parent having attending college. Table 1 summarizes demographic data for the sample.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

	Age	Gender	First Gen	High School Curriculum	Applied to 4 year	Admitted to a 4 -year
1	20	F	No	Recommended	Y	Y
2	19	F	No	Recommended	Y	Y
3	19	F	Yes	Recommended	Y	Y
4	21	F	Yes	Recommended	Y	Y
5	18	M	Yes	Recommended	Y	Y
6	25	M	No	Recommended	N	N
7	18	M	No	Recommended	Y	Y
8	18	F	Yes	Recommended	N	N
9	20	F	Yes	Recommended	N	N
10	19	F	Yes	Recommended	N	N
11	19	M	No	Recommended	Y	Y
12	18	F	Yes	Recommended	Y	Y
13	20	M	No	Recommended	N	N
14	19	F	No	Recommended	Y	Y
15	19	F	No	Recommended	Y	Y
16	19	F	Yes	Recommended	Y	Y
17	22	F	No	Recommended	N	N
18	24	F	No	Recommended	N	N
19	20	F	Yes	Recommended	Y	N

For this qualitative study, one-on one semi structured interviews were used as the primary means of data collection and a demographic questionnaire was utilized to gather additional demographic data. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes in length and were digitally recorded and transcribed. These techniques assisted the researcher in understanding personal information about academically qualified African American community college student experiences and gaining knowledge including opinions, beliefs, and feelings (Best & Kahn, 1998) to provide a descriptive picture of how they made meaning of their college choice decision. A thorough review of students' high school transcripts was conducted to help build an accurate profile of each participant. Information such as having completed recommended high school curriculum, advanced placement courses and participation in dual credit programs was reviewed and taken into consideration.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involves “bringing meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants in the study” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.72). Data collected in this study were analyzed using several techniques that began during data collection. The demographic questionnaire provided an opportunity to begin analyzing data. The purpose of the study and research questions were constantly taken into consideration and the transcripts were read and re-read. Merriam (2009) affirms that making notes in margins to comment on data and writing memos that capture reflections, tentative themes, and hunches are best practices when analysis during data collection. This initial process led to a set of tentative themes and categorizes that were used and refined as additional transcripts were analyzed. To ensure validity of the findings member checks and peer-reviews were employed. Member

checks involve the sharing of preliminary results with participants for additional insight into a phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). In addition to member checks, peer examination was also utilized to determine if the findings are plausible based on the data. Merriam (2009) describes peer examination as asking an expert colleague to scan and assess some of the raw data as well as the process of the study to assess the congruency of emerging findings and the tentative interpretations.

Results

Once a student has determined that going to college is the right option for them and has ideally had an opportunity to go through the college search process, the next step is to make a choice on which college they want to apply to and ultimately attend. In the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, the final phase is choice. This phase emphasizes the choice process where students take the information they gathered, evaluate it and make a decision on which school to attend. Hossler et al. (1989) described choice as the evaluation of alternatives to make a final college selection for matriculation. During this phase, academic performance and socioeconomic status plays a role in the number and type of colleges that students consider (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). According to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, the choice phase occurs in the twelfth grade and is when a student begins to actually apply to specific institutions and decides on which to enroll; this stage culminates the student's college-choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997). Contrary to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, most of the participants in this study engaged in the choice phase the summer after they graduated from high school rather than in their twelfth grade year. In fact, a large number of them were still in the search phase

during their twelfth grade year. When it can time to decide on an institution to attend, factors such as cost, family, and sports proved to be important factors in their decision. Several themes emerged from this study.

Cost of College and Financial Literacy

The primary reason to attend a community college for 14 of the 19 participants was associated with cost. This finding is consistent with both general college choice literature as well as community college choice specific literature (Somers et al., 2006). While the cost of higher education undoubtedly played a role in their decision to attend a community college, it affected them in different ways. A few of the participants had actually been admitted to a four-year university, attended new student orientation and changed their mind once they received a bill for registration. One participant shared,

I made my decision the middle of the summer, towards the beginning of the school year. It was after I went to an orientation at a four-year school and I was registering for classes and I saw the amount and I was like, wow. What both my parents told me finally clicked and so I personally made the decision. I was like, yeah; I don't think I want to go here. I don't want to take out all these loans, and I'm undecided, too, so I decided to go to a community college.

Another student explained,

After attending orientation, I saw my freshman year would have cost me like \$20,000 and that was spooky. Then, I heard about how much it cost for one class at a community college and I thought, why wasn't that my first choice? It's so much less expensive to get the exact same education.

For two other participants, it was the timeliness of receiving scholarship and financial aid information that contributed to their decision to attend a community college. They made their decision only after they found out that they were not receiving enough aid to cover their tuition. One female participant, who was in the top 10% of her graduating class recalled,

I had automatic admissions to four- year schools across the state because of my academics, so I could basically go to any school here that I wanted to. But I did not receive financial aid and did not have enough scholarships to cover the tuition and housing so basically my parents couldn't meet the financial needs of me going to a university. Instead they told me that I had to do the community college thing.

Timing proved to be a deciding factor for the next participant as well.

After I graduated high school I decided to attend a community college because although I had been accepted to two universities, my financial aid hadn't come through yet. One of the schools ended up offering me a scholarship but by the time I got to being able to say, "Yes" or "No," the deadline to accept it had already expired.

St John et al. (2005) found that African American students rely heavily on financial aid and that the greatest barrier for students of low socioeconomic backgrounds is the ability to pay tuition at four-year institutions. Consistent with this research, participants whose choice was influenced by cost, were aware of the cost associated with attending a four-year institution and simply believed that it was out of their or their parent's price range.

Previous research suggests that financial barriers have an influence on students' educational choice (Bers & Galowich, 2002); echoing this finding, two financial barriers that proved to be an influence, to both the participants and their families, was the sticker price associated with the cost of attendance at a four-year institution and their lack of financial literacy regarding ways to fund a college education. More than half of the participants in this study were offered admission into at least one four-year institution; despite their acceptance and academic preparedness, they declined because of a lack of financial understanding on how to pay for it. They did not understand how financial aid and scholarships worked nor could they depend on others to help them. Even those who were not first generation college students described their parents and extended family members being confused about the financial aid

process and anxious about the amount of money associated with them attending a four-year university. One price conscious student describes this as follows,

I chose to come to a community college and not a four-year university because of the cost. The price to go to a four-year was out-of-range for me to be able to pay or for my parents to pay. We were all worried about me going away to college and then having to come back because we ran out of money. So that was our plan, for me to attend a community college so we could save money. Then I would transfer and attend a four-year school.

Most of the participants looked at the community college as being a possible route to the baccalaureate because they could afford on their own without taking out loans or depending on their parents for help. A finding consistent with Smith (2008, 2009) and Styles-Hughes (1987), who suggest that African American students are more likely to not attend their first-choice college due to the lack of financial resources to enroll and to afford tuition. While many knew that they could attend a four year university by taking out a loan, most did not want to carry that type of debt. In fact hearing about college debt from their parents, siblings, and peers played a large role in their decision to attend a community college. A concept highlight by one of the participants,

As far as the cost associated with going away to college, I did not want to be \$20,000 in debt off of one year in college; especially while I was undecided about my major. I have a lot of friends who are doing that. I have a friend who has taken a loan out in her name, her mom's name, her grandparents' name. It's just ridiculous, so I think it's something I can look back on years from now and be glad that I made that decision.

For others, it was seeing what their own siblings went through in regards to college debt. One male participant shared,

I saw what my sister's went through. They graduated and they're doing stuff, I guess, but they have a lot of debt. One sister is 31 and she is still living with our mom even though she has a Master's degree. The other, she finally got out of the house but it took forever and she was still working regular jobs not making a lot of money or anything

after all these years and multiple degrees. So I decided I'll take my time with going into all that debt; that's why I choose to attend a community college.

One participant made a unique decision related to cost and his choice to attend a community college. In high school he had the option to graduate early based on credits he accumulated in junior high and over the summers. He made the decision to graduate early and ended up receiving a scholarship for his effort. Understanding the cost associated with attending college, he chose to enroll at a community college rather than a four year university because he believed that his scholarship would be worth more credit hours based on the cost of attendance

I got a scholarship for graduating high school early. I knew it would get eaten up through a university and obviously not at a community college where all of my credits would be transferable anyway. That scholarship was a major reason for me choosing to attend a community college.

Family

College choice literature consistently cites family as being a major influence (Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Consistent with this research, participants in this study cite family as playing a large role. Many of them revealed that their family members are the ones who influenced them to choose a community college. In fact, two female participants explained that their mothers were the only reasons why they stayed home and enrolled at a community college. One first generation female participant shared,

Despite all of the research I did, I still ended up at a community college. I really wanted to go to a university, but at the end of the day, my mom wanted me to stay home and come to a community college. My mom just didn't want me to move and so I didn't go.

The second recalled,

I stayed home and went to a community college because I don't think my mom was ready for me to leave because we weren't really close when I was growing up and then senior year we were closer than we had ever been before and she just wasn't ready to let go of that relationship that we finally had. I was mad at first but then I started to understand why and I accepted it. I decided, for her, I will stay for a year or two and then I'll go out of the state.

Many of the participants had family members who had previously attended a community college. Those family members often spoke of their own experiences and encouraged the participants to choose the same route, a finding consistent with Somers et al., (2006). For example, one male participant explained how talking to his mom influenced his choice.

Once I started talking to my mom about college, she said a community college was the best route. Because that's what she did, she went to a community college. I mean, my mom is a nurse now so she obviously going to a community college worked for her. I also think that my parents wanted me to go to a community college first to save money.

One of the male participants, received his encouragement to attend a community college from his brother.

My brother went to a community college so he encouraged me to go to one too. He told me not to rush into trying to go away and to think about the amount of money I would be spending. He told me he didn't want me to end up dropping out of my classes because I wasn't ready for a four-year school and then me feeling like I can't do college anymore.

For others, their families played such a large role in financing their education that the only college choice they were given was to attend a community college. This was especially true for one of the student athletes. She recalls her parents telling her that without a scholarship, the community college was her only option.

My parents always told me if you don't get an athletic scholarship, you know, you are going to community college. With four kids, they aren't financially acclimated to put us

all through college without scholarships. We wanted to go to universities, big universities. I wanted to go out of the state so my mom was like get a volleyball scholarship and you can go but if not, I'm not paying that or that's all on you so it was either that or a community college. So once I did not get recruited or offered a scholarship anywhere, I knew I had to go to a community college.

In most college choice literature, location serves as an influence to college choice; most students want to remain close to home or work (Bergerson, 2009; Somers et al., 2006).

However in this study, many of the participants made the choice to attend a community college because of the opportunity to still live at home and have continued support from their family.

Several students valued the curfews and home cooked meals that their parents provided and were not ready to give that up. As a result, they decided to attend a community college.

Sports

Five of the nineteen participants were heavily involved with sports in high school. Once they learned that they were not being recruited to a four-year college, they decided to enroll at a community college with hopes of earning a transfer scholarship. As a result, a major finding of this study was that some students who are academically eligible to attend four-year institutions, choose to attend community colleges for the opportunity to play intercollegiate sports. For all of them, being an athlete was more than just a hobby; it was a lifestyle and choosing to attend a community college served as an alternative route to playing collegiately while still affording to attend college. For example, one first generation female participant who played volleyball shared how important it was for her to remain a student athlete.

Being a student athlete was very important to me. Once I graduated from high school and realized that I would not be playing on a team anymore, I got really sad. For the past 10 years, I have played sports; it is what I am known for. The thought of not playing anymore was just scary. So even though I got into a few four-year schools, I decided to give it one more shot and go to a community college so I could continue playing volleyball and possibly still get recruited by a four-year university.

These participants believed in the values they learned through playing organized sports and wanted to continue being a part of a team, even if it meant delaying the opportunity to attend a four-year university. One of the female participants expressed how much she missed the team aspect of being an athlete.

Being an athlete and on a team was one of the best feelings in the world, one that I wanted to experience in college. I miss that whole aspect. I miss being around the girls. I miss all of that. That one of the main reasons I chose to come here because I want that feeling back.

McDonough et al. (1997) shared in their research on college choice that where a student is being recruited plays a role in the institution they end up attending. This theme, however, did not surface in this exploration. Instead in the case of these participants, not being recruited but still wanting to compete athletically contributed to their decision to attend a community college. Since they did not receive a four-year scholarship as freshman, five of the nineteen participants had hopes of obtaining an athletic scholarship as a transfer student. They viewed their choice to attend a community college as a second chance to being a student-athlete at the collegiate level. One male participant shared his plans for obtaining a scholarship as a transfer student.

I made the decision to attend a community college my senior year when I realized that I was not being recruited or offered any scholarships. That's when I knew that I was going to go to a community college first and then transfer out. That was the best thing to do because I wanted to play sports in college. I figured I would go to a community college and play sports there and try to get a scholarship as a transfer student.

While another explained how sports was his main reason for attending a community college.

One of the main reasons I chose to attend a community college was sports, because I didn't have a scholarship. Even though I ran track and played football, I didn't want to go to a 4-year university on a track scholarship, because I really liked football. That was another main reason why I wanted to go to a community college, so I could be able to

play sports and hopefully get a scholarship to a 4-year university.

Unexpected Circumstances

While most of the participant's choice to attend a community college was based on cost, location and family; a few of them experienced unexpected circumstances that led to their decision. For two of the females, it was unplanned pregnancies, for another female participant it was a knee surgery and for one of the male participants it was a court case that resulted in a felony. Despite these unplanned circumstances, each participant shared how their situation never veered them from their goal of going to college. For example, the female participant who had knee surgery shared how she viewed her circumstance as a part of life and felt she made the best decision for her.

I had to have another knee surgery and it was going to be hard for me to go off to school. I just decided to stay close to home, so I wouldn't be behind and enroll at a community college. It was easier for me to get around campus on crutches here than it would have been the university. I knew in making my decision that I could do something way better than this but due to circumstances, I wasn't able to. It didn't make me feel dumb, or anything like that. It's just like I got pushed back, because I had to have knee surgery, which wasn't a big deal, because that's life. As long as I knew I could start college and not be behind all the way, it wasn't a big deal to me.

Age Ain't Nothing but a Number

When asked about their decision to attend a community college rather than a four-year institution, more than half of the participants simply said "I wasn't ready" or "I wasn't prepared." They then shared reasons that included a lack of maturity, lack of self-discipline, the desire to remain at home, and having other responsibilities. All reasons that contributed to their intentional decision to attend a community college rather than a four-year university despite being academically eligible.

All of the male participants, and a few of the female participants, believed that they were not mature enough to go away to college and instead wanted to stay home and attend a community college. One male participant remembers being scared to move away from home

I was scared to move away from home. I was immature. I knew that if I went and moved away and stayed in a dorm, I would probably be out all night and not get enough rest or sleep so that I could do well in school. Because of that, I decided to stay at home and go to a community college.

Similarly, another male participant explained how he did not want to be the guy away at college wasting money and not doing well in school.

Leaving right out of high school, I wouldn't have been ready. I would still have been childish. I mean, I would be up late having fun, living the college life and would have been going to class late or not going at all. All the freedom you have in college; that was in my head, too I was thinking, "I'll go out there and fail the classes. I'm just wasting this money for nothing." I didn't want to do that; I didn't want that to be me.

One participant shared his personal feelings about his maturity level and how seeing some of the mistakes his friends made when going off to college contributed to his decision to attend a community college.

Just because you graduate high school, doesn't automatically make you mature. After high school I still had things that I had to take care of for me to make myself mature enough to be able to actually handle going off to college. I mean, I know if I would have went away after high school, I would have just went out all the time and I might already be doing bad in my second semester. Honestly I might already be back home or kicked out or something. That's what happened to my friend. Like one of my friends, he just got enrolled in school and he wasn't down there a full week before they kicked him out for getting in trouble.

Another participant shared how a lack of self-discipline negatively impacted his friend who went away to college and how seeing that contributed to his decision to attend a community college.

I have a friend, he didn't get kicked out of school, but he was away at school and didn't have the discipline to get up and go to class every day. He went for the first month and

then just stopped going. He didn't realize once you go to college you have got to stop partying and go to class. He was just there wasting money and that is something I didn't want to do. But I knew in high school that I was just like him and would have probably done the same thing. Man seeing that let me know that I wasn't ready and confirmed for me that I needed to be at the community college, Yeah, that let me know that my decision to start at a community college was the right one for me.

All of the participants who felt they were not ready for college discussed the importance of having self-discipline; something that they all believed that did not have coming out of high school. Two participants candidly shared the lack of self-discipline they believed that they had at the time that they graduated from high school.

I wasn't ready or disciplined enough to go off to a four-year university after high school. My mindset was still, you graduated high school, take a year off and go ahead and have some fun, and that was my thing. I loved to hang out with my friends and party. I was the life of the party. But I did not want to go away to college thinking that this is my time to party. So I would rather start out slow and progress my way into being the student that I want to be, someone that has already been successful at a community college and is disciplined enough to know when to party and when to study.

Similarly, the other recalled,

Even though I could have gone to a four-year university out of high school, I don't think that I was ready. I would have struggled because there is so much going on. I have friends at four-year universities and seeing what they were doing, I think that I would be so focused on my social life and social status that I wouldn't be focusing on my school work. Like some of my friends are really struggling now at a four-year school and me, well I am doing really well.

Acknowledging that they would have done well academically, two of the participants were concerned about not being disciplined enough to avoid distractions and voiced their reasons for wanting choosing to attend a community college.

Academically, I would have done ok at a four-year but I wouldn't have done as well as I would have wanted to because I would be trying to do other things. I would prioritize everything wrong. With me, it takes me awhile to like get the hang of stuff. I feel like I'd put friends and parties and social events before studying and that's how it was with me in high school, even like junior and senior year. I'm really bad at studying. But I'm really good at paying attention in class but I feel like I would have distractions in class, with

friends and boys and stuff. That is what really made me consider a community college. I didn't think I was disciplined enough to go away to school.

The second participant shared,

At a four-year I probably wouldn't have been in the same position I am now as far as my grades. Here at the community college I am able to focus because there aren't a lot of distractions. At a four-year school, I probably would not have went to class some mornings because I would stay up late partying. I probably would have skipped class because I'm not very disciplined and get easily distracted so I think coming here has helped me.

The idea of being away from family was also a reason why some of the participants felt they were not ready to go away to college. Two participants shared how having a structure at home was something that they just weren't ready to give up. For example, one of them shared how continuing to live at home was very important to her.

Still being with my family was really important for me after high school. Still having the home structure, still have home support, as you start stepping out a little bit on your own. Right out of high school I might have struggled a little bit more. I think going to a community college has allowed me to mature so that I am ready to handle that type of environment more.

While another shared how he was scared to move away from home.

I was scared to move away from home. I was immature. I knew that if I went and moved away and stayed in a dorm, I would probably be out all night and not getting enough rest or sleep. If I would've just went to a university, I probably would've failed the first semester. It would've been so many options and distractions. I just wasn't ready to leave home after high school; I knew that I needed my mom constantly on my back every day to make sure I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Some of the participants knew that going away to a four year wasn't the right choice for them at the time because of other responsibilities they had to take care of; like children and work. One participant shared how she considered her responsibilities in her decision to attend a community college.

I really thought that a two-year would be better for me at the time. I had all these

people telling me to go to a university, a four-year, but I didn't think that I was ready for that at the moment, so I chose to do the community college. I felt like I already had a lot of responsibilities and I just felt like it would be harder and I would be actually on campus. It would be easier for me to deal with everything else, my kid and work, school and all that, while attending a community college rather than a four-year.

Discussion

Research suggests that a student's college choice decision is influenced by family and peers, socioeconomic status, and institutional fit (Freeman, 2005; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Rouse, 1994; Van Camp, Barden & Sloan, 2010). Findings from this study add to this research and acknowledge that community college choice influences for academically eligible African American students vary from traditional college choice influences. While factors such as cost, location, and the role of peers played a role in their choice, the participants in this study were also heavily influenced by sports, self-perceptions of maturity and the perceptions of their family members. For example, for some not being recruited by a four-year university, despite being academically eligible to attend, influenced them to choose to attend a community college. This finding extends Freeman's (2005) model of predetermination to community college students and illustrates the appropriateness of Somers et al.'s (2006) model of community college choice for African Americans while adding additional personal and institutional factors that influence college choice.

Findings also suggest that the college choice process for the African American students in this study is similar to the college choice process for African Americans in general. Many findings were consistent with the African American college choice process revealed in current literature and follow the 3 stage traditional model of predetermination, search and choice. As a result of their choice to attend a community college, despite being academically eligible to

attend a four-year university, the participants in this study undermatched. Research suggest that a large number of academically eligible students, who undermatch by enrolling at less selective colleges, are losing out by not attending institutions with greater resources, higher graduation rates and more prestige (Roderick et al., 2008, 2009). Findings from this study reveal that despite undermatching, all of the participants felt that attending a community college fosters academic preparedness for four-year institutions, supports personal development and promotes academic success.

Implications

Recognizing that the majority of the nation's minority students choose to attend a community college over a traditional four-year institution (Joshi, Beck & Nsiah, 2009), more has to be done to support community colleges as a pathway to the baccalaureate. An implication then for institutional, state, and national policymakers is to consider focusing on educating the community about the role that community colleges play in higher education.

This can be done in various ways. First, continue to impart knowledge to the world on the work that is being done at community colleges and the role that it plays in local communities. Community Colleges were given national attention when included in the President's state of the union address and will continue to need attention from national figures. Second, provide funding opportunities to community colleges so that they can strengthen their infrastructure, offer appropriate support services, enhance their academic offerings, and recruit the brightest professionals. They too want to contribute to the Nation's completion agenda but want to do so as equal partners with their four-year counterparts. Lastly, provide assistance for two-year and four-year colleges to participate in articulation agreements, reverse transfer

programs, and state wide common course numbering systems. This would strengthen the reputation of the coursework offered at community colleges while encouraging community colleges and four-year universities to work together on creating a seamless transition for students and building a stronger pathway to the baccalaureate.

References

- American Association of Community Colleges. (2013). *Community college fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/2013facts_fold_revised.pdf
- Bergerson, A. (2009). College choice and access to college: Moving policy, research, and practice to the 21st century. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 35 (4), 1-141.
- Bers, T.H., and Galowich, P.M. (2002). Using survey and focus group research to learn about parents' roles in the community college choice process. *Community College Review*, 29, 67.
- Best, J. W., and Kahn, J. V. (1998). *Research in education* (8th ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon
- Bouse, G. A., & Hossler, D. (1991). Studying college choice: A progress report. *Journal of College Admissions*, 130, 11-16.
- Cabrera, A. F., & La Nasa, S. (2001). On the path to college: Three critical tasks facing America's disadvantaged. *Research in Higher Education*, 42(2), 119–150.
- Callahan, W. C. (2003). *Effects of factors and people of influence on college choice comparing general population and top academic students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska at Omaha).
- Chapman, D. W. (1981). A model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 52, 490-505.

- Chapman, D. W. (1984). *Toward a theory of college choice: A model of college search and choice behavior*. Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta Press.
- Christie, R. L., & Hutcheson, P. (2003). Net effects of institutional type on baccalaureate degree attainment of "traditional" students. *Community College Review*, 31(2), 1-20.
- Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2008). *The American community college* (5th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J.W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications
- Engberg, M., & Wolniak, G. (2009). Navigating disparate pathways to college: Examining the conditional effects of race on enrollment decisions. *The Teachers College Record*, 111(9), 2255-2279.
- Filter, S. (2010). *The choice-of-college decision of academically talented students*. (Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University).
- Freeman, K. (1998). African Americans and college choice: Cultural considerations and policy implications. In K. Freeman (Ed.), *African American culture and heritage in higher education research and practice* (pp. 181-194). Westport, CN: Praeger.
- Freeman, K. (1999). No services needed? The case for mentoring high-achieving African American students. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 74(2), 15-26.
- Freeman, K. (2005). *African Americans and college choice the influence of family and school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Freeman, K., & Thomas, G. (2002). Black colleges and college choice: Characteristics of students that choose HBCUs. *Review of Higher Education*, 25(3), 349-358.

- Gasman, M., Lundy Wagner, V., Ransom, T., & Bowman, N. (2010). Unearthing promise and potential: Our nation's historically Black colleges and universities. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 35(5), 1-134
- Gumport, P. J. (2007). Sociology of higher education: An evolving field. In P. J. Gumport (Ed.), *Sociology of higher education* (pp. 17-52). Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Hanson, K.H., & Litten, L.H. (1982). The college attendance/choice process. In P. Perun (Ed.), *The undergraduate woman: Issues in education*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Harper, S. R., & Nichols, A. H. (2008). Are they not all the same? Racial heterogeneity among Black male undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(3), 199-214.
- Hearn, J. C. (1991). Academic and nonacademic influence on the college destinations of 1980 high school graduates. *Sociology of Education*, 64(3), 158-171.
- Horton, D. (2009). Class and cleats: Community college student athletes and academic success. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2009(147), 15-27.
- Hossler, D., Braxton, J., & Coopersmith, G. (1989). Understanding student college choice. In J.C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education and research*. Volume V. (pp. 213-288) New York: Agathin Press.
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K.S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policymakers. *College and University*, 62 (3), 207-222.
- Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N. (1999). *Going to college: How social, economic, and*

- educational factors influence the decisions students make*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jackson, G.A. (1982). Public efficiency and private choice in higher education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(2), 237-247.
- Joshi, P.V, & Beck, K, A. (2009). Student characteristics affecting the decision to enroll in a community college: Economic rationale and empirical evidence. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 33, 805-822.
- Kinzie, J., Palmer, M., Hayek, J., Hossler, D., Jacob, S., & Cummings, H. (2004, September). *Fifty years of college choice: Social, political and institutional influences on the decision-making process*. 5(3). Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.
- Kurlaender, M. (2006). Choosing community college: Factors affecting Latino college choice. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 133, 7-16.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1989). *Design qualitative research*. California: Sage.
- Maxey, J. (1995). Are Black students less likely to enroll at their first-choice college?. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 7, 100-01.
- McCullough, A. K. (2010). *Factors that impact two-year college attendance and program enrollment among community college students*. (Doctoral Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges. How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

- McDonough, P.M., Antonio, A.L., & Trent, J.W. (1997). Black students, Black colleges: An African American college choice model. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education*, 3(1), 9-36.
- Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). *Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by level of student, sex, attendance status, and race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1976 through 2010*, NCES 2011-237. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Nettles, M. T., Millett, C. M., Association of Community College Trustees, A. A., & American Association of Community Colleges, W. C. (2000). Student Access in Community Colleges. *New Expeditions: Charting the Second Century of Community Colleges*. Issues Paper No. 1
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 117-141.
- Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., & Moeller, E. (2008). *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research
- Rouse, C. (1994). What to do after high school? The two-year vs. four-year college enrollment decision. In R. Ehrenberg (Ed.), *Contemporary policy issues in education* (pp.59-88). Ithaca, NY: ILR press.

- Santos, M. (2004). The motivations of first-semester Hispanic two-year college students. *Community College Review*, 32(3), 18-34.
- Schoenherr, H. J. (2009). *Beyond academic reputation: Factors that influence the college of first choice for high achieving students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida).
- Smith, M. J. (2008). College choice process of first generation Black female students: Encouraged to what end?. *Negro Educational Review*, 59(3), 147-161.
- Smith, M. J. (2009). Right directions, wrong maps understanding the involvement of low-SES African American parents to enlist them as partners in college choice. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(2), 171-196.
- Smith, M.J. & Fleming, M.K. (2006). African American parents in the search stage of college choice: Unintentional contributions to the female to make college enrollment gap. *Urban Education*, 41(1), 71-110.
- Somers, P. Haines, K., Keenem B., Bauer, J. Pfeiffer, M. McCluskey, J., Settle, J. & Sparks, B. (2006). Towards a theory of choice for community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 30(1), 53-67.
- Stokes, T. & Somers, P. (2004). *Two-year college choice: A national study*. Unpublished paper.
- St. John, E. P., Paulsen, M. B., & Carter, D. F. (2005). Diversity, college costs, and postsecondary opportunity: An examination of the financial nexus between college choice and persistence for African Americans and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(5), 545-569.
- Strayhorn, T. L., & Terrell, M. (2010). *The Evolving Challenges of Black College Students: New Insights for Policy, Practice, and Research*. Herndon, VA: Stylus Publishing.

- Styles-Hughes, M. (1987). Black students' participation in higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 28(6), 532-545
- Sztam, S. R. (2003). *Selecting a college or university: A study of students and their parents*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Florida International University).
- Townsend, B. K. (2007). Interpreting the influence of community college attendance upon Baccalaureate attainment. *Community College Review*, 35(2), 128-136.
- Townsend, B. K. (2009). The two-year college as a first choice, second chance institution for baccalaureate-degree holders. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 33(9), 749-764.
- Van Camp, D., Barden, J., & Sloan, L. R. (2010). Predictors of Black students' race-related reasons for choosing an HBCU and intentions to engage in racial identity-relevant behaviors. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 36(2), 226-250
- Wood, J. L. (2013). The same...but different: Examining background characteristics among Black males in public two year colleges. *Journal of Negro Education*, 82(1), 47-61.

APPENDIX A
EXTENDED INTRODUCTION

The important role of the community college in fostering postsecondary access and success for underserved students cannot be overstated. Nettles and Millet (2000) referred to it as “one of the most important innovations for higher education in the 20th century” (p. 1). For students of color, community colleges serve as an important path for entering higher education; in 2011, students of color represented 48% of students enrolled at community colleges (AACC, 2013). Comparatively, in 2011, students of color made up 27-30% of the student population in four-year institutions (Reyes, 2011). These statistics demonstrate the significance of community colleges in the U.S. education system as a whole and to minority student populations specifically.

Community colleges are significant to higher education for various reasons. For example, they provide a pathway to the baccalaureate through programs such as dual credit, transfer initiatives, and basic skill development. No longer home to only the less affluent or academically underprepared (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), community colleges also serve as the first college of choice to students who will become future lawyers, doctors, scientists, and engineers (Townsend, 2009). Prevalent reasons that students choose to attend community colleges include proximity and course scheduling flexibility as well as college preparation and cost of attendance (Kurlaender, 2006; Somers et al., 2006; Townsend, 2009). Scholars also suggest that students may choose to attend a community college as a result of an educational system that prepares students for destinations that match their family background (Hallinan, 2000; Kurlaender, 2006). The purpose of this study was to explain why academically qualified students of color are choosing to attend community colleges. Academically qualified is defined in the context of this study as students who meet the minimum admission standards for four-

year institutions. All of the participants in this study met high school curriculum requirements and the required grade point average. Although minimum admissions criteria differ across institutions, these generally include high school grade point average (GPA), specific high school curriculum that is aligned with college admissions standards, and standardized college admissions test scores. This phenomenon of academically qualified students who choose to attend community colleges is known as “undermatching” (Roderick et al., 2008).

Undermatching occurs when students attend a college that is less selective than one that they are academically qualified to attend (Roderick et al., 2008). It is most common among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minorities (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Many times undermatching is a result of students attending a secondary school that does not promote a college going culture through educational opportunities, resources, or information. Parental education and family income are also strongly correlated with college choices and may lead to a student undermatching (Bowen et al., 2009). As a result of undermatching, students may take longer to earn their degree, or they may not graduate at all (Bowen et al., 2009). A better understanding of undermatching will help community colleges to better serve this population.

Across all institutions, college completion is of value not only to the individual but also to society. College graduates are more likely than high school graduates to live healthier, longer lives and to have insurer provided health insurance and pension plans (Baum & Ma, 2008). Benefits for society include less dependence on public aid, an increase in civic engagement and participation, and contributions to the economy. In regards to educational attainment disparities, African Americans stand to lose a great deal to postsecondary undermatching.

Nationally, 49% of all African American undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges (AACC, 2013). Academically qualified community college students who do not complete or transfer to four-year institutions represent a loss of talent and investment (Reyes, 2011). In order to improve their degree completion and transfer rates, it is important to understand the decision-making process of academically qualified African American students who begin at community colleges. Within the literature, African American student undermatching tends to focus on highly qualified students who choose to enroll in less-selective four-year colleges and universities. However, given the comparatively large number of African American students who enter the higher education pipeline through community colleges, it is important to explore African American undermatching at these institutions.

Problem Statement

College choice is a complex process that includes myriad factors that influence the decision to go to college as well as the choice of which college to attend. Most college choice research has focused on traditional students, and more recently first generation students and students of color (Bergerson, 2009; Chapman, 1981; Freeman, 1998, 2005; Hearn, 1991; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Maxey, 1995; McDonough, 1997). This research has helped to explain the college choice process and the stages that students go through when choosing which college to attend. While this research has been helpful, a gap in research regarding community college choice among academically qualified African Americans remains (Bers & Galowich, 2002; Somers et al., 2006; Townsend, 2007).

Studies that have investigated college choice factors for academically qualified students consistently cite academic reputation, academic rigor and expertise of faculty as top indicators

of choice (Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Goenner & Snaith, 2004; Manski & Wise, 1983). For example, top performing high school students, such as valedictorians and salutatorians typically choose to attend high ranking universities such as state flagships, private, and elite research institutions. Being academically qualified, however, does not only include students who are at the very top of their class. Academically qualified students comprise a wide range of students who are not only at the top of their class, but also somewhere in the middle. Academically qualified students include those who meet minimum eligibility requirements for entry into four-year colleges and universities. These could be students who took standardized tests during their high school career and tested at college ready levels and/or may have participated in dual credit and advanced placement courses. Students who are considered academically qualified could also include those who completed the required high school curriculum for college entry as well as those who obtained appropriate grade point averages to make themselves eligible for four-year institution admissions. Despite meeting four-year college admissions standards, a large number of these students are choosing to attend community colleges (Bowen et al., 2009; Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

This raises questions about why academically qualified students choose to attend community colleges (Filter, 2010; Santos, 2004; Sztam, 2003) and the factors that influence their decision (Dale, 2010; Hu & Hossler, 2000; Kinzie et al., 2004; Schoenherr, 2009). Limited research explores undermatching (Bowen et al., 2009; Light & Strayer, 2000; Smith et al., 2012), even less focuses on undermatching among African American community college students. Exploring the college choice process of African American community college students who undermatch will enable parents, teachers, counselors and higher education professionals to

better serve this population in making the right college decision. Light and Strayer (2000) found that students of all academic ability levels have a higher probability of completing a degree if the selectivity level of the college they attend matches their measured academic skill level. Despite this, more minority students, regardless of academic ability and eligibility to attend four-year institutions, are beginning their careers at community colleges. In fact, in 2008 more African Americans chose to attend two-year colleges (41%) when compared to for-profit institutions (33%) or four-year universities (26%) (NCES, 2011). However, research has shown that institutional selectivity plays a role in student persistence and degree completion as a result of spending per student, quality of faculty and student body, as well as availability of support and resources (Hoxby, 2009; Sherwin, 2012).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore why academically qualified African American students, those eligible to attend four-year institutions, choose to attend community colleges and how this choice affects their college experience and aspirations of obtaining the baccalaureate. This research sought to understand what happens during the college choice process for African Americans students. More specifically, how do these students successfully navigate the college choice process, what influences their decision to choose to attend a community college, and what is their experience at a community college like?

Research Questions

This qualitative study explores the college choice process for academically qualified African American students who choose to attend community colleges and the role

undermatching, if any, has played in their college experience. Four research questions guided this study:

1. What is the college choice process for academically qualified African American students who start higher education at a community college?
2. What personal factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice?
3. What institutional factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice?
4. How do academically qualified African American students describe their community college experience in regards to the concept of undermatching?

This study examined why academically qualified American African students choose to attend a community college and identified which factors played the largest roles in their choice.

Significance of the Study

College choice research has existed for decades and has contributed to the understanding of the college choice process for students who choose to attend four-year institutions (Bergerson, 2009; Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Chapman, 1981, 1984; Hossler & Gallagher 1987; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982). More recently there has been an increase in the literature regarding students who choose to attend a Historically Black College and University instead of a Predominately White Institution as well as students who choose to attend a public university rather than a private one (Freeman, 1998, 2005; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Gasman et al., 2010; Maxey, 1995; McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). Researchers have also investigated college choice factors for students who chose to

attend community colleges (Christie & Hutcheson, 2003; Lee et al., 2004; McCullough, 2010; Santos, 2004; Townsend, 2007, 2009), and why high achieving students chose to attend four-year colleges and universities (Callahan, 2003; Dale, 2010; Kinzie et al., 2004; Schoenherr, 2009; Sztam, 2003). However, there are few studies that include data regarding college choice factors related to academically qualified students attending community colleges (Filter, 2010; Schoenherr, 2009). In addition to the need to understand community college choice, scholars have considered how college enrollment decision-making factors differ based upon racial/ethnic affiliation (Kurlaendar, 2006; Perna, 2000) but have yet to consider race and academic achievement collectively.

Along with the need to study community college choice, several scholars have called for the examination of within-group differences among African American collegians (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Wood, 2013). Research is necessary to fully understand why academically qualified African American students choose to attend community colleges given the consequences of undermatching. With such a small volume of literature available on the college choice decisions of African American students, understanding what influences their decision making process will help higher education professionals as well as their community to better serve them educationally and developmentally (Bonner, 2000, 2001).

This research sheds light in our understanding of African American college choice in general and community college choice in particular. More specifically, it answered the research call made by Strayhorn and Terrell (2010) to “unpack the within-group heterogeneity that exists among Black student populations” (p. 209) and examined the college choice process of academically qualified African Americans who begin their careers at community colleges. The

factors that influenced their college choice were examined as well as their experience at the community college while they aspired to obtain a baccalaureate degree. This adds to the scholarship on African American postsecondary undermatching and the limited literature on their college choice process.

Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions are provided for clarification purposes of the terms used throughout this study:

Academically qualified- For the purpose of this study, academically qualified students are high school graduates who met minimum college admissions standards by:

- Completed high school coursework that makes them eligible for enrolling in a four-year college or university. In the case of Texas, this means completing at least the “Recommended High School Program.” Specifically, these courses are:
 - Courses and Credits that Fulfill the RHSP are:
 - English, Language Arts - 4 credits (English I, II, III, IV)
 - Mathematics - 4 credits (Must include Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry.
 - Science - 4 credits (These might include Biology, Chemistry, Physics or Principles of Technology I.)
 - Social Studies - 4 credits (Courses will be World History, World Geography, U.S. History since Reconstruction and two .5 credit courses, U.S. Government and Economics.)
 - Language other than English - 2 credits (Must take courses in the same language.)
 - Physical Education - 1 credit
 - Fine Arts - 1 credit
 - Speech - .5 credit
 - Electives - 5.5 credits
- Having a high school gpa of at least a 2.5

Academic Undermatch- occurs when a student's academic credentials permit them access to a college or university that is more selective than the postsecondary alternative they actually choose (Smith, et al., 2012).

College choice: "The process through which students decide whether and where to go to college" (Bergerson, 2009, p.2)

Selectivity Level- Colleges are classified by selectivity level using the Barron's Admissions Competitive Index. The index is based on SAT/ACT scores of accepted students, admission rate and the GPA and class rank required for admission. Using the categories from the index, Smith, Pender and Howell (2012), provides the following selectivity levels:

- 1.) Very Selective (Most Competitive, Highly Competitive)
- 2.) Selective (Very Competitive)
- 3.) Somewhat Selective (Competitive)
- 4.) Nonselective (Less Competitive, Noncompetitive)
- 5.) Two-Year College
- 6.) No College

Substantial undermatch- Occurs when students enroll in a college that is two selectivity levels below the level they could have attended (Smith et al., 2012).

APPENDIX B

EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This review of literature begins by exploring the past and current status of African American college students; particular attention is given to the number of African Americans who have earned college degrees. Second, the topic of African American college choice is then explored and a review of the most common institutional types selected by African Americans is provided. Finally the review will address prominent college choice models and influences as well as explore the concept of undermatching. This review closes with an explanation of the conceptual framework developed from relevant research that is applied and used as a lens in this study

African American College Students

Education has played a vital role in the past and current lives of African Americans in the United States. Long before the abolition of slavery, African Americans recognized the importance and power of education and viewed it as the key to their freedom (Gasman, 2007). Despite living in a society that has systematically oppressed and discriminated against them (Ortiz & Santos, 2009), African Americans have attended college since the 1800's and view a college education as the portal to economic security and family stability (Gasman, 2007)

Through the eras of segregation and integration, the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and important court cases like *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, African Americans have continued to seek equal opportunity to pursue education. Although initiatives like the creation of financial aid programs, the gains of the civil rights movement, and the war on poverty have all helped to increase access for African American students in

postsecondary education (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003), significant strides still need to be made.

Historically, African Americans have been underrepresented in American higher education. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011) reports historic data and documents the disparities between African American and White American educational attainment by type of degrees awarded. For example, during the 1989-1990 academic year, of the 455,102 associate degrees that were conferred, only 34,326 (7.5%) were awarded to African Americans compared to 376,816 (82.8%) awarded to White Americans. In the awarding of bachelor degrees, 1,051,344 were conferred during the same academic year of which 887,151 (84.4%) were given to White Americans while 61,046 (5.8%) were given to African Americans. Disparities also rang true for graduate degrees. During the 1989-1990 academic year, 330, 152 master's degree were awarded of which 259,196 (78.5%) were conferred to White Americans while 15,752 (4.8%) to African Americans. Comparatively in regards to doctorates, 103,508 were earned during the same academic year of which 81,811 (79%) were awarded to White Americans and 4,142 (4%) to African Americans (NCES, 2011).

Figure B. 1. Degrees conferred during 1989-1990 (NCES, 2011, Tables 297, 300, 303, 306).

Considering more current data, NCES (2012) reports that during the 2009-2010 academic year, 833,337 associate degrees were conferred of which 552, 863 (66.3%) were awarded to White Americans and 113,905 (13.7%) to African Americans. In regards to bachelor's degrees, 1,602,480 were conferred during this same academic year with 1,167,499 (72.9%) awarded to White Americans and 164,844 (10.3%) to African Americans. At a time where graduate degrees are becoming necessary for job opportunities and economic stability, there were 611,693 master's degree conferred during the 2009-2010 academic year with 445,038 (72.8%) being awarded to White Americans and 76,458 (12.5%) to African Americans. Conversely, the number of doctoral degrees conferred was 140, 505 with 104,426 (74.3%) awarded to White Americans and 10,417 awarded to African Americans (7.4%) (NCES, 2012)

Figure B. 2. Degrees conferred during 2009-2010 (NCES, 2012-045, Indicator 47).

Statistics like the ones mentioned above support the need for research regarding the enrollment, retention, and graduation of African American college students as a whole. Concepts such as college choice and academic undermatching need to be explored and understood to best serve a population who may be in danger of continuing to be left behind.

African American College Choices

Choosing which college to attend is not an easy decision; with over 2,774 colleges and universities and 1,132 community colleges in the United States (NCES, 2012) the decision is complex to say the least. College choice has been defined as “the process through which students decide whether and where to go to college” (Bergerson, 2009, p.2). Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) define the concept of college choice as a “complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of

advanced vocational training” (p.234). There are various definitions of what college choice is and each acknowledges that it is a decision and a process. Much of the research regarding college choice is centered on factors that may influence college choice, like cost and location, and various college choice models have been created to better understand the process for students.

Historically, African Americans have not been a focal point in many college choice studies (Chapman 1981, Jackson 1982, Hossler & Gallgher, 1987); however recent attention has been given to this population and multiple factors that influence their college choice decision have been identified (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 1998, 1999, 2005; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997)

Freeman (2005) explored African American college choice in her qualitative study in which she interviewed 12 African American first-year college students. Unlike other investigations on college choice (McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2009), Freeman specifically focused on African American students’ approach to the college choice decision-making process. From her study, she posits that African American students approach the college choice decision-making process from a cultural lens that is predicated by immediate family as well as their high school curriculum. Freeman builds on McDonough’s (1997) findings that college choice process differs based on race/ethnicity and socioeconomics and asserts that although African American students aspire to attend college at percentages equal to White students, a disconnect exists between African American students’ aspirations and their actual enrollment in any higher education institution (Freeman, 2005). Maxy (1995) highlights this disconnect in their research by acknowledging that most African American high school students begin the college choice

process as juniors and seniors which is much later than their White counterparts. In addition to the previously mentioned factors that influence college choice, Freeman (2005) considers race, cultural characteristics, school characteristics, and family/kinship as variables when exploring college choice influences of African Americans. Similar to Freeman, this study sought to explore both personal and institutional factors that African American students perceive as influences to their college choice process and decisions.

Institutional Types and College Choices

Although much is known about the experiences of African Americans in different types of higher education institutions (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Gasman, 2007; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010; Wilson, 1994; Wood & Vasquez Urias, 2012), less is known about why they choose certain institutional types over others (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Townsend, 2009; Van Camp, Barden, & Sloan, 2010). Though various institutional types exist, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), most African American students choose to attend two-year colleges (41%) and for-profit institutions (33%) more than four-year universities (26%).

Figure B. 3. African American Enrollment 2008 (NCES, 2012-045, Indicator 47).

Much of the reason for their choice includes: socioeconomic status, background, academic ability and high school track (Bowen et al., 2009). Although for-profit institutions are becoming increasingly more attractive to African Americans, historically Black college and universities, predominately White institutions and community colleges are amongst the most popular.

For-Profit Institutions

For-profit institutions, also referred to as career colleges and proprietary schools, offer a variety of vocational, technical, academic and workforce related programs (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2003). They are established and owned by individuals and corporations and are designed to serve the best interests of the company owners and shareholders (Wood & Vasquez Orias, 2012). In the past two decades, this institutional type has become popular among various populations, especially minorities. Specifically, for-profit institutions serve a high proportion of first-generation, African Americans and Hispanics who are adult learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; Riegg, 2006). Outcomes such as high graduation rates for certificates and associate degree programs, student retention, and workforce employment help to make this institutional type a viable option (U.S. GAO, 2011).

Despite their popularity, recent research suggests that minority males are more satisfied at community colleges rather than for-profit institutions. In a recent study, Wood and Vasques Urias (2012) evaluated student satisfaction by comparing outcomes for minority males in community colleges and for-profit institutions. Data was derived from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 2003/2009). BPS is a nationally representative study designed to examine first-year students' experiences in postsecondary education. Their

sample represented 253,700 minority men who attended community colleges and proprietary schools. Overall findings reveal that minority males who attended community colleges are significantly more satisfied than those enrolled at proprietary institutions. Specifically they found that minority male students who attended a community college have greater satisfaction with their major, quality of education, and the cost-effectiveness of their educational pursuits than their counterparts at for-profit institutions (Wood and Vasques Urias, 2012). Hence, while enrollment trends and past studies suggest that minority males are more likely to graduate from proprietary schools (Bailey, Badway, & Gumport, 2001; U.S. GAO, 2011), recent research shows that they are also less likely to be satisfied, more likely to be unemployed and owe greater monies in student loans than their public college counterparts (Mullin, 2010, U.S. GAO, 2011; Wood & Vasques Urias, 2012)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been a part of African American education since the 1800's and in 2009 served approximately 250,000 African American students (Gasman, 2009). Most African Americans attended historically Black colleges until the last quarter of the 20th century (Freeman, 1999; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Gasman, 2007; Gasman, 2009) as they served as one of the only choices that African Americans had for higher education due to segregation and limited access. Allen et al. (2007) indicate that "HBCUs play important roles in the perpetuation of Black culture, the improvement of Black community life, and the preparation of the next generation of the Black leadership" (p.263). In a quantitative study on African Americans choice to attend an HBCU, McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) found that religion (being Baptist), the college's reputation, and relatives' desires are among

the top reasons as to why students chose to attend. Benavides (1996) also proposes that students who are looking to embrace history and tradition typically consider attending an HBCU. Similar to these findings, Tobolowsky et al. (2005) cite family ties, personal goals and familial expectations as important factors that contribute to the decision to attend an HBCU.

In Freeman's (1999) qualitative study on African American college choice, she found three major influences on selecting an HBCU: (a) knowing someone who attends an HBCU (cultural affinity), (b) seeking roots, and (c) lack of cultural awareness. For example her findings revealed African Americans who attend HBCUs often attend the alma mater of a parent, sibling, or close friend. Some felt isolated from their cultural heritage and longed for a deeper understanding of it. Others who may not have been educated in a K-12 African American context (i.e. African American teachers or classmates) desired a postsecondary experience that provided a connection to the African American community. Following Freeman's (1999) findings on African American college choice, Van Camp et al. (2010) surveyed 109 undergraduates who were attending an HBCU and validated the importance of race-related reasons for college choice. Analyzing the reasons for choosing an HBCU, they suggest the opportunity to develop racial identity in a predominately Black environment as a driving force behind the choice to attend. They also cite contact with Black students and faculty, class offerings, available student organizations, and historic legacy as reasons student choose to attend HBCUs (Tobolowsky et al., 2005; Van Camp et al., 2010). While acknowledging that all students do not choose to attend HBCUs for race-related reasons, they argue that these race-related reasons are comparable in importance to other reasons for college choice.

HBCUs play a unique role in American higher education; as evidenced in high levels of achievement and measured by their student persistence, graduation rates, and student satisfaction (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Freeman, 1997; Van Camp et al., 2010). While considered a popular option by African Americans, HBCUs also produce the largest number of African American graduates in the fields of Law, Science and Engineering (Gasman et al., 2010; Perna et al., 2009). For example, of the top 20 leading producers of African American bachelor's degrees in STEM fields, all but three are HBCUs (Borden & Brown, 2004.)

This idea is substantiated by data from Fleming's (1984) study of 2,591 African Americans college students who attended HBCUs and predominantly White institutions. She found that those who attended HBCUs were more comfortable and successful in their HBCU environments and demonstrated higher academic achievement, greater college satisfaction and had more satisfying relationships with faculty. African Americans students at HBCUs experience higher intellectual gains and have more favorable psychosocial adjustment, more positive self-images, stronger racial pride, and higher aspirations (Fleming, 1984; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Gasman, 2009; Gasman et al., 2010); all reasons why HBCUs serve as a popular college choice for African Americans.

Predominately White Institutions (PWI)

Equal access to education for all Americans was reasoned a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and by the 1970s, after the G.I. Bill and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, more African Americans began to choose to attend predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Freeman, 1999). In fact, even though the benefits of HBCUs are well documented, the

majority of African Americans attend PWIs (Allen, 1988, 1991; Fleming, 1984; Walpole, 2009; White, 1998).

In regards to college choice, McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) suggest that being recruited by an athletic department, proximity to home, and academic reputation are influences for African Americans who choose to attend PWIs. Flemming (1984) and Guiffrida & Douthit, (2010) point out that PWIs greatly outnumber HBCUs. Adding to the point of access, Gasman et al. (2010) reports the number of four-year HBCUs consistently remaining at 105 or fewer institutions, representing generally 3% of American postsecondary institutions. While the number of HBCUs compared to PWIs impacts African American college choice, so does the geographic location of HBCUs. Most HBCUs are located in the Southeastern United States, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands (Gasman et al., 2010); locations that students may or may not be willing to travel to.

Freeman and Thomas (2002) add financial assistance as a reason why African American students select PWIs. In a study of the role of institutional type on African American college choice, Freeman (1999) interviewed 70 students through group interviews. Implicit in her findings were patterns that suggest students who attend predominantly White private high schools, were more likely to consider attending HBCUs and those students attending predominantly Black high schools were more likely to consider attending PWIs. In fact, her findings reveal that African American students who had virtually no contact with other races because they were attending predominantly African American schools expressed a need to share their culture and were interested in attending PWIs. Comparatively, students attending

predominately White high schools acknowledged the lack of cultural awareness in curriculum and desired to “go back to their roots” (Freeman, 1999, p.10).

Scholars differ on the benefits and consequences of African Americans choosing to attend PWIs rather than HBCUs. Some argue that African Americans students at PWIs are less satisfied, more socially isolated, and less likely to persist than those at HBCUs (Allen, 1988, 1991, Fleming, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole, 2009; White, 1998). While others suggest that African Americans who attend PWIs have higher career and educational aspirations and access to valuable networks (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Braddock & Hua, 2006; Jackson & Swan, 1991).

In a recent study, Walpole (2009) looked specifically at African American female students’ social experiences on two highly selective college campuses. She conducted in-depth interviews with 19 participants. Her findings suggest that African Americans who attend PWIs feel isolated, marginalized, and different from their White peers in regards to their social experiences. While she acknowledges that not all African Americans have the same experiences at PWIs, she highlights the importance of considering race, class, and gender in understanding student’s college experiences. Walpole (2009) explains that the students’ social experiences were shaped by their habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and that their race, socioeconomic status and gender all played a role. Habitus is an internalized set of outlooks and beliefs that shape an individual’s aspirations, expectations, attitudes and experiences (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997). It is a common set of subjective perceptions learned from one’s immediate environment (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997). Cultural capital is derived from one’s social class and provides an individual with resources which, if used effectively, can

provide needed advantages in social institutions (McDonough, 1997). For example, cultural capital can be transmitted by parents to their children through information regarding the value, process and importance of education; hence cultural capital can be considered “the knowledge that elites value but schools do not teach” (McDonough, 1997, p.9). While Walpole’s findings resonate with students’ social experiences at PWIs, her results are consistent with past literature (Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997) and may play a role in the college choice decisions of African American students.

Community Colleges

The majority of the nation’s minority students choose to attend a community college over a traditional four-year institution (Joshi, Beck & Nsiah, 2009). Similar to HBCUs, community colleges are a popular pathway to higher education for African Americans. In fact, 49% of all African American undergraduates make the decision to attend a community college (AACC, 2013). Some of the factors and influences include previous college experience by parents and academic ability (Rouse, 1994). Rouse (1994) provides greater information into the decision to attend a community college and revealed that tuition cost and geographic proximity were two factors that have a strong influence in the choice to attend a community college over a four-year institution.

Perna and Titus, (2005) examined the likelihood of a student enrolling in a two-year or four-year college or university after high school. They sought to understand the role of parental involvement on college choice. Using longitudinal data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), the authors frame this quantitative study with prior research and social and human capital theories. Their research demonstrates that parental involvement as a

form of social capital is positively related to college enrollment regardless of the level of individual and school resources (Perna & Titus, 2005). It also acknowledges the likelihood of enrolling in a community college after graduating based on the norms and standards that parents convey that promote college enrollment through interactions with the student, the school, and other parents, controllable costs of attendance, and the volume of resources that may be accessed through social networks at the school attended.

Similar to the study by Perna and Titus (2005) on the role of parental involvement on college choice is the work from Engberg and Wolniak (2009) which examined how high school context affects students' postsecondary outcomes. Their work highlights the normative role of high schools in promoting college enrollment, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and access to parent, peer, and college-linking networks. Engberg and Wolniak (2009) drew from a nationally representative sample of high school seniors from the Educational Longitudinal Survey (ELS: 2002) and looked at student's likelihood to enroll in two and four year colleges. They found that across all student-level measures of human, cultural and social capital, the variables with the greatest overall impact on college enrollment include academic achievement variables, aspirations of family and friends for the student to attend college, and all college-linking activities (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009).

Public two-year institutions have traditionally maintained an open enrollment admissions policy while providing access to higher education at lower costs of attendance than is typically found at a four-year institution (Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009). These two factors, amongst a host of others, play a huge role in the choice to attend a community college. Similar to past research on institutional type, this study seeks to investigate why African American

students choose to attend community colleges when they are academically eligible to attend four-year institutions.

The data found on the institutional types most selected by African Americans is consistent with the literature on undermatching and draws attention to the harm that this phenomenon may be doing to this population. African American and Hispanic students who enroll in community colleges are less likely to transfer and complete bachelors' degrees than their Caucasian counterparts (Bailey et al., 2005; Zamani, 2001). In fact, research suggests that only 2% of African American community college students successfully transfer to earn a Baccalaureate degree (Bailey et al., 2005; NCES, 2002; Zamani, 2001). While limited financial resources, inadequate academic preparation, and feelings of cultural alienation can hinder minority community college transfer and degree completion (Green, 2001; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Rendón & Nora, 1994; Rendón & Valadez, 1993; Zamani, 2001), one has to also wonder what role, if any, undermatching may be playing in the lives of these students.

Undermatching

Undermatching is a phenomenon where academically capable students, who graduate from high school and are prepared for college, choose to attend less selective four-year colleges, where graduation rates are distressingly low, or two-year colleges where degree completion and transfer rates are even lower (Sherwin, 2012). Roderick et al. (2008, 2009) suggest there are a large percentage of students who enroll in colleges for which they are academically overqualified. They also assert that many highly capable students are not pursuing any postsecondary studies at all.

Although the term undermatching can be considered new, the concept is not (Smith, et al., 2012). Previous research has shown that students of different socioeconomic status (SES) but similar academic ability often choose to attend different types of colleges (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hearn, 1991; Hill & Winston, 2010; Kane, 1999; Manski & Wise, 1983; Pallais & Turner, 2006). Though most related literature refers to this phenomenon simply as college choice or enrollment decisions, and not “undermatching”, scholars suggest that regardless of academic ability, low SES students are less likely to enroll in any college. When they do enroll, however, they are more likely to enroll at two-year colleges and high-SES student are more likely to attend four-year universities (Baum, et al., 2010). While these suggestions imply that low SES students are undermatching, they do not consider the full extent of undermatching, the multiple ways in which it occurs, or the role of race.

To date, there are two prominent studies that focus on academic undermatching; one was conducted on students in Chicago and the other on students in North Carolina. Both explore the extent of undermatching and reveal that it is in fact a prevalent phenomenon. The Chicago study was conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research and focused on the 2005 Chicago Public School (CPS) high school seniors’ experiences, college aspirations, and their transition into and out of college (Roderick et al., 2008). The North Carolina study was conducted by a group of researchers who used a 1999 cohort of North Carolina high school seniors and focused primarily on students who were likely eligible to enroll in the most selective public colleges in the state (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). In the Chicago study, two-thirds of the students undermatched and enrolled in a college that did not match their academic qualifications and in the North Carolina study, 40 % of their sample was eligible

to enroll in the most selective in state-colleges but choose to attend elsewhere and as a result, undermatched (Roderick et al., 2008; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

Recently academic undermatching has also been considered nationally. Using a national representative sample of the 2004 graduating high school class, Smith et al. (2013) found that 40.9 % of students enroll in a college below the selectivity level they could have attended while 16.1 % enrolled in a college that was two selectivity levels below the level they could have attended. This resulted in substantial undermatching. This study also suggests that students, who have access to somewhat selective and nonselective four year institutions, undermatch and choose to attend two-year colleges. Together these works provide much needed information regarding the influences and consequences of undermatching as well as the benefits of matching.

Influences of undermatching

Undermatching is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of educational, social, and economic factors (Bowen et al., 2009). These factors individually impact college choice and collectively result in undermatching.

Educational

The research on educational factors that influence undermatching include parental education and information from counselors and teachers. Many college enrollees cite parents as an important source of information (College Board, 2011) and studies show that students whose parents have not earned a college degree are more likely to undermatch than students whose parents are college graduates due to lack of college-related knowledge and information (Smith et al., 2013).

The information provided to students by counselors and teachers regarding college options play a significant role in college choice as well. Similar to the finding of Smith et al. (2013), who suggest that students who undermatch have less information, support, and resources at their disposal, Dillon and Smith (2009) argue that the lack of information about colleges from high school is a major source of academic undermatch. Findings from their study reveal financial constraints, lack of information, and the public college options all affect the probability of mismatch (Dillon & Smith, 2013). More informed students attend higher quality colleges, even when doing so involves overmatching.

Typically recruiters communicate regularly with high school counselors and share pertinent college related information, like application deadlines, view books, and academic requirements. If this information is not shared with a student who is also not receiving this information at home, there can be a huge void present related to knowledge about collegiate options.

Social

Social factors that influence undermatching include peers, high school attended and community type. Typically students are influenced by the quality and postsecondary aspirations of their peers (Smith et al., 2012). They generally apply to the same or a similar type of institution as well as consider the same majors. This influence often limits the scope of college choices for an academically qualified student.

Students who live in rural areas are more likely to undermatch than those that live in suburban or urban areas (Smith et al., 2013). This is partly due to geographical biases in the spread of information during recruitment by colleges (Hill & Winston, 2010) as well as fear of

leaving home by students and parents and proximity to different types of institutions (McDonough, 1997). Colleges may promote and recruit at certain high schools based on past performance and geographic location limiting the amount and type of exposure that students have with different institutional types. Lack of information about colleges is a major reason students undermatch (Smith et al., 2013).

Economic

The research on economic factors associated with undermatching includes tuition, financial aid and socioeconomic status. High tuition, inaccurate estimates of tuition, and failure to apply or complete the steps to receive financial aid negatively impact low-SES students' college choices (Smith et al., 2012). For example, low-SES parents are less able to pay out of pocket or provide accurate estimates of tuition when compared to high-SES parents (Grotsky & Jones, 2007) and thousands of aid eligible students do not receive financial aid due to not completing the application or submitting necessary forms (King, 2004).

Smith et al. (2013) found that students below the median socioeconomic status (lower-SES) undermatch 49.6 % of the time. Their counterparts above the median SES (higher-SES) only undermatch 34 % of the time. Their investigation showed SES gaps in substantial undermatching to be considerably sizeable; 22.7 % of lower-SES students enroll in a college that is two selectivity levels below the level that they could have attended compared to 13.6 percent of higher-SES students. Research asserts that the consequences to undermatching and benefits to matching vary.

Consequences of undermatching

Although theoretically, undermatched students are no less likely to graduate than properly matched students, evidence suggests otherwise (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen et al., 2009; Light & Strayer, 2000). As a result, researchers have begun investigating academic undermatch as a potential source of low college completion. For example, Light and Strayer (2000) investigated whether the "match" between student ability and college quality is an important determinant of college graduation rate. Data was gathered from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and used in their quantitative study. Their findings suggests that students of all academic ability levels have higher probability of completing a degree if the selectivity level of the college they attend matches their measured academic skill level (Light & Strayer, 2000).

As a result of undermatching and unsuccessfully completing a college degree, the benefits of degree attainment and future earning potential are forfeited. The returns to having a college degree that are typically experienced such as higher wages, lower unemployment rates, and healthier lifestyles are lost (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Undermatching can also be related to campus culture and a student's peer group which influences study habits, aspirations and thoughts of dropping out. Less selective institutions typically have smaller budgets and lower spending per student (Hoxby, 2009) resulting in less academic support and resources to help students succeed academically. Smaller budgets also translate into less spending on student engagement, non-academic support services and extracurricular opportunities; areas associated with high retention and graduation rates (Webber & Enrenberg, 2010). These negative consequences may be compounded among African American students who

undermatch since African American students in general, are less likely to earn a degree even when matched properly (Bowen et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2012).

Benefits of matching

Students who match academically with an institution are more likely to persist, retain and ultimately graduate. As a result, students with higher levels of educational attainment are observed to have better pensions, greater satisfaction with their jobs, and healthier lifestyles (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

The primary forces leading to high undermatching rates are a combination of inertia, lack of information, lack of forward planning, and lack of encouragement (Bowen et al., 2009). Bowen, Chingos & McPherson (2009) suggest that students who enroll in colleges for which they are overqualified are placing their academic future at risk. They posit that students are most likely to graduate when they attend the most academically demanding institution that will admit them. Collectively, studies reveal that undermatching does indeed exist and although undermatching is common among low-SES students, minorities, and first-generation students, it exists among the most academically credentialed student as well (Bowen et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2013).

Regarding race and undermatching, Smith et al. (2013) began the conversation and found that Asian students are less likely to undermatch than White students because they have access to and are eligible to attend four-year institutions and are very likely to enroll in a four-year institution. African American students, on the other hand, are estimated to have little access to four-year institutions so theoretically, they have less of an opportunity to undermatch (Smith et al., 2013). Interestingly enough, however, when access is controlled, African

Americans are most likely to undermatch. The question still left to be answered is why academically prepared African American students choose to attend community colleges, when they are eligible and have access to attend four-year institutions? This study goes beyond previous work on college choice and undermatching to address this question and considering African American students generally. It also specifically, considers academically qualified students who choose to attend community colleges despite four-year institution eligibility.

College Choice

College choice literature has been around for decades and has focused on the process that students go through to ultimately make a decision on what institution to attend for their postsecondary education. The college choice process includes having college aspirations, starting the search process, gathering information, sending applications and ultimately enrolling. Various frameworks and models exist that describe this process. One of the most widely used models is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice. Within this model, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) group the college choice process into three distinct stages: predisposition, search, and choice.

During the predisposition stage, students make the decision to go to college instead of alternative paths like work or the military (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997). They also begin to focus on becoming academically aware and are intentional about selecting appropriate coursework while in secondary school (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Once a student has determined that they will attend college they move into the search stage. It is within this stage that a student begins to gather information from prospective institutions while preparing for admission requirements through standardized test, college pre-

curriculum and grade point average (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997). After a list of prospective institutions has been generated, a student moves into the choice stage. The choice stage is where a student begins to actually apply to specific institutions and decides in which to enroll; this stage culminates the student's college-choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997).

While these stages will be discussed in greater detail throughout this chapter, along with the grade levels associated with each stage, it is important to recognize that past research on college choice has focused on traditional aged, White, male students who choose to attend four-year institutions (Freeman, 2005). Recently, more attention has been given to different student populations including women and African Americans (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997) which as a result has helped to bring college choice literature into the 21st century.

College Choice Influences

Drawing on previous literature, some of the reported factors that may influence college choice are the reputation of the school (Bergerson, 2009; Holland, 1959) and the match of student characteristics to institutional characteristics (Bergerson, 2009; Zemsky & Odell, 1983). More recent literature has focused on what institutional characteristics influence a student's decisions (Freeman, 2005; Joshi, Beck, & Nsaih, 2009; Martin & Dixon, 1991; Paulsen, 1990; Van Camp, Barden, & Sloan, 2010) and noted influence of family and peers, socioeconomic status, and institutional fit as factors that influence college choice. Cost, social climate, parents, counselors, church family, teachers, friends, aptitude levels, educational aspiration, and high school performance have all been cited as factors for students during the college choice

decision-making process (Freeman, 2005; Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; McDonough, 1997; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005). Of these factors, family, socioeconomic status, high school support, and institutional fit have proved to be critical.

Family

Several research studies document the influences of parents on the development of a student's interest in and decision to attend college (Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). The influence of family includes parental involvement in the college choice process (Bouse & Hossler, 1991), parental encouragement and parental support (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999), and parental education background (Litten, 1982). Hossler et al. (1999) theorized that parental involvement includes setting aspirations, providing encouragement, and active support. Parental encouragement is demonstrated through regular conversation and communication between parents and children regarding dreams and aspirations about college (Hossler et al., 1999). Although parental support refers to more concrete forms of support such as saving and/or paying for college; playing the largest role of family influence in college choice is parental education. Research suggests that the more education a parent has (i.e. Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and Doctoral degree) the more intentional their support around attending college will be for their children. This intentional support is demonstrated through the parent encouraging or even requiring standardized test, advanced placement or dual credit enrollment, and college visits (Litten, 1982; Smith, 2008, 2009). In fact, Galotti and Mark (1994) suggest that students rely on an educated parent's perception of college and as a result have more options when selecting a college.

Although parental influence plays a significant role in shaping the decision of students in the college choice process, the level and type of parental involvement has been shown to vary based upon ethnicity (Smith & Fleming, 2006). For example, some suggest that contrary to the dominance of father's aspirations on White children, most African American and Hispanic children are guided by their mothers (Freeman, 1999; Hearn, 1991; Hossler et al., 1989). Despite this variance, college choice theorists recognize the important role that family plays in influencing students' postsecondary plans (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and affirm that parents' orientation toward college and expectation of their children are major influences on college attendance (Coleman, 1990; Hossler & Stage, 1992; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Smith, 2009; Smith & Fleming, 2006).

African American Families

For African Americans specifically, Freeman (2005) posits that family plays a larger role when compared to other ethnicities. In fact she suggests that "the way in which African American families value education has everything to do with the way they influence their children's college choice process" (Freeman, 2005, p. 14). In her study of African American college choice, she found that the influence of family often took on an additional dimension for African Americans and affirms automatic college attendance expectations within the family, encouragement to go beyond family level and lack of positive family influences (self-motivation) as influences that need to be considered. While research suggests parental education influences college attendance (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2008, 2009; Van Camp et al., 2010), Freeman (2005) found that African American students were also influenced "because the family wanted the student to achieve beyond the level of other

family members” (p.15). Regardless of the parent’s having personal experience of attending college, she also suggests that family influences should be expanded to include both immediate family, close relatives, and church members and recognizes the role that others, who are like family, play in college choice (Freeman, 2005).

Echoing Freeman’s (2005) ideas are Smith and Fleming (2006) who propose that the role that African American families play in establishing college aspirations is significant. In their qualitative study, they explored how involvement of African American parents, during the search stage of college choice, contributes to post-high school aspirations (Smith & Fleming, 2006). These researchers go beyond the ways in which parents influence college choice and instead reveal how parents, specifically African Americans, impact college aspirations.

Unlike Hossler et al. (1999), who posits that parents play a diminishing role and become secondary influences after predisposition; Smith and Fleming (2006) found that African American parents remain heavily involved in the college choice process beyond the predisposition and search stages. Often times, this continued involvement influences a student’s decision between attending a four-year institution or a two-year college (Smith & Fleming, 2006). While both Freeman (2005) and Smith & Fleming (2006) highlight the integral role that African American families play in college choice, like other researchers (Hossler et al, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2012; Van Camp et al., 2010) they also acknowledge how strong of a factor socioeconomic status is in college choice.

Socioeconomic Status

Despite the intent to go to college, many students’ perception of college is affected by their socioeconomic status (SES) and social class level (McDonough, 1997, Smith, 2008, 2009);

this is especially true for low-income students of color. Something as simple as an application fee can deter students from applying to various colleges and universities. African American students, women, and others from low SES backgrounds are more likely to attend lower selectivity institutions regardless of academic achievement, ability, or aspirations due to the lack of financial resources to enroll and to afford tuition at their first-choice colleges (McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2008, 2009; Styles-Hughes, 1987). As a result of socioeconomic status, St John et al. (2005) documented that African American students rely heavily on financial aid offers and competitive tuition costs as important factors in selecting a college and that the greatest barrier for students of low socioeconomic backgrounds is the ability to pay for four to five years of college.

When coupled with parental involvement, socioeconomic status has the potential to play a vast role in college choice. For example, college aspirational signals and college choice options provided by parents are often tied to low proximity, and low cost (Smith & Flemming, 2006). A parent may suggest an institutional type based on perceived out of pocket cost and not a student's academic or institutional fit. This idea of being cost sensitive is then perpetuated by the student and taken into constant consideration during the search process (Bergerson, 2009). It influences whether students apply to selective colleges and universities. Lower income and less education for parents correlate with the lower likelihood of applying to more selective institutions (Turley, Santos, & Ceja, 2007).

Another way in which socioeconomic status inadvertently impacts college choice is with the availability and scheduling of parental involvement programs, especially for low income parents. Typical parental involvement programs are designed under a set of assumptions that

support participation of middle and upper income parents while placing lower-income parents at a disadvantage (Smith, 2008, 2009; Winter, 1993). For example, events like college fairs are usually offered in the evening and during the week. This type of scheduling may pose a threat for working-class parents for reasons ranging from transportation scheduling to needs related to other children or work (Smith, 2008, 2009); thus limiting the college-related involvement of that parent with his or her child.

Like other researchers (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997, Smith, 2008), Smith (2009), suggests that the children of working-class and low-SES parents are increasingly marginalized, lacking economic and social resources to help their children compete in the college admission game, thereby impacting their college choice options. To expound on this concept, Smith (2009) considered the role that the socioeconomic status of African American parents played in the postsecondary choice process of their children. In this qualitative study, he supports the idea that parents encourage their children to achieve more educationally than they did themselves. In some instances, that is a high school diploma or even an Associate's degree. He also points out that for some low-SES families, a high school diploma or Associate's degree is the normative credential for upward mobility and as a result, the level of parental involvement is different (Smith, 2009). This difference, however, does not equate to low-SES parents having less hope or not wanting educational opportunities for their children; instead it revealed the need for additional support and information. While the participants in his study used narratives of struggle to motivate their children towards high school completion, he found that they could benefit from assistance in understanding the advantages of college as an option for their children and that they needed support from others

to shift expectations from high school to college completion (Smith, 2009). Support from their high schools by way of high school guidance counselors, peers, and pre-college outreach programs could make the difference in not only them making the decision to go to college but also in the type of institution they decide to attend.

High School Support

For first generation students, high school is often the first place students learn about college; their high school experiences influence their college predisposition (Bergerson, 2009) as well as the formation of their educational aspirations (Pitre, 2006). Predisposition refers to the decision students make to go to college instead of alternative paths (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997) while aspirations refers to the educational goals a student has for his or her future. It is in high school that they begin to consider if they will go to college and if so, what institution they are interested in applying to and/or attending. This is especially true for minority students who are unable to obtain college related information at home. In Perna's (2000) study on the differences in Whites, Hispanics, and African Americans decision to attend college, she found that access to information was a concern. Other scholars suggest that minority students have less information about college cost (Grotsky & Jones, 2007; Kirst & Venezia, 2004), college requirements (Kirst & Venezia, 2004), admission exams (Walpole et al., 2005), and differences in institutional types and degrees (Grotsky & Jones, 2007). As a result, the role of guidance counselors, peers, and pre-college outreach programs are critical.

Guidance Counselors. High school guidance counselors play a unique role in the college choices of high school students. The introduction of high school curriculum, standardized test,

career information, and college applications typically are initiated through a high school guidance counselor who ultimately has an influence on a student's college choice (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler, et al., 1989; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). For students of color, their high school academic track tends to channel them into vocational or academic careers (Freeman, 2005; Smith, 2009). For decades, studies have shown that students of color are overrepresented in lower track curricula and not provided educational experiences that prepare them for college-level work (Braddock & Dawkins, 1993; MacLeod, 1995; Oakes, 1985; Smith-Maddox, 1999). Hossler et al. (1989) found that high school curriculum and academic track does have an influence on college choice.

For students of color specifically, lack of support, fewer college preparatory classes, environments that do not support college attendance, and information are barriers that they face in the college choice process (Bergerson, 2009). While guidance counselors do not serve as the only source for college related information, they do serve as gatekeepers to information, especially for students who lack support and encouragement from their family (Freeman, 1998).

Peers. For many students of color, peers are an important element of forming aspirations (Bergereson, 2009). At times, students rely more on their peers rather than their family as resources. Azmitia and Cooper (2001) explored the impacts of peers on student achievement and educational aspirations. Their findings suggest that peers serve as both challenges and resources to educational achievement and aspirations. For example, as a challenge, choosing to attend the same institution or staying close to home may not be in the best interest of a student but yet the college choice decision is made based on the

recommendations from a close peer. Peers can also serve as resources, however, by filling in for family when college information is needed (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001).

Pre-college outreach programs. Although some students receive assistance from teachers and guidance counselors regarding college options, often times students' needs are great and school resources are limited. As a result, programs such as Upward Bound, AVID and Puente, have been designed to provide supplemental assistance. Services such as college advising and assistance with college financial aid applications as well as scholarship opportunities, college tours, and academic tutoring are provided to students while they are in high school (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Perna & Swail, 2001; Schultz & Mueller, 2006). Many students depend on pre-college outreach programs to provide them with information and often times make their college choice decision based on that information that was provided.

Experiences with guidance counselors, peers, and pre-college programs can influence student's educational aspirations. As noted by Bergerson (2009), "When they have little encouragement or preparations for college, students are less inclined to aspire to furthering their education (p.72)".

Institutional Fit

In a study conducted by McDonough et al. (1997) institutional fit was found to be an instrumental factor in the college decision of African Americans; specifically in the decision to attend a historically Black college and university or a predominately White institution.

Institutional fit, refers to how well a student fits into the culture of an institution. Institutional characteristics that contribute to institutional fit include tuition cost, financial aid availability,

size, geographic location, student diversity, social atmosphere and types of support services institutions offer (Hossler et al., 1989).

Institutional fit also plays a role in community college choice. In 1996 Absher and Crawford examined important factors that community college students attribute to college choice. Their findings revealed that the overall quality of education, the types of academic programs, tuition and fees at the college, the overall reputation of the college, and the faculty qualifications were the top five selection variables. In similar studies, both Kurlaender (2006) and Smith (2008) found that proximity to home and familiarity were factors related to community college choice, both which eased the transition to college for their participants.

Geographic proximity, student's religion, the school's social and academic reputation, the desire of relatives and even athletic recruitment were deemed to be important factors when considering if the institution was a good fit for the student (McDonough et al., 1997). Overall, institutional fit has proven to be an important factor in the institutional choice process (Bergerson, 2009).

College Choice Models

College choice models have been developed to provide a rationale for the decision making process involved with choosing a college. Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith (1989) identified three types of college choice models: econometric, sociological, and combined. In the econometric models, primary considerations for students' perception of the value of higher education are associated with costs and future earning expected from attending college. These models are also known as economic models and are based on the idea that students use a cost benefit analysis by weighing the cost of their choice against the perceived benefits (Hossler et

al., 1999). The sociological model focuses on factors which influence aspiration and describes the family, socioeconomic level, expectations from others, secondary school attended and student academic ability as predictors of students' aspirations for college (Hossler, et al., 1989). Combined models feature aspects of both economical and sociological models to explain the college-choice process (Coleman, 1990; McDonough, 1997).

While numerous models exist, each model typically fits into one of the three types identified. Four major models that continue to serve as frameworks for college choice are: Chapman (1984); Hanson and Litten (1982); Hossler and Gallagher (1987); and Jackson (1982); all represent a sequential progression to the college-choice decision. Although the Hossler and Gallagher Model of college student choice was not the first college choice model developed (Kolter, 1976; Chapman, 1981, 1984, Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982); it has proved to be popular as it has been reiterated by several other studies (Galotti, 1995; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Cho et al., 2008). It has also been used to understand the influences of socioeconomic status, family influences, earning potential, and race in the choice decision-making process for diverse student populations

Hossler and Gallagher Model of college student choice

In the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, there are three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. The first phase focuses on characteristics of the student and whether or not they have aspirations to attend college. The second phase concentrates on the search process and involves the student narrowing down options and deciding on institutional fit. The final phase emphasizes the choice process where students take the information they gathered, evaluate it and make a decision on which school to attend. Hossler et al. (1989) described the

three phases as: predisposition is the formation of educational aspirations; search is the acquisition and examination of information about colleges to identify a limited set of institutions to apply; and choice is the evaluation of alternatives to make a final college selection for matriculation.

The first stage, predisposition, refers to post-high school plans and occurs between the seventh and ninth grade (Hossler et al., 1989). During this stage, peers, high school experiences, student's family background and academic performance play significant roles as factors that influence the development of the student's post high school plans (Freeman, 2005; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997). This stage is a key component to the development of college aspirations, or the desire to continue an education after high school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989).

During the second stage, search, students explore and evaluate possible colleges to attend and determine if institutions have the characteristics that they deem as important. This stage occurs in high school, specifically during grades ten through twelve (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler et al., 1998; McDonough, 1997). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify this stage as most important because of the increased interaction between students and institutions and the time associated with students gathering information and creating a list of prospective institutions. This stage would include requesting college view books, attending college fairs and visiting college campuses.

In the final stage, choice, students use the list that they created during the search stage and begin to apply to specific institutions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This stage occurs in the twelfth grade and ends with a student making a final decision and choosing which institution to

actually enroll in. The choice stage, then, concludes a student's college choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1998; McDonough, 1997). During this stage, academic performance and socioeconomic status plays a role in the number and type of colleges that students are considering (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Figure B. 4. Hossler and Gallagher model of college student choice

Despite its popularity, this model is based on data that reflect the experience of traditional aged, middle class, White students who chose to attend four-year institutions; as a result elements such as high school factors (college culture, academic advising, tracking, teacher training and expectations) and socioeconomic factors are overlooked. Race and culture are also two factors that are not reflected in this traditional model. As a result, college choice models that focus on minority populations as well as community colleges need to be considered.

Freeman's Model of Predetermination

Expanding on the work by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and focusing on the predisposition phase, Freeman (2005) developed a three-stage model of predetermination to include cultural characteristics in college choice. She investigated whether African American students followed the same stages with similar influential factors and further explained the role

that family, church, and college aspirations play in the decision making process for African Americans. Freeman (2005) studied the family structure of African Americans and included historical and environmental circumstances. She contends that the Black church is a major influence in the college choices of African Americans and often times a financial supporter.

Acknowledging the role that culture plays in college choice, Freeman (2005) explored the different ways that families influence their children's college choice process and argues that merely indicated that significant others, or parents specifically, influence college choice is not enough. She also took into consideration how schools channel and influence different cultural groups' aspirations and motivations to choose higher education. Her findings affirm economic influences, internal influences (family, community, church, automatic expectations of family to attend college), external influences (economy, geographic location, teacher/counselor recommendations), high school curriculum, and potential perceived barriers to higher education also serve as factors related to college choice for African Americans (Freeman, 2005).

In her model, she refers to phase one of the college decision-making process as predetermination instead of predisposition. Her reasoning includes acknowledging the role and large impact that environmental circumstances generally have on whether or not a student chooses to go to college. She posits that these environmental circumstances (economy, geographic location, teacher/counselor recommendations) are usually out of the student's control and that in order to better understand African American student college-choice, an examination of what influences students and how they are influenced is required (Freeman, 2005). Next she includes family and kinship (parents, immediate family, distant family, church family, community) and school characteristics. She believes that these influences must be

funneled through students' cultural characteristics in order to understand their influences on students' college choice. By cultural characteristics Freeman (2005) means the uniqueness found in each cultural group based on historical circumstances. For example, if someone were to develop a model based on one culture, it does not allow for differences in other cultures. Together this shapes a student's predetermination to choose to attend college.

This model differs from Hossler and Gallagher's by taking into account student's cultural characteristics. For example, Freeman reviews the influence of family and community by accounting for cultural differences and applying those to the predetermination phase. As a result she recognizes that parental education may play a different role in college choice for African Americans than it does for White Americans. For White students, the literature shows that if either parent attended college, the student is more likely to attend themselves (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997). For African Americans, however, at times the lack of parental education is a driving force for a student to attend college and achieve more than what their parents did educationally as a means for social mobility and economic freedom (Freeman, 2005). This force then motivates a student to decide to attend college.

Freeman's model also varies according to the subcategories under both family and kinship and school characteristics that she believes has to be studied and examined in order to best understand an African American student's college choice process. One limitation of Freeman's work is that it only focuses on the predisposition stage, or what she calls the predetermination stage, of college choice.

Figure B. 5. Freeman's model of predetermination

Community College Choice Model

Community colleges are the most financially, geographically, and academically accessible route to a higher education for minorities, women, first generation and rural students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Gumport, 2007; Townsend, 2009). The common misconception is that students who choose two-year schools do so because they are academically deficient or price conscious (Somers et al., 2006) even though community colleges are home to competitive technical and medical programs, academic honors programs and honor societies. Despite the large number of students who attend community colleges, except for unpublished dissertations and recent studies by Bers and Galowich (2002), Horton, 2009, Kurlaender (2006), Somers et al. (2006) and Stokes and Somers (2004) there has been little research done on why students choose to attend a two-year college.

Recognizing its importance, Somers et al. (2006) conducted a study involving over 200 community college students in an attempt to develop a framework for community college choice. Using focus groups, the researchers revealed influences on community college choice and explored why students choose to attend community colleges. Their findings suggest that there are several factors related to community college choice: Encouragement from family,

support services, financial aid awarded, academic programs, access, location, aspirations, information and encouragement from friends. The scholars go on to suggest that these factors can be categorized into three areas: aspirations and encouragement, institutional characteristics, and finances. Unlike the Freeman model, which focuses on pre-determination and the Hossler and Gallagher's model which is based on traditional aged White students who choose to attend four-year institutions, this framework focuses on a specific institutional type; the community college. Because of its focus, it is inclusive and considers minority student choice in general.

Figure B. 6. Community College Choice Model

Conceptual Framework

This study looks at the choice process as a combination of models from Freeman (2005) and Somers et al. (2006). Although both Freeman's and Somer's models were described earlier, this section will briefly review their similarities, differences, and what each model adds to framing this study.

Freeman's model of predetermination (2005) considers cultural characteristics in college choice. Acknowledging the impact that family (both immediate and extended), culture, history,

and environmental factors play in the decision of African Americans to attend college at all, the Freeman model allows this study to consider race and focus on the predetermination of college choice. The Somers et al. (2006) model offers a look into community college choice by revealing the factors that increase the likelihood of a student choosing to attend a community college. This framework suggests that encouragement from family, support services, financial aid awarded, academic programs, access, location, aspirations, information and encouragement from friends are all deciding factors in community college choice. This model permits this study to focus on institutional type and community college selection.

As a result, this study will utilize Freeman's model to frame how African American students experience the predetermination process and the Somers et al. model to frame why African Americans choose to attend community colleges. By utilizing both models as a lens for this study, the researcher will be able to take a more in-depth look at how race, type of institution, and influences impact the decision making process of prospective African American students who consider community colleges as their institution of choice.

This integrated framework posits that students enter the choice process with their predispositions or preferences, go through the process of searching, while having access to various institutional types, and concludes with choosing an institution that best meets their needs regardless of academic credentials. This framework fits this study specifically because it acknowledges the role that family and culture play in the college choice of African Americans while accounting for the factors that influence community college choice.

Summary of Literature

This review of literature first explored the past and present status of African American college students. Particular attention was given to the number of African Americans who have earned college degrees to highlight the persistent educational attainment gap between White Americans and African Americans. Despite limited research, the concept of undermatching was introduced and two dominant studies were explored. The benefits of matching and consequences of undermatching were also discussed. Research on African American college choice was then presented and a review of the most common institutional types selected by African Americans was provided. This review revealed that more African Americans attend community colleges and for profit institutions compared to four-year universities. Despite this, African Americans fall short of transfer and completion which contributes to the low rates of degrees awarded to this population. Included in this review was information regarding factors that influences and contribute to college choice. Specifically the role of family, socioeconomic status, high school support and institutional fit were described. Finally, the literature review discussed prominent college choice models and highlighted a college choice model for African Americans as well as community college choice. This review concluded with an explanation of the conceptual framework that will be used as a lens in this study to examine the community college choice of academic qualified African American students.

APPENDIX C
DETAILED METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter presents the research methods used in this study. The purpose of this study was to explore why academically qualified African American students, those eligible to attend four-year institutions, choose to attend community colleges. A qualitative research approach was utilized to construct meaning of this college choice decision-making process and community college experience. This chapter provides a theoretical and practical foundation for the qualitative data collection techniques utilized in the study. The items discussed in this chapter include: the design of the study, research questions, the site, selection of participants, data collection procedures and data analysis. Finally, positionality and trustworthiness measures conclude the chapter.

The previous chapter identified the role that education has played in the African American community and the challenges faced by African American collegians. College choice models were examined with particular attention being paid to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model of college student choice, Freeman's (2005) predetermination model and Somers et al.'s (2006) framework for community college choice. Factors that influence college choice for African Americans include: socio economic status, lack of information, and family (Freeman, 2005). Influences for community college choice include: location, aspirations, encouragement, and cost (Somers et al., 2006). Individually these factors are known to affect certain student groups but for academically qualified African American students, they have a collective impact. Furthermore, academically qualified African American students are beginning their academic careers at community colleges and may face barriers and challenges typical of the majority of African American college students such as low retention and persistence and lack of completion

and transfer. Hence, it is important to understand the decision-making process used by academically qualified African American students and how this choice may impact their opportunities to gain a baccalaureate degree.

Design of the Study

This study explored the phenomenon of academically qualified African American students who undermatch. The exploratory nature of this study is supported by a constructivism perspective and qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2008) defines quantitative research as a “means for testing objective theories by examining the relationships among variables” (p. 4) and qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). While a quantitative approach could have been useful to identify correlations related to college choice factors, a qualitative design provided more detailed descriptions of the participants’ lived experiences (Kuh & Andreas, 1991). In fact, this study aligns well with a qualitative design since its purpose is to better understand the context that influences this college choice experience (Creswell, 2008).

Paradigm of Inquiry

A paradigm of inquiry serves as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p.17). It influences the practice of research (Creswell, 2008) while advancing assumptions about the social world to help understand phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). It also serves as a lens for researchers to frame a study. Postpositivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism are four paradigms or “world views” used throughout qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). These paradigms are shaped by the researcher’s beliefs and guide the

approach of their research. The most appropriate paradigm of inquiry for the purpose of this study was constructivism since the goal of this research is to rely on the participants' view of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2002). Constructivism assumes that meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting; the goal of this type of research is to rely on the participant's views of the situation being studied as much as possible (Creswell, 2008).

Research Design

A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was employed to understand how academically qualified African American students who chose to attend a community college made meaning of the college choice process and to explore what factors contribute to their college choice decision. Whereas an ethnographic account studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting, a phenomenological account identifies the essence of human experiences as described by participants (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) describes this approach as a "strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants" (p. 13). Since this study sought to understand the perception of a specific participant group, a phenomenological approach was used to develop patterns and relationship of meanings in an attempt to better describe and understand this sub-population.

By using a phenomenological approach, the intention and root meaning in the lived experiences of the participants is revealed and the researcher gains an understanding of the true essence of the experience as perceived by those who have lived it (Creswell, 2008). This methodology was used to extract the richest and broadest information regarding this group's

perceptions and their personal insight pertaining to their experiences. A phenomenological research design is particularly appropriate for this study and is reported to have many advantages. Gall, Gall, & Borg (2003) suggests that when used properly, a phenomenological study is able to analyze the intrinsic perceptions and ideations that exist in the individual experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. This data collection method was employed to understand, create, and interpret the realities of the participants in regards to college choice. This interview approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher to extract participants' experiences in context as well as in a comprehensive manner. According to Patton (2002), qualitative interviewing ensures that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowledgeable, and able to be made explicit.

Research Questions

This study explored the college choice process for academically qualified African American students who choose to attend community colleges. Four research questions guided this study:

1. What is the college choice process for academically qualified African American students who start higher education at a community college?
2. What personal factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice?
3. What institutional factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice?

4. How do academically qualified African American students describe their community college experience in regards to the concept of undermatching?

These research questions allowed academically qualified American African students to explain their reasons for choosing to attend community colleges and identified which factors played a major role in their college choice.

Site Selection

Research was conducted at a community college in an urban city in the Southern Region of the United States referred to in this research as Southern College. According to its Carnegie classification, it is a public, urban-serving multi-campus institution. During the fall 2012 academic semester, the total student enrollment was 14,375, of which 2700 were first time in college students. The student demographics were: 4,787 (32.9%) White, 3,706 (25.5%) African American, 5,355 (37.3%) Hispanic, and 527 (4.3%) other. Seventy-five percent attend part-time while 25% are enrolled full time. Female attendance outpaces male at 61% and 39% respectively; with a larger gender gap existing between African American males and females with females representing 70% of African American enrollment. The majority of students are between the traditional ages of 23-28. Sixty-one % are 24 years and under and 39% are 25 years and over (NCES, 2013). Southern College offers level 1 certificates (16 hours), level 2 certificates (30-45 hours), and associate's degree (60 hours), which is its highest awarded degree. When compared to national data, Southern College enrolls a higher percentage of minority, female, and part-time students. Further, their percentage of students receiving Pell Grants, 56%, exceeds the national average of 32% (NCES, 2013).

Southern College reports a 62% retention rate for full time students, a 49% retention rate for part-time students, a 42% transfer-out rate and a 7% overall graduation rate. Of the students who graduate, 7% are African American males and 8% are African American females and the overall graduation rate of African Americans at Southern college is 3% compared to 6% for Whites, 11% for Hispanics and 9% for Asians. Campus statistics are presented in Table C.1.

Table C.1

Fall 2012 Campus Statistics for Southern College (NCES, 2013)

	Southern College
Total number of students	14,375
Number of enrolled students (full-time)	25%
Number of enrolled students (part-time)	75%
Number of African American students enrolled	25.5%
Number of enrolled students 24 years and younger	61%
Number of enrolled students 25 years and older	39%
Number of students receiving Pell Grants	56%
Number of female students enrolled	61%
Number of African American female students enrolled	70%
Graduation rate	7%
Graduation rate of African Americans	3%
Transfer rate	42%
Retention rate (full-time)	62%
Retention rate (part-time)	49%

This site was purposefully selected based on specific criteria. Creswell (1998) suggest that access is an important step in finding a place to study and that in a phenomenological study participants may be located at a single site. Therefore, this site was selected because of the accessibility of data, convenience of location and the number of individuals who have

experienced the phenomenon being explored. At the time of this study, the researcher worked as a full time administrator in student services at Southern College and as a result had access to student data, facilities and resources. The researcher was also able to confirm, through a student information system, that there were a number of participants who fit the criteria for the study. This site was also selected because of its proximity to four-year institutions. Southern College is within a 30 mile or less radius of eight four-year universities, including three public, one HBCU and four private. Because of its central location, it is likely that the selected participants made a specific choice among colleges.

Sample

Merriam (2009) offers insight on different types of sampling. Considered the “method of choice for most qualitative research” (Merriam, 2009, p.77); purposeful sampling allows the researcher to solve qualitative problems such as discovering what occurs, its implications, and the relationships linking occurrences (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). This method assumes that because the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight regarding a sample, the sample then will be selected from a group of participants from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). For the purpose of the study, purposeful sampling was employed. Creswell (2008) recommends purposefully selecting participants for qualitative research as this data collection method will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question. The sample for this study included 19 currently enrolled, academically qualified, African American community college students. A wide range of academic majors as well as a variety of familial backgrounds were included.

Prior to contacting potential participants, I submitted a proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my institution and to the community college, where the study was conducted to gain permission to survey the population. Once approved, prospective participants were identified through academic records including high school and college transcripts provided to me by the Registrar's office. The criterion to participate was consistent with minimum university admission requirements and included:

1. Having followed the recommended or distinguished curriculum offered in high school for college admission
2. Having a high school GPA of at least a 2.5 and
3. Having appropriate standardized test scores

Participant Recruitment

Once identified, I confirmed each prospective participant's eligibility for the study. I reviewed their current college records and their high school transcript to verify the high school curriculum that they followed as well as their standardized test scores and grade point averages. Only African American students who met the criteria were invited to participate in this study. All prospective students were emailed a letter of request to participate (Appendix A). The letter notified potential participants of the nature of the study, asked for their participation in an interview, offered them \$20 for their participation, included an informed consent form, and asked them to forward the letter to any other academically qualified African American community college student who may be interested in participating. There were two participants who each referred two prospective participants. After verifying that the prospective students met the criterion to participate, those prospective participants were sent a letter of request to participate and notified about the study. This approach is similar to the snowball sampling technique explained by Merriam (2009) and was used to accumulate "new-

information-rich cases (p.79).” Merriam suggests that snowball sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria established and asking them to refer other participants.

The interview took place in a comfortable room on their campus during a time that worked best for the participants. Participants were interviewed until saturation was evident (Morse, 1995). Morse defines saturation as “data adequacy” and operationalizes it as “collecting data until no new information is obtained (p.147).” The final sample included 19 participants who were chosen regardless of age, major, enrollment status, or socioeconomic status. Table C.2 summarizes demographic data for the sample which consisted of 14 females and 5 males. Nine participants were first generation, defined as neither parent having attending college. Student ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old.

Table C.2

Participant Profiles

	Age	Gender	First Gen	Dependent(s)	High School Curriculum	College Prep
1	20	F	No	0	Recommended	AP & Dual Credit
2	19	F	No	0	Recommended	AVID, AP
3	19	F	Yes	0	Recommended	AP
4	21	F	Yes	0	Recommended	AP
5	18	M	Yes	0	Recommended	none
6	25	M	No	0	Recommended	None
7	18	M	No	0	Recommended	AVID
8	18	F	Yes	0	Recommended	None
9	20	F	Yes	1	Recommended	Upward Bound
10	19	F	Yes	1	Recommended	None
11	19	M	No	0	Recommended	None
12	18	F	Yes	0	Recommended	None
13	20	M	No	0	Recommended	None
14	19	F	No	0	Recommended	None
15	19	F	No	0	Recommended	JROTC
16	19	F	Yes	0	Recommended	None
17	22	F	No	0	Recommended	None
18	24	F	No	1	Recommended	None
19	20	F	Yes	0	Recommended	None

Data Collection

For this qualitative study, person to person interviews were used as the primary means of data collection and a demographic questionnaire was utilized to gather additional demographic data. These techniques assisted me in understanding personal information about academically qualified African American community college student experiences and gaining knowledge including opinions, beliefs, feelings, and demographic data (Best & Kahn, 1998). The demographic questionnaire asked participants to share information regarding themselves as well as their family. Facts such as parental education, involvement in college prep programs, and age were provided. This information is listed in both Table C.2 above and Table D.3 in Appendix D, to provide a descriptive picture of how they made meaning of their college choice decision. A thorough review of high school transcripts was conducted to help build an accurate profile of each participant. Information such as high school curriculum, advanced placement courses and participation in dual credit programs was reviewed and considered as forms of preparation and exposure to college related information.

Demographic Questionnaire

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire before the interview (Appendix B). The questionnaire gathered student demographic information including parental education information, age, and gender. The purpose of having participants submit questionnaires prior to the interviews was solely for organizational and time saving purposes. During the data analysis, this descriptive information helped me synthesize responses and make inferences about the participant responses. In addition, this questionnaire helped me construct a demographic profile on each participant prior to the interview.

Interviews

For the purpose of this study, person to person interviews were conducted Merriam (2009) posits that this is the most common form of interview and its purpose is to “obtain a special kind of information” (p.88). Patton (2002) suggests that researchers conduct interviews to find out what is “in and on someone else’s mind” (p.341). The process and meaning of college choice cannot be observed and is an event that has already occurred; hence, it cannot be replicated. As a result, person to person interviews was the best mode of data collection for this study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data (see Appendix G.). Based on saturation, a total of 19 African American community college students were interviewed for this study. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes in length. The protocol elicited the personal perspectives and experiences of the participants while still allowing the interview to remain informal and conversational (Patton, 2002). Included in the interview protocol was a brief statement regarding the study, a background of the researcher, a reminder about voluntary participation and confidentiality, and a list of open-ended questions about their college choice decision. The questions in the interview guide followed Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin’s (1981) four major categories of questions: hypothetical, devil’s advocate, ideal position, and interpretive. Merriam (2009) suggests that these four categories are “particularly useful in eliciting information (p.97).” I also conducted a pilot interview to identify confusing and useless questions and to determine if any protocol questions need to be modified, added or deleted (Merriam, 2009) prior to the study began. The pilot interview was conducted on three individuals who meet the same criteria required for the study participants

to ensure that the questions made sense to the population being studied. Based on the pilot interviews, some questions were reworded for clarity and a few were omitted to avoid redundancy.

The interviews took place in a “safe space” so that the participants felt comfortable. A room, on campus, was utilized on a day when there are limited courses being offered to eliminate noise and traffic in the building. The participants were encouraged to engage in meaningful conversations and provided clear and complete information. The interviews were digitally recorded using a digital recorder to ensure students’ complete responses were captured for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Post interview notes were written immediately following the interview to allow me to “monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyze the information itself (Merriam, 2009, p. 110)”. Post interview notes and digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, within 48 hours of the interview and each participant was identified with a pseudonym. All subjects received \$20 at the completion of their interview as a token of appreciation for their willingness to participate in the study.

Data Analysis Plan

The process of data analysis involves “bringing meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants in the study” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.72). Data collected in this study were analyzed using several techniques that began during data collection. The demographic survey and pilot interview provided an opportunity to begin analyzing data. The purpose of the study was reviewed and considered while the surveys were being read and reread. Merriam (2009) affirms that making notes in margins to comment on data and writing memos that capture reflections, tentative themes, and hunches are best practices when

analyzing during data collection. This initial process led to a set of tentative themes and categorizes that were used in conjunction with interview data and incorporated into the findings.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts proofread and corrected against the digital recording. This analysis process began with reading and rereading the transcripts from the interview as well as the post interview notes. Observer comments, emerging judgments, and assumptions were written along the margins of printed transcripts to ensure the participant's perceptions captured and not subject to the researcher's interpretation (Merriam, 2009). After reading the transcripts, preliminary textual summaries were written that were responsive to the research questions (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Merriam, 2009).

Coding

Transcripts were coded for patterns and an inventory of the entire data set was created to help organize and manage the data (Merriam, 2009). First, manual coding was completed during data transcription. By reading and re-reading the transcripts, an initial list of codes was developed. Once confirmed and refined, codes were linearly arranged in ATLAS.ti; a qualitative data analysis software. Pattern coding, which revealed concepts, common ideas, feelings and experiences (Creswell, 2008), led to a set of explanatory conclusions regarding the college choice process of academically qualified African American students, who have access to selective institutions, but begin their academic careers at a community college. The key quotes determined the strength of the conclusions and the frequency of contributing code word is used in ATLAS.ti (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Each conclusion was categorically clustered into

major themes. The themes were organized to gain thick descriptions and a conceptual understanding of what was presented by each interviewee. Thick descriptions allow the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of individuals to be heard and were compiled as the study's findings (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009).

Trustworthiness and Transferability

The trustworthiness and transferability of qualitative data are greatly dependent upon the sensitivity, interviewing skills, and integrity of the researcher (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). Piloting the interview protocol, asking a peer to examine the findings, and facilitating member checks were completed to support the validity and reliability of this study.

Pilot Study

In order to ensure that the instrument measured what it intended to measure, the interview protocol was used in a pilot study. Piloting the interview protocol allowed me to refine the protocol questions as well as the ideas and theories of the research on the sample population. Noted by Maxwell (2005) as one of the ways that researchers can develop an understanding of the concepts, ideas, beliefs, and theories held by the people that they are studying, piloting the interview protocol helped me retool or rethink the questions or approach before the actual study began (Yin, 2003). Through validity, reliability and trustworthiness techniques, I was able to address potential personal and professional biases by including others in the confirmation and verification of the meanings constructed through this study.

Member Checks

Member checks involve the sharing of preliminary results with participants for additional insight into a phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). Once I had preliminary findings and

conclusions, I invited five of the participants to join me for a focus group in order to conduct member checks. The focus group was digitally recorded and transcribed; it included a presentation of the findings and an open ended conversation of their thoughts and feelings about the findings. Specifically, I asked them to listen to the findings, confirm accuracy, and offer interpretive feedback, clarifications and changes. Eager to hear what I found through the study, the participants' affirmed the findings, supported the conclusions and demonstrated a sense of validation by expressing how good it felt to hear their stories aloud and to know that they were not alone in their college search process. During the presentation of the findings all of the participants nodded their heads and smiled as I read some of the quotes used to support the conclusions. They also collectively clapped their hands and gave their applause as the focus group concluded. During and after the focus group, participants provided reflective comments about the findings. All communication between myself and the focus group participants during the session were digitally recorded and transcribed. The following summarizes participant feedback.

I agree with all of the findings and conclusion of this study. In a way, I feel like everybody had the same thing to say and it's funny because you never know who's actually going through the same thing as you. Hearing this lets me know that I wasn't the only one who had to make this type of college decision. I can relate to everything that everyone said. Now I just hope the people that read this, like the high school counselors and college advisors stop making people feel bad about their choice. Then maybe people won't feel like they're out of place if they choose to go to a community college.

Another participant said,

Everything is accurate, like spot on from the findings, the conclusion and even the things that we should do in the future to help out. You know a lot of people, like my friends and teachers, they would ask "Why did you go to a community college?" and I think they just don't understand that it's not even just about the cost itself. It's also close to home and the academics. It's a whole bunch of other things that's also tied into your decision

making and that's what the study was about. Helping people to understand why we chose to attend a community college and highlighting how our experiences are here. I am glad that you selected this topic.

Peer Review

In addition to piloting the study and member checks, peer examination was also utilized to determine if the findings are plausible based on the data. Merriam (2009) describes peer examination as asking an expert colleague to scan and assess some of the raw data as well as the process of the study to assess the congruency of emerging findings and the tentative interpretations. Strategies, such as peer examination are used to ensure that consistency, dependability and reliability are present in the study. In an effort to uphold the trustworthiness and transferability of this study a peer who is not directly involved with this study but is a scholar on African American community college students was contacted. She also worked at a community college as an academic advisor and had professional experience serving this specific student population. Once she agreed to serve as a peer reviewer, I emailed her the preliminary findings and she responded with feedback. She first provided me with personal background information to display how she felt reading the initial findings.

As I read these findings, I found myself relating to several aspects of these students' stories. Although I did not consider attending a community college while I was in high school, my family played a key role in imparting the importance of education and what college represents. Everyone in my family attended an HBCU, so that definitely influenced my search process. Ultimately, I decided to enroll in a predominantly white university, but I clearly see how my college choice process paralleled these participants'.

Next she agreed on my interpretation of the data and highlighted the lack of current research on undermatching. She also confirmed the importance of considering African American college choice, especially of those who undermatch. The following summarizes her impression of the preliminary findings.

Based on the literature review, little to no research exists on undermatching. This study provides a much-needed examination of this phenomenon among African American college students. As African Americans enroll in community colleges in growing numbers, it is important to understand why they choose this higher education entry point. It is especially important to explore the choice process of those who qualify for admittance to four-year institutions yet attend community colleges because of the ramification of this choice. For example, research indicates community college enrollment is particularly detrimental to African Americans aspiring to the baccalaureate. So why choose the community college pathway instead of entering a four-year institution to pursue a four-year degree? These findings reveal why. They point out both positives and negatives of undermatching and paint a clearer picture of students' choice process. The researcher guided her study with questions that not only reveal the "how" and "why" about these students college choice process, but also what can be done to better support others high achieving African Americans in during their college choice process.

Positionality

Considered a strategy for internal validity, a researcher's position is an essential component of a qualitative research study in terms of integrity. Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest that positionality, also referred to as reflexivity, is "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the human instrument (p.183). Positionality critically considers researcher experiences, biases, and assumptions and their possible effect on data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2009).

I share with the participants the experience of being an academically qualified African American student who was eligible to attend four-year institutions but chose to attend a community college. This study is important to me because of my own college choice experience. Despite being accepted to numerous four-year institutions, I chose to attend a community college that was less than 15 miles from my home. I attribute my college choice decision to being a first generation college student and not being informed or knowledgeable about what going to college meant or the outcomes that it provides. Neither I nor my parents

knew anything about going to college and as a result I did not fully understand the options that I had. What I did know was that a large majority of my friends from high school and a family member attended a local community college and that my parents did not have the financial means to pay for my college education. I had no assistance with college or financial aid applications so I did not understand what a Pell grant or student loan was at the time. I did not know the unlikeliness of transfer or completion that haunts students who attend community colleges nor did I know of the scholarship opportunities at four-year institutions.

Despite starting my academic career at a community college, I successfully completed an associate's degree, transferred to a four-year institution and completed both a bachelor's and Master's degree. Many would call me a success story, someone who has beaten the odds. Unfortunately for the majority of my friends, who were eligible to attend four-year institutions but chose to attend a community college, their ending looks a lot different. In fact, a number of them stopped attending after their first or second semester, never completing a degree or transferring to a four-year institution. Some started a family very young while others simply started working. This leaves me to wonder if they had chosen to attend a four-year institution rather than a community college and not "undermatched" would their academic career and life have looked any different. Despite "undermatching" was there something that could have been done, while they were at the community college, that could have contributed to their retention, persistence and potential completion? I "undermatched" and yet I had a very different college experience, why?

Because of this similar experience, I assumed a *participant as observer* stance while collecting information. Merriam (2009) notes that "being a member of the group being studied

may be the only way to gain access and obtain reliable information (p.125)". While the internal battle between being both an observer and participant was a challenge, Patton (2002) recognized the importance of the researcher balancing both roles:

Experiencing the program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, the inquirer remains aware of being an outsider. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders (p.62)

Despite the shared experience between myself and the participants, I stayed "sufficiently detached to observe and analyze" (Merriam, 2009, p.126) throughout the study by utilizing epoche and a self-study. The process of epoche permits the researcher's everyday understandings, judgments and knowings to be set aside (Merriam, 2009). Epoche allows the researcher to examine biases and assumptions about the experience of interest before embarking on a study. Prior to the interviews, I documented a complete description of my own experience. I also spoke with my parents and sibling to make sure all of my assumptions and beliefs were discussed and accounted for. This self-study helped to clarify any preliminary pre-conceived notions and assisted me with being conscious about my role and perspective of this experience.

During data collection I felt confirmed and assured as a participant observer. The participants' current feelings were my past feelings. Their current moments of embarrassment and confusion, were my past moments. Yet, if I had to make a college choice decision again today, I would still choose to attend a community college. Attending a community college was the best choice for me and my family. It prepared us all. For me, it prepared me academically, socially, and personally, to attend a four-year university. For my family, it prepared them by providing college information and resources that afforded my younger sibling and eventually

my parents to pursue a college degree. It was bittersweet to hear that my same experience, as a first generation, African American student who was eligible to attend a four-year university, but undermatched and chose to attend a community college over 16 years ago, is still relevant today. While it validated my college choice and community college experience, it also revealed the work that still needs to be done in both secondary and post-secondary settings.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the findings are restricted to a single urban community college district in one county. As a result, the findings are limited to the context of the district. Hence, the findings should not be generalized to other community college districts. However, the findings may lead to future research that would increase the transferability of its results.

Delimitation

This research also included delimitation. This sample only considered students at one community college who were eligible to attend four-year institutions. It does not include academically qualified African American students who undermatch by attending other institutional types, nor does it consider selectivity based on admission standards. Therefore the findings may not resonate with the experiences of all academically qualified African American students who undermatch.

Ethical Considerations

Noted by Merriam (2009), “ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings (p. 230).” To confirm that the study was carried out with integrity, strategies like: explaining the purpose and methods to be used,

informed consent, confidentiality, and data collection boundaries were utilized. These strategies also ensure trustworthiness of the study and credibility of the researcher.

APPENDIX D

COMPLETE/UNABRIDGED RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore why academically qualified African American students, those eligible to attend four-year universities, choose to attend community colleges. In this chapter key findings are presented from interviews of 19 community college students who met minimum admission standards to four-year universities based on standardized test scores. Fourteen participants were female and five were male. Four research questions guided this study: (1) What is the college choice process for academically qualified African American students who start higher education at a community college? (2) What personal factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice? (3) What institutional factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice? (4) How do academically qualified African American students describe their community college experience in regards to the concept of undermatching? Five categories of findings emerged from the semi-structured interviews:

1. Why I went to college
2. How I learned about different colleges
3. What contributed to my college choice decision
4. My community college experience
5. Reflections and advice

This chapter begins with how participants made the decision to go to college and what a college degree represented to them. What follows is how they navigated the search and choice process as well as their community college experiences in light of the undermatching phenomenon.

Finally, the chapter concludes with participants' overall reflections of their decision to attend a community college and advice they offer to others who are making college choice decisions.

Due to the depth of the data collected, it is important to provide a comprehensive report of the participants. Each graduated from high school and followed the recommended high school curriculum that prepared them for minimum admission to a four-year university. Seven participants graduated in the top quarter of their class and two graduated in the top 10 %. Every participant had spent at least a full semester at a community college and four were in their final semester before graduation. The average age of the participant was 20, the youngest participant was 18, while the oldest was 25. Sixteen of the nineteen participants still lived at home with at least one parent and all of the participants lived 30 miles or less from the college.

Table D.1

Additional Participant Demographics

	High School Curriculum	Applied to 4 year	Admitted to a 4 -year	Current GPA	Total hours completed	Plan to transfer	Receiving aid
1	Recommended	Y	Y	3.72	65	Y	Y
2	Recommended	Y	Y	3.77	26	Y	N
3	Recommended	Y	Y	3.12	48	Y	Y
4	Recommended	Y	Y	3.02	60	Y	Y
5	Recommended	Y	Y	3.54	13	N	Y
6	Recommended	N	N	2.90	73	Y	N
7	Recommended	Y	Y	2.50	12	Y	Y
8	Recommended	N	N	3.5	45	Y	N
9	Recommended	N	N	2.54	54	Y	Y
10	Recommended	N	N	4.0	12	Y	Y
11	Recommended	Y	Y	2.8	12	Y	Y
12	Recommended	Y	Y	3.0	9	Y	Y
13	Recommended	N	N	2.75	12	Y	N
14	Recommended	Y	Y	4.0	34	Y	Y
15	Recommended	Y	Y	4.0	16	Y	N
16	Recommended	Y	Y	3.8	12	Y	Y
17	Recommended	N	N	3.68	19	Y	Y
18	Recommended	N	N	2.45	64	N	Y
19	Recommended	Y	N	3.5	36	Y	N

1. Why I Went to College

Students decide to go to college for many reasons. Often times those reasons stem from educational aspirations that have been cultivated for years by parents and extended family members. Going to college is a personal investment; the outcomes of a college degree can be compared to a return on investment and appear in the forms of financial stability, job security, and overall well-being. Consistent with the literature was the finding that the African American students in this study have a predetermination to go to college. Education was viewed as important and college represented upward mobility and future opportunities. These messages regarding college were given to the participants by their immediate and extended family members regardless of their levels of education and intensified by their environmental factors.

Predetermination

In the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, there are three phases of college choice with the first one being called predisposition. The predisposition phase focuses on characteristics of the student and whether or not they have aspirations to attend college. Hossler et al., (1989) describes predisposition as the formation of educational aspirations. This stage refers to post-high school plans and occurs between the seventh and ninth grade (Hossler et al., 1989). During this stage, peers, high school experiences, student's family background and academic performance play significant roles as factors that influence the development of the student's post high school plans (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). A critique of this model, however, is that it is based on one culture; middle class, traditional-aged Americans. As a result, it does not take into account cultural differences thereby limiting who this model can be applied to.

For example, while the participants in this study developed educational aspirations at very young ages, they did not begin making post-high school plans until their junior and senior year. This is just one example of how they did not fit into the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model.

In 2005, Kassie Freeman expanded on the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model by acknowledging race, culture, and the environment and suggested that the first stage of college choice for African Americans be called predetermination. Predetermination typically begins at a young age and acknowledges the role and large impact that environmental circumstances generally have on whether or not a student chooses to go to college. Along with the environment, family plays a vital role in predetermination, a larger role than the one that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggests for family in their model. This stage has less to do with forming educational plans and more to do with a student deciding if higher education is an option at all. Consistent with Freeman's research, all of the participants in this study shared why education was important to them, what college represented for them as well as for their families, and what environmental factors contributed to their predetermination to attend college.

Importance of education. All nineteen participants expressed how important education was to them and to their families; a finding consistent with Gasman (2007) who notes that African Americans recognize the importance and power of education. Most of them remembered being in grade school when their parents first explained the importance of education. One participant jokingly said that his parents have been instilling the importance of education in him since he came out of the womb, noting the role that he believes education will

play in his life.

My mom and dad preached the importance of school since I came out the womb. All I heard when I was growing up was do well in school. If you don't go to college, you're not going to be anything in life. You're not going to make the money you want to make, meet the girl you want to meet, drive the car you want to drive, live where you want to live. They just preached that. They made sure that I knew what college was and how important it was to get an education.

Another participant shared how education was a daily routine for her and her siblings, no matter where she was or what time of the year it happened to be, her parents always expressed the importance of education. She shares how strongly her parents cared about her education which led her to understand how important it really was.

Growing up I was taught to work hard for everything and to keep education first. There is always a time to study at home. Even when you are on break, study. When you're not at school, study. Even if you're in the car, have a book, reading something, doing something education wise. Every single day, just make sure you benefit something. So I learned quickly that education is important and that it's one of the main things that no one can ever take from you; it's always going to be there. You can always use it somehow.

Another participant, whose parents both attended college, remembers being taught the importance of education as early as first grade.

Going to college was just something my parents instilled in me since I was little. They always tried to reinforce the importance of an education, so it's just something I always knew and wanted to do. As far back as first grade, my parents would say always do your best, whether it's coloring, math, whatever. Just do your best. Always aim for an A. They always stressed that education was going to help me have a better future and they want me to do better than them, so it was always reinforced to me that I need to get an education.

Similarly, all other participants shared how their parents or extended family members instilled the importance of education. Comments like "school was everything to my family" and "you are nothing without school" contributed to their predetermination and led them to believe that college was the only option after high school.

No other option. For some African Americans there is an automatic expectation, often times initiated by their families, to attend college (Freeman, 2005). All of the participants in this study spoke about this automatic expectation and shared how it contributed to their decision to choose to attend college. For example, one female participant recalled,

Since I was young I knew that I was going to college. I just knew. Both of my parents have bachelor's degrees so not going to college was never an option. They always taught us the importance of education and getting good grades so that we could go to college. That's what it's always been about; taking education seriously and going to college.

Another participant shared a similar perspective.

Basically not going to college was never an option for me. I have always known that after high school I would go to college. My parents helped me to understand that going to college was the right thing to do. They always talked about me going to college; it was expected.

Two participants reported that having a child at an early age intensified the feeling of having no other option but college. They both believed that college was the only way they were going to be able to provide for their children. One explained how she knew she had to do something to be able to provide for her child.

I had a kid my senior year. It's not just me anymore, so I'm going to have to do better than just cosmetology school or just nothing at all. I knew I had to do something so that I could be able to provide for my child. I also want him to look up to me, and I want to be able to take care of him and give him the best. Once I had my child, my Mom told me that college was a must. I had to do it; there was no other option, really.

While the other shared how having her son confirmed her choice to go to college.

Before I had my child, I had a choice. Of course, my mom told me that you need to go, but I didn't have to. It still was up to me. It still is up to me, but after I had my son she influenced me more, like, "Okay, now you really need to go." I understood the importance of me going, especially for him. So once I had him, not going to college was not an option.

What college represents. Participants were asked to share why they were interested in going to college and to explain what college truly represented for them. Consistent with past research that suggests that African Americans view a college education as the portal to economic security and family stability (Gasman, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004); all of the participants associated a college degree with having future professional opportunities, being successful, and a stable flow of income; factors that contributed to their predetermination.

Future opportunity. When describing why they were interested in going to college, the participants in this study described the options they would have later in life; a message that often times was instilled in them by their parents. As a result, they associated college with future opportunities. This finding is similar to Gasman (2007) who suggests that African Americans view education as the key to their freedom. One participant shared how her parents explained how going to college would help her later in life.

My parents always said stay in school. It's not like I had an option to drop out or anything but they always stressed the importance of going to school and continuing my education. I remember them telling me how going to college would help me later in life in getting jobs and careers.

A first generation female participant shared how even though no one in her family went to college, they all encouraged her to go.

Even though no one in my family has a degree, they would all say go to college. It's good. A degree will really make a difference in your future. It will help you to get a good job. I think overall the message was just if I wanted to have a better opportunity at life and make some money, then I was going to have to go to college.

Success. Like most people, the participants in this study also associated college with being successful. They talked about people who they thought were successful and how they went to college, but also about people who did not go to college and who were not successful.

Both types of people served as factors that contributed to their predetermination. One male participant shared what success looked like to him.

College represents being successful. Being able to do something with your life and becoming somebody. Growing up I just knew that was success. I saw people who went to college get really good jobs and really do something with their lives. And then I saw other people choose not to go to college and end up without a job, living at home or making a dumb decision and ending up in jail. So yeah, to me going to college leads to being successful.

For some of the participants, the message of college equaling success came from their parents.

One first generation male participant recalled the security that his parents told him a college degree would bring.

My parents always told me that going to college is the only way that you're going to be successful, pretty much, to insure financial security and job security, an education is the way to go.

Similarly, another participant shared how her mom's advice on how to be successful contributed to her decision to go to college.

My mom, she went to college. She had her bachelor's degree. She would just say how, even though she has a degree, it's still not guaranteed that you'll have a good job or a good career. Just to go to school. That's probably the best option to be successful. So she was a big influence in my decision to go to college.

One female participant shared how successful her dad was and how seeing that success really influenced her to make the decision to go to college.

My father, really influenced me to go to college because he's very successful and he went to college. So I really want to be as successful as him or even more, just because the more successful I am, the more proud he is. And plus my dad would say, "Well you know that's what you need to do." "You need to go to college because that's what I did." A lot of people in my family didn't go and they are not successful, so that's even more encouraging for me to go to college and finish high school when a lot of people didn't in my family.

Financial Security. Being able to provide for themselves and for others was a major

reason for the participants in this study to choose to attend college. They believed that college led to the ability to make money. They also associated college with a career or a “good paying job.” One female participant shared what types of jobs she believed people who went to college were qualified for.

College is normally a place where doctors or lawyers come from; that’s where everyone goes to get high paying jobs. So I wanted to better myself and to get a good job so I can live comfortably which meant I needed to go to college.

This idea of college leading to the ability to make money was given to some of the participants by their parents. A male participant reflected on what his family showed him regarding salary based on education.

My family showed me the facts about people who didn’t attend college and the money that they make is not good money or not enough. So once I saw that I knew and understood that if I wanted to make enough money to live well I needed to go to college.

One of the female participants explained that once she had a child she understood that she was financially responsible for someone else. For her that meant she needed to go to college so she could get a job and be financially stable.

Once I had my child I decided to go to college because I wanted to be financially stable. Going to college will allow me to live comfortably. I'd be able to take care of everything that I need to take care of financially, including my son.

Being an example. In addition to having future opportunities, being successful, having a good job, and a stable flow of income; many of the participants were determined to go to college so that they could be an example to other people, mainly to their family and younger siblings. Half of the participants were first generation college students so they were truly the first person in their family to go to college. They believed that if they didn’t go to college their

family would be disappointed. One first generation, male participant shared how we wanted to be an example for his family and not a disappointment.

Right now there is no one in my family who has a degree. I want to be an example, I want them to be able to look up to me and see that they can go to college. I am going to school for my brother and sister, my parents, and hopefully my kids. I don't want any of them to be disappointed in me.

Similarly, another female participant spoke about the example she was expected to be for her younger sister.

My family wanted me to actually graduate. I think they did some college but they didn't finish it. So they basically put pressure on me like, okay you need to set an example for your younger sister and go to college. You know your older sister didn't graduate college; we didn't graduate college, so you need to be an example.

For one of the male participants he knew if he did not go to college, not only would he let his parents down but also his younger sister.

Well, my little sister looks up to me a lot and I know that I am setting an example for her. When I was in high school she would always ask me what college I was considering and what I was going to do with my degree. It was a big deal for me to go to college and I just didn't want to fail because I knew my parents would be disappointed. They always talked about how smart I was and how important it was for me to do well in school.

A few of the participants shared how they were expected to go to college and how that expectation served as motivation and ultimately contributed to their predetermination. For example, one male participant shared how his whole family expected him to go to college.

From day one I was expected to go to college. My whole family expected me to go to college and to be an example for my siblings and my cousins. That pushed me harder to be eligible to go. I wanted to live up to their expectations and not let them down. Especially my mom, I didn't want to let her down, so it just makes me work harder and push myself harder because she always says how important my education is.

Family

Freeman's model (2005) of predetermination suggests that immediate and extended family members' play an essential role in the predetermination of college for African American students. Findings from this study confirm that notion. Although their levels of parental education, support and encouragement varied, all of the participants discussed the role that their families played on their predetermination to attend college. Most parents made sure that college was a topic of discussion at home regularly. They continuously discussed the importance of education and provided examples of what a college education can offer in regards to money and a career. Others expressed the importance of education in general and asked the participants to commit to achieving more in life than people without degrees had.

The two participants, who had children, expressed the role that their families had with their predetermination to attend college. They felt that once they had their child, their families encouraged them to attend college even more. One first generation female participant shared how her family helped her through encouragement.

My family helped a lot, they put it in my head that I can do it and it's not impossible having a child. Because that's what is put out there in society that if you have a child early, your life is done. So with my family encouraging me, that's what made me go to college.

Another first generation female participant recalled how she wanted to break a family cycle and go to college despite having a child early.

With my family it's like a cycle, my grandmother had my father early. My father had my older sister early. My older sister had my nephew early, and none of them went to college, you know. So it's like I am in the cycle now, I had my son early, so it's like seeing my Father, he was so hurt, because I'm guessing he just thought I was going to follow his footsteps and not go to college. So I was like I just can't do this to him. So he is one of the main reasons why I decided to go to college, I have to get this degree to make him proud and to be an example for my younger sisters.

Similar to the findings of Freeman (2005) and McDonough (1997), some of the participants were first generation college students so despite their parents not having a college degree, they were still encouraged to attend college and in essence influenced to accomplish more than what their parents accomplished. One female participant explained how her dad not having a degree served as motivation for her to go to college.

My parents hadn't gone to college. Well, they did, but they didn't complete college, and seeing how my dad kind of struggled. He has a decent job. He makes more than what people without degrees should make or really make but I wanted to do better and he wanted me to do better. He wanted me to have a better life than he did and to make better decisions than he did. That's why I was determined to go to college.

Similarly, a first generation male student shared how his family encouraged him to go to college even though none of them had gone; a finding that is also consistent with Smith (2012) who discusses the role of African American families in student aspirations.

Even though no one in my family has a degree, they would say go to college. It's good. A degree really makes a difference. I think I was like in the eighth grade, that was when my grades started slipping and they were like your grades can't slip because you have to go to college so you have to stay on top of your grades.

Environmental factors

Freeman (2005) posits that environmental factors and circumstances “often have much to do with whether students will choose higher education (p.111)”. Similarly, exposure serves as an environmental factor and contributes to a student’s predetermination. Exposure comes in various forms including having conversations with others about college, going on college tours, attending college fairs, and even participating in college prep programs. For many of the participants, most of their exposure to college came from their parents, schools, peers, and television. For others it came from church and through sports.

Church. Both Freeman (2005) and McDonough, Antonio, & Trent (1997) discuss the role of the church in African American history; particularly when it comes to the importance of education. For these participants, church was a place of exposure and encouragement. Some attended a church that offered a scholarship program for college students, while others attended a church that took students on college road trips. One male participant, remembers his pastor, speaking to him directly about the importance of going to college.

My pastor always told me to stay in school. Actually, he didn't get his high school degree. He said that it's very important, just stay in school and you'll have an easy life. He always preached stuff like go to college so that you can go out there and be something. He'd always try to uplift those who were going to college or about to graduate high school. He was one of the first people outside of my family to really talk to me about college and the possibilities of me going.

Sports. Regarding sports, five out of the nineteen participants were athletes in high school and were exposed to college through sports. At times it was their coaches who made them aware of college as a way to compete after high school. One male participant remembered his coach telling him that working hard as an athlete could lead to an athletic scholarship at a university.

The majority of my friends, we all played sports together. Our coaches would always talk to us about continuing to play after high school and the possibility of being recruited by a college. Once we hit our junior year, some of them got scholarships so that got me really thinking about college and considering which schools I wanted to try to play for. For me, college was always tied to sports and my coaches always reminded me that I could go to college for free if I gave 100% on the field every game.

Coaches were not the only ones who used sports to expose the participants to college, their parents also did by considering sports and athletic ability to be a means to finance a college education. They exposed their children to the possibility of an athletic scholarship at an

early age and many of them invested time and money on the possibility of their child being recruited.

Well, me and my brothers played AAU basketball and I played club volleyball so we competed year around. Both of my brothers, they have personal trainers and coaches and so did I so sports were a very big deal. For us my parents always pushed us to work hard in our sport so that we could get an athletic scholarship to a college. My dad told us that he couldn't afford to send us all to college so we knew early that the only way we could go to a four-year university was through sports. Being that sports was so dominate at home, we began to look at schools that we may get recruited from and my dad would take us to their games and walk us around the campus so we could see what it was like.

One of the male participants shared how involved his parents were with him being an athlete and how they intentionally helped him get recruited.

When I was young, playing football, my parents used to record me and put me on YouTube. They were learning all kind of ways to help me get recruited. They were putting me on YouTube, showing me to high school coaches, trying basically to recruit me, trying to push me to get a college scholarship. They did a lot. They knew how important sports were to me and wanted to use that to keep me motivated in school.

These findings are similar to McDonough et al. (1997) who suggest that athletic recruitment serves as a factor in African American choice. However, what this study reveals is the influence sports has on the college choice process for the parent as well.

2. How I Learned About Different Colleges

Predetermination is only the first stage in African American college choice. Once the participants determined that they would go to college; they then began the search process. For some, the search happened intentionally. They knew early on what type of school they wanted to go to, what they wanted to major in and where they wanted to attend college and they searched accordingly. A few used the recommendations of their families, peers, teachers and

coaches to search for possible colleges to attend. The remaining participants, however, relied on no one during this phase and were left to complete the search phase alone.

Search

The second phase of the college choice process according to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, also known as search, involves the student narrowing down options and deciding on institutional fit. Hossler et al. (1989) described this phase as the acquisition and examination of information about colleges to identify a limited set of institutions to apply to. During this stage, students explore and evaluate possible colleges to attend and determine if institutions have the characteristics that they deem important (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This stage occurs in high school, specifically during grades ten through twelve (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler et al., 1998; McDonough, 1997).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify this stage as most important because of the increased interaction between students and institutions and the time associated with students gathering information and creating a list of prospective institutions. Findings from this study, however, reveal that this stage is important for different reasons. Unfortunately, many of the participants did not have any interaction with any institution nor did they gather information or create a list of prospective institutions. Instead they relied on the recommendations of their families, peers and high school staff. Some recommendations helped and resulted in the participant researching and applying to a suggested institution. Other recommendations were nonexistent and despite attempts to talk to counselors or attend college fairs, a number of the participants felt alone during the search stage. Without having anyone to talk to or rely on for

college related information many of them felt lost and confused during this stage; especially those that were first generation students.

Family. Families play a unique role in a student's search process. Some are very involved and encourage students to consider best fit, major and resources when searching for a college. Others limit a student's college options due to sticker prices and perceived cost of attendance while few encourage students to consider specific institutional types based on past personal experiences (Smith, 2012). During the search process, some of the participants in this study recall their families encouraging them to consider certain types of institutions as they were going through the search process; a finding consistent with Smith (2012) and Smith and Fleming (2006). For example, one female participant explained how she considered attending a community college based on the recommendation of her cousin.

At first, my cousin talked to me about going to a four-year university because she was attending one, but then after a semester she came back home because she didn't like it. Once she came back, she recommended me to go to a community college first just to make sure I knew what I wanted to major in and what type of college I wanted to go to.

Surprisingly for some of the participants, their parents were not actively involved in their search process despite being a major factor in their determination and aspiration to attend college. In fact, for these participants, their parents were invisible when it came time to research or visit schools and instead were expected to complete the search phase on their own. This concept is illustrated through one male participant's story on how his mom was not involved.

Me and my mom, we would talk about college, but it really wasn't heavy until I got to the end of my junior year, because that's when I really needed to start seeing which college I wanted to go to. She did not tell me what school I had to go to or really help me with looking up different schools but she would always be like "Son, you need to start researching and see what you want to do with college."

Similarly, one female participant explained how although her family wanted her to go to college, they did not help her search for one.

My family just wanted me to go to school. So they didn't really care what type of school it was. When it came time for me to start searching for schools I was pretty much on my own. I guess they figured I knew what I was doing but I really didn't. As far as my family though, as long as I went to school they didn't really care which one.

Nine participants shared how being first generation college students impacted their ability to search for college options. Although their families really wanted them to go to college, they were unable to help them search. This finding is similar to that of Freeman (2005) and Smith and Flemming (2006) in that most African American parents who have not been to college, while it is important for their children to attend college, are not equipped with the tools needed to help them search for a college. This precisely describes one student's experience who struggled with searching for a college on her own.

Other than telling and wanting me to go to college, my family didn't do much. I had to figure it out on my own. My parents did not go to college so they did not know what to tell me. It was just like being stuck in a hole. I would take one step ahead and seven back because I did not know what to do or what to look for so I was just felt stuck.

Location. The idea of being at colleges that were close in proximity to family was a notion shared by many of the participants and was reflected in their search phase. These participants only searched for colleges that were in the same city, county or within a 2-3 hour drive. Most of them felt like they were not ready to leave home and wanted to be close enough in case anything happened. One female participant shared how her search was limited to in-state schools because she wanted to attend a school that was close to home.

When it came time to pick a school, I searched for schools in-state, because I'm a homebody. I knew I didn't want to go too far. At first I was like, "Yeah, I'll get away," but in reality, I was like, "No, that's not what I really want to do." I wanted to stay as close to

home as possible.

A male participant explained that he wanted to remain close to home in case he needed help; he wanted to be able to get to his family quickly if anything happened.

I didn't search for many schools out of state because I didn't want to be too far from my family. I mean just in case I needed help or they needed help I wanted to make sure that I would be able to get to them quickly or at least be in their reach. Being away would have made me feel bad because what if my family needs me or something happens and I am not able to be there. I couldn't live with that.

Sometimes the desire to be close to home was not that of the participants but that of the parent. A few participants shared how their families told them they needed to stay close to home as they were searching for colleges. This finding is very consistent with Freeman's (2005) study on college choice and proved to be a strong influence on the participants' search options. For example, one female participant shared what her parents told her when she began searching for a college.

When it came time to start looking at colleges, first my parents started with don't go too far or tuition maybe too high; so then I looked at in state schools. But then they said you're just going to be so far away, it's your first year, you should just live close to our home; so then I only considered school that were no more than 30 minutes to an hour away.

Another female participant recalled hearing a similar message from her parents.

My family just wanted me to stay close to home so I would say they influenced me to consider schools in-state. They told me because if I had any problems or issues, especially being a freshman, I could always come home or they could be close enough to where they can drive and not have to take off a whole week or something to come see me.

Peers. When it came time to search for a college to attend, the participants in this study looked to their peers for options. Consistent with literature, some considered certain schools and majors because of their peers (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001; Bergereson, 2009). Often time

searching together and planning to room together, the participants in this study valued the input that their friends had on their search process. One male participant shared,

When it came time to start searching for colleges, it made me reach out and start asking my peers what college they were going to go. Once I found out I thought well let me apply to those schools to and see if I can be there because no one wants to go to go college alone. You always want to have someone you know so I applied to a lot of the same schools that my friends applied to.

One female participant explained the role that her friends had on which colleges she was considering.

My friends played a large role in what colleges I was considering. We all wanted to go together. We all wanted to go to the same college, do everything together. Who doesn't want to go somewhere with all of their friends? We just wanted to be with each other. So we all agreed to apply to the same schools and the plan was whichever school admitted us all was the school that we were going to go to.

Another participant, in particular, planned to room with a group of friends and shared the plans that they had to attend college together.

Once we started to apply to colleges we were like "Hey, we should all go to college together," because we had a group of five or six friends and the grand idea was for us, four girls to all room together and then, the two guys room together and then we could all be friends at the same college and then I have that sort of thing going.

Teammates also played a large role in the search process for those participants who were athletes. Some teammates would encourage them to consider a school that they had already committed to and accepted an athletic scholarship at so that they could continue to compete together. One participant shared his story of visiting a college with a teammate and how he was encouraged to consider attending.

My high school pushed a lot of in state schools. In fact, they were pushing me to go to one particular school because one of my teammates I was playing with, had already committed there. We were real cool so he would say "Hey, man, I know by your junior year you're going to start getting a whole bunch of looks, you should come here." Then he took me to the college a few times to show me around and kept asking me about

committing to the school so that we could keep playing together. If it wasn't for him, I would have never considered that school, they just weren't on my radar.

High School. For first generation students, high school is often the first place students learn about college. They gather information from their high school teachers, counselors and coaches as well as from college fairs hosted at their high schools (Kinzie et al., 2004; Perna & Swail, 2001). These experiences influence their college predisposition (Bergerson, 2009) as well as the formation of their educational aspirations (Pitre, 2006). For example, one of the female participants shared how her teachers influenced both the college that she applied to and her major.

My senior year teacher actually said, "Hey, this is a pretty good school for you and they offer your major." I had never heard of the school before so that was really good for me to hear. She then encouraged me to apply to it and I did. Then I had another teacher who would be like well I went here and you are like me so you should apply to the college I went to. I see a little bit of me in you so you know you should look at this school and see if that is where you might want to go. I didn't end up applying to that school but I considered it based on what my teacher said.

Counselor. High school guidance counselors play an important role in the college search process of high school students (Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Muhammad, 2008).

The role of a guidance counselor is one that is typically rewarding but also very complicated. Often time schools report the ratio of counselor to student as 1 counselor per 500 students. McDonough (1997) and Freeman (2005) review this notion and posit that schools with high subdominant group populations, like African Americans, are more resource constrained and more likely to have fewer school counselors. As a result some students have great experiences with their counselors and for others the relationship is nonexistent.

What rang true for these participants, especially those that were first generation, is when counselors were available and provided college related information and expectations, the student benefitted but when no relationship existed, the student suffered. A finding that is consistent with Muhammad (2008) who suggests that a student's understanding of their counselors' expectations for their future positively influences the college search process. A finding that also confirms the work of Freeman (2005) and McDonough (1997) who contend that school counselors are particularly effective in influencing student predisposition in schools where parental educational experiences are limited. Some participants shared their positive experiences with their counselors and explained how much of a help they were. For example, one explained how her counselor paired her with schools.

My counselor paired me up with schools that would match me. We had a career aptitude test. So that's how they did it, matched us with different schools that best fit our careers or what we wanted to be. It narrowed it down a lot and it helped me find schools outside of the area. It really helped a lot, helped me to look at outside of the area and my other options other than just state schools.

While another referred to her counselor as the "it" man because of all the help he provided her and her classmates.

I had one counselor who helped me look at colleges that I could go to, where I ranked, and whether they would accept me and things like that. I think just keeping me really on track, so that I can even get accepted in a university to begin with, he helped me do everything. He really was the "it" man.

Other participants, however, explained what their experiences were like without the help of a counselor. Feeling alone, confused and overwhelmed, these participants acknowledged how hard the search process was for them echoing the findings of Muhammad (2008) and Smith (2009). This finding highlights the importance of counselors, especially for first generation students. This precisely describes one male student's experience.

It was really hard for me to get information from my high school about college. Every time I would ask they would just tell me to talk to my parents or attend college night and said I could ask the people there. The hard part for me was that my parents didn't go to college and college night was a little intimidating. I wish my counselor would have prepared me for college night. She could have helped me think of questions to ask or recommend schools that I should consider. But she didn't. I guess I was just left to kind of figure it out on my own.

Despite following the recommendation of a counselor to attend college night, another participant reported feeling intimidated, frustrated and defeated. She also felt confused because she did not understand the information that was being provided.

At the school I went to they had this specific day where they invited a variety of colleges to come and they told us about the college and gave us information on it. It helped a lot I guess because I heard about schools that I didn't know about but most of what they gave me I really didn't understand so I felt very confused. My parents never went to college so I knew nothing about it. Honestly I didn't know what the information really meant or what I was supposed to do with it. I tried to ask my counselor for help but she never had the time. It was really frustrating.

Like the previous participant, another student remembered how hard it was to gather college related information from their counselor.

I never met with my counselor about going to college. It always seemed like they were too busy or that they focused on certain groups of students only. The only thing we talked about were the courses that I was taking in high school but even then they weren't pleasant about it. They acted like it was a chore and were actually pretty rude. Because of that I never wanted to go to their office so when it came time to learn about different colleges I did a lot of it on my own or with my friends.

Although experiences with counselors varied among the participants, other ways that counselors contribute to the search process are through handouts, posters and general information. One participant commented on how helpful a sheet on the window of her counselor's office was to her search for college options.

My counselor's office at my high school was a big help. Even though I did not get to meet with them often, they always kept a big list of all the colleges that most of the students from our school went to and then they had a list of scholarships and which

schools would accept them. That really helped me start my research. I ended up looking into all of the colleges on that list.

Coach. For student-athletes, a coach is a prominent figure, not just in their sport but often in their lives. An athletic coach is generally someone that an athlete trusts and looks up to. As a result, they typically have a strong influence on the college search process. The participants who were student-athletes reminisced about the role that their high school coach played in determining which colleges they were considering. For example, one male student explained the role his coaches played in his college search process.

Both my AAU coach and my high school coach always told me about possible schools I could go to for basketball. They also told me about schools who were interested in recruiting me. They would say, "Hey man you should consider going to this school because they want you to play for them." My coaches always told me to go where I could play. So that has always been important to me. I considered schools based on where I thought I would get some playing time at.

Similarly, a female participant shared how her coaches instilled in her the belief that she could compete at a four year university. That belief proved to be the catalyst in her college search process as well as in her ultimate college choice.

Since the fourth grade, my coaches told me that I was going to get college scholarships and that I would be able to go to whatever college I wanted. They were putting it in my head that if I did well in basketball, I could go anywhere. They started telling me about colleges to start looking at and colleges they had connections to. That's how I really got into searching for possible colleges to attend.

For these students, competing collegiately was a childhood dream so when their coaches spoke of the possibility and associated that with specific schools, they paid particular attention. One participant shared how his coach encouraged him to attend the same school he went to.

There was my football coach. He encouraged me to attend the school he graduated from. He said that I had a really good shot at playing if I went there and that they had a really good football program. He ended up inviting one of the Assistant coaches to our practices and I was able to talk to him a couple of times. I have to admit that I had never

heard of that school before but based on what my coach said I think it was a good school. I actually ended up applying to it. Besides my coach told me that they had some really good teachers and offered the major that I was considering so it was like a win-win for me.

College Prep Programs. College prep programs proved to be instrumental in the search process and lives of the participants who were fortunate enough to participate in them; a finding that is consistent to that of past and recent literature (Perna & Swail, 2001; Schultz & Mueller, 2006) Out of the nineteen participants, four of them were actively involved with some type of college prep program. When asked how their search process would have been without the programs, they all answered hard or nonexistent. For one female participant, being involved in the college prep program is what taught her about the difference between a community college and a university.

My college prep program helped me a lot. They basically let us know what types of schools were out there, because I didn't know anything about community colleges, trade colleges or nothing like that. Basically they broke down what college is about because no-one really knew. They broke down what kind of salaries you can make with a degree and how many years you need to go to school. Basically they taught us everything. That was big for me because no one in my family has gone to college so they could never help me with that kind of stuff or knew that information I guess.

Another recalled how instrumental her prep program was in helping her navigate the college application process.

While I was in high school we had this student services center on campus which pretty much had all the information to any university in the world, and they encouraged a lot of us juniors and seniors just to stop by and get information. There was staff in there who actually helped us apply for college and helped us with fee waivers and everything, so that's pretty much where I gained all of my brochures, all of my information regarding different colleges from.

We had what you would call a college night where the whole hallway of our school would be filled with all these different colleges and I think the military was there too. We pretty much would go down the aisle in the hallways, talk to whoever we wanted to, and get applications. I think it helped a lot. It helped me realize that there are more

colleges than just ones that are here locally. After attending a college fair I started to look at colleges that were out of state.

3. What Contributed to my College Choice Decision

Once a student has determined that going to college is the right option for them and has gone through the college search process, the next step is to make a choice on which college they want to apply to and ultimately attend. Research suggests that top college choice factors include cost, family, and location (Freeman, 2005; Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; McDonough, 1997; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005). These factors rang true for the participants in this study along with sports, unexpected circumstances, and feeling unprepared personally to attend a four-year university.

Choice

In the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, the final phase is choice. This phase emphasizes the choice process where students take the information they gathered, evaluate it and make a decision on which school to attend. Hossler et al. (1989) described choice as the evaluation of alternatives to make a final college selection for matriculation. During this phase, academic performance and socioeconomic status plays a role in the number and type of colleges that students are considering (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). According to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, the choice phase occurs in the twelfth grade and is where a student begins to actually apply to specific institutions and decides which to enroll in; this stage culminates the student's college-choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997). Contrary to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, most of the participants in this study engaged in the choice phase the summer after they graduated from high school rather than in their twelfth grade year. In fact, a large number

of them were still in the search phase during their twelfth grade year. When it can time to decide on an institution to attend, factors such as cost, family, and sports proved to be important factors in their decision.

Cost. The choice to attend a community college for 14 of the 19 participants was associated with cost. This finding is consistent with both general college choice literature as well as community college choice specific literature (Somers et al., 2006). While the cost of higher education undoubtedly played a role in their decision to attend a community college, it impacted them all in different ways. Three of the participants had actually attended new student orientation at a four year institutions and changed their mind once they received a bill for registration. One participant shared,

I made my decision the middle of the summer, towards the beginning of the school year. It was after I went to an orientation at a four-year school and I was registering for classes and I saw the amount and I was like, wow. What both my parents told me finally clicked and so I personally made the decision. I was like, yeah; I don't think I want to go here. I don't want to take out all these loans, and I'm undecided, too, so I decided to go to a community college.

Another explained,

After attending orientation, I saw my freshman year would have cost me like \$20,000 and that was spooky. Then, I heard about how much it cost for one class at a community college and I thought, why wasn't that my first choice? It's so much less expensive to get the exact same education.

For two other participants, it was the timeliness of receiving scholarship and financial aid information that contributed to their decision to attend a community college. They made their decision only after they found out that they were not receiving enough aid to cover their tuition. One female participant recalled,

I had automatic admissions to four- year schools across the state because of my academics, so I could basically go to any school here that I wanted to. But I did not

receive financial aid and did not have enough scholarships to cover the tuition and housing so basically my parents couldn't meet the financial needs of me going to a university. Instead they told me that I had to do the community college thing.

Timing proved to be a deciding factor for the next participant as well.

After I graduated high school I decided to attend a community college because although I had been accepted to two universities, my financial aid hadn't come through yet. One of the schools ended up offering me a scholarship but by the time I got to being able to say, "Yes" or "No," the deadline to accept it had already expired.

St John et al. (2005) found that African American students rely heavily on financial aid and that the greatest barrier for students of low socioeconomic backgrounds is the ability to pay tuition at four-year institutions. Consistent with this research, participants whose choice was influenced by cost, were aware of the cost associated with attending a four-year institution and simply believed that it was out of their or their parent's price range.

Previous research suggests that financial barriers have an influence on students' educational choice (Bers & Galowich, 2002); echoing this finding, two financial barriers that proved to be an influence, to both the participants and their families, was the sticker price associated with the cost of attendance at a four-year institution and their lack of financial literacy regarding ways to fund a college education. Many of the participants in this study were offered admission into at least one four-year institution; despite their acceptance and academic preparedness, they declined because of a lack of financial understanding on how to pay for it. They did not understand how financial aid and scholarships worked nor could they depend on others to help them. Even those who were not first generation college students described their parents and extended family members being confused about the financial aid process and anxious about the amount of money associated with them attending a four-year university. This accurately describes one price conscious student's experience

I chose to come to a community college and not a four-year university because of the cost. The price to go to a four-year was out-of-range for me to be able to pay or for my parents to pay. We were all worried about me going away to college and then having to come back because we ran out of money. So that was our plan, for me to attend a community college so we could save money. Then I would transfer and attend a four-year school.

Most of the participants looked at the community college as being higher education that they could afford on their own without taking out loans or depending on their parents for help. A finding consistent with McDonough (1997), Smith (2008, 2009) and Styles-Hughes (1987), who suggest that African American students are more likely to not attend their first-choice college due to the lack of financial resources to enroll and to afford tuition. While many knew that they could attend a four year university by taking out a loan, most did not want to carry that type of debt. In fact hearing about college debt from their parents, siblings, and peers played a large role in their decision to attend a community college. A concept highlight by one of the participants,

As far as the cost associated with going away to college, I did not want to be \$20,000 in debt off of one year in college; especially while I was undecided about my major. I have a lot of friends who are doing that. I have a friend who has taken a loan out in her name, her mom's name, her grandparents' name. It's just ridiculous, so I think it's something I can look back on years from now and be glad that I made that decision.

For others, it was seeing what their own siblings went through in regards to college debt. One male participant shared,

I saw what my sisters went through. They graduated and they're doing stuff, I guess, but they have a lot of debt. One sister is 31 and she is still living with our mom even though she has a Master's degree. The other, she finally got out of the house but it took forever and she was still working regular jobs not making a lot of money or anything after all these years and multiple degrees. So I decided I'll take my time with going into all that debt; that's why I choose to attend a community college.

One participant made a unique decision related to cost and his choice to attend a community college. In high school he had the option to graduate early based on credits he accumulated in junior high and over the summers. He made the decision to graduate early and ended up receiving a scholarship for his effort. Understanding the cost associated with attending college, he chose to enroll at a community college rather than a four year university because he believed that his scholarship would be worth more credit hours based on the cost of attendance

I got a scholarship for graduating high school early. I knew it would get eaten up through a university and obviously not at a community college where all of my credits would be transferable anyway. That scholarship was a major reason for me choosing to attend a community college.

Family. College choice literature consistently cites family as being a major influence of college choice (Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Consistent with this research, participants in this study cite family as playing a large role. Many of them revealed that their family members are the ones who influenced them to choose to attend a community college. In fact, two female participants explained that their mothers were the only reasons why they stayed home and enrolled at a community college. One shared,

Despite all of the research I did, I still ended up at a community college. I really wanted to go to a university, but at the end of the day, my mom wanted me to stay home and come to a community college. My mom just didn't want me to move and so I didn't go.

The second recalled,

I stayed home and went to a community college because I don't think my mom was ready for me to leave because we weren't really close when I was growing up and then senior year we were closer than we had ever been before and she just wasn't ready to let go of that relationship that we finally had. I was mad at first but then I started to understand why and I accepted it. I decided, for her, I will stay for a year or two and

then I'll go out of the state.

Many of the participants had family members who had previously attended a community college. Those family members often spoke of their own experiences and encouraged the participants to choose the same route, a finding consistent with Somers et al. (2006). For example, one male participant explained how talking to his mom impacted his choice.

Once I started talking to my mom about college, she said a community college was the best route. Because that's what she did, she went to a community college. I mean, my mom is a nurse now so she obviously going to a community college worked for her. I also think that my parents wanted me to go to a community college first to save money.

One of the male participants received his encouragement to attend a community college from his brother.

My brother went to a community college so he encouraged me to go to one too. He told me not to rush into trying to go away and to think about the amount of money I would be spending. He told me he didn't want me to end up dropping out of my classes because I wasn't ready for a four-year school and then me feeling like I can't do college anymore.

For others, their families played such a large role in financing their education that the only college choice they were given was to attend a community college. This was especially true for one of the student athletes. She recalls her parents telling her that without a scholarship, the community college was her only option.

My parents always told me if you don't get a scholarship, you know, you are going to community college. With four kids, they aren't financially acclimated to put us all through college without scholarships. We wanted to go to universities, big universities. I wanted to go out of the state so my mom was like get a volleyball scholarship and you can go but if not, I'm not paying that or that's all on you so it was either that or a community college. So once I did not get recruited or offered a scholarship anywhere, I knew I had to go to a community college.

In most college choice literature, location serves as an influence to college choice; most students do not want to remain close to home or work (Bergerson, 2009; Somers et al., 2006). However in this study, many of the participants made the choice to attend a community college because of the opportunity to still live at home and have continued support from their family. They valued the curfews and home cooked meals that their parents provided and were not ready to give that up. As a result, they decided to attend a community college.

One side of family influence on college choice that often goes unheard is when parents discourage students from going away to college. A few of the participants in this study, mostly the males, were told they were not ready to “go away” to college and instead to stay home and attend a community college until they matured a little more. For example, one of the male participants shared,

When it came time to pick a school, my mom told me to stay and go to a community college. She said I play too much and I'm just not ready; I need to stay home and wait until I grow a little bit.

Sports

Five of the nineteen participants were heavily involved with sports in high school. Once they figured out that they were not being recruited to compete and attend a four-year college, they decided to enroll at a community college with hopes of earning a transfer scholarship. As a result, a major finding of this study was that some students undermatch for the opportunity to play intercollegiate sports. For all of them, being an athlete was more than just a hobby; it was a lifestyle and choosing to attend a community college served as an alternative route to playing collegiately while still affording to attend college. . For example, one first generation female participant who played volleyball shared how important it was for her to remain a student

athlete.

Being a student athlete was very important to me. Once I graduated from high school and realized that I would not be playing on a team anymore, I got really sad. For the past 10 years, I have played sports; it is what I am known for. The thought of not playing anymore was just scary. So even though I got into a few four-year schools, I decided to give it one more shot and go to a community college so I could continue playing volleyball and possibly still get recruited by a four-year university.

These participants believed in the values they learned through playing organized sports and wanted to continue being a part of a team, even if it meant undermatching. One of the female participants expressed how much she missed the team aspect of being an athlete.

Being an athlete and on a team was one of the best feelings in the world, one that I wanted to experience in college. I miss that whole aspect. I miss being around the girls. I miss all of that. That one of the main reasons I chose to come here because I want that feeling back.

These student athletes knew academically that they could go to college; but they also believed that they could be more successful in college by being a student athlete. One male participant said it best, "I knew, sports-related or not, I could go to college. But I also knew sports would help me through college." McDonough et al. (1997) shared in their research on college choice that where a student is being recruited plays a role in the institution they end up attending. This theme, however, did not surface in this exploration. Instead in the case of these participants, not being recruited but still wanting to compete athletically contributed to their decision to attend a community college. Since they did not receive a four-year scholarship as freshman, five of the nineteen participants had hopes of obtaining an athletic scholarship as a transfer student. They viewed their choice to attend a community college as a second chance to being a student-athlete at the collegiate level. One male participant shared his plans for

obtaining a scholarship as a transfer student.

I made the decision to attend a community college my senior year when I realized that I was not being recruited or offered any scholarships. That's when I knew that I was going to go to a community college first and then transfer out. That was the best thing to do because I wanted to play sports in college. I figured I would go to a community college and play sports there and try to get a scholarship as a transfer student.

While another explained how sports was his main reason for attending a community college.

One of the main reasons I chose to attend a community college was sports, because I didn't have a scholarship. Even though I ran track and played football, I didn't want to go to a 4-year university on a track scholarship, because I really liked football. That was another main reason why I wanted to go to a community college, so I could be able to play sports and hopefully get a scholarship to a 4-year university.

Unexpected Circumstances

While most of the participants' choice to attend a community college was based on cost, location and family; a few of them experienced unexpected circumstances that led to their decision. For two of the females it was unplanned pregnancies, for another female participant it was a knee surgery, and for one of the male participants it was a court case that resulted in a felony. Despite these unplanned circumstances, each participant shared how their situation never veered them from their goal of going to college. For example, the female participant who had knee surgery shared how she viewed her circumstance as a part of life and felt she made the best decision for her.

I had to have another knee surgery and it was going to be hard for me to go off to school. I just decided to stay close to home, so I wouldn't be behind and enroll at a community college. It was easier for me to get around campus on crutches here than it would have been the university. I knew in making my decision that I could do something way better than this but due to circumstances, I wasn't able to. It didn't make me feel dumb, or anything like that. It's just like I got pushed back, because I had to have knee surgery, which wasn't a big deal, because that's life. As long as I knew I could start college and not be behind all the way, it wasn't a big deal to me.

Age ain't nothing but a number

When asked about their decision to attend a community college rather than a four-year institution, more than half of the participants simply said “I wasn’t ready” or “I wasn’t prepared”. They then shared reasons that included a lack of maturity, lack of self-discipline, the desire to remain at home, and having other responsibilities. All reasons that contributed to their intentional decision to attend a community college rather than a four-year university despite being academically eligible.

Maturity. All of the male participants, and a few of the female participants, believed that they were not mature enough to “go away to college” and instead wanted to stay home and attend a community college. One male participants remembers being scared to move away from home

I was scared to move away from home. I was immature. I knew that if I went and moved away and stayed in a dorm, I would probably be out all night and not get enough rest or sleep so that I could do well in school. Because of that, I decided to stay at home and go to a community college.

Similarly, another male participant explained how he did not want to be the guy away at college wasting money and not doing well in school.

Leaving right out of high school, I wouldn't have been ready. I would still have been childish. I mean, I would be up late having fun, living the college life and would have been going to class late or not going at all. All the freedom you have in college; that was in my head, too I was thinking, "I'll go out there and fail the classes. I'm just wasting this money for nothing." I didn't want to do that; I didn't want that to be me.

One participant shared his personal feelings about his maturity level and how seeing some of the mistakes his friends made when going off to college contributed to his decision to attend a community college.

Just because you graduate high school, doesn't automatically make you mature. After high school I still had things that I had to take care of for me to make myself mature enough to be able to actually handle going off to college. I mean, I know if I would have went away after high school, I would have just went out all the time and I might already be doing bad in my second semester. Honestly I might already be back home or kicked out or something. That's what happened to my friend. Like one of my friends, he just got enrolled in school and he wasn't down there a full week before they kicked him out for getting in trouble.

Another participant shared how a lack of self-discipline negatively impacted his friend who went away to college and how seeing that contributed to his decision to attend a community college.

I have a friend, he didn't get kicked out of school, but he was away at school and didn't have the discipline to get up and go to class every day. He went for the first month and then just stopped going. He didn't realize once you go to college you have got to stop partying and go to class. He was just there wasting money and that is something I didn't want to do. But I knew in high school that I was just like him and would have probably done the same thing. Man seeing that let me know that I wasn't ready and confirmed for me that I needed to be at the community college, Yeah, that let me know that my decision to start at a community college was the right one for me.

Self-discipline. All of the participants who felt they were not ready for college discussed the importance of having self-discipline; something that they all believed that did not have coming out of high school. Two participants candidly shared the lack of self-discipline they believed that they had at the time that they graduated from high school.

I wasn't ready or disciplined enough to go off to a four-year university after high school. My mindset was still, you graduated high school, take a year out and go ahead and have some fun, and that was my thing. I loved to hang out with my friends and party. I was the life of the party. But I did not want to go away to college thinking that this is my time to party. So I would rather start out slow and progress my way into being the student that I want to be, someone that has already been successful at a community college and is disciplined enough to know when to party and when to study.

Similarly, the other recalled,

Even though I could have gone to a four-year university out of high school, I don't think that I was ready. I would have struggled because there is so much going on. I have

friends at four-year universities and seeing what they were doing, I think that I would be so focused on my social life and social status that I wouldn't be focusing on my school work. Like some of my friends are really struggling now at a four-year school and me, well I am doing really well.

Acknowledging that they would have done well academically, two of the participants were concerned about not being disciplined enough to avoid distractions and voiced their reasons for wanting choosing to attend a community college.

Academically, I would have done ok at a four-year but I wouldn't have done as well as I would have wanted to because I would be trying to do other things. I would prioritize everything wrong. With me, it takes me awhile to like get the hang of stuff. I feel like I'd put friends and parties and social events before studying and that's how it was with me in high school, even like junior and senior year. I'm really bad at studying. But I'm really good at paying attention in class but I feel like I would have distractions in class, with friends and boys and stuff. That is what really made me consider a community college. I didn't think I was disciplined enough to go away to school.

The second participant shared,

At a four-year I probably wouldn't have been in the same position I am now as far as my grades. Here at the community college I am able to focus because there aren't a lot of distractions. At a four-year school, I probably would not have went to class some mornings because I would stay up late partying. I probably would have skipped class because I'm not very disciplined and get easily distracted so I think coming here has helped me.

Being away from family. The idea of being away from family was also a reason why some of the participants felt they were not ready to go "away" to college. Two participants shared how having a structure at home was something that they just weren't ready to give up. For example, one of them shared how continuing to live at home was very important to her.

Still being with my family was really important for me after high school. Still having the home structure, still have home support, as you start stepping out a little bit on your own. Right out of high school I might have struggled a little bit more. I think going to a community college has allowed me to mature so that I am ready to handle that type of environment more.

While another shared how he was scared to move away from home.

I was scared to move away from home. I was immature. I knew that if I went and moved away and stayed in a dorm, I would probably be out all night and not getting enough rest or sleep. If I would've just went to a university, I probably would've failed the first semester. It would've been so many options and distractions. I just wasn't ready to leave home after high school; I knew that I needed my mom constantly on my back every day to make sure I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Other Responsibilities. Some of the participants knew that going away to a four year wasn't the right choice for them at the time because of other responsibilities they had to take care of; like children and work. One participant shared how she considered her responsibilities in her decision to attend a community college.

I really thought that a two-year would be better for me at the time. I had all these people telling me to go to a university, a four-year, but I didn't think that I was ready for that at the moment, so I chose to do the community college. I felt like I already had a lot of responsibilities and I just felt like it would be harder and I would be actually on campus. It would be easier for me to deal with everything else, my kid and work, school and all that, while attending a community college rather than a four-year.

4. Community College Experience

Despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university, all of the participants in this study, undermatched and enrolled at a community college. Undermatching is a phenomenon where academically capable students, who graduate from high school and are prepared for college, choose to attend less selective four-year colleges, where graduation rates are distressingly low, or two-year colleges where degree completion and transfer rates are even lower (Sherwin, 2012). There are both benefits to matching and consequences to undermatching. Students who match academically with an institution are more likely to persist, retain and ultimately graduate. While undermatching has been linked to campus culture and a student's peer group which influences study habits, aspirations and thoughts of dropping out.

Non selective schools are also associated with smaller budgets and lower spending per student (Hoxby, 2009) resulting in less academic support and resources to help students succeed academically. Although theoretically, undermatched students are no less likely to graduate than properly matched students, evidence suggests otherwise (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Bowen et al., 2009; Horn & Carroll, 2006; Light & Strayer, 2000).

In spite of following a recommended high school curriculum, obtaining appropriate standardized test scores, and applying and being admitted to four-year universities, these participants chose to attend a community college. For most it was intentional and due to feeling unprepared to attend a four-year institution personally. These participants expressed wanting to mature and needing more time with their families to be prepared for what going away to college meant. However for a few, the decision to undermatch was also unintentional and due to a lack of financial literacy regarding the cost of higher education. They believed that their families could not afford the cost of attendance at a four-year university and saw the community college as the only option. As a result of their college decision, the participants' community college experience has been influenced by their personal feelings associated with their choice and other people's perception of their choice. They also shared the benefits and challenges of attending a community college as an academically prepared traditional aged student. The following table provides additional information on each participant.

Table D.2.

Additional Demographic Data

	High School Curriculum	Applied to 4 year	Admitted to a 4 -year	Current GPA	Total hours completed	Plan to transfer	Receiving aid
1	Recommended	Y	Y	3.72	65	Y	Y
2	Recommended	Y	Y	3.77	26	Y	N
3	Recommended	Y	Y	3.12	48	Y	Y
4	Recommended	Y	Y	3.02	60	Y	Y
5	Recommended	Y	Y	3.54	13	N	Y
6	Recommended	N	N	2.90	73	Y	N
7	Recommended	Y	Y	2.50	12	Y	Y
8	Recommended	N	N	3.5	45	Y	N
9	Recommended	N	N	2.54	54	Y	Y
10	Recommended	N	N	4.0	12	Y	Y
11	Recommended	Y	Y	2.8	12	Y	Y
12	Recommended	Y	Y	3.0	9	Y	Y
13	Recommended	N	N	2.75	12	Y	N
14	Recommended	Y	Y	4.0	34	Y	Y
15	Recommended	Y	Y	4.0	16	Y	N
16	Recommended	Y	Y	3.8	12	Y	Y
17	Recommended	N	N	3.68	19	Y	Y
18	Recommended	N	N	2.45	64	N	Y
19	Recommended	Y	N	3.5	36	Y	N

Feelings about the choice

The choice to attend a community college came with mixed feelings. For some of the participants it was an easy choice because of personal and financial circumstances; for others it was an unplanned choice that influenced how they saw themselves as college students and how they believed other people saw them. Some of the participants felt proud and happy that they were starting college; others felt conflicted and embarrassed because of stigma that is associated with attending a community college. Regardless of the type, their feelings associated with their choice impacted their community college experience and how they perceived themselves as community college students.

Proud. When asked how they felt about their decision to attend a community college, half of the participants expressed feelings of happiness. They really felt good about their decision to go to college and were just proud to say that they were a college student, regardless of the type of college that they were attending. This was especially important for the first generation students who were the first in their family to go to any type of college. For them it was more about remaining committed to their predetermination of choosing college as an option and less about the type of institution they attended. One participant shared how big of a step enrolling in college was for her.

I felt like I took a huge step in my life with choosing to attend a community college because most people don't feel like they are ready to go to college period. That was the big thing for me, I knew I wanted to go to college and this was my opportunity. It didn't matter to me that it was a community college and not a four-year university. I was just happy to be in school especially when so many of my friends were not.

Another described feeling good about her decision despite it not being her first choice.

I felt good about my decision to attend a community college. I knew I was making a step in the right direction because I wasn't just saying, "You know what? Just because I can't go to a big university, I can't do anything." I felt good. I was proud and so was my family.

Being that most of the participants made the decision to attend a community college due to financial reasons, they also considered their decision to be a "smart financial decision that will pay off on the future." One participant compared her decision to that of her peers who decided to attend four-year universities.

I felt good about my decision to start at a community college because I felt like I was doing something that a lot of my friends weren't; making a responsible decision. They're going off to universities, taking loans out and will probably end up with a lot of debt by the time they graduate. I didn't want to end up like that. Now I am sure that I may end up with some debt once I graduate, but it won't be as much as if I had went away to a four- year school right after high school. I'm doing something that they'll probably regret not doing in the future.

Embarrassed. While most of the participants felt happy and proud of their decision to attend a community college, some felt embarrassed. They grew up associating success with attending a four-year university so for them their decision was a moment of shame and disappointment. They felt as if they had not lived up to the expectations that they had for themselves or that others had for them. This precisely describes one student's experience.

At first I felt like I failed because I would see people over break and they would ask when I was going back to school. I'm like oh, well I'm staying home for a little while and going to the community college and they were like why. Being in my city, where everyone is going to a four year college, it's just kind of like I'm not doing as good as I wanted to or was expected to. So that has been hard for me.

Another recalled how she was afraid that others would look down on her because of her choice.

When people ask me what school I go to, it's like I'm proud but I really don't want to tell them because I don't want them to look down on me. It's because I'm so tired of the stereotypes and even if I do graduate from a community college it's still going to be like; she got a degree but it's just a community college one, you know. That was embarrassing for me to admit that I was attending a community college instead of a four-year university,

Some of the negative feelings associated with attending a community college that the participants felt were influenced by what they were told about community colleges from other people. For example, one female participant shared what her AP teacher told her and her classmates about attending a community college and how that contributed to how she felt about attending one.

I was influenced by my teacher's negative comments about community colleges because I looked up to her and valued her opinion. She would tell our AP class that we shouldn't go to a community college and that it wasn't a good option for kids that were smart and able to do college level work. So once I decided to attend a community college, I was upset and embarrassed. I wasn't proud because I heard that four-year schools are better than community college. This was not my first, second, or third option. I didn't want to come here but I had to. To this day when I see my AP teacher, she shakes her head at me as if I have disappointed her or made a wrong decision.

Although a few of the participants expressed feelings of unhappiness, it wasn't derived from having to attend a community college specifically; instead it was because of wanting to be "out of the house". For example, when asked about how the decision to attend a community college made one of the female participants feel, she explained,

Making the decision to attend a community college instead of a four-year university was hard. I did not want to go to a community college even though I knew it would be better for me. I did not want to because there is this negative stigma against community colleges and I did not want to be a part of that. There is also the stereotypical movie on going away to college and living on campus your freshman year. As a freshman, you don't want to live at home with your parents telling you what to do. So, the decision to go to a community college was hard for me, it really left me feeling disappointed about starting college.

Other People's Perception about the Choice

When asked how other people responded to their decision to attend a community college the participants reported mixed results. Some of them shared positive comments that people were happy for them and validated their decision by telling that it was "a smart decision" or a "great choice". Others, however, were met with negative comments about their choice and told that they would have "less of a college experience" and "would have a hard time once they transferred". Other people's perceptions of their college choice, then influenced their community college experience by allowing them to begin their college careers with preconceived notions and biases about the type of institution that they were enrolling in.

Validation. Most of the participants were validated and supported in their decision to attend a community college by both immediate and extended family members. Many of them heard comments like "that is a great choice" and "I'm so proud of you". One male participant shared what his sisters told him once he revealed his decision.

Once I told my sisters that I was going to a community college, they all said “I wish I went to community college first. That's smart”. So I was like, okay, I guess I made a good decision.

Another participant recalled a similar experience.

My mom, my friends, and some of my teachers from school, once I told them what I was doing, that I was going to a community college, they told me that was a great thing to do, to go for 2 years, because of the cost, the good professors, and the overall environment.

A few of the participants were also validated by their friends. One of the participants shared how her friends told her that they “wished” they had made the decision to attend a community college first rather than a four-year university.

Once I had told my friends that were already away at college that I was going to a community college, they said “man I wish I would have did that, I should have waited to come to a university.” They’re like it is very overwhelming; they should’ve waited or went to a community college first. That really made me feel good about my decision. Like it made me feel that I had made a better decision than them.

Criticism. Despite the benefits of attending a community college, some of the participants received criticism regarding their decision. The idea of a community college being less than or only a last option was given often by high school staff and internalized by the participants. For example, one participant described what one teacher told her about community colleges and how it altered her perception.

There was one teacher. She encouraged me to go to a university and was mad that I decided to go to a community college. She was actually against community colleges and helped me learn that negative stigma associated with them. She would say things like their teachers aren’t as good and you won’t learn as much or that it’s boring. She told that to the whole class. She also said that if you go there and do your two years, it will set you back because you won’t be accustomed to the university life or learning structure. That really influenced how I felt about going to a community college. I felt like I had failed.

Another recalled how others perceived her decision to attend a community college and the negative feedback she received.

When I told people at my school about my decision to attend a community college, they said well you might as well just drop out of college now. It's just the way that other people seem to perceive it. That kind of makes it feel like this is a waste but at the same time I know since I'm going towards the bachelors anyway that at least I've completed this portion of my journey. So, in that sense it doesn't feel like a waste. But it does alert me to the fact that when I do get out, I'm going to have to get a bachelor's degree to make it all mean something.

This notion of community colleges not being as "good" as four-year universities was also perpetuated by peers. One female participant shared,

One friend in particular, she would always put down community colleges and make it sound like it wasn't a real college. She didn't go to one so she couldn't say anything about it but she always did. She always criticized me. Just being really condescending about it. It really made me feel bad about my decision for a while.

For these participants, the perceptions of others impacted how they felt about themselves as college students in general and community colleges specifically. It also contributed to their overall community college experience. Some of them entered feeling validated and attended a community college with a positive outlook. They looked forward to the interactions with professors and even anticipated successfully transferring to a four-year university. Those who received criticism for their choice, however, felt as if they did not belong and were embarrassed. They did not want to be there and had an overall negative view of community colleges. They anticipated a boring college experience and expected trouble with transferring to a four year university. Luckily all of the participants' community college experiences have proved to be positive and have transformed the way they see themselves as well as community colleges.

Different, but the Same

Research on undermatching suggests that one of the consequences associated with attending a school that is below your academic level is lower spending per student (Hoxby, 2009) resulting in less academic support and resources to help students succeed academically. In addition, a common misconception is that courses at a community college are less rigorous than those found at four-year universities. Contrary to these beliefs, all of the participants acknowledged that although attending a community college is different than attending a four-year university, in many ways it is still the same.

Professors. When asked about their professors, the participants described them as being fair, prepared, and student centered. They all mentioned how they felt able to talk to their professors outside of class and associated it with small classroom size. A few of the participants also recognized that some of their professors actually taught at four-year universities as well, this validated for them that there was not a lot of difference between their community college professor and one that they can expect at a four-year university. One participant explained,

The classes, they're the same. They're all challenging. Being a community college class doesn't make it any less, in my opinion. It just depends on your professor the same way it would at a university whether or not it's challenging. I'm sure that there are really challenging professors at a four-year school just like there are challenging professors here. In fact, one of my hardest professors teaches both here and at a four-year school and he told us that. He wanted us to know that he had the same expectations regardless of what school he was teaching at.

Similarly, another participant noted,

As far as professors, now that I'm here and I see what they're like, I feel like I know what to expect once I transfer. I mean I have a professor in government here and he teaches here and he teaches at a four year university, so it's the same education. We use the same book and syllabus. He is not less or anything than a professor at a university because he is a professor at a university.

Courses. When asked if courses taken at a community college were different than courses

they would be taking at a four-year university, all of the participants unanimously said no.

Responses including things like “the classes are the same”, “I’m going to be able to transfer all of my classes once I’m done” and “these are the same classes that they offer at a university” was given. One participant shared how he compared what he was doing in class to what his friends at four-year university was doing and confirmed that they were in fact doing the same exact thing.

I feel like, education-wise, going to a community college is no different. Just because I'm at a community college doesn't mean I'm stupid. It doesn't mean I'm slow or nothing like that. For me, it just means I don't have the money to go to a 4-year so that is not the route to go for me right now. I don't feel like nothing's different here though. I've got friends at 4 year institutions right now and we are taking the same exact classes, sometimes using the same exact book, doing the same thing. It's kind of crazy because I can literally call one of my friends who is taking English and we even have similar assignments. So yeah I know that there are no major differences in the courses here compared to there.

Another participant shared a similar story

I guess education wise I feel like it's the same thing. The people I talk to we pretty much go through the same thing within the same classes and they take the same classes that I do. I don't really feel like I'm missing anything when it comes to the classes that I am taking. Besides, I already checked and all of my classes will transfer over so I don't feel like there is anything I really have to be worried about.

College Experience. Some would suggest that students who attend community colleges have less of a college experience than those who attend a four-year university. Despite that assumption, most of the participants said that they were having a great college experience and attributed it to the community college environment. One male participant who reported a positive community college experience shared what he likes about his college.

Community colleges still give you the college experience. You still get to join clubs and make friends and do a bunch of essays you don't want to do. You still get to have the college experience. It just cost less, it's probably closer to your home. You still have people around you in your age group, maybe older and you are still learning the same things. It's just that you are in a different place.

Benefits of attending a community college

All 19 participants agreed that there were numerous benefits to attending a community college. Viewing the community college as a cost effective place to prepare for a four-year institution, they spoke of the diverse study body, flexibility and the ability to focus on academics.

Preparation for Transfer. Every participant agreed that the community college was preparing them to attend a four-year university. One first generation female participant shared how she felt the community college was allowing her to take baby steps.

It's like baby steps with the community college and going to a university. I think it's helping me. This will prepare me for when I go off to a university, and now I know how college works so going into a 4-year university, I won't be as frazzled as a freshman walking in there. That's one thing that I like about staying here at a community college. I think this is my foundation for going off to a university. If I would have went straight to a university, I know I would have struggled that first year, but because I'm close to home, I don't think it's so much of a struggle.

Likewise, another participant believed that her experience at the community college has been eye opening and has helped her set realistic expectations of what it means to be in college.

My experience at the community college has been eye opening. It helps me understand how things are going to be from now on because no professor is going to hold my hand. There's not going to be any late work, almost all of my teachers have said that, "No late work, no makeup work. If you're absent, email me or get it from a friend in your class. This is on you. All I have to do is give you the assignment, teach you what you need to learn and test you." They're not going to baby us anymore, we're adults. This has definitely helped me better prepared for a four-year school.

Two of the female participants shared how the community college is preparing them personally. One mentions how her friends that went straight to a four-year university and ended up coming back home without completing their degree.

I think without the community college I would probably be like a lot of my friends, left the four year, and did not go back to school. But I think with community college it has basically changed me when it comes to school period because now I know this is what I need and I can achieve it. I think with community college it's like smaller, you know it's not so hard to do anything. It's like a step before the big college life. I feel like I've learned a lot since I've started college and actually finished something. I feel like I've grown a lot as a person, so it was good.

The other describes how she has become more responsible at a community college.

Even though I am at a community college, I am still the one responsible for coordinating my classes, and juggling those types of things, and getting my work done. Coming to a community college has allowed me to gradually expand and test the waters. It allows me to ask myself, "What can I do well?" So going to the community college prepared me to handle those types of things on my own and to become a more responsible person.

One of the first generation male participants explained that attending a community college has given him a better start.

I was really nervous when I graduated from high school and didn't think I was ready for college because I didn't know what to expect. Like I knew that I wanted to go to school but I also knew that I needed to work and wasn't really ready to live away from my family. So I feel like coming to a community college first has given me a better start since I'm able to go to school and get my education and also still work and live at home and get a head start with stuff. I really don't think things would have worked out for me this well at a four-year school.

Cost. There is no denying the economic advantage of attending a community college rather than a four-year university. Consistent with the literature was the finding that cost was seen as a major benefit of attending a community college (Somers, et al., 2006).

One of the best things about attending a community college is that it's affordable. My parents are able to help me with it and it doesn't put a huge strain on our family. I'm able to do the classes that I want and I'm able to do them on line and I can work too so I don't have to ask my parents for any extra money so it's a win/win for me.

Participants who understood the implications of debt and receiving student loans made a conscious decision to attend a community college. For example, one female participant was aware of how long it took some people to pay off student loans and wanted to be sure she took her time accumulating debt.

Going to a university was an option, but I made the decision that I didn't want to. I would have had to indulge in a bunch of loans that I was going to be paying off for the rest of my life. I did not want to deal with that especially not starting at such a young age when I still have a lot to learn about it. I would say that's a benefit of coming to a community college. I did not have to take out any loans but if I would have went to a four-year, I definably would have had to.

Unlike the majority of the participants, whose parents were helping them finance their education, three of the participants were paying for college on their own and believed that the cost of attending a community college was a huge benefit. For example, one female participant shared how convenient attending a community college has been for her.

It's more convenient, because I mean I'm 22 now, so I'm having to pay for school myself, so it's more convenient with my schedule being able to actually have a real-life job than being on a 4-year campus and you're far from everything else. Most of those jobs out there are like restaurants or anything, and I mean, I need a better job to pay for classes.

Student Body. Perhaps one of the biggest differences between a community college and a four-year institution is the student body. Today, community colleges remain the most financially, geographically, and academically accessible route to a higher education for minorities, women, first generation and rural students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Gumport, 2007; Townsend, 2009) making them some of the most diverse institutions in the nation. Attending a diverse community college has proved to be a benefit for the participants in this study. As a result, a number of them realized that they have become more tolerant, patient and accepting. For example, one female participant shared her experience with have an older student in class.

This community college is pretty diverse. I mean, not just ethnically but also by age. Like this is the first time I've had 30 or 40-year old man in one of my classes not teaching me. That was pretty interesting...it was so weird thinking that I was the youngest one in the class by multiple years. I know it's not going to be the same at a university...But having him in my class was great because he added so much life experience to our class discussions. He definitely gave me more things to think about.

Similarly, a male participant shared his experience with meeting students from different cultural backgrounds.

Coming to this college has given me the opportunity to be able to meet new people from all around the world. The good thing is that you are sharing your college experience with them. You get a chance to share stories and learn about each other. I have a guy in one of my classes who is from another country. I have never met someone from another country so I am amazed when he talks in class and shares his experiences. Being here you are going to see people that are different from you and that helps you get used to real life with everyone being so diverse in the world.

What was evident from the participants in this study was their ability to connect with peers who had common goals. When asked to describe the student body, many of them used characteristics such as “focused”, “determined” and “studious”. A few of the participants even acknowledged the motivation that their peers provided them. For example, one male participant described how focused his peers were at his community college and how they served as an example for him.

As a whole, I think everybody here is pretty focused on graduating. It's like everybody is sitting down studying, you know going to class on time, paying attention. So when everybody is focused you can't help but to focus too. You don't want to be the one in class on your phone, because then you look bad. So in a way the students here have motivated me to be a good student.

Similarly, one of the first generation male students explained how he was not used to being around so many focused people and the difference it is having on his life.

I have a lot in common with the students here. They want to get something done just like I do. It's the first step to a better life. That makes coming here a lot better. It's weird because I've never been around people who actually want to do something with

their life just as much as I do. I mean none of my friends went to college so I have just been kind of doing this school thing on my own. It's exciting though to see and meet so many people who want the same thing as I do and then it makes me more comfortable to talk to them.

Opportunity to focus. All of the participants spoke of the opportunity to focus on their academic and educational goals; they considered this to be a benefit of attending a community college. Most felt that the mixture of autonomy and distractions at a four-year university would lead to them being unsuccessful and appreciated the skills they were developing at a community college. Getting enough sleep, not being distracted by Greek life and not getting caught up in athletic games are just a few things that contribute to the ability to focus while being at a community college. One of the female participants felt very strongly about the focus that she currently has towards her academics and shared why she felt students at four-year schools struggled.

The community college is a good first step instead of just rolling myself into the world of the university that I see a lot of friends posting on Twitter about how they never get sleep because they're staying up doing homework and I don't think that, "Well, I get a full eight hours every night." I don't have to sit up and just bother myself down with all this work. At a University, there is so much more you can do there; they have fraternities and sororities mixed in with balancing classes and the football games. In just one year there, everything just feels so packed in. They try to get you to go to everything whereas at community college, they let you know. Yes, there is a baseball game. You do have the opportunity to go to it but we are not going to make you. That way if you have homework, you can do say no and do it. But I feel like at a university is a lot more packed in and focused on. That is a lot for a freshman to handle and balance. I think that's why some students do so bad their first year. They don't know how to balance their social and academic life. But at a community college you can learn to focus.

I'm not missing anything. One of the most discussed benefits of attending a community college for these participants was the notion that they were not missing anything by not attending a four-year university. Fourteen out of the nineteen participants said undoubtedly

that they believed they were having comparable, if not better, college experiences than that of their peers.

I'm not missing anything by attending a community college. My friends at universities can post pictures of them partying and having study sessions in their room and, "Oh, my mom sent me cookies and all this stuff." I'm like, "Okay. My mom can hand me cookies." I feel like it's almost the exact same thing, I just get to come home. I get the exact same education depending on what classes and I just don't have to be so far away from my family. So yeah, I don't think anything is missing. I'm actually glad that I chose to come to a community college because I get to see how college really is. I wouldn't change it.

Challenges of attending a community college

Despite making a conscious and informed decision to not attend a four-year university, some of the participants admitted to feeling like something was missing from their community college experience. Things like autonomy, social life and the possibility of networking were items that they wish were associated with attending a community college.

Autonomy. In spite of feeling that attending a community college was the best decision for them academically, half of the female participants expressed frustration with still living at home. Wanting more "freedom" and the opportunity to "be themselves", continuing to live at home, while in college wasn't ideal for personal reasons. For example, one female participant shared that the only thing missing from her college experience was living on campus and the autonomy that came with it.

To me the only thing missing from my college experience is being able to stay and live on a campus. I want to experience being able to wake myself up and get to class, choosing what to eat when and not having to answer to my parents every day. I know that they mean well but sometimes I just want to make decision for myself and not have to get their ok first. So, yeah I am really looking forward to being free. That's pretty much the only thing missing to me is being able to stay on campus.

Social Life. In line with research that suggests small schools are typically associated with

smaller budgets which also translate into less spending on student engagement, non-academic support services and extracurricular opportunities (Webber & Enrenberg, 2010), one of the challenges that a number of participants expressed was the lack of a social life on campus. This finding is similar to what has been considered a consequence of undermatching. Although the participants attended a very large community college, they described feeling “bored” and wanting to “meet people”.

One male participant, in particular, shared how people at his community college tend to stay to themselves which makes it harder to meet new people.

I’d say the only challenges I have here at the community college is probably the lack of a social life. Like they have more options for clubs and stuff like that at a University so I think I would be able to meet a whole bunch of new people. Yeah, the social life; getting to know people. Because here at the community college, people they just stay to themselves and mind their business; like they go to class and leave. Whereas at a four year university, you have dorms and you have people constantly around you and you are able to talk to people all the time. We don’t have that here.

Like the previous student, three others struggled with the lack of social life on campus.

The first participant explained that she is doing well academically but very bored socially.

I get bored being here. I’d rather be around more people my age and just be doing stuff that people in universities are doing. Like the football games and the fashion shows. I mean it just seems like a lot of people here don’t have school spirit vs. students who go to universities like they are all excited about their school and wear their schools colors and stuff. So you don’t really see that much here. It’s just like, “Go to class and get it over with.” So while I don’t feel like I am missing anything, say academic-wise, I would say I am missing the social side of college.

The next participant shared that he misses “the vibe of being at a four-year university because it’s more people, more organizations”. While the third reported how she wishes she went to school with more people her age.

I can’t wait to experience college with more people that are my age, like just the experience of being able to be in college. Because right now I don’t feel like I’m in

college. There are no social activities that I am interested in or what to go to. I think the experience would be a lot different at a university, a lot more people my age around me.

Two other female students expressed wanting to be a part of a group and how they are not able to do that at their community college

It's boring. I feel like we don't really do anything to get to know other students. I may not be on campus enough, but it's just not a social life around here, unless you already know somebody. I feel like I missed the social life. I used to know a lot of more people ... and the fraternities. I feel like I do miss out on that.

I think the only thing that I am missing is like wanting to be a part of a group; you know the party life or having my friend's right there on my campus. I think that would be the only thing I'm missing.

Another participant shared how she thinks attending a community college has stunted her acquisition of social skills.

If I would have attended a university, I think I would have been more involved in activities and clubs or organizations. I would be a lot more comfortable with meeting new people and just being around people. Because here I just go to class, go to work and then go home. At a university I would have been living in a dorm so I would have been more forced to talk to people and just my social skills would probably be a lot better than what they are now.

Networking. Similar to the idea of a social life, a few of the participants expressed concern for not being able to network with peers at their community college like they would be able to at a university. For example, one male participant shared how he hopes to network once he transfers.

I don't get a chance to network here; like, real networking. Not to diss anyone that's here but when it comes to knowing somebody who knows somebody this isn't really that place, so far has not been that place for me whereas in a university you have people who are going on to do this and do that and do this and do that so it's like then you can really rub shoulders with some people who can get you where you want to be. That's what I want to do once I transfer.

Information. Although a diverse student population is a benefit for students attending a

community college, it can also serve as a challenge for faculty and staff. The challenge to serving such a diverse group of students is the expectation to be well versed in everything from workforce development to transfer and articulation agreements. The level of expertise will vary based on staff and department. Unfortunately for students, a lack of comprehensive knowledge in all areas with every staff member poses a threat. Some of the participants described feeling “rushed” and receiving “inconsistent” or “inaccurate” information; especially regrading transfer. This student’s perceptions echoed most participants’ regarding their experience receiving conflicting information.

Sometimes, you’re just running back and forth to get information that you could have had the first time you went to go ask so I feel like sometimes they don’t know everything they need to know profoundly. Or its really busy on campus because of registration so then the staff is rushing you so that can work the line fast. There were times when two advisors told me two completely different things about what I needed to graduate. I ended up having to ask my teacher. In the end that hurts the student because then we are getting wrong information.

Another recalled a similar experience.

It seems like now when you come up to the school for something, instead of actually sitting down with you and trying to figure out your problem, they just rush you and tell you how busy they are. It’s like you are bothering them so it makes you not want to ask anyone for help; especially the staff. But of course as a student you have to go to advising, you have to go to admissions, you have to go to records so you end up coming to the school like 5 different times for the same issue until somebody finally takes the time to help you or to tell the right information.

5. Reflections and Advice

College choice is a complex process that includes countless factors that influence the decision to go to college as well as the choice of which college to attend. Despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university, the participants in this study chose to attend a community college. When asked to reflect on their decision they discussed if they

would make the same choice again, the amount of continued support they received from their family, and provided advice for others who are making a college choice decision.

Same choice, different decision...Maybe

When asked if they would make the same decision to attend a community college after high school, most of the participants, 14 out of 19, said yes while the other 5 said no. For those who said yes, they based their decision off of their current community college experiences as well as the experiences of their friends who attend a four-year university. For example, one participant shared how most of her friends did not go back to college after their first semester due to grades or finances and how that made her feel even better about her decision to attend a community college.

If I had to choose again, I would still pick a community college. I think without the community college I would probably be like a lot of my friends who left the four year, and did not go back to school. For some of them it was the cost to go there but for others it was not being ready and partying all the time. Once they got their grades back after their first semester, their parents told them they couldn't go back. But I think with community college it has basically changed me when it comes to school period because now I know this is what I need and I can achieve it. I am doing great in my classes and on track to transfer next year. I think with community college it's like a step before the big college life and I really needed that.

Cost came up as a major reason as to why they would make the same decision again. The ideas of debt from student loans really influenced their college choice. As one female participant put it "I am paying for school myself so the community college is what I could afford". She continued to explain why she felt a community college was the best choice for her and her family.

I would still choose to attend a community college after high school, I mean even if I did get a bunch of scholarships to a university, there's probably still a chance that I will have to pay for something or I'll feel like I'm too far and I wouldn't want to move on or anything. The cost was probably the biggest factor though because I knew that my

parents didn't have the money for me to go away to college and I still have younger siblings who they have to take care of.

For some of the other participants; they would still choose to attend a community college for the same reasons they choose it in the first place: cost, location, and the desire to live at home with their family. Comments like "going to a community college is way cheaper" and "my friends who went away are in so much debt right now" were given as justification. One of the male participants explained how attending a community college was always his plan.

If I could do it all over, I would still have chosen to go to a community college. Because of my same plan. First, the location. I knew I wasn't going to be able to go out there and probably get my own place, or afford to live in a dorm or anything like that, so I knew I had to come to a community college first and continue to live with my parents. The good thing though is that we are able to save money for when I do go off to college. So now when I go, I will be able to afford my own place and all the other things that I am going to need.

Similarly, a female participant shared the same perspective.

Going to a community college is just a smart decision. It makes no sense to go blow a lot of money just to be away from your parents. Whether you know what you are going to major in or not, I just don't think it makes sense to waste money. Especially if you can take the same classes, at a way cheaper cost and transfer them in to a four-year school and still graduate. Going to a community college it's just a very smart decision.

Although 14 of the participants would make the same decision to attend a community college after high school, there were 5 participants said they would not. Instead, they would choose to attend a four-year university rather than a community college. Reasons include wanting to be "away from home" as well as wanting a "social life". One female participant shared,

I would choose differently because...I just think I need to get the 4-year college experience, to be away from my family and everything and just to go off and just have some responsibility. I think I missed out on all that when I came to a community college, because they're people of all different ages here, and so, it's basically you just blend in with everybody else. I would want to just enjoy the college life and just be able to be out

on my own.

While another female participant revealed,

I wish I would have chosen to just go to a university. One of the main reasons is the social life because I'm a very social person. It would be better than being here and I would be able to be away from parents. I feel like I definitely miss out on that. I get bored being here so I'd rather be around everybody my age and be just doing stuff the people in universities are doing.

A few of the participants who would have chosen differently shared that a community college was never their first choice and how based on unforeseen circumstances, like going to jail, having a child, or not being recruited, they had to attend a community college. If given a chance to do it over, they would have attended a four-year university because that was what was "expected" of them.

If my situation had never happened, I would be at a university. I would have never even thought about coming to a community college. Throughout my whole life, my plan was always to go to a university, not a community college. I knew what a community college was and knew people who went but it wasn't on my radar. It wasn't in plan until it became my only option.

One student athlete shared,

If I would have received a volleyball scholarship; I would have went to a four-year university because that's what I was always being raised to do, to think, is go to a four year university. It's a better choice for you, you'll get more out of it. It's more fun, it's cool, and it's a better experience. That's what everyone always told me, even my parents. It wasn't until I realized that I wasn't getting recruited that I had to consider other options.

Conversely, one of the participants had a different reason for wanting to choose to attend a four-year university instead of a community college and discussed the level of respect he believed came with a Bachelor's degree rather than an Associate's degree.

I think I would choose to attend a University because...ok well going to a four-year school you get a more respected education. I'm not going to say a better education because I do know some instructors here that are pretty on point but you get the more

respected education. I mean like my associate's degree is, unfortunately, it's probably not going to get me too much out here whereas that Bachelor's degree it's going to raise some eyebrows.

Continued Support

Freeman (2005) discusses the role that African American parents play after their child has chosen which college to attend. Often there is continued support from family members that serves as encouragement and a form of love. That continued support was a key role in these participant's college experiences. Two female participants described how their families continue to help them with their children. Being there to watch their children while they go to school, study or work proved to be very beneficial to their academic success. For example, one of them shared how supportive her mom is and how much that support has helped her.

I mean even now that I am in college my mom is very supportive, so that helps a lot. She helps with my son when I'm at school; she watches him for me which cuts down on the cost of daycare. So she continues to play a pretty big role. She stays on me about my homework, making sure I'm turning things in on time and that I'm doing everything I'm supposed to do. With a kid it gets hard sometime to juggle everything but with my mom and family, I am able to get it done. They encourage me all the time and tell me that I'm doing a good job and not to give up even when it seems hard.

Things like transportation and money were given as examples of ways that their families show continued support. One female participant shared how involved her family continued to be once she started college.

My family remained supportive even when I started college. Both financial support and just making sure I had what I needed, be it tuition or transportation to get to get to school. I had access to a car whenever I wanted and when I didn't drive, my family would give me rides to school. They would help me.

One male participant shared how important his mother's continued support of him is and how it makes him feel.

As long as I have my mom around, I know that I am going to do well in college. Even

now, even though I am in college, I can talk to her and she gives me advice about stuff. Still being at home and in college is a plus; I get a home-cooked meal every night. I hate to cook for myself because I can't cook. If I need something, my mom will do it for me; she just gives me a lot of good support. She asks me all the time me do I study every day, and am I getting the right material that I need for the class and stuff. Her support makes me feel loved.

He also described how he is looking forward to his mom continuing to support him after he transfers to a four-year university.

I know even when I transfer my family will still be involved and supportive; especially my mom. She's going to be calling me every day, and being like, "How was school? Are you getting your work done? Are you not playing around, goofing around, partying? What are you doing? Make sure you stay on your school work, because it's school first, and everything else just follows." Knowing that just makes me happy that she's still calling me and checking up on me to make sure I'm still on my books and not slacking off. I like that she's doing it, it's helping me out. That motivates me to become a better person than I am today.

The Other Side of Community College Choice

While all of the participants highlighted that academically, attending a community college has been a good experience, some reflected on the other side of choosing to attend a community college and their struggles battling life living at home with their parents.

Surprisingly, all of the male participants were happy to still be living at home and liked the structure that it provided them. Some of the female participants, however, felt that by living at home, they were missing a true college experience. One of the female participants spoke candidly about being ready to leave home and experience college life.

Being 18, I wanted to go away to college. I want to be away from my parents. Now that I am out of high school, it's different; I guess I just want that space. College is supposed to be a time to learn, make mistakes, and grow. It's a time where you can see if the things your parents taught you were true, like how real life really is. So while I am happy I picked a community college and I know it was a smart decision, it has been difficult just trying to manage my home life. The most difficult part about it is just not being able to be me in a sense or be able to be free. Here, I have to go home at the end of the day versus at a university, I'd go to my dorm and do whatever I want to do.

Student Athlete

An unexpected finding of this study was the role of sports in education and the importance of being a student athlete. Five of the nineteen participants played at least one sport in high school and had hopes of competing at a four-year university. All of them shared the role that sports has played in their lives and the impact that it has had on their educational pursuits, even if that meant undermatching for the opportunity to compete. For one male participant, at an early age, sports was tied to education and for him going to college was always tied to being an athlete

Man since I was young my parents always used sports to make me do well in school. Since like grade school; if I didn't have good grades then I couldn't play ball. If I didn't do my homework then I couldn't watch a game on TV or go outside with my friends and play ball. And they knew I hated to have to wait to play or miss games but I guess it taught me that academics should always come first. Once I figured that if I got good grades, my parents would let me play; I was good. Then I figured out that having good grades could help me get recruited so I started to take school even more seriously. I knew that I wanted to go to college and be an athlete and was willing to do anything that would make my chances better.

The parents of these participants in particular, learned early on that they could use sports as a motivator towards education for their children. It is also evident that they viewed sports as a possible means to finance higher education at a university; a message that was given to the participants early and served as an influence as they considered attending a community college.

Advice for Others

All of the participants shared what they would do differently regardless of their decision on which type of college to attend. Starting the search process early, asking more questions, and applying for more scholarships were the most frequent responses. For example, one female participant explained what she would have done differently.

I would have taken finances and a lot more things into account, not just look at the list of majors and apply blindly. Colleges don't really tell you much about how much the school is going to actually cost. They'll give you a rough estimate, but then when you look at your account there are all kinds of hidden or additional fees. I guess I just would have thought through a lot of things. I definitely would have started ahead of time instead of just applying and then leaving it and letting it sit, while all the deadlines are passing.

One of the male participants wished he had looked into both athletic and academic scholarships.

I would have applied for more scholarships because I didn't have anyone in my ear telling me look up academic scholarships. I always had to get an athletic scholarship so I wish I had focused more on that and got a lot more money from that rather than just trying to find an athletic scholarship.

Despite knowing that they wanted to go to college at an early age, all of the participants did not start actively researching and preparing for college until their junior year in high school. For most of them that was too late and if given the chance they would have started much sooner. When asked about giving advice to others, one participant emphasized the need to start as early as possible.

Start early. Just don't wait until your junior year. Start early, maybe even like your freshman year or even earlier. Get into stuff. Get into anything. Try to look into how you can get a full scholarship. Start early not just during your junior year. Start early, early. Look and try to get scholarships, look into whatever you can look into, save up, whatever you can do to get money from somewhere, just start saving. Not just in your senior year. Just start saving even before. Save whatever you can to go to school. It really helps.

Consistently the participants in this study spoke about the information they did not know, did not understand or just was not given; as a result they all encourage others who are going through the college choice process to ask a lot of questions, especially if no one in their family has gone to college. One participant shared what he tells anyone who is thinking about going to college.

I tell anyone who is in high school that asks me about college to make sure they have questions to ask, because I found that most people won't tell you information that you need to know unless you ask. You just need to go in there and have specific questions and ask for specific answers. Some people will go all the way around your question, and you still won't know but don't get discouraged and speak up. If you don't understand something ask them to break it down for you.

Similarly, one participant explained how she prepares her brothers and cousins for college.

I tell my brothers and cousins who are in high school now, I'm like, "Do this. Make sure your GPA is this high and make sure you're looking into this. Make sure you're talking to the right counselors, the right teachers and asking the right questions because that can play a huge role in you getting to where you need to be," because a lot of students don't know that, especially those whose parents did not go to college.

Researching different colleges proved to be one of the things that most of the participants did not do. Instead they only looked into schools that high school staff (teachers, counselors, coaches) or their friends recommended and based their search off of location (wanting to be close to home) and major. As a result they try to make sure that other students who are looking into college really take the time out to research schools to make sure that it is a good fit. Suggestions like "think about how far away you want to be from your family", "make sure the schools you are considering offers your major", and "Ask all the questions. Everything that comes in your head, ask. Don't leave nothing out" was provided.

One of the male participants offered a list of things to consider when doing research on a college.

Research the location. Where do you want to go? What is your boundaries? Are you going to pay out-of-pocket? Are you going to sign up for financial aid? Are you going to get a scholarship? What is your major? What type of classes are you going to take? Think about sports. Are you going to play sports or anything when you go to school? Are you going to work? Are you going to live in the dorms? Are you going to get your own places? Research all these things and more before you choose which college you are going to attend. Don't just choose it because it has your major, or just because everybody in your family went there, or because your friend went there. Really ask around. Because once you get there, you're there.

Choose the best school for you

Recognizing the value in attending a community college rather than a four-year university, all of the participants unanimously said that students should choose the best school for them. During their search and choice process, the participants received a lot of feedback from various people, some positive and some negative. That feedback influenced their decision and ultimately their experience. As a result they encourage other students to make a well informed decision based on their own requirements on where to attend college. One participant shared why listening to yourself is a must when considering which college to attend.

Do not rush, take your time. Don't just listen to what everyone else is saying. Think about yourself. Everyone can tell you how it is going to be but only you know what you can handle because it is your life. You will have to figure out how you want to live, if you would be happy at a specific school, and where can you see yourself after you go to that school. So choose the best college for you, not for someone else.

Those who believed a community college was the right school for them, regardless of what others said, shared how listening to themselves and knowing their weaknesses allowed them to make the best decision. For example, one female explained what she would tell someone regarding best fit.

I would tell anyone to go to the college that they feel like they'll be best fit for regardless of whoever is telling them to go which way. If they feel like they're really fit for a university and that they can be academically successful there, then I would tell them to go, but if they need a foundation or they don't know if they really want to go to college or something and they feel like they will struggle at a university, then I'd tell them to try community college first. But regardless don't feel bad about making a decision on a school that is the best fit for you.

One participant encourages others to "go with the college that best suits your needs and your lifestyle; don't just go with the one that society or your family is telling you to go to because in the end it's your college degree and experience, not theirs."

Although their decision to attend a community college was economically smart, a few of the participants, believe that it wasn't the best decision for them. Instead they felt that being at a four-year university would have been a better fit personally and as a result they encourage others to keep their own wants, needs, and desires in mind when selecting a college.

Consider a Community College

Choosing to attend a community college often times is not a popular or cool college choice. In fact, for some of the participants in this study, the choice to attend a community college came with feelings of embarrassment and disappointment. Despite this, all of the participants strongly recommend that all students at least consider attending a community college. They explained that the foundation that you build is priceless. A participant who is now a strong supporter of community colleges said,

I would tell anyone to go to community college first. Because it will introduce you to college and help you transition from high school into college. After high school, sometimes you really don't know what you want to do. It's best to start off at a community college, build a strong foundation, decide what you really want to major in, and then transfer to a four-year university.

Noting how hard it is to not be influenced by the stigmas associated with attending a community college, some of the participants urged others to ignore the stereotypes and see for themselves. For example, one of the male participants shared,

I would tell others to consider a community college because the education is the same. It just depends on what professor you choose. Same education, same professor, cheaper cost. It makes sense. Just avoid the stigmas. It's not a bad thing to go to a community college. People look down upon it, but it's not a bad thing. Ignore them and just see for yourself. You'll be glad that you made the choice if you do go to a community college. If you have the finances to take you to a university, that's fine as well, but if you don't, you can just go to a community college, a place that you can afford.

A few of the participants would recommend a community college as a place to go when

you are unsure about your major or what career path you are planning to follow in life. One of the undecided participants explained how attending a community college was the best decision for her and how it could be the best starting point for anybody.

I actually love attending a community college and I would tell anybody to go because no one really knows what they want to do. They may have an idea, as a first year student you are really not that sure. So I feel like going to a community college and getting your basics out the way gives you a chance to figure out what you really want to do in life. Community colleges give you that chance, and allow you to still take credits that you need while figuring it out. So I think community college should be the starting point for anybody.

APPENDIX E

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the community college choice process of African American students who were academically eligible to attend four-year universities. Qualitative methods were used to examine the experiences and perceptions of nineteen African American community college students. Fourteen female and five male students, ranging in age from 18 to 25 years old, composed the sample. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which were transcribed and analyzed based on an integrated conceptual framework of Freeman's (2005) model of predetermination and Somers, et al.'s (2006) community college choice model. Findings suggest that the college choice process for the African American students in this study is similar to the college choice process for African Americans in general. Many findings were consistent with the African American college choice process revealed in current literature and follows the 3 stage traditional model of predetermination, search and choice. However, findings differ from the traditional college choice model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Freeman (2005) and reveal how students internalize their choice based on the influence of personal and institutional factors. Personal factors include family, high school staff and sports while institutional factors include cost, location, and reputation. Findings also suggest that the effects of undermatching vary.

This chapter is composed of four sections. The first section is a summary of the study followed by a discussion of the conclusions arising from the study. Section three gives the implications for policy, and practice, while the fourth and last section provides recommendations for further study.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore why academically qualified African American students, those eligible to attend four-year institutions, choose to attend community colleges and to determine what role undermatching, if any, had in their lives. Thus four research questions guided this study:

1. What is the college choice process for academically qualified African American students who start higher education at a community college?
2. What personal factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice?
3. What institutional factors do academically qualified African American students perceive to be influential in their college choice?
4. How do academically qualified African American students describe their community college experience in regards to the concept of undermatching?

The conceptual model that guided this study was an integrated framework that merged Freeman's model of predetermination (2005) and Somers et al.'s (2006) model of community college choice. Freeman's model of predetermination (2005) focuses on the first stage of college choice and considers cultural characteristics. The Somers et al. (2006) model offers a look into community college choice by revealing the factors that increase the likelihood of a student choosing to attend a community college. Merging these two models, offers a way to explain how race, type of institution, and influences impact the decision making process of prospective African American students who consider community colleges as their institution of choice.

Discussion

At a time where attending college is more important than ever, the decision of which college to attend is one of the largest decisions that a high school student makes. A historic and

growing body of literature has focused on college choice (Galotti, 1995; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Cho et al., 2008) and recently attention has been given to the college choices of students of color (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2012). What is now at the forefront of higher education research is college completion and determining what institutional and personal factors put a student in the best position to not only attend college but finish. This is especially true for underserved student populations such as African Americans who during the 2009-2010 academic year were awarded only 10.3% of the Bachelor's degrees in the nation (NCES, 2012). Recent research suggests the institution students attend has everything to do with their completion. In fact, Bowen and his colleagues (2009) posit that the higher the selectivity level of an institution, the increased likelihood of college completion. Unfortunately, of high school sophomores nationwide in 2002, one out of every six White and one out of every four Asian students compared to one out of every 20 African American students attended a highly selective institution (Bozick & Lauff, 2007). With 49% of all African American undergraduate students attending a community college (AACC, 2013), this discrepancy warrants a look into the college choice decisions of African Americans, particularly those that are academically eligible to attend four-year institutions but undermatch and attend community colleges.

The community college choice process for African Americans who undermatch

In answering the first research question, the three stage college choice model fit for the academically qualified, African American students in this study who undermatched by choosing to attend a community college. As a result their college choice process can be explained using the college choice stages known as predetermination, search, and choice. These findings are

consistent with research on African American college choice (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 1998, 1999, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Smith 2012).

Predetermination. The findings of this study are consistent with that of Freeman (2005) in that the college choice process for African Americans begins with predetermination. All of the participants had a predetermination to attend college that was instilled in them at a very young age. This predetermination was then cultivated by parental encouragement, support, and involvement; three things that proved to be important later on in the participants' college choice process. For example, many of the participants communicated with their parents about the importance of education and the benefits of having a degree. For most, this dialogue happened at an early age and became an expectation. Their parent's active engagement in their lives made the participants believe that education was important to their family and as a result they sought to do well in school. This finding is consistent with literature that focuses on the parent's role in the educational aspirations and attainment of their children (Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006)

The participants in this study received parental encouragement from both parents, but primarily from their mothers. A finding that is consistent with the findings from both Freeman (1998, 2005) and Smith (2012), which states that the mother, in the African American family, continues to be significant in influencing her children to pursue postsecondary education. All of the participants' mothers were indeed involved in conveying to their children the message that education was important and encouraging them to pursue higher education. This finding, however, differs from Freeman (1998) in that participants' fathers also played an integral role.

Often times it was the father who had the highest academic credential or who was the breadwinner in the household. As a result, the father was considered successful and practically represented the results of having a college degree. Participants described their parents as strict, noting that they monitored their report cards, homework and test scores. This, too, contributed to the participant's concept of education being important and to their predetermination to attend college.

It was found that predetermination set the stage for college choice. It provided students with a reason to attend college. Some reasons included expectation of family, associating success with having a college degree, and wanting to be an example for others to follow; findings that are similar to that of Freeman (2005) and McDonough (1997). The college choice process for academically eligible African Americans who undermatch was then followed by search and choice.

Search. In the search phase, students seek information about college opportunities. Research suggests that this stage nears completion by the summer of the junior year (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this study, despite deciding early on that they were going to attend college, most participants began the search process late in their junior year, some waited until their senior year, and others did not search at all. This finding is consistent with that of Maxey (1995) who found that most African American high school students begin the college choice process as juniors and seniors which is much later than their White counterparts. Unfortunately, for some, the lateness of their search ultimately influenced their choice; for example, many missed deadlines and applied late thereby limiting the amount of scholarship money that they were eligible to receive.

What is interesting to note is that at the onset of the search process, half of the participants considered attending a community college while the rest only searched for four-year universities. This is vastly different from the research done by Zahs et al. (2005) that suggests the majority of college-bound high school students do not consider the community college option seriously when making a college choice. Those, in this study, who considered community college as an option early, did so at the encouragement of their family and were influenced by their families' educational experiences and the proximity of the community college to their home. Those who did not, based their search on what they thought was expected of them, to attend a four-year university. Only a few of the participants actively searched for a college by attending college fairs, researching through the internet, and going on campus tours. All of these students applied and were accepted to four-year universities. Although more than half of the participants had considered attending a four year university and searched for information on such institutions, only five of them had actually visited a college campus.

While each participant discussed how important going to college was for them and their family as well as how influential their family was in their predetermination and college choice, only a few discussed how their parents were actually involved with the search process. Those few recalled their parents going with them to college fairs, taking them on campus tours, and helping them with their college applications; things that the other participants did not do with their parents. This finding supports Perna and Titus (2005) and Smith (2009) who found that a lack of parental involvement during the search phase has a direct influence on the institution in which a student chooses to enroll. For most of the participants in this study, their parents were

invisible during the search phase and instead relied on high school staff to provide college related information. This lack of cultural capital is common among first-generation college students. Not having access to college-promoting resources (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006) or being able to discuss different institutional types with their parents limited their ability to negotiate the college choice process (McDonough, 1997). Often parents who have never been to college struggle with helping their children search and apply to college. This does not, however, lessen the importance of education for the parent and often results in the parent pushing the child to achieve beyond the level of other family members (Freeman, 2005); even if that means an Associate's degree at a community college. This finding is similar to that of Smith (2009) who supports the idea that parents encourage their children to achieve more educationally than they did themselves but that a lack of resources, support, and information makes it hard for them to be actively involved in the search process. After predetermination and search, the final stage for African Americans who undermatch is choice.

Choice. The choice phase includes a student selecting, applying to and enrolling at an institution. Hossler et al. (1989), define choice as the evaluation of alternatives to make a final college selection for matriculation. They go on to suggest that this stage occurs in the twelfth grade and ends the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1989). In this study, half of the participants applied for admission and were accepted to four-year universities and after careful consideration all chose to attend a community college. Contrary to the Hossler and Gallagher model (1987), most of the participants did not make their college choice decision until the summer after they graduated from high school, an outcome directly related to the timeline associated with their search process.

Research suggests that a student's college choice decision is influenced by family, peers, socioeconomic status, and institutional fit (Freeman, 2005; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Rouse, 1994; Van Camp, Barden & Sloan, 2010). This study extended prior understandings of college-choice by illustrating that academically qualified African American students also selected college based upon sports, self-perception of maturity, and the community college experiences of their family members as influences as they evaluated college options and made their final college selection. For example, for some not being recruited by a four-year university, despite being academically eligible to attend, influenced them to choose to attend a community college.

While socioeconomic status was not discussed directly, a number of the participants associated their choice to attend a community college with the cost of education and explained that their parents were not in a position to afford the cost associated with attending a four-year university. A finding that is consistent to that of Smith & Flemming (2006) who found in their study that college aspirational signals and college choice options provided by parents are often tied to proximity and cost. It is important to note, however, that despite recognizing that their parents could not afford to send them to a four-year institution, all of the participants were still determined to go to college, and enrolled in a local community college. Hence, their socioeconomic status did not deter them from seeking a postsecondary education; instead it allowed them to identify an alternate route to achieving their goal of obtaining a Bachelor's degree.

One finding, not typically highlighted in college choice research but present in this study was how the perceptions of others impacted how a student internalized their decision. Once

the decision was made to attend a community college, most of the participants shared the news with their families, friends, coaches and high school support staff. Some were given positive feedback which validated their decision and allowed them to begin their community college careers without any preconceived notions or disappointments. Others received negative feedback and were encouraged to reconsider their college choice. Comments of a community college being less than a four-year institution or a place for people who were not smart enough for a four-year institution were given. For these participants, their choice was criticized which caused them to second guess themselves and question their decision to attend a community college. While this criticism did not result in a different college choice decision, it did influence their college experience as a whole because they reported feeling embarrassed to be a community college student. What this study adds to the literature is the student perspective of the college choice process for African American students who were academically eligible to attend a four-year university but undermatched and chose to attend a community college.

Personal factors that influence college choice for African Americans who undermatch

In answering the second research question, findings are consistent with current research which lists background characteristics, educational achievement, and aspirations as factors that influence community college choice (Somers et al., 2006). While most African American college choice research also cited church, aptitude levels, and high school performance as factors for students during the college choice decision-making process (Freeman, 2005; Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; McDonough, 1997; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005), these factors did not prove to be essential in the participant's final choice. Instead personal factors such as encouragement from family, high school staff, and

peers proved to play the largest role in their decision to attend a community college despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university. Answers to the second research question highlight the roles of family, self, and others when making a final college choice decision.

Encouragement from Family. Several research studies document the influence of parents on the development of a student's interest in and decision to attend college (Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). The ways that families influenced the community college choice of the participants in this study were through constructing predetermination, supporting their decision to attend a community college and the willingness to contribute financially to their college education.

All of the participants recalled being encouraged by their parents at an early age to go to college. They confirmed the notions of automatic expectations, wanting to be an example for others, and wanting to achieve more than their parents; concepts that Freeman (2005) suggests are instrumental in the predetermination of African Americans. None, however, remembered being told that their only option was a four-year university. In fact, all of them mentioned how supportive their families were in their decision to attend a community college and most mentioned how proud their parents were that they enrolled in college at all, regardless of the institutional type. This support and encouragement of considering a community college served as a strong influence to their ultimate college choice decision. While many peers and high school staff criticized their college choice, family members validated it and congratulated them on making a huge step towards their ultimate goal of completing a bachelor's degree.

A few of the participants mentioned that their parents told them that they could not help them financially if they attended a four-year university due the total cost of attendance, however if they chose to attend a community college, they would be able to provide financial support by way of tuition, books, gas, food, and even living expenses. Not wanting to take out student loans, this promised financial support served as a major influence to the college choice of these participants.

The opinions and perceptions of extended family members were also perceived to be influential in the college choice of the participants in this study. This finding confirms Freeman's (2005) study in that family influences in regards to college choice should be expanded to include both immediate family and close relatives. Regardless of whether or not extended family members attended college, they promoted educational attainment. In many cases where the immediate family member had not attended college, a member of the extended family influenced the participants to participate in higher education and often times recommend certain institutions for them to consider. Many of the participants spoke about the examples they were setting not just for their siblings but also for their cousins. They spoke of the support they received from grandparents, aunts, uncles and distant relatives. This finding provides further support of the role that African American families play in promoting educational attainment and aspirations (Smith & Flemmings, 2006; Smith 2012).

High School support. It was found that high schools exert a tremendous influence in the college choice process for African American students. From guidance counselors, to teachers and peers, and even coaches, high schools offer exposure to college that often times cannot be replicated. This confirms findings from Engberg and Wolniak (2009), McDonough (1997), and

Muhammad, (2008) which all found that guidance counselors have a direct impact on students; college choices. Findings from this study are also consistent with Smith (2012), who found that guidance counselors influenced the participant's participation in higher education. The participants visited their counselor's office often, picked up college related information, and discussed postsecondary options. Teachers and coaches were also engaged in conversations with the participants regarding institutional types and offered advice on which school to apply to and ultimately attend. Both positive and negative comments were offered to students regarding college options. While these comments did not serve as the deciding factors in their college choice, they did impact how the participants felt about their choice by either providing a feeling of validation or embarrassment.

Peers. In regard to the role of peers and the influence they have on college choice for African Americans who undermatch, findings from this study reveal that peers serve as a form of encouragement to participate in postsecondary education and an influence on college choice options. This confirms Azmitia and Cooper's (2001) research, which found that peers serve as college resources; especially for first generation students. Participants had regular conversations with their peers about their postsecondary plans and often agreed to attend the same college together. Topics such as major, location, and housing arrangements were frequently discussed. One unanticipated finding in this study was the impact that peers who had already gone to college had on the participant's college choice decision. Almost all of them talked about how unsuccessful some of their peers had been at four-year institutions and how they did not want to go down the same path. Seeing their peers struggle while away at college

or dropping out and returning home after the first semester or year influenced the participants to choose to attend a community college to “test the waters”.

This study adds to previous college choice research an understanding of how African Americans are influenced to make their college choice decisions. It also introduces the impact that other peoples’ perceptions have on the college choice of a student and reveals an alternative way that peers serves as an influence.

Institutional factors that influence college choice for African Americans who undermatch

The third research question speaks to the institutional factors that are perceived to be influential to college choice. Numerous studies (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Somers et al., 2006; Van Camp, Barden & Sloan, 2010) have reported that institutional characteristics, institutional climate and net cost are among the most influential factors in the college choice process, regardless of institutional type. Consistent with their findings, the participants agreed that those factors contributed to their college choice decision but also stressed the role that their family’s community college experience, the desire to continue living at home, cost, and sports played as an influence in their decision to attend a community college despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university.

Reputation- Family’s Community College Experience. Historically, academic reputation has been noted as an influence on college choice (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Academic reputation refers to the success, retention, and graduation rates as well as job opportunities associated with certain academic programs. Students often consider and apply to certain institutions based on their academic reputation. For the participants in this study academic reputation was less of an influence and instead the community college’s reputation

based on their family members' experiences proved to be a strong institutional factor on their college choice. Many of them had a parent, sibling, or cousin that attended a community college who either transferred on to a four-year university or entered the workforce. These positive experiences spoke volumes for the reputation of community colleges and served as validation of their college choice. Things like "small class size" and "dedicated professors" were used often used to describe what the participants had been told to expect at the community college. Unfortunately, some of the participants also received negative feedback from people outside of their family regarding attending a community college and heard that it was "less than" any four-year university. Despite hearing conflicting messages, they relied on the comments and support they received from their families and chose to attend a community college.

For some of the participants, the messages they received regarding their families' community college experience proved to be the deciding factor. The fact that their family members had such a good experience with the faculty, the course work, and access to support services highly influenced their decision to attend a community college. In addition, a few of the participants had family members that were not successful at four-year institutions. They, too, encouraged the participants to begin their college careers at a community college and then transfer to a four-year university to avoid feeling overwhelmed, alone, and unprepared. That also served as an influence to attend a community college, despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university, as they did not want to run the risk of not being successful and dropping out of college. This finding, while different from the traditional literature on academic reputation, highlights the reputation community colleges earn through past student's

experiences which proved to serve as an influential institutional factor to community college choice.

Location-The Desire to Continue Living at Home. Most research suggests that location is a major factor in college choice (Bergerson, 2009; Freeman, 2005; Hossler et al., 1989; Joshi, Beck & Nsaih, 2009; Somers et al., 2006; Van Camp, Barden & Sloan, 2010). Some students want to move as far away from home as possible while others prefer to attend college in their home state. Often students create their potential list of colleges based on geographic location alone (Bergerson, 2009). As with past research on college choice (Filter, 2010; Hossler et al., 1989, 1999; Kurlaender, 2006), location proved to be an institutional factor that served as an influence to college choice. In this study, however it was more about the desire to continue living at home and less about wanting to remain in the state or being as far away as possible; adding another dimension to the role of location as a college choice influence.

Despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university and essentially having the opportunity to live away from home, the participants in this study undermatched and chose to attend a community college. While not the only factor, their desire to continue living at home served as a crucial influence. Over half of the participants expressed not being ready to move out of their parent's house and wanting to remain as close as possible to their family. Reasons of wanting to live at home varied. Some wanted to stay because they genuinely did not want to be away from their parents, some were scared that if something bad happened they wouldn't be home to help their family, and others believed that they were simply not mature enough to live on their own. Although this finding resonated with a few of the female participants, it was especially true for all of the male participants. For the female participants

that wanted to stay at home, attending a community college was a logical and economical decision. While obtaining an education was important to both them and their families, they still depended on their parents for money, childcare, and transportation. In regards to the males, each one discussed not being mature enough, mentally ready, or self-disciplined enough to be “away” at college and shared the security they felt by continuing to live at home. They believed that living at home was their opportunity to grow up, work on their time management skills, and become more self-disciplined. They valued the rules at home and the continued support that their parents provided. They all felt that continuing to live at home would serve as preparation for when they transferred to a four-year university to complete their bachelor’s degree.

Although the desire to continue to live at home was shared by most of the participants, it was also influenced by some of their parents. A number of the participants reported that their parents did not want them to leave to attend college. For some the message was to not leave the state, for other it was the county, and yet still some it was the home. A number of the participants recalled their parents encouraging them to stay home and attend a community college so they could save money and get a feel for what being in college was all about. This finding is consistent with Smith and Flemming (2006) who found that parents often influence their children to attend colleges that are close in proximity to their home.

Cost. The cost to attend a community college is generally significantly lower than that of a four-year institution. Cost is a common influence in college choice. In fact, findings from Rouse (1994) revealed that tuition cost has a strong influence in the choice to attend a community college over a four-year institution; a finding that proved to be true in this study as

well. For some of the participants, cost was an influence from the beginning. They knew that they could not afford the costs associated with attending a four-year university so they decided early in their college choice process to attend a community college. For others, the influence of cost came after they learned about the lack of financial aid and scholarship money that they were set to receive if they attended a four-year university. For them, cost became an influence at the end of the college choice process. In fact, the cost of attendance at a four-year institution is what drove them to consider attending a community college. For these participants, attending a community college was not a choice on their list. Despite doing their research, it wasn't until they got a bill that they made the decision to attend a community college.

In most instances, cost served as an influence to the parents of the participants in this study as well. Those that made mention of their parents helping them financially with college indicated that their parents encouraged them to attend a community college because it was less expensive than a four-year university. A finding that is consistent with a study done by Smith and Flemming (2006) who found that a parent may suggest an institutional type based on perceived out of pocket cost and not a student's academic or institutional fit. Regardless of when and how cost served as an influence, it proved to be one of the deciding factors of the participant's college choice.

Sports. Having dreams of playing for a certain college and being considered a college athlete is something that all of the participants who participated in sports discussed. They recalled waiting patiently for college recruiters and coaches to contact them while they hoped for an athletic scholarship offer to attend a four-year university. Despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university as a general student, they all longed to be student

athletes and wanted to continue competing in their sport. Unfortunately, none of them received a call or letter offering an athletic scholarship. Although research suggests that being recruited by an athletic department serves as an influence for African American college choice (McDonough et al., 1997) in this study, not being recruited served as an influence. Without a four-year university offering an athletic scholarship, these participants decided to undermatch and attend a community college in hopes of competing as a community college athlete and still obtaining an athletic scholarship to a four-year university as a transfer student. While an athletic scholarship as a transfer student was not something that was guaranteed, the participants spoke of peers who had been successful in obtaining one and believed that they could, too. For them sports played an important role in both their lives and in their identities as college students.

What this study adds to the literature is confirmation of the findings of Somers et al.'s (2006) research which revealed the overall quality of education, tuition and fees at the college, and overall reputation of the college were most influential in the decision to attend a community college. It also acknowledges the influence that other people's experience has on a persons' college choice and the layered influence that location and sports plays in which college a student will attend.

Community College Experience of African Americans who Undermatched

The fourth research question explored the participants' community college experience related to the concept of undermatching. Research suggests that a large number of academically eligible students who undermatch by enrolling at less selective colleges are losing out by not attending institutions with greater resources, higher graduation rates and more

prestige (Roderick et al., 2008, 2009). As a result, these students are more likely to have less access to academic resources and support as well as have less of a college experience as a result of limited spending on student engagement, non-academic support services and extracurricular opportunities (Hoxby, 2009; Webber & Enrenberg, 2010). While the theory of undermatching has some validity, it has focused on academic credentials and institutional selectivity and not what is in the best interest of the student. Findings from this study reveal that although African Americans, who were eligible to attend a four-year university, undermatched and chose to attend a community college, they were very satisfied with their community college experience. This satisfaction was attributed to the academic and personal development that the community college provided and the continued support that they received from their families. In spite of this satisfaction, it is important to note that a few of the participants did acknowledge the lack of social opportunities at a community college when compared to a four-year university.

Academic and Personal Development. Despite being academically eligible to attend a four-year university based on high school curriculum and standardized test scores, most of the participants expressed concern with being ready both academically and personally to handle the demands associated with attending a four-year university. They saw firsthand the struggles that some of their peers faced at four-year universities and believed that attending a community college would allow them to strengthen their study skills and develop stronger time management skills to handle the multiple distractions typically found on a four-year campus. Their community college experience has provided them with this development and much more. Participants revealed how they felt academically challenged in the classroom and supported by

faculty, staff, and their peers. This finding contradicts what Bowen & Bok, (1998), Bowen et al., (2009), Horn & Carroll, (2006) and Light & Strayer (2000) suggest are consequences of undermatching. Instead of being less likely to persist and graduate, these students have successfully completed coursework, obtained above average GPAs, and made progress toward degree completion. In terms of resources and support, all of the participants were involved with something on campus; some had jobs while others were involved in clubs, the honors college, a transfer honor society and athletics. They also all reported feeling more academically and personally prepared to accomplish their educational goals. For seventeen of the nineteen participants, that goal is transferring to a four-year university to pursue a bachelor's degree. For the remaining two, the career field they desire to enter does not require a bachelor's degree so completing their associate's degree will allow them to enter the workforce and become contributing members of society. Even the few who discussed the lack of social opportunities found at their community college shared how they believed their college choice decision was "smart" and the "best" decision for them and their family. Outcomes that are very different from the ones that research suggest are tied to undermatching (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

Continued Support. Unlike Hossler et al. (1999) who posit that parents play a diminishing role and become secondary influences after predisposition; Smith and Fleming (2006) found that African American parents remain heavily involved in the college choice process beyond the predisposition and search stages and continue to be involved even after a college choice decision has been made. This proved to be true in this study as well. Despite not being actively involved in the search stage, all of the parents of the participants in this study were heavily involved in the predetermination and choice stage as well as after the participant had started

college. A finding similar to the one found by Freeman (2005) regarding the role of continued support by African American families in regards to their children. For example, all of the male participants spoke about their mothers' roles in their lives and the security, love, and stability that her support provided them as they transitioned into being college students. Cooking them dinner, providing transportation, and simply checking on them daily was attributed to them doing well in college. Understanding the importance of their first year in college, they wanted to make sure that they continued to get the level of support they received in high school. A level that they did not think could be replicated if they went away to a four-year university. This continued support contributed to a positive community college experience and validated their decision to attend a community college despite being eligible to attend a four-year university.

Lack of Social Opportunities. One of the consequences of undermatching that rang true and impacted a few of the participant's college experience was the difference between student engagement and extracurricular opportunities (Webber & Enrenberg, 2010) offered at a two-year college and a four-year university. This difference, for some, was translated to a lack of social opportunities at the two-year college. Unfortunately there are certain co-curricular activities, like Greek life and homecoming, which simply cannot be replicated and some of the participants expressed interest in joining a fraternity and sorority. Although a few of the participants reported a lack of social life on campus they did not feel like they were getting any less of a college experience than their four-year counterparts. They just simply recognized that there would be different student engagement and extracurricular opportunities once they transferred to a four-year university.

Findings from this study reveal a different side of undermatching. All 19 participants believed that their college experience is comparable if not better than that of their four-year counterparts. They base this assessment on their development academically and personally as well as the success that they have experienced in college when compared to their peers. While some of them admit to missing the social aspect, most of them are glad that they have the opportunity to stay at home a little longer and to mature. The good news is that if these participants stay on track, they should graduate on time and in less debt than many of their four-year counterparts, much of which they attribute to attending a community college. This study should then begin to change how society views community colleges and the students that attend them. Instead of focusing on the decision of academically eligible students to attend lower selectivity level institutions let's consider that these students will now become transfer students who according to research (Ishitani, 2008; Ishitani, & McKittrick, 2010) are said to have higher completion and retention rates than that of native students.

Conclusion

Three major conclusions were drawn from this study. First, African American college choice does not differ based on academic ability or institutional type. Participants' experiences revealed a three phase process that includes predetermination, search, and choice. All participants explained how they experienced each phase and how the process ended with a choice on which college to attend. This finding is consistent with the literature on African American college choice and is in line with Freeman's model of predetermination (2005).

Second, community college choice influences for academically eligible African American students vary from traditional college choice influences. While factors such as cost, location,

and the role of peers played somewhat of a role in their choice, the participants in this study were also heavily influenced by sports, self-perceptions of maturity and the perceptions of their family members. This finding extends Freeman's (2005) model of predetermination to community college students and illustrates the appropriateness of Somers et al's. (2006) model of community college choice for African Americans while adding additional personal and institutional factors that influence college choice. This finding differs from current literature on college choice by highlighting the role that these additional factors have on community college choice and reveals them as a possible reasons why some students undermatch.

Third, undermatching effects vary. A key finding that should be added to the literature on college students in general and the phenomenon of undermatching specifically. Despite undermatching, all of the participants in this study felt that attending a community college fosters academic preparedness for four-year institutions, supports personal development and promotes academic success. This finding suggests that their college choice decision was more of a match and less of an undermatch; in fact for the students in this study their choice was more about their personal influences than their academic qualifications or college readiness. The opportunity to continue living at home, saving money, and preparing to transfer was more important for both the participants and their families than attending a four-year institution. In addition, however, some of the participants, also felt that attending a community college rather than a four-year university hinders a sense of autonomy and limits social engagement; leaving one to wonder if attending a community college is really a right match for academically eligible students. This variation leads to the conclusion that undermatching effects vary and can produce multiple outcomes in a student's college experience.

Implications for Policy

Despite President Barack Obama's support of community colleges and acknowledgement of their role in the future of higher education in the United States, many people still consider a community college education to be less than that of a four-year university. Some perpetuate a negative reputation of community colleges and look down upon those who attend and work there. As revealed in this study, many view the community college as an option for students who do not have access to or are not academically eligible to attend four-year institutions. The participants in this study did not learn anything positive about community colleges from anyone at their high schools and for some of them, attending a community college was not a first, second, or third choice. Regardless of how they came about their decision to attend a community college, it appears to be a "smart" choice for all of the participants. Recognizing that the majority of the nation's minority students choose to attend a community college over a traditional four-year institution (Joshi, Beck & Nsiah, 2009), more has to be done to support community colleges as a pathway to the baccalaureate. An implication then for institutional, state, and national policymakers is to consider focusing on educating the community about the role that community colleges play in higher education.

This can be done in various ways. First, at the national level continue to impart knowledge to the world on the work that is being done at community colleges and the role that they play in local communities. Community colleges were given national attention when included in the President's state of the union address and will continue to need attention from national figures (Obama, 2012). Second, at the local level provide funding opportunities to community colleges so that they can strengthen their infrastructure, offer appropriate support

services, enhance their academic offerings, and recruit the brightest professionals. They too want to contribute to the Nation's completion agenda but want to do so as equal partners with their four-year counterparts. Lastly, provide assistance for two-year and four-year colleges to participate in articulation agreements, reverse transfer programs, and state wide common course numbering systems. This would strengthen the reputation of the coursework offered at community colleges while encouraging community colleges and four-year universities to work together on creating a seamless transition for students and building a stronger pathway to the baccalaureate.

Implications for Practice

Having state, regional and national policies that support community colleges is an important piece in the future of higher education. Another just as important piece is implementation and practice. Although much is currently being done to provide access to various institutions for all types of students, there is more work to be done and an enhanced focus is needed. In order for students to be made more aware of the options that a community college offers and the pathway that it provides, exposure, training and a community college presence is needed across multiple areas and will require the attention of multiple types of people. Community colleges also need to address the need for more co-curricular opportunities for students on campus.

Parents

Information. Although all of the participants commented on the positive support and encouragement they received from their parents during the predetermination and choice phase, almost all of them discussed the lack of help they were provided during the search

phase. This gap in the process stemmed from their parents lacking information regarding how to navigate through the college choice process, what things to consider when choosing a college, and most importantly how to afford/pay for college. As a result parents should be provided with accurate information regarding how to help their children prepare for and go to college. For example, middle school and high school faculty and staff should inform parents on college prep curriculum options early in their children's secondary career. Also, financial aid/literacy programs should be offered that cater to parents since college choice is so heavily influenced by cost of attendance.

Secondary Administrators, Teachers and Staff

Training. A number of the participants received negative and conflicting messages regarding attending a community college from staff at their high school. As a result, secondary administrators, teachers and staff who work with students on college related items should be required to complete college related training. Specifically all guidance counselors, AP and dual credit instructors, and athletic coaches should be given the opportunity to learn how to help students successfully navigate the college choice process by providing them with information on various institutional types. They need to gain an understanding and working knowledge of the benefits associated with each type of institution since they serve as students' first point of contact when it comes to college related information. For example, becoming familiar with transfer services offered at community colleges, transfer scholarships offered at four-year universities, and articulation agreements designed to create a seamless transition into an academic major would be powerful information for a student who is interested in going to college but does not have the money to afford it or is not ready personally to handle living away

from home. While this student is academically eligible to attend a four-year institution after high school, maybe it's not the best match for them at the time. Understanding this type of information is especially important when students are looking for validation regarding their college choice. That way when they share information with a student regarding college options they can provide accurate and supportive information and not bias or assumed information.

Exposure. In this study only a few of the participants considered attending a community college during the search phase of the college choice process and of those who did they were only given information by their parents. As a result more exposure and information on the options offered at community colleges has to be present in high schools. Community college flyers, handouts, and banners should be seen in high schools just like four-year university material is. On college days, staff and instructors could wear community college t-shirts and sweatshirts to support and promote attending a community college. This would send a message to students that attending a community college is just as worthwhile as attending a four-year university. It is something to be proud of and is a viable pathway to the baccalaureate.

Post-secondary Administrators, faculty and staff

Exposure. Oftentimes misguided information is provided to students by people who are not familiar with the benefits of attending a community college. To remedy this, community colleges should host luncheons and information sessions for guidance counselors, advanced placement and dual credit instructors, as well as any other staff member who plays a role in college preparation on a high school campus. Parents, community leaders and church officials should also be invited. Community colleges could provide fact sheets, view books, and academic program brochures to inform those that are unfamiliar with their services about the

benefits of attending a community college and highlight the pathway that they provide to the baccalaureate. Revealing information on the success that transfer students have at four-year institutions while informing them about the student-centeredness found at community colleges will help destroy the stigmas associated with attending a community college. Students should be encouraged to choose the best school for them and not ridiculed because it's not an expected choice. Increasing awareness and exposure of the benefits of attending a community college is critical if students are to make an informed decision on which college is best for them to attend.

Community College Presence. Additionally community colleges need to have a larger presence at local high schools. They should schedule recurring visits and be present at all college fairs. Connecting students to options early through programs like dual credit and upward bound is a start, but community colleges must consider recruiting just like four-year institutions. Who best to get the word out about the benefits of attending a community college than someone who works there or used to attend there? Discussions can focus on cost of attendance, reputation, location, academic programs, student services and articulation agreements. It also allows a student to hear firsthand about what to expect at a community college instead of relying on assumptions made by someone who has never stepped foot on a two-year campus.

Community colleges should also be ready to welcome prospective students and their parents on their campuses. They should provide them with general college information, program specific information, a campus tour, and give them the opportunity to speak with a current student. Allow them to look into a classroom to see the teacher to student ratio and

attend a campus event or social activity to witness and feel the campus climate and culture.

Share with them information regarding cost of attendance and financial aid. Since parents play such a large role in college choice, providing them with accurate and timely information can make a significant impact in the college choice of their children.

Co-curricular opportunities at Community Colleges. A number of participants, reported the lack of a “social life” on campus. This had a direct impact on their college experience and if they would have chosen to attend a community college rather than a four-year university out of high school again. As a result, community colleges must be more intentional in offering social opportunities for students on campus. While meeting the need of all students at a diverse campus with numerous missions is complicated, more traditional academically eligible student are beginning their careers at community colleges and are expecting more of a traditional social experience while in college. To address this need, options could include partnering with local universities and offering Greek life related events like a step show or sponsoring students to have alternative spring break trips and study abroad opportunities. Initiatives like the ones mention begin to breakdown the stigmas associated with attending a community college and instead highlight the benefits.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of African American college choice in general and undermatching specifically. Given the scarce literature on these topics, a need still exists to learn more about why so many African American students make the decision to attend a community college, how parents, including those without a college degree, can best assist their child through the college choice process, how secondary education can expose

students to all postsecondary options positively, and how higher education can better serve them.

While this study provided insight into the college choice process of academically eligible African American students who choose to attend community colleges, it is important to note that this study examined the lives of 19 participants. Therefore, it is unable to offer generalizations to the larger community of African American students who begin their careers at community colleges. As a result, this study could be replicated on a larger scale to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Incorporation of second interviews might also surface new findings. More than half of the participants were in their second semester of their first year at a community college. Perhaps interviewing them again at the end of their second year would alter their perception of their choice to attend a community college and generate thoughts they might not have had as a first year student. A follow up study would also be helpful to determine if their educational goals were met after attending a community college. With graduation and transfer rates being so low at community colleges, it would be interesting to see if students who start at community colleges with an intent of transferring actually do and what contributed to their ability to transfer. This would provide further insight on their community college experience and transfer/degree completion.

Future investigations could be conducted across different ethnic groups to compare the community college choice process across race and focus on factors that influenced the decision to enroll at a community college. Additionally, future research could choose to concentrate on areas specifically related to gender, a specific socioeconomic background, or the educational capital and level of involvement of the students' parents. There were also a large number of

participants who were influenced by the lack of success that their peers were having at four-year institutions; as a result future research could consider students who met minimum admissions standards and chose to attend four-year universities to determine if they feel they made the best choice for them.

Closing

African Americans continue to be one of the largest minority populations found on community college campuses today. Their reasons for attending this institutional type vary from other populations but are valid. They go through a college choice process that is intentional and inclusive of their families' goals and values. Their informed decision to attend a community college is influenced by the things and the people that matter most to them and should not be criticized.

The concept of undermatching suggests that there are consequences for a student who is attending an institution that is below their academic ability level which include being less likely to persist and graduate (Sherwin, 2012). What this study shows is that some students, who undermatch, do so intentionally based on decisions made by themselves and often times their parents. Despite attending a community college and undermatching the participants in this study reported feeling better prepared personally and academically to begin their careers at four-year universities. While some longed for autonomy and a social life, all agreed that attending a community college was the best decision for them and a student well-matched for such a college should be a very strong candidate for graduation no matter what institution they attend. The truth is that academically eligible students can save lots of money and still get a great education at a community college.

This qualitative study sought to understand the college choice process of academically eligible African American students who choose to attend community colleges as well as explore their college experiences. This research sought to expand our understanding of African American college choice, add to the limited scholarship on undermatching and to increase the sparse literature on community college choice for African Americans.

APPENDIX F
INVITATION EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear (student name),

My name is Kimberly Lowry. I am a doctoral candidate examining the community college choice of African Americans who were academically eligible to attend four-year Institutions. If you are African American, were academically eligible to attend a four-year institution out of high school, graduated with at least a 2.5 gpa and followed a recommended or distinguished high school curriculum, you are eligible to participate in this study!

All you need to do is participate in one individual interview. Each interview will last 45 - 60 minutes and will occur at place and time convenient to you. Interviews will be recorded, however all participants will be given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. You will also receive \$20 for your participation in this study.

If you are interested in participating in the study or know someone who may be, please reply to this email. If you have any questions about my research, please feel free to contact Dr. Amy Fann in the College of Education Higher Education department at amy.fann@unt.edu.

Thank you.

Kimberly M. Lowry
Doctoral Candidate
College of Education
Higher Education Program
University of North Texas

APPENDIX G

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name _____

Gender: Male ___ Female ___ Age _____

Which best describes your college goals?

- ☐ Complete a certificate and/or trade program and start working.
☐ Complete my Associate's Degree and start working.
☐ Complete my "basics" and transfer to a 4-year college to complete a bachelor's degree.
☐ Complete my Associates Degree and transfer to a 4-year college to complete a bachelor's Degree.
☐ Complete my Associates Degree and transfer to a 4-year college to complete a bachelor's Degree and a Master's degree.
☐ Other (please explain) _____

With whom do you live?

Self _____ Parents _____ Family members _____
Friends _____

Are you the primary caregiver for anyone (children, parents, siblings, etc)? Yes _____ No _____
If yes, how many people are you responsible for? _____

Are you working during the school year?

not working _____ full-time _____ part-time _____ Other _____

Are you attending school:

_____ Part time (6 hours or less)
_____ 3/4 time (9 hours)
_____ Full time (12 hours or more)

What is your parents' and siblings highest level of education? (Please check)

Educational Level	Father	Mother	Sibling 1	Sibling 2	Sibling 3
Some high school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
High School/GED	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Some college	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Associate's	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bachelor's	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Master's	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Doctorate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

How many miles is your community college from your home?

____ 0-10 miles ____ 11-20 miles ____ 21-30 miles ____ More than 30 miles

How would you rate your community college on the following attributes?

Educational Level	Very Unfavorable	Somewhat Unfavorable	Neutral	Somewhat favorable	Very favorable
Academic strength	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Academic reputation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tuition Cost	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Facilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Campus Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social Life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Overall Favorability	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Did you apply to any four-year institutions after high school? Please circle: Yes or No

If so how many? _____

Where you admitted to any four-year institutions after high school? Please circle: Yes or No

If so which ones?

Did you participate in any of the following?

College Preparation Programs	Yes	No
Upward Bound	☐	☐
Talent Search	☐	☐
AVID	☐	☐
Gear UP	☐	☐
Other: Please list		

Please describe why you chose to attend a community college.

APPENDIX H
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

1. Tell me a little about your life before attending college.
 - a. Academics – achievement
 - b. High School- what was your high school life?
 - c. Co-curricular activities – e.g., leadership, community service

Predetermination

2. When did you first learn about college?
3. When did you make the decision to go to college?
 - a. Grade/age
4. Why were you interested in going to college?
5. Did your family encourage you to go to college? If so, please give examples.
 - a. Peers (friends), community
 - b. Others (priest, pastor, outreach officer, admissions officer, etc.)
6. What expectations were communicated by family? Peers? The school?
 - a. What role did these expectations have on your plans after high school?
7. Did most of your friends go to college after high school?
 - a. If so, what types of colleges and where
 - b. If not, why?

Search

8. Where did you receive information about college?
 - a. From who?
 - b. When?
9. What types of resources did your high school provide to assist you with college decisions?
10. What type of information did you use to research your college options (Campus tours View books, Websites)?
 - a. what role did they play in your college choice decision?
11. What role did your family play in your college search process?
 - a. encouragement to apply/attend specific schools?
 - b. Did you know family members (siblings, other relatives) who attended the schools you applied to?
12. Did peers encourage you to apply/attend specific schools?
 - a. Did you know peers (friends) who attended the schools you would be attending/applying to?
13. Did school staff/classmates/alumni encourage you to apply/attend specific schools?
 - a. Did you know classmates (HS alumni, school staff alumni) who attended the schools you would be attending/applying to?

Choice

14. When did you make your decision to attend a community college?
 - a. What influenced you to attend a two-year institution rather than a four-year institution?

- b. Did you apply to other colleges?
 - c. Were you accepted?
 - d. What were the reasons for nonattendance?
- 15. Who, if anyone, influenced your decision to attend a community college? Explain
- 16. What was most important for you in making your choice to attend a community college? (college's size, cost, program, location, friends)
- 17. Once you made the decision to attend a community college, how did you feel?
- 18. Was making the choice to attend a community college easy or hard? Explain.
 - b. What things did you consider?
 - c. Did anything unexpected happen?
 - d. What was the final factor?

Undermatching

- 19. How satisfied are you with your choice to attend a community college? Explain.
- 20. Do you feel like you were prepared to attend a community college? Explain.
- 21. How do you think you would have done at a four-year college?
- 22. Overall, how do you think your college experience would have been had you started at a four-year institution?
- 23. Was attending a community college the best choice for you? Explain.
- 24. Given what you know now, do you think that you would make the same decision to attend a community college today?
 - a. Why or Why not

Wrap Up

- 25. What are your post community college plans? (Graduate, transfer, work, etc.)
- 26. Do you think that your choice to attend a community college is preparing you for your goals? Explain.
- 27. How would you describe your college experience so far?
 - a. Are you getting the information you need to complete your educational goals? Explain.
- 28. In retrospect, what would you have done differently?
- 29. What kinds of information would you have wanted to receive?
- 30. What advice would you give to other students who are choosing which college to attend?
- 31. Do you have any remaining questions? Is there something else you would like to add?

COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE LIST

- Allen, W. (1988). The education of Black students on White college campuses: What quality the experience? In M.T. Nettles (Ed.), *Toward Black undergraduate students equality in American higher education* (pp. 57-85). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Allen, W. (1991). Introduction. In W.R. Allen, E.G. Epps, & N.Z. Haniff (Eds.), *College in Black and White: African American students in predominantly White and in historically Black public universities* (pp. 1-14). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Allen, W. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominantly White and historically Black colleges. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62, 26-44.
- Allen, W. & Haniff, N. (1991). Race, gender, and academic performance in U.S. higher education. In W.R. Allen, E.G. Epps, & N.Z. Haniff (Eds.), *College in Black and White: African American students in predominantly White and in historically Black public universities* (pp. 95-109). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Allen, W. R., Jewell, J. O., Griffin, K. A., & Wolf, D. S. (2007). Historically Black colleges and universities: Honoring the past, engaging the present, touching the future. *Journal of Negro Education*, 76(3), 263-280.
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2013). *Community college fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/2013facts_fold_revised.pdf
- Azmitia, M., & Cooper, C. R. (2001). Good or bad? Peer influences on Latino and European American adolescents' pathways through school. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 6(1-2), 45-71.

- Bailey, T., Badway, N. & Gumpport, P.J. (2001). *For-profit higher education and community colleges*. Stanford, CA: National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University.
- Bailey, T. R., Jenkins, D., & Leinbach, T. (2005). *What we know about community college low-income and minority student outcomes: Descriptive statistics from national surveys*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
- Baum, S., & Ma, J. (2008). *Trends in college pricing*. Washington DC: College Board.
- Baum, S., Ma, J., & Payea, K. (2010). *Education pays: The benefits of education for individuals and society*. Washington DC: College Board.
- Benavides, I. (1996, February 19). Historically Black colleges buying muscle to up enrollment. *Tennessean*, 1A.
- Bergerson, A. (2009). College choice and access to college: Moving policy, research, and practice to the 21st century. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 35(4), 1-141.
- Bers, T. H., & Galowich, P. M. (2002). Using survey and focus group research to learn about parents' roles in the community college choice process. *Community College Review*, 29(4), 67-82.
- Best, J. W., and Kahn, J. V. (1998). *Research in education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bonner, F.A. (2000). African American giftedness: Our nation's deferred dream. *Journal of Black Studies*, 30(5), 643-663.

- Bonner, F. A. (2001). *Gifted African American male college students: A phenomenological study* (RM01148). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.
- Borden, V. M. H., & Brown, P. C. (2004). The top 100: Interpreting the data. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 21(8), 3.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A.H. Hasley (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487-511). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bouse, G. A., & Hossler, D. (1991). Studying college choice: A progress report. *Journal of College Admissions*, 130, 11-16.
- Bowen, W. G., & Bok, D. (1998). *The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bowen, W.G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M.S. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bozick, R., Lauff, E., & Wirt, J. (2007). Education longitudinal study of 2002 (ELS: 2002): A first look at the initial postsecondary experiences of the high school sophomore class of 2002. *National Center for Education Statistics*.
- Braddock, J. H., & Dawkins, M. P. (1993). Ability grouping, aspirations, and attainments: Evidence from the national educational longitudinal study of 1988. *Journal of Negro Education*, 324-336.

- Braddock, J., & Hua, L. (2006). Determining the College Destination of African American High School Seniors: Does College Athletic Reputation Matter?. *Journal of Negro Education*, 75(3), 532-545.
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Cabrera, A. F., & La Nasa, S. (2001). On the path to college: Three critical tasks facing America's disadvantaged. *Research in Higher Education*, 42(2), 119–150.
- Callahan, W. C. (2003). *Effects of factors and people of influence on college choice comparing general population and top academic students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska at Omaha).
- Carnevale, A. P., & Rose, S. J. (2004). Socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and selective college admissions. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *America's untapped resource: Low-income students in higher education* (pp. 101–156). New York, NY: Century Foundation Press.
- Chapman, D. W. (1981). A model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 52, 490-505.
- Chapman, D. W. (1984). *Toward a theory of college choice: A model of college search and choice behavior*. Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta Press.
- Chapman, D.W., & Jackson, R. (1987). *College choices of academically able students: The influence of no-need financial aid and other factors*. Research Monograph No. 10. New York, NY: College Board Publications.

- Cho, S. J., Hudley, C., Lee, S., Barry, L., & Kelly, M. (2008). Roles of gender, race, and SES in the college choice process among first-generation and non first-generation students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 1(2), 95.
- Christie, R. L., & Hutcheson, P. (2003). Net effects of institutional type on baccalaureate degree attainment of traditional students. *Community College Review*, 31(2), 1-20.
- Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2008). *The American community college* (5th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Coleman, J.S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press.
- College Board. (2011). *The college keys compact: Expanding options for low-income students. A review of barriers research and strategies*. New York: The College Board.
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. (2008). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications
- Dale, A. (2010). *The college-choice process of high achieving freshmen: a comparative case study*. (Doctoral Dissertation, Arizona State University).
- Dillon, E., & Smith, J. (2009). *The determinants of mismatch between students and colleges*. Unpublished working paper. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Eggleston, L. E., & Laanan, F. S. (2001). Making the transition to the senior institution. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, (114), 87–97.

- Engberg, M., & Wolniak, G. (2009). Navigating disparate pathways to college: Examining the conditional effects of race on enrollment decisions. *The Teachers College Record*, 111(9), 2255-2279.
- Filter, S. (2010). *The choice-of-college decision of academically talented students*. (Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University).
- Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Freeman, K. (1998). African Americans and college choice: Cultural considerations and policy implications. In K. Freeman (Ed.), *African American culture and heritage in higher education research and practice* (pp. 181-194). Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger.
- Freeman, K. (1999). No services needed? The case for mentoring high-achieving African American students. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 74(2), 15-26.
- Freeman, K. (2005). *African Americans and college choice the influence of family and school*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Freeman, K., & Thomas, G. (2002). Black colleges and college choice: Characteristics of students that choose HBCUs. *Review of Higher Education*, 25(3), 349-358.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2003). *Educational research: An introduction* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: A & B Publications
- Galotti, K.M. (1995). Memories of a 'decision-map': Recall of a real-life decision. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 9, 307-319.
- Gándara, P., & Bial, D. (2001). *Paving the way to postsecondary education: K-12 intervention programs for underrepresented youth*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Gasman, M. (2007). Swept under the rug? A historiography of gender and black colleges.

American Educational Research Journal, 44(4), 760-805.

Gasman, M. (2009). African American female students at Historically Black Colleges: Historical and contemporary considerations. In V.B. Bush, C.J. Muhammad, C.R. Chambers, and Walpole, M. (Eds.), *From diplomas to doctorates: The success of Black women in higher education and its implications for equal education opportunities for all*. (pp. 73-83).

Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, Inc.

Gasman, M., Lundy Wagner, V., Ransom, T., & Bowman, N. (2010). Unearthing promise and potential: Our nation's historically Black colleges and universities. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 35(5), 1-134

Education Report, 35(5), 1-134

Goenner, C., & Snaith, S. (2004). Assessing the effects of increased admissions standards.

College and University, 80(1), 29-34.

Green, P. E. (2001). The policies and politics of retention and access of African-American students in public white institutions. In L. Jones (Ed.), *Retaining African Americans in higher education: Challenging paradigms for retaining students, faculty and administrators*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Grodsky, E., & Jones, M. T. (2007). Real and imagined barriers to college entry: Perceptions of cost. *Social Science Research*, 36(2): 745–766.

Guba, E. G. (Ed.). (1990). *The paradigm dialog*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Guiffrida, D. A., & Douthit, K. Z. (2010). The Black student experience at predominantly White colleges: Implications for school and college counselors. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 88(3), 311-318.

- Gumport, P. J. 2007. Sociology of higher education: an evolving field, in P. J. Gumport (ed.), *Sociology of higher education: Contributions and their contexts*, 17–52. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Hallinan, M. T. (2000). On the linkages between sociology of race and ethnicity and sociology of education. In M. T. Hallinan (Ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of education* (pp. 65-84). New York: Plenum.
- Hanson, K.H., & Litten, L.H. (1982). The college attendance/choice process. In P. Perun (Ed). *The undergraduate woman: Issues in education*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Harper, S. R., & Nichols, A. H. (2008). Are they not all the same? Racial heterogeneity among Black male undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(3), 199-214.
- Hearn, J. C. (1991). Academic and nonacademic influence on the college destinations of 1980 high school graduates. *Sociology of Education*, 64(3), 158–171.
- Herndon, M. K., & Hirt, J. B. (2004). Black students and their families: What leads to success in college. *Journal of Black Studies*, 34(4), 489-513.
- Hill, C. B., & Winston, G. C. (2010). Low-income students and highly selective private colleges: Geography, searching, and recruiting. *Economics of Education Review*, 29(4), 495–503.
- Holland, J.L. (1959). Determinants of college choice. *College and University*, 35, 11-28.
- Horn, L. and Carroll, C.D. (2006). *Placing college graduation rates in context: How 4-year college graduation rates vary with selectivity and the size of low-income enrollment* (No. 2006-184). Washington, DC.: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics

Horton, D. (2009). Class and cleats: Community college student athletes and academic success.

New Directions for Community Colleges, 2009(147), 15-27.

Hossler, D., Braxton, J., & Coopersmith, G. (1989). Understanding student college

choice. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol.

5, pp. 231–288). New York: Agathon Press.

Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K.S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and

the implications for policymakers. *College and University*, 62 (3), 207-222.

Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N. (1999). *Going to college: How social, economic, and*

educational factors influence the decisions students make. Baltimore, MD: The Johns

Hopkins University Press.

Hossler, D., & Stage, F. K. (1992). Family and high school experience influences on the

postsecondary educational plans of ninth-grade students. *American Educational*

Research Journal, 29(2), 425-451.

Hoxby, C. (2009). The changing selectivity of American colleges. *Journal of Economic*

Perspectives, 23(4), 95–118.

Hu, S., & Hossler, D. (2000). Willingness to pay and preference for private institutions.

Research in Higher Education, 41(6), 685-701.

Hughes, R. L., & Howard-Hamilton, M. F. (2003). Insights: Emphasizing issues that affect

African American women. *New Directions for Student Services*, (104), 95-104.

Ishitani, T. (2008). How do transfers survive after “transfer shock”? A longitudinal study of

transfer student departure at a four-year institution. *Research in Higher Education*,

49(5), 403–419.

- Ishitani, T. T., & McKittrick, S. A. (2010). After transfer: The engagement of community college students at a four-year collegiate institution. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 34(7), 576–594.
- Jackson, G.A. (1982). Public efficiency and private choice in higher education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(2), 237-247.
- Jackson, K.W., & Swan, L.A. (1991). Institutional and individual factors affecting Black undergraduate student performance: Campus race and student gender. In W.R. Allen, E.G. Epps, & N.Z. Haniff (Eds.), *College in Black and White: African American students in predominantly White and in historically Black public universities* (pp.127-141). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Johnson, R. G., Stewart, N. R., & Eberly, C. G. (1991). Counselor impact on college choice. *The School Counselor*, 39(2), 84-90.
- Joshi, P.V, & Beck, K, A. (2009). Student characteristics affecting the decision to enroll in a community college: Economic rationale and empirical evidence. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 33(10), 805-822.
- Kane, T. (1999). *The price of admission: Rethinking how Americans pay for college*. New York, NY: Brookings Institution Press.
- Kinzie, J., Palmer, M., Hayek, J., Hossler, D., Jacob, S., & Cummings, H. (2004, September). *Fifty years of college choice: Social, political and institutional influences on the decision-making process*. Vol. 5, No. 3. Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.
- Kirst, M. W., & Venezia, A. (2004). *From high school to college: Improving opportunities for success in postsecondary education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Kolter, P. (1976). Applying marketing theory to college admissions. *A role for marketing in college admissions*, (54-72).
- Kuh, G. D., & Andreas, R. E. (1991). It's about time: Using qualitative methods in student life studies. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32(5), 397-405.
- Kurlaender, M. (2006). Choosing community college: Factors affecting Latino college choice. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 133, 7-16.
- Light, A., & Strayer, W. (2000). Determinants of college completion: School quality or student ability? *The Journal of Human Resources*, 35(2), 299–332.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). The only generalization is: There is no generalization. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, & P. Foster (Eds.), *Case study method* (pp. 27-44). London: Sage.
- Litten, L. (1982). Different strokes in the applicant pool: Some refinements in a model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 53(4), 383-402.
- MacLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin'it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Manski, C.F., & Wise, D.A. (1983). *College choice in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1989). *Design qualitative research*. California: Sage.
- Martin, N.K. & Dixon. P.N. (1991). Factors influencing students' college choice. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32(3), 253-257.
- Maxey, J. (1995). Are Black Students Less Likely to Enroll at Their First-Choice College?. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 7, 100-01.

- Maxwell, J.A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- McCullough, A. K. (2010). *Factors that impact two-year college attendance and program enrollment among community college students*. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges. How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- McDonough, P.M. & Antonio, A.L. (1996). Ethnic and racial differences in selectivity of college choice. Paper presented at *American Educational Research Association*, New York, NY.
- McDonough, P.M., Antonio, A.L., & Trent, J.W. (1997). Black students, Black colleges: An African American college choice model. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education*, 3(1), 9-36.
- Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morse, J. M. (1995). The significance of saturation. *Qualitative health research*, 5(2), 147-149.
- Muhammad, C. G. (2008). African American Students and College Choice A Consideration of the Role of School Counselors. *Nassp Bulletin*, 92(2), 81-94.
- Mullin, C. M. (2010). *Just how similar? Community colleges and the for-profit sector*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). *Total fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions, by level of student, sex, attendance status, and race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1976 through 2010*, NCES 2011-237. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The condition of education 2012: Number of degrees conferred to U.S. residents by degree-granting institutions, percentage distribution of degrees conferred, and percentage of degrees conferred to females, by level of degree and race/ethnicity: Academic years 1999–2000 and 2009–10*. NCES 2012-045. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Nettles, M. (Ed.). (1988) *Toward Black undergraduate student equity in American higher education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Nettles, M. T., & Millett, C. M. (2000). *Student access in community colleges. New expeditions: Charting the second century of community colleges. Issues Paper No. 1*. Washington, DC: Community College Press.
- Oakes, J. (1985) *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Obama, P. B. (2012). President Obama's State of the Union Address, January 25, 2012. *The New York Times*, January, 24.
- Ortiz, A.M. & Santos, S.J. (2009). *Ethnicity in college: Advancing theory and improving diversity practices on campus*. Sterling: Stylus.

- Pallais, A., & Turner, S. (2006). Opportunities for low-income students at top colleges and universities: Policy initiatives and the distribution of students. *National Tax Journal*, 59(2), 357–386.
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P.T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (Vol.2). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Paulsen, M. B. (1990). *College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 6. Washington, DC: George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
- Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 117-141.
- Perna, L., Lundy-Wagner, V., Drezner, N. D., Gasman, M., Yoon, S., Bose, E., & Gary, S. (2009). The contribution of HBCUs to the preparation of African American women for STEM careers: A case study. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(1), 1-23.
- Perna, L. W., & Swail, W. S. (2001). Pre-college outreach and early intervention. *Thought and Action*, 17 (1), 99-110.
- Perna, L. W., & Titus, M. A. (2005). The relationship between parental involvement as social capital and college enrollment: An examination of racial/ethnic group differences. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(5), 485-518
- Pitre, P. E. (2006). College choice: A study of African American and White student aspirations and perceptions related to college attendance. *College Student Journal*, 40(3), 562-574.

- Riegg, C.S. (2006). The economics of two-year college education: Essays on community colleges and proprietary schools. (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles).
- Rendón, L., & Nora, A. (1994). Clearing the pathway: Improving opportunities for minority students to transfer. In M. J. Justiz, R. Wilson & L. G. Bjork (Eds.), *Minorities in higher education*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx.
- Rendón, L. I., & Valadez, J. R. (1993). Qualitative Indicators of Hispanic Student Transfer. *Community College Review*, 20(4), 27–37.
- Reyes, M. (2011). Unique challenges for women of color in STEM transferring from community colleges to universities, *Harvard Educational Review*, 81(2), 241-262.
- Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., & Moeller, E. (2008). *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Rouse, C. (1994). What to do after high school? The two-year vs. four-year college enrollment decision. In R. Ehrenberg (Ed.), *Contemporary policy issues in education* (pp.59-88). Ithaca, NY: ILR press.
- Santos, M. (2004). The motivations of first-semester Hispanic two-year college students. *Community College Review*, 32(3), 18-34.
- Schoenherr, H. J. (2009). *Beyond academic reputation: Factors that influence the college of first choice for high achieving students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida).
- Schultz, J. L., & Mueller, D. (2006). *Effectiveness of programs to improve postsecondary education enrollment and success of underrepresented youth: A literature review*. St. Paul, MN: Wilder Research.

- Sztam, S. R. (2003). Selecting a college or university: A study of students and their parents. *ETD Collection for Florida International University*, AAI3085018.
- Sherwin, J. (2012). *Make me a match: Helping low-income and first-generation students make good college choices* (MDRC Policy Brief). New York, NY: MDRC.
- Smith, M. J. (2008). College choice process of first generation Black female students: Encouraged to what end?. *Negro Educational Review*, 59(3), 147-161.
- Smith, M. J. (2009). Right directions, wrong maps understanding the involvement of low-SES African American parents to enlist them as partners in college choice. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(2), 171-196.
- Smith-Maddox, R. (1999). The social networks and resources of African American eighth graders: Evidence from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988. *Adolescence*, 34(133), 169-183.
- Smith, J., Howell, J., Pender, M., & Hurwitz, M. (2013). A Review of the causes and consequences of students' postsecondary choices. Literature Brief. *College Board Advocacy & Policy Center*.
- Smith, J., Pender, M., & Howell, J. (2012). The full extent of student-college academic undermatch. *Economics of Education Review*, 32, 247-261.
- Smith, M.J. & Fleming, M.K. (2006). African American parents in the search stage of college choice: Unintentional contributions to the female to male college enrollment gap. *Urban Education*, 41(1), 71-110.

- Somers, P. Haines, K., Keenem B., Bauer, J. Pfeiffer, M. McCluskey, J., Settle, J. & Sparks, B. (2006). Towards a theory of choice for community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 30(1), 53-67.
- Stephan, J. L., & Rosenbaum, J. E. (2013). Can high schools reduce college enrollment gaps with a new counseling model?. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35(2), 200-219.
- Stokes, T. & Somers, P. (2004). Two-year college choice: A national study. Unpublished paper.
- St. John, E. P., Paulsen, M. B., & Carter, D. F. (2005). Diversity, college costs, and postsecondary opportunity: An examination of the financial nexus between college choice and persistence for African Americans and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(5), 545-569.
- Strauss, A., Schatzman, L., Bucher, R., & Sabshin, M. (1981). *Psychiatric ideologies and institutions* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Strayhorn, T. L., & Terrell, M. (2010). *The Evolving Challenges of Black College Students: New Insights for Policy, Practice, and Research*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Styles-Hughes, M. (1987). Black students' participation in higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 532-555.
- Tobolowsky, B., Outcalt, C., and McDonough, P. (2005). The role of HBCUs in the college choice process of African Americans in California. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 74(1), 63-75.
- Townsend, B. K. (2007). Interpreting the influence of community college attendance upon Baccalaureate attainment. *Community College Review*, 35(2), 128-136.

- Townsend, B. K. (2009). The two-year college as a first choice, second chance institution for baccalaureate-degree holders. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 33(9), 749-764.
- Turley, R. N. L., Santos, M., & Ceja, C. (2007). Social origin and college opportunity expectations across cohorts. *Social Science Research*, 36(3), 1200-1218.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The condition of education 2012* (NCES 2012-045), [Indicator 47](#).
- United States Government Accountability Office (2011). Postsecondary education: Student outcomes vary at for-profit, nonprofit, and public schools (GAO-12-143). Washington, DC: U.S. GAO. Retrieved March 20, 2012, from <http://www.gao.gov/assets/590/586738.pdf>
- Van Camp, D., Barden, J., & Sloan, L. R. (2010). Predictors of Black students' race-related reasons for choosing an HBCU and intentions to engage in racial identity-relevant behaviors. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 36(2), 226-250
- Walpole, M. (2009). African American women at highly selective colleges: How African American campus communities shape experiences. In V.B. Bush, C.J. Muhammad, C.R. Chambers, and Walpole, M. (Eds.), *From diplomas to doctorates: The success of Black women in higher education and its implications for equal education opportunities for all*. (pp. 73-83). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, Inc.
- Walpole, M., McDonough, P. M., Bauer, C. J., Gibson, C., Kanyi, K., & Toliver, R. (2005). This test is unfair: Urban African American and Latino high school students' perceptions of standardized college admission tests. *Urban Education*, 40(3), 321-349.

- Webber, D., & Ehrenberg, R. (2010). Do expenditures other than instructional expenditures affect graduation and persistence rates in American higher education?. *Economics of Education Review*, 29(6), 947–958.
- White, L.S. (1998). “Am I Black enuf fo ya?” Black students diversity: Issues of identity and community. In K. Freeman (Ed.), *African American culture and heritage in higher education research and practice* (pp.93-120). Westport, CT: Praeger Press.
- Wilson, R. (1994). The participation of African Americans in American higher education. In M. J. Justiz, R. Wilson, & L. G. Bjork (Eds.), *Minorities in higher education* (pp. 195–211). Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Winters, W.G. (1993). *African American mothers and urban schools: The power of participation*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Wood, J. L. (2013). The same...but different: Examining background characteristics among Black males in public two year colleges. *Journal of Negro Education*, 82(1), 47-61.
- Wood, J. L., & Vasquez Urias, M. C. (2012). Community College v. Proprietary School Outcomes: Student Satisfaction among Minority Males. *Community College Enterprise*, 18(2), 83-100.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Zamani, E. M. (2001). Institutional responses to barriers to the transfer process. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 114, 15-24.
- Zemsky, R., & Odell, P. (1983). *The structure of college choice*. Princeton, NJ: The College Board.