“IT’S ALL ABOUT THAT PIECE OF PAPER”: VOCATIONAL ANTICIPATORY SOCIALIZATION MESSAGES RECEIVED BY FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The number of first-generation college students (FGCSs) attending four-year colleges/universities is on the rise. While numerous studies have examined descriptive characteristics of this growing population, few studies have examined why FGCSs choose to attend college. This study sought to tackle this question by conducting focus groups with thirty-five FGCSs. Participants were asked to identify sources of vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) that were influential in their decision to pursue a college degree as well as the VAS messages they received from these sources. Focus group data revealed seven sources of VAS with parents being the number one source of VAS messages regarding higher education. Results also revealed five VAS message types, though messages referencing a perceived overall better quality of life were the most common. The findings show that FGCSs receive socializing messages from a variety of sources but parents maintain the greatest influence.

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H. A. A.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the United States Census Bureau (2012), in 2009 one in four adults (28%) aged twenty-five or older reported attaining a bachelor's degree or higher. This is a five-fold increase in postsecondary degree completion since the Census first began collecting educational attainment data in 1940 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). In essence, more young adults are choosing to attend a four-year university immediately after, or within a few years, of graduating high school than ever before. Amidst an economic recession, attainment of a bachelor's degree enhances the likelihood of employment with an only 4.1% unemployment rate (as of July 2012) compared to unemployment rates among people with an associates degree (7.1%), a high school diploma (8.7%), or less than a high school diploma (12.7%) (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2012). Additionally, workers with a bachelor's degree earn about $20,000 more per year than someone with a high school diploma or GED (United State Census Bureau, 2012). Of these individuals choosing to begin work towards a bachelor's degree, about 38% of all freshmen students enrolling in four-year institutions are first-generation college students (FGSCs) (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

FGCSs are defined as individuals whose parents'/guardians' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Numerous studies on FGCSs identify descriptive characteristics such as demographic composition (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), high school involvement and course load (Warburton et al., 2001), learning styles (Bui, 2002), and the likelihood of attrition within the first year (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Lareau & Conley, 2008; Warburton et al., 2001). However, only a handful of studies examine the reasons behind a FGCS's decision to attend college (Fallon, 1997; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Sewell &

Shah, 1968), which is often influenced by parent encouragement (Sewell & Shah, 1968) and/or parent involvement (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Through the process of vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS), children are introduced to the world of work and career options, which can also include the importance or lack of importance placed on higher education (Jablin, 1982; 1984; 1985a; 1985b; 2001). VAS occurs in the form of memorable messages that people receive when they are young that have a lasting impact on their lives (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). Sources of VAS include parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, media, and part-time jobs (Jablin, 1985a; 1985b; 2001). Of these five sources, parents are the most influential in the VAS process of their children (Jablin, 1985a; 1985b; 2001; Myers, Jahn, Gailliard, & Stoltzfus, 2011) and the single biggest predictor of college aspirations among their children (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Previous research in communication has examined VAS and memorable messages separate from one another, although there is much overlap between the concepts. Notably, however, Myers et al. (2011) combined the two concepts in their VAS Model of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) to highlight the memorable messages individuals receive during VAS that influence career choice. From a communicative perspective, expanding Myers et al.'s (2011) initial work into VAS messages to additional research arenas could bridge the gap between the areas of organizational assimilation and memorable messages. More specifically, applying the concept of VAS messages to FGCSs may help reveal the role parents and other sources play in the vocational socialization process towards college attendance.

Unlike previous research that focuses on VAS and memorable messages in isolation from one another, this study enters the conversation of VAS messages guided by Myers et al.'s (2011) previous research, as well as examines how socializing messages influence pursuits of higher

education. The VAS process is often examined through the context of career replication or occupational following (Adya & Kaiser, 2005; Berkelaar, Buzzanell, Kisselburgh, Tan, & Shen, 2012; Buzzanell, Berkelaar, & Kisselburgh, 2011; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lucas, 2011). However, by examining the VAS process of FGCSs, additional insight will be gained by understanding the socializing messages that occur when individuals choose a path that does not replicate that of their parents, and instead, involves higher education. To this end, the research question that guides this study is: What are the socializing messages that influence FGCSs' decision to pursue higher education? As such, the study provides scholars and practitioners with insight into the motivations for FGCSs' attendance at institutions of higher learning. This understanding could help support FGCSs during their time at universities in order to lower attrition rates and increase graduation rates. To begin, this chapter provides an introduction to FGCSs and VAS messages in order to understand the concepts that are at the heart of this study.

First Generation College Students (FGCSs)

The bulk of research on FGCSs has centered on revealing descriptive characteristics in comparison to non-FGCSs. For example, a FGCS is more likely to be an ethnic minority and/or female (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), speak a language other than English at home (Bui, 2002), and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bui, 2002; Nunez, & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) as compared to their non-FGCS peers. Beyond familial characteristics, research reveals FGCSs engage in high school academics differently than non-FGCSs. In high school, FGCSs are less likely to take rigorous courses and college preparatory classes, which has a direct impact on their ability to succeed during their first year at a four-year institution (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Additionally, Gibbons and Borders (2010) found high school students who would be the first in their family to attend

college (pre-FGCSs) perceive more barriers than non-pre-FGCSs related to finances, family issues, racial and ethnic discrimination, lack of college-educated role models, lack of college-planning guidance, negative educational role models, and lack of preparation. Additionally, pre-FGCSs reported less parental support for education and lower positive outcome expectations (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).

When making the decision to a attend a specific institution, FGCSs largely base their decision around the affordability of the school, the ability to live close to home, and being offered financial aid, rather than about degree benefits (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Once they begin their degree, FGCSs are more than twice as likely than non-FGCSs to leave a four-year institution before the second year (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Furthermore, FGCSs typically do not perform as well during their first year in college and have lower GPAs (2.4 v. 2.8) than non-FGCSs (Warburton et al., 2001; Xianglei, 2005).

In past research, parents who earn college degrees have been shown to be more likely to transmit the value of higher education to their children than parents who did not attend college (Brooks-Terry, 1988). In more recent research however, more and more parents who did not attend college are beginning to see that in order for their children to obtain a well-paying job and compete with their peers, a college degree is a necessity (Fallon, 1997). This shift in mindset could be due in part to the rise in educational requirements and expectations for particular occupations (Goyette, 2008). In other words, more jobs are requiring at least a bachelor's degree for hiring and advancement. However, because parents of FGCSs have not experienced college themselves, they often hold stereotypical notions about the purpose of college, which can be transmitted to their children (Fallon, 1997). For example, while many non-FGCSs view college as providing personal, educational, and career development opportunities, FGCSs and their

parents are more likely to view college as purely a means to a good job (Billson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; Fallon, 1997) and a way to attain skills for a particular occupation (Goyette & Mullen, 2006).

This view of college as simply a means to a well-paying job can have an influence on major and eventual career choice (Montmarquette, Cannings, & Mahseredjian, 2002; Xianglei, 2005). FGCSs are less likely than non-FGCSs to choose a major and/or career in humanities, arts, and social sciences due to the perceived lower earning potential in the aforementioned fields, and are more likely to choose majors related to vocational or technical fields (Montmarquette et al., 2002; Xianglei, 2005). Additionally, 33% of FGCSs are undecided on a major when they first enter college as compared to non-FGCS at only 13% (Xianglei, 2005). FGCSs' major choice that has clear occupational outcomes (e.g. nurse, farmer, accountant, teacher, etc.) supports previous research on the notion that FGCSs are attending college to obtain a well-paying job upon completion of their degree and not to find an area that necessarily aligns with their interests (Bilson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; Fallon, 1997; Goyette & Mullen, 2006).

Choosing the appropriate major that aligns with the individual's interests is important to college success (Montmarquette et al., 2002). According to Montmarquette et al. (2002), if a student chooses a major that is not suited towards their interests or abilities, it is more likely they will not succeed in obtaining the degree. With attrition rates for FGCSs higher than those of non-FGCSs, 45% and 29% respectively (Billson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; Nunez & Cucco-Alamin, 1998), it is important that students are choosing to attend college, as well as select a major, based on their own interests (Montmarquette, 2002). However, because of the strong influence parents have on their children's career choice (Berkelaar, Buzzanell, Kisselburgh, Tan, & Shen, 2012; Jablin, 2001; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001;

Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Myers et al., 2011; Serravallo, 2004), and the likelihood of parents of FGCSs viewing college merely as a means to a good job (Fallon, 1997), FGCSs may be choosing to attend college and select majors that align with their parent's expectations rather than their own.

VAS Messages

According to Myers et al. (2011) VAS messages are the memorable messages individuals receive during their career development process, which vocationally socializes them towards a given occupation. The VAS messages individuals receive help guide them "in making sense of how their experiences and individual traits apply to the world of work" (Myers et al., 2011, p. 99-100). VAS messages are typically received from one of five socializing agents: parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, part-time jobs, and media (Jablin, 1985a; 1985b; 2001). Examples of VAS messages regarding career choice include messages that guide the individual towards a specific career such as, "you would make a good living as a doctor" (Myers et al., 2011, p. 100) or messages regarding certain values that shape career choice, such as those emphasizing careers that allow for flexible family time (Myers et al., 2011).

Though parents are typically shown to be the most influential and frequent source of VAS messages regarding career choice (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Jablin, 1985a; 1985b; 2001; Myers et al., 2011), research has not examined if this holds true when applied to the VAS messages received by FGCSs. While Nanzione, LaPlante, Smith, Cornacchione, Russell, and Stohl (2011) as well as Kranstuber et al. (2012) took steps to understand the sources of messages received by college students, the focus was on messages regarding overall college experience and not the messages that socialized children towards their decision to attend college.

Additionally, when examining the source of these messages (family members, academic personnel, friends, and media), Nanzione et al. (2011) as well as Kranstuber et al. (2012) did not differentiate between FGCSs and non-FGCSs. Though results patterned past socialization research revealing family members as the most frequent source of messages, it is possible that if FGCSs and non-FGCSs had been analyzed separate from one another, alternate results may have emerged. Recognizing this lack of research, Kranstuber et al. (2012) calls for additional research with messages related to FGCSs in order to understand how families help/hinder their children during their transition to college. This call to action by Kranstuber et al. (2012) will be addressed in the present study.

Rationale

While many researchers have examined characteristics of FGCSs, results typically reveal descriptive characteristics and challenges FGCSs face. Though this research can be used to target students before entering college to help prepare them for the challenging course-load ahead, additional research needs to be conducted to understand what influences FGCSs to attend college in the first place in order to provide additional support to FGCSs once they arrive. VAS messages have a lasting impact on an individual's future career trajectory, and by understanding the VAS messages FGCSs receive, as well as the source(s) of these messages, researchers and practitioners could provide outreach to FGCSs to help improve the likelihood of college success and lower attrition rates. By treating VAS messages as one concept rather than studying VAS and memorable messages in isolation from one another, this study will work to expand Myers et al.'s (2011) initial research into VAS messages. In doing so, a greater understanding in the socializing process of FGCSs may be revealed.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Beginning at a young age, many children are socialized towards specific careers prior to graduating high school (Jablin, 1982; Gibson & Papa, 2000). This early socialization is called vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) (Jablin, 1982; 2001) and is a facet of the first phase of the organizational assimilation model, anticipatory socialization. The VAS process occurs through the receiving of messages regarding career trajectory that have a lasting influence on the direction of the individuals' lives (Knapp et al., 1981). The study of VAS typically involves the sources of influence on career choice (Berkelaar et al, 2012; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1982; Myers et al., 2011). However, since the purpose of college attendance is often to prepare individuals for careers that require advanced degrees, the VAS process is also relevant to the study of an individual's decision to pursue higher education. In VAS research, messages individuals receive regarding career trajectory are similar to those received regarding higher education. For example, Kranstuber et al. (2012) shows how many parents reference their own college experiences when discussing college with their children. This could be thought of as a form of occupational following, which is often found in VAS research regarding career influence (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lucas, 2011).

Though previous research shows parents are typically the most influential and frequent source of VAS messages for their children (Jablin, 1985a; 1985b; 2001; Myers, et al., 2011), this may not be the case in the context of FGCSs because VAS messages from parents often involve the subject of occupational following (Berkelaar et al., Buzzanell et al., 2011; 2012; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lucas, 2011). In the case of FGCSs, children are choosing a career path different from their parents' as evident in their choice to attend higher education. Thus, parents may not be the most influential source of VAS messages among FGCSs. It is possible that the most

influential VAS messages FGCSs receive may not be from their parents at all due to the lack of occupational following that is occurring.

This thesis seeks to understand what VAS messages influence a FGCS's decision to be the first in their family to attend college as well as the source of these messages. This chapter presents a review of literature relevant to the study of FGCSs and the VAS messages they receive that drives their decision to pursue higher education. First, Jablin's (1982; 1984; 2001) organizational assimilation model will be discussed with a focus on VAS in order to understand how VAS is influential in eventual organizational choice and the successful assimilation into an organization. Second, an in depth analysis of the VAS process will be explored with a focus on the five sources of VAS in order to understand what additional source(s), other than parents, may be revealed when discussing influential VAS messages with FGCSs. Third, an overview of the memorable message literature that overlaps with VAS message literature will be examined to reveal the means by which individuals, including FGCSs, are vocationally socialized. Next, a brief overview of VAS messages will be provided with special attention given to the five VAS message types revealed by Myers et al., (2011) in their study that first coined the term 'VAS messages'. Although alternate message types may be revealed in the current study, Myers et al.'s (2011) five types provide a framework in VAS message analysis. Finally, the research questions that guide this study will be presented.

Organizational Assimilation

According to Jablin (1982), "Organizational assimilation refers to the process by which organizational members become a part of, or are absorbed into, the culture of an organization" (p. 256). In other words, assimilation occurs when newcomers are attempting to fit into an organization and become participating members. In the context of FGCSs, the process of

organizational assimilation begins prior to actual college enrollment and continues until the individual exits the institution through either graduation or attrition.

The process of joining, or assimilating, into a new organization was first examined from a sociological perspective (Van Maanen, 1978; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). In Jablin's (1982; 1984; 2001) theory of organizational assimilation however, a communicative perspective was integrated into the existing model. The communicative model of organizational assimilation examines how newcomers are socialized or assimilated into an organizational culture, through the acquisition of information, from a variety of sources including co-workers, supervisors, and outside sources.

Assimilation is an ongoing process that involves both behavioral and cognitive challenges individuals face as they work to become integrated and eventually exit an organization (Jablin & Krone, 1987). During the process of organizational assimilation, conflicting actions occur. First, the organization is attempting to *socialize* the new member by encouraging them to accept organizational rules and norms (Jablin, 1987). Second, the newcomer is attempting to *individualize* their role within that same organization by negotiating organizational rules and norms (Jablin, 1982). Socialization is the process by which new members "learn the ropes" within their organization including the values, roles, and norms (Van Maanen, 1978). By contrast, individualization is the process by which employees are attempting to negotiate their role within the organization in order to meet their needs (Jablin, 2001). According to Porter, Lawler, and Hackman (1975):

> At the same time that an organization is attempting to put its distinctive stamp on an individual, he in turn is striving to influence the organization so that it can better satisfy his own needs and his own ideas about how it can best be operated. (p. 170)

The process of organizational assimilation takes place in four phases or stages: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit (Jablin, 1982; 1984; 2001; Jablin & Krone, 1987). Anticipatory socialization can be further divided into organizational anticipatory socialization (OAS) and vocational anticipatory socialization (VAS) (Jablin, 1982; 1985a; 2001). Both socialization efforts by the organization as well as individualization efforts by the newcomer occur throughout all phases of assimilation (Jablin, 1982; 1984). To understand how newcomers become active members of an organization through socialization efforts, a brief overview of four phases will be provided, with an expanded explanation of VAS, which is the focus of this study. This process can be applied to FGCSs as they assimilate into the college environment.

Anticipatory Socialization. The time prior to organizational entry is called anticipatory socialization (Jablin, 1982; Kramer, 2010; Van Maanen, 1976). Individuals "anticipate" what their role will be within an organization prior to actual entry. According to Jablin (1982), "Most of us have developed, prior to entering any particular organization, a set of expectations and beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations and work settings" (p. 680). It is during this time that the newcomer develops an idea of what he/she believes life will be like as an organizational insider.

Anticipatory socialization can be further divided into OAS and VAS (Jablin, 1982; Jablin, 2001). VAS takes place over a long period of time and often begins in early childhood (Bullis, 1993; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1982; 2001). Gibson and Papa (2000) examine the process of VAS and show how influential parents can be towards their children's future occupation by examining parent-child dialogue in a town composed of mainly blue-collar families employed by "Industry International". Children are socialized by their parents into to the

factory culture and learn about the value of hard work before they even finish high school. "Indoctrination at the dinner table" (p. 79) begins long before individuals set foot on the factory floor and prepares them for a work culture of long hours, tough conditions, and back-breaking labor. Gibson and Papa (2000) argue that VAS can occur early on in life through anecdotal stories of parents' own experience. In the context of Industry International, these stories help acclimate children to factory life and make difficult manual labor not only tolerable, but also expected and enjoyed once children become employees later on in life.

While VAS can be a life-long process towards a desired occupation, OAS is more short-term (Kramer, 2010). OAS is created by the individual towards a particular organization (Jablin, 1982), is influenced throughout the recruitment and interview process (Kramer, 2010), and is composed of the individual's previous work experience as well as his or her expectations of the new organization (Jablin, 1984). Additionally, OAS is a mutual interaction between the organization and the individual (Kramer, 2010).

Unfortunately, research has shown that inflated expectations during anticipatory socialization can lead to dissatisfaction during the encounter phase of socialization and increase the likelihood of job turnover (DiSanza, 1995; Jablin, 1982; Jablin, 1984; Jablin & Krone, 1987; Myers, 2005). Jablin's (1982) study of newly hired nursing home nurses examines the battle between inflated expectations during anticipatory socialization and disappointment with reality once they become participating members. Jablin (1982) found that nurses were more likely to leave the organization if they had extremely high expectations prior to organizational entry.

Encounter. The encounter phase of socialization occurs when individuals enter the organization and are able to gain a clearer picture of the values, norms and culture they have now joined, all while attempting to determine if the aspects of their new organization align with their

own ideals (Jablin, 1982; Jablin & Krone, 1987; Van Maanen, 1976). It is during this time when the new organizational members are able to see if their role either meets or disrupts their previous expectations created during the anticipatory phase of socialization (DiSanza, 1995; Jablin, 1982). The encounter phase, often called the "breaking in" period, can be very traumatic for the newcomer (Kramer, 2010), especially if he or she had inflated expectations during the anticipatory socialization phase (Jablin, 1984). DiSanza's (1995) study of new bank tellers found that for those newcomers that were unable to reconcile their expectations prior to organizational entry with their reality entering the organization experienced dissatisfaction and struggle to maintain membership during the encounter phase.

While there is no set timeframe for newcomers to move out of the encounter phase and into metamorphosis, Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2005) suggest the greatest adjustment for newcomers occur within the first few months. It is also not uncommon for newcomers to experience a curvilinear pattern of satisfaction with their new position, beginning with high satisfaction and optimism only to drop as they begin to acclimate (Boswell, Shipp, & Payne, 2009). This period of "honeymoon" and "hangover" (Boswell et al., 2009) during the encounter phase mediates the necessity for socialization strategies by the organization to ensure limited shock post anticipatory phase and strive towards greater job satisfaction. When the newcomer determines they are able to become a participating member within the organization, they are able to move to the next phase of the assimilation model, metamorphosis.

Metamorphosis. The metamorphosis phase occurs when the newcomer determines they are able to accept the values and norms of the organization and is a result of the prior encounter phase (Jablin, 1982; Van Maanen & Schien, 1978). "As a result of his or her 'encounters,' the recruit during this stage attempts to become an accepted, participating member of the

organization by learning new attitudes and behaviors or modifying existing ones to be consistent with the organization's expectations" (Jablin, 1984, p. 596). Without the initial shock and eventual adjustment during the encounter phase, the metamorphosis phase would not occur. Instead of the individual focusing on learning new roles, as during the encounter phase, they focus on becoming comfortable in their environment, confident in their abilities, and an active participating member of the organization (Kramer, 2010).

Exit. Eventually, all organizational members will leave an organization. Organizational exit occurs in one of two ways: voluntary exit or involuntary exit (Jablin, 2001). Voluntary exit occurs when an individual decides on his or her own accord to leave an organization. There are a variety of reasons an organizational member may decide to voluntarily leave an organization. Planned exit, which often involves non-work related events, occurs when the organizational member plans far in advance that they will be leaving (Kramer, 2010). This could include a pregnancy, retirement, or another family related event. Shock resulting in quitting is another reason individuals choose to leave an organization rather abruptly, and may be due to a traumatic event or announcement (Kramer, 2010). Similarly, shock resulting in a job search before quitting also stems from a traumatic event; however, members do not leave until they have typically secured another position (Kramer, 2010). Finally, gradual disenchantment occurs when there is no particular reason for leaving the organization other than a loss of interest, enthusiasm or passion for the current role or organization (Kramer, 2010). Involuntary exit can be a result of lay-offs within the organization due to downsizing or mergers as well as firing due to inadequate role function (Kramer, 2010).

This section provided an overview of the organizational assimilation model in order to understand how FGCSs assimilate into college beginning with their initial anticipatory

socialization and extending to their eventual exit from the institution. While each step of Jablin's (1982; 1984; 2001) model is important for successful organizational assimilation, the present study focuses on the assimilation phase prior to organizational entry, or anticipatory socialization, in order to understand the reasons behind a FGCS's decision to attend college. A deeper look into the VAS element of the anticipatory socialization phase may provide clues into why FGCSs decide to attend college. Additionally, since VAS can be a precursor to successful assimilation into an organization due to realistic expectations and reduced shock during the encounter phase (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1984), an understanding of the VAS process of FGCSs may provide researchers and practitioners with successful intervention efforts to help reduce shock of FGCSs when beginning college, especially if they have no parental guidance. The next section will further explore VAS in order to provide additional insight into the relevance with FGCSs and VAS messages.

Vocational Anticipatory Socialization

VAS is an element of the anticipatory socialization stage of Jablin's (1982; 1984; 2001) organizational assimilation model and explains how we learn about the world of work prior to entering a significant paid occupation (Medved et al., 2006). This phase takes place over a long period of time and often begins in early childhood (Bullis, 1993; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1982; 2001). As a child, individuals begin to develop expectations about certain careers and occupations through messages sent by a variety of information sources: parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, mass media, and part-time jobs (Jablin, 1985a; Jablin, 2001). Next, a brief overview of each source will be provided in order to understand what additional sources may be influential in FGCSs' VAS process. Each source is discussed in an order of the preponderance of research.

Family Members/Parents. While family members in general are influential in the socialization process of individuals, parents are often considered the primary influence on their children's career trajectory and the most influential of all five sources (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Jablin, 2001; Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001; Leifer & Lesser, 1976; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Lucas, 2011; Medved et al., 2006; Myers et al., 2011; Serravallo, 2001; Smith & Butler Ellis, 2001). "Listening to parents discuss aspects of their jobs and observing work-related activities serve to socialize children to future careers" (Myers et al., 2011, p. 90). Children are socialized towards work through the messages they receive from their parents. In turn, children often replicate their parents' values and attitudes towards work when evaluating their own career options (Adya & Kaiser, 2005; Berkelaar et al., 2012; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Buzzanell, Berkelaar, & Kisselburgh, 2011). While both parents have been shown to be influential in the career decision-making process, mothers have been shown to exhibit more direct communication when vocationally socializing their children (Bradford, Buck, & Meyers, 2001; Lucas, 2011; Nanzione, Laplante, Smith, Cornacchione, Russell, & Stohl, 2011).

Due to the strong role parents have been shown to play in the VAS process, the majority of VAS research has centered on parental influence (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; Lucas, 2011; Myers et al., 2011). Most relevant to this study is the research by Gibson and Papa (2000), Berkelaar et al. (2012), Serravallo (2001), and Lubrano (2004) because these studies show, in different ways, how parental influence can either support career trajectory and higher education or discourage certain career paths depending on occupational following and individual values. Gibson and Papa (2000) show how working-class parents socialize their children to the world of work long before the children step foot on the factory floor. This "indoctrination at the dinner table" (p. 79) prepares them for the challenging

work culture ahead and makes the transition to factory life easier than for those individuals without VAS. As one worker at Industry International notes:

> I knew what to expect. I always did. I knew that if I busted my ass I could make real good money and have things that guys like me don't get from lots of other jobs. My dad always told me, "Do it right or don't do it at all. There's no room for screw-ups at Industry International." I haven't had a hard time here like some other young guys because I knew what I had to do coming in. (Gibson & Papa, 2000, p. 81)

Similar to Gibson and Papa's (2000) depiction of blue-collar children socialized towards factory work through parental influence, Berkelaar et al. (2012) show how Chinese urban youth are vocationally socialized towards specific careers. By contrast however, children are socialized by their parents to value "honorable" (p. 107) jobs based on education level and professional skills, rather than manual labor. While the children were unsure at times why an occupation is considered "honorable" (p. 107), they could clearly recall parent VAS messages that shaped their own perceptions of undesirable occupations. As one youth described why he/she would not pursue a job that entails manual labor: "First it's dirty. Second, it's dangerous. Third, it's insulting" (Berkelaar et al., 2012, p. 102). Berkelaar et al. (2012) found that parental encouragement or discouragement regarding particular occupations during VAS, shaped children's own career expectations.

Whereas Berkelaar et al. (2012) and Gibson and Papa (2000) examine families socializing children into occupations that align with parents' social class, or occupational following, Serravallo's (2004) study consists of participants experiencing a VAS process into careers beyond their parent's social class. Serravallo (2004) examines the process of "mobility socialization" (p. 399), where working-class parents from bricklayer communities communicate

a set of values that encourage children to pursue a college education, non-manual occupations, and a middle-class lifestyle. However, the VAS messages the parents used were not based on their own experiences with college or middle-class occupations, but rather their own experiences in a blue-collar lifestyle, which serve as a deterrent from occupational following. For example, Serravallo (2004) found parents vocationally socialize children away from manual labor and into higher education through messages such as simply "don't be like me" (p. 377), and, "you better stick with a pencil and paper 'cause this breaking-your-back stuff is no good" (p. 377). While many children welcome this encouragement and opportunity for social mobility, some children feel pressure to attend college or pursue specific careers due to their parents' desire and not their own.

In contrast, Lubrano (2004) shows how some blue-collar families discourage middle-class careers and pursuits of higher education. These families are called "black-hole families" (p. 34) or families that try to suppress children from social mobility for fear a divide will be created between the educated children and the working-class parents (Lubrano, 2004). While Lubrano (2004) acknowledges his own parents' encouragement towards higher education, he interviews many "straddlers" (p. 2) who have not faced the same fate. Straddlers are individuals who are born to blue-collar families but eventually move into a middle-class lifestyle thanks to higher education (Lubrano, 2004). "They are the first in their families to have graduated from college. As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living in a kind of American limbo" (Lubrano, 2004, p. 2). Often the differences in lifestyles are too great, and children and parents are forever divided due to the child's choice to disobey their parents' wishes and enter into the world of higher education (Lubrano, 2004).

Education Institutions. According to Jablin (1985a), what students talk about and read about in school socializes them towards the world of work as well as guides their interests in a particular career. Additionally, internship opportunities and student-teacher interactions can help develop career related interests that children may not otherwise receive at home (Adya & Kaiser, 2005; Myers et al., 2011). However, the information received from education institutions is often about general requirements rather than specific career options (Jablin, 2001). Children first encounter communicating in a formalized setting and learn the rules and norms of organizational employment in an educational institution (Jablin, 2001). For example, children are taught to listen and obey authority figures (teachers) of which they will replicate when reporting to their supervisor once employed (Jablin, 2001).

Peers. Peers influence an individual's career choice in both positive and negative ways and influence not only present behaviors but also in the development of an individual's sense of self (Stake & Nickens, 2005). Peers can encourage career interests or discourage undesirable career options (Jablin, 2001; Levine & Hoffner, 2006). According to Peterson and Peters (1983) in their study examining the role peers play in the socializing process of adolescents' social construction of reality, "Peers function as significant others who confirm or disconfirm the desirability of particular occupations" (p. 81). While peers are influential in career guidance, they more serve to teach individuals social skills necessary in the working world such as how to manage working together and controlling emotions, rather than have a strong influence on specific career choice (Jablin, 2001).

Media. While media influences shape children's expectations about work, they often create stereotypical images of the working world (Peterson & Peters, 1983). Myers et al. (2011) found that media has an impact on reinforcing traditional gender roles related to certain

occupations. For example, female adolescents often view STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers as typically male dominated fields. Male adolescents typically strive for masculine careers such as doctors and law enforcement officials, while staying away from traditionally feminine careers such as teachers and nurses. These views develop through movie and TV show portrayals of men and women in stereotypical occupations. However, Levine and Hoffner (2006) note that mass media is rarely mentioned as a leading influence for adolescent career development.

Part-time Jobs. Adolescents who hold part-time jobs prior to entering fulltime employment learn about relational communications skills that can apply to other occupations (Jablin, 2001). Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) note how the six most common part-time jobs held by adolescents (retail, clerical, food-service, cleaning, manual labor and skilled labor) do not require advanced skills or training. Instead, these jobs serve to provide general requirements of the working world such as responsibility, honesty, and being on time, rather than providing a strong influence on future career trajectory. However, part-time jobs in an individual's area of career interest may help to establish career networks and influence future career pursuits (Levine & Hoffner, 2006).

Children are vocationally socialized towards specific careers through the influence of parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, media, and part-time jobs (Jablin, 2001). Though parents have repeatedly been shown to be the most influential on their child's perceptions of work and eventual career choice, Gibson & Papa (2000), Berkelaar et al. (2012), Serravallo (2004), and Lubrano (2004) demonstrate, in different ways, the impact parents play in the VAS process. Frequently, the career choice of children patterns those of their parents (Gibson & Papa, 2001; Myers, 2005; Willis, 1977). In the context of FGCSs however, an alternate source

may be more prominent in their socialization towards higher education due to a lack of occupational following. It is unclear if FGCSs receive socializing messages from their parents that lead them towards advanced education and specific careers as in Serravallo (2004), or if they typically strive for advanced education from other sources as mentioned in elements of Lubrano's (2004) book.

Though the source of VAS for FGCSs requires further examination, the way in which the VAS process occurs is through the use of socializing messages. The next section will examine the messages that are used during VAS that socialize children towards higher education and specific career paths.

Memorable Messages

Though research has examined the messages that vocationally socialize children and adolescents towards certain career paths, prior literature often refers to this concept as memorable messages (Butler Ellis & Smith, 2004; Lucas, 2011; Knapp et al., 1981; Medved et al., 2006; Smith & Butler Ellis, 2001) rather than VAS messages (Myers et al., 2011). The two necessary characteristics of memorable messages are 1) the individual remembers the message for a long period of time and 2) the individual perceives the message had a major influence on the course of his/her life (Stohl, 1986). Memorable messages stick with an individual because they help to socialize him/her with appropriate values, expected behaviors, and knowledge essential for effectively assuming a certain role (Knapp et al., 1981). The content of memorable messages are often action oriented (Knapp et al., 1981), involve the development of an individual's self-concept (Knapp et al., 1981), and help shape the daily experiences of an individual (Lucas, 2011). Memorable messages are typically brief and orally delivered, can be

applied to a variety of contexts, are often conveyed in a private setting, and are serious in nature (Knapp et al., 1981).

Characteristics relevant to the sender/source of the message play a key part in whether or not the message is considered memorable. The source of the message is frequently well respected and often older or of higher status (Knapp et al., 1981). Since parents typically are respected by their children and are of higher status, research has shown parents are the most influential source of memorable messages among their children (Butler Ellis & Smith, 2004; Smith & Butler Ellis, 2001). In addition, frequency of contact and proximity between sender and receiver are strong predictors of memorable message behavior (Stohl, 1986). Memorable messages typically resonate most if the source of the message is part of the receiver's social network and if the receiver has contact with the source on a regular basis (Stohl, 1986). While the source of the message plays a pivotal role on the likelihood of the receiver viewing a message as memorable, the interpretation of the message is receiver focused (Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986). This means that even if the sender had a specific intention in mind for the message, the overall interpretation of the message, even if that interpretation is not what the sender had in mind, is based on the receiver's construal.

Unfortunately, the topic central to a specific memorable message is varied and can include virtually any topic that has a resounding impact on the receiver. This means whether the researcher is studying messages regarding career choice (Lucas, 2011) or messages regarding general advice about work ethic and values (Medved et al., 2006), both receive the general title of memorable messages. Myers et al. (2011) sought to isolate previously broad memorable message subject areas, by specifically focusing on the messages received that influence career choice and coining these messages as 'VAS messages'. However, even though previous research

has grouped career socializing messages under the vague concept of memorable messages rather than VAS messages, examining past research on career socializing memorable messages can still benefit the analysis of the sources of VAS messages with FGCSs due to the conceptual similarity. Due to this usefulness, and examination of three studies on memorable messages relevant to VAS message research will follow.

In their study of memorable messages among multi-generational families' views on the importance of work and family, Medved et al. (2006) notes that parents have the largest impact on career choice in their children. Medved et al. (2006) examined memorable work messages and revealed that most work messages are based around career enjoyment, followed by work-career choice, financial necessity, work ethic, role of education, prioritizing family, and prioritizing work. Additionally, messages regarding balance frequently involved choosing a career that allows for enjoyment with family and financial stability, this could include pursuing higher education in order to provide more for the individual's family. However, Medved et al. (2006) had a fairly homogenous sample (92% white) and did not take variables such as parents' level of education into account. If FGCSs are socialized to view college as a means to a good job (Billson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Fallon, 1997), messages regarding work, family, as well as education, may be quite different.

Memorable messages can also be influential in an individual's decision to attend college (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012; Lucas, 2011; Nanzione et al., 2011). In Lucas' (2011) study of memorable messages in blue-collar mining families, parents used a variety of message types to communicate the value of higher education as well as particular careers. These messages include direct, indirect, ambient, and reproduction messages. *Direct messages*, such as advice, gentle or not-so gentle prodding, and suggestions are used to encourage children to pursue higher

education or a particular kind of work, and are influential in an individual's decision to attend college or work towards a particular career. These messages were the most frequently used message type. *Indirect messages* are stories about parents' work experiences, adages about work, and general advice and rules of thumb about work that are not individually focused. *Ambient messages* occur when children extract meaning from their environment and use contextual cues rather than participating in a communicative exchange with their parent. This could include watching their parents go to work, observing family members deal with work-related problems, etc. While no participant reported parents directly communicating messages about not wanting their children to attend college, *reproduction messages*, or messages that encouraged reproduction of the families' social class and thus not attending college, were typically communicated by omission. Omission messages are those messages where meaning is drawn from what is *not* discussed. For example, no parent said directly, "don't go to college", but individuals knew by the lack of discussion about college that their parents were not supportive of their plans. As one participant notes in Lucas (2011):

> No, no college really wasn't discussed in my family. You know, the options was there. But it wasn't pushed, I thought, or as much as I thought it should have been, maybe. Then again, Mom didn't have a degree. Dad didn't have a degree. (p. 108)

As a result, it made it difficult for children to make the decision to attend college when they were unsure if their parents approved or disapproved. If the individual decides to attend college, memorable messages from parents have an influence on their overall college experience.

Kranstuber et al. (2012) examined how children's understanding of college is shaped through the memorable messages they hear from parents called "college talk" (p. 58). The study asked students to recall the most memorable message they could remember their parents telling

them about college. From this, multiple themes emerged including "college as necessary" (p. 55). In these messages, parents discussed with their children how college is necessary to secure a good job, especially in a difficult economy. As one student recalls their parent stating, "nowadays you have to go to college to get a great job" (p. 55). Some parents relayed negative messages such as, "you can always come back home and farm later, but you need to stay in college and get a degree so you have something to fall back on" (p. 59). Kranstuber et al. (2012) notes that messages similar to this may form negative viewpoints of college and discourage students, especially those who may not be as enthusiastic about college, from performing well.

While Medved et al. (2006), Lucas (2011), and Kranstuber et al. (2012) reveal the role of parent messages in the VAS process of children, the studies fail to take additional sources of VAS messages into consideration. In fact, Lucas (2011) acknowledges the need for additional sources of VAS to be evaluated in future research. An analysis into Jablin's (2001) five sources of VAS could help understand the messages that influence FGCSs to attend college. Additionally, Medved et al. (2006) and Kranstuber et al. (2012) again rely on occupational following and do not address individuals whose parents have no college experience to reference. However, Kranstuber et al. (2012) does acknowledge this lack of research and calls for additional research with memorable messages related to FGCSs in order to understand how families help/hinder their children during their transition to college.

VAS Messages

Myers et al. (2011) combined VAS literature as well as memorable message literature into the concept of VAS messages. Though the general concept of children being vocationally socialized towards specific careers through the use of influential messages is similar to the concept of memorable messages, Myers et al. (2011) was the first to isolate the vocational

subject area from general memorable message research. In their study, Myers and colleagues (2011) found five prevalent VAS message themes. Though parents were found to be the most common source of these VAS messages, all five of Jablin's (2001) VAS sources were analyzed (Myers et al., 2011). An overview of each of the five themes will follow.

Value messages encouraged adolescents to pursue a career that aligned with family or social ideals and were the most common type of message reported. Parents directed children to prioritize their values and figure out what will be the most important element to them when considering a career. Messages include "Pursue your passion", "Use your talents," and "Do it for yourself" (Myers et al., 2011, p. 100).

Expectation messages gave reasons why the individual should pursue a specific career. These messages could be direct verbal messages or indirect observations (Lucas, 2011) where the individual felt like the parent was emphasizing thinking about career choice relative to important elements of life. Expectation messages include such advice as, "Find a stable career," "provide for your family," "be financially independent" and "get a good education." (Myers et al., 2011, p. 100). Expectation messages are similar to the balance messages Medved et al. (2006) found that emphasized choosing careers where the individual could balance work and family life. For example, "My mom always said I should be a teacher because she is one and you get summers off" (Medved et al., 2006, p. 171).

Prescription messages identify specific careers that the message sender believes the individual should pursue based on his/her talents, interests, career prestige, and income potential. Examples of prescription messages are "Don't waste your math skills- be an engineer," "you love arguing- be a lawyer," and "you would make a good living as a doctor." (Myers et al., 2011, p. 100).

Opportunity messages target under-pursued careers, or careers that lack diversity. The sender encourages the receiver of the message to take advantage of such careers that have labor shortages and could potentially lead to a greater multitude of job opportunities. These messages include such responses as "We need more women in the medical field" and "there's a shortage of engineers in this country." (Myers et al., 2011, p. 100).

Description messages typically are created by talking to career insiders, participating in job shadowing programs, observing career insider's enthusiasm about their occupation, or from viewing job-related TV shows. These messages convey job-specific details about the occupation and teach individuals to value more highly some aspects of their experiences than others. These messages may be less common among rural children because they are exposed to fewer careers than children from urban communities (Trice, 1991a).

By focusing on narrowed VAS message themes rather than broad observations based mainly on parental experience, Myers et al. (2011) reveals not only the role communication plays in driving career interests and pursuits of higher education at a young age, but also how parents use messages based on ideals and expectations rather than simply experience to influence their children towards or away from specific careers. These themes also allow for a more in depth analysis of specific message types and additional sources, which may be particularly beneficial when examining a narrowed demographic such as FGCSs. According to Myers et al. (2011), the analysis of VAS messages "depicts factors that influence adolescent academic-career interests" (p. 87). While Myers et al. (2011) use these messages to look at how children are socialized towards STEM careers, VAS message themes are worth exploring outside of the realm of STEM. One area where an in-depth analysis of VAS messages similar to Myers et al. (2011) may be of worth would be in the context of how FGCSs are socialized towards pursuing higher education.

Research Questions

Previous FGCS literature has focused mainly on descriptive characteristics of individuals and the likelihood of attrition within the first year or two of college. Few studies have examined the reasons behind a FGCS's decision to be the first in their family to receive a bachelor's degree (Lubrano, 2004; Lucas, 2011). Although parents are typically the number one influence on a child's occupational aspirations and decision to pursue higher education, Lubrano (2004) and Lucas (2011) did not examine alternate VAS sources that may influence higher education pursuits. Examining alternate sources of VAS messages for FGCSs is important since most VAS research has shown children are socialized towards occupational following (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Gibson & Papa, 2000). In the context of FGCSs however, occupational following is not necessarily occurring, and thus, an alternate source of VAS messages may be more influential. This study seeks to examine the source(s) of VAS messages to see which of Jablin's (2001) five VAS sources have the greatest impact on a FGCS's decision to pursue higher education. Second, the study will discuss the VAS messages FGCSs receive from Jablin's (2001) sources of VAS that influence their decision to attend college.

RQ1: What source(s) of VAS messages do FGCSs identify as having the greatest impact on their decision to attend college?

RQ2: What are the VAS messages FGCSs received that influenced their decision to attend college?

a) *What sources of VAS do FGCSs attribute to specific messages?*
b) *In addition to the VAS message being received, is any context given for a specific message?*

Conclusion

Organizational assimilation is the process by which individuals enter and become participating members of an organization. The present study seeks to understand the process prior to organizational entry (VAS) that influences a FGCS's decision to pursue higher education through an examination of VAS messages. Additionally, the source(s) of these messages will be evaluated with particular attention paid to Jablin's (2001) five sources of VAS. By understanding the VAS messages that are a driving force in a FGCS's college aspirations as well as the source(s) of these messages, as well as how these messages are delivered (Lucas, 2011) and the context for these messages, knowledge may be gained in order to offer increased support to FGCSs during their collegiate journey.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand the socializing messages that influence FGCSs' decisions to attend college as well as the source(s) of these messages. Since prior VAS literature mainly examines the process of VAS through occupational following (Berkelaar et al., 2012; Gibson & Papa; 2001), examining alternate sources of VAS messages may reveal additional insight into FGCSs' pursuit of higher education and offer support for FGCSs before entering college as well as once they arrive. An analysis of the VAS messages FGCSs receive will be examined in order to gain a better understanding of the VAS process. Additionally, the source(s) of the VAS messages regarding college attendance that FGCSs receive will be reviewed using Jablin's (2001) five sources of VAS as sensitizing concepts. Finally, Lucas' (2011) memorable message types (direct, indirect, ambient) will be taken into consideration to understand how the messages were delivered.

Research Design

A qualitative methodology utilizing focus groups was used for collecting and analyzing data regarding the messages participants received that influenced their decision to attend college. Focus groups were used as the primary form of data collection in this study due to the allowance for the collection of responses from multiple participants (Morgan, 1997). For the nature of this study, focus groups were the optimal method for data collection due to numerous advantages (Morgan, 1997). Due to the nature of focus groups involving discussion, additional insights that may not arise during individual interviews could occur through interaction among participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Myers et al. (2011) argues that focus groups can encourage participants to discuss experiences they may not have shared during one-on-one interviews "because of the natural, extended interaction that takes place among participants" (p.

94). The homogeneity found in focus groups allow for more free-flowing conversations among participants due to the comfortable environment that is formed through participant similarities (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). For example, all participants in this study share the commonality of being FGCSs. Additionally, focus groups allow for immediate comparison of group members' responses between participants that would not be possible in individual interviews (Myers et al., 2011) and provide a more natural environment than that of an individual interview (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Furthermore, because of the extended reflection needed when recalling VAS messages, hearing examples from other participants may help trigger responses from individuals that may not have occurred during one-on-one interviews (Myers et al., 2011). Finally, Keyton (2011) encourages researchers to follow the methodology of other researchers with similar interests in order to create a common language. Though previous studies on memorable messages often utilize individual-interviews (Knapp et al, 1981; Lucas, 2011; Nanzione et al., 2011) or open-ended questionnaires (Ellis & Smith, 2004; Medved et al., 2006; Smith & Ellis, 2001), this study builds off Myers et al.'s, (2011) initial work into VAS messages where they also chose to utilize focus groups (Myers et al., 2011), thus creating a shared methodological language.

Though for the nature of this study, the benefits of focus groups outweigh any disadvantages, it should be acknowledged that there are potential weaknesses. During focus groups, participants may withhold information due to the nature of group discussion. As Morgan (1997) notes, "for some types of participants discussing some types of topics, the presence of a group will affect what they say and how they say it" (p. 15). Another potential weakness occurs when some participants dominate the discussion, causing other participants to shy away from discussion. In order to minimize these weaknesses the researcher was trained in focus group

moderation through coaching and extensive research and utilized techniques such as question probing and polite interruption in order to encourage and/or limit discussion from participants (Kruger, 1998d; Kruegar & Casey, 2000). Finally, due to the nature of qualitative research, the questions of researcher trustworthiness, objectivity, and authenticity come in play when implementing focus groups and analyzing the results (Patton, 2002). To address these concerns, the researcher complied with a stance of complete neutrality in the development of the focus group instruments as well as throughout the moderation of focus groups as to remain completely unbiased and to let the results emerge naturally (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the credibility of the researcher as the lead moderator of the focus groups is reinforced by the researcher having research assistants carefully keep notes throughout the focus groups as well as holding a practice or "mock" focus group prior to the actual data collection (Patton, 2002).

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from a research pool of students at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The research pool consisted of students enrolled in introductory public speaking courses. The students were required to participate in two research studies each semester, earning five points of credit for each study. Due to the time commitment for participation in this focus group, students earned all ten of their research points after completion of the focus group session. Additionally, all participants were put in a drawing for one of two $15 gift cards to an area restaurant.

Individuals were recruited by email, which specified the characteristics needed for this study [Appendix A]. To be included in a focus group, the following inclusion criterion was required: degree-seeking and a FGCS. A description of what constituted degree-seeking and a FGCS was provided in the recruitment email. Participants are considered FGCSs if both of their parents'/guardian's highest level of education is a high school diploma or less (Nunez &

Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). For example, if the participant's mother had a high school diploma but their father held a bachelor's degree, the participant would not be considered a FGCS. If the participant was unsure of either parents' highest level of education, they were excluded from the focus group. Students signed up for one of the pre-designated focus group times in the researcher's office. A reminder email was sent to participants prior to their scheduled focus group date outlining the date, time, and location of the focus group.

Participants. Participants were selected for this study based on their ability to meet the following inclusion criterion (Keyton, 2011): degree-seeking and a FGCS. A convenience sample (Keyton, 2011) of 35 participants was recruited for this study. Participants were recruited until all focus groups were filled. Participants had a mean age of 21 and a range of 18 to 47, consistent with the average age range of undergraduate students at the university where this study was conducted, with 91% of students under the age of 25 and an average age of 21 (College Portrait of Undergraduate Education, 2011). Even though FGCSs are traditionally older than non-FGCSs, this age range is comparable to the national average of FGCSs being between the ages of 18-24 and the majority being 18 years of age (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Participants were in compliance with the Midwestern university's Institutional Review Board being 18 years of age or older. The sample was composed of 21 males and 14 females. The ethnic make-up of the sample was composed of 74% white/Caucasian, 8.5 % black/African American, 5.5 % Asian, 5.5 % Hispanic/Latino, and 5.5% identified as "other". Participants also identified their parent's highest level of education for both their mother and father. The highest level of education for participants' mothers included 83% with a high school diploma, 5.5% with an elementary level of education (K-5th grade), 2.5% with a middle school education (6-8th grade), 2.5% with some high school education but no diploma, 2.5% with a GED, and 2.5% with

no formal schooling. The highest level of education for participants' fathers included 83% with a high school diploma, 5.5% with an elementary level of education (k-5th grade), 5.5% with a GED, 2.5% with some high school education but no diploma, and 2.5% with a middle school education (6-8th grade).

Instruments. This study utilized three instruments for data collection. First, an anonymous demographic questionnaire was distributed to all participants [Appendix B]. Data obtained from the questionnaire included the participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and their parent's highest level of education for both mother and father. Options for parental education included no formal schooling, elementary school (grades K-5), middle school (grades 6-8), some high school (grades 9-12), high school diploma, and GED. Participants were also asked to provide their major. If the individual had yet to declare a major, an undecided major was listed.

The second instrument was an interview guide used by the moderator [Appendix C]. The purpose of the guide was to help lead group interaction in order to make comparisons across groups during data analysis (O'Connor, 2006). This helped ensure consistency among focus groups and to assist the moderator during each session.

The final instrument was a written reproduction of the primary questions under investigation: "Of all the things we have discussed today, what was the most important thing ever said to you about college and who said this?" Participants responded to the question on a separate sheet of paper after the key focus group discussion had ended and prior to the final summary of the discussion by the moderator. Written responses provided an internal validity check between individual responses and group discussion (O'Connor, 2006).

Procedures

Prior to actual data collection, a mock focus group was conducted by the primary researcher to test the interview guide and prepare the primary researcher for moderation (Krueger, 1998d). Questions that were leading or did not address the research questions in the study were thrown out after the mock focus group. After the mock focus groups, the primary focus groups were conducted.

This study consisted of five focus groups composed of five to ten participants (n=35), which is consistent with the optimal number of participants suggested by researchers (Keyton, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1992a; 1997). The number of focus groups was determined when focus groups did not reveal any new information, or when saturation was achieved (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). Participants were assigned to individual focus groups based on their preference for time and date. Focus groups were conducted in a private classroom at the participants' university. Each focus group lasted approximately sixty minutes (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1998d) with the primary researcher serving as the moderator for each group with one of two research assistants taking notes throughout. The research assistants were FGCSs and were introduced at the beginning of each focus group session in order for participants to feel more comfortable when sharing their stories (Keyton, 2011; Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Following completion of the preliminary demographic questionnaire and participant consent form [Appendix D], one-hour focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview approach based off of the moderator's interview guide. The semi-structured style allows for results "grounded in the public's voice rather than the voice of researchers" (O'Connor, 2006, p. 268). The focus groups used a series of open-ended questions with follow-

up questions (Krueger, 1998c). During the focus groups, participants were asked several general questions about the messages they received regarding college attendance. Initial questions explored the participants' reasons for attending college. More in-depth questions were asked to investigate specific VAS messages that influenced their decision to attend college. Finally, participants were asked where these messages came from, or the source(s) of these VAS messages. Throughout the focus group, concrete examples of VAS messages regarding college attendance as well as possible sources were used to facilitate discussion.

Data Collection. Four forms of data collection were utilized during each focus group session in order to ensure accuracy of information and provide triangulation to improve data analysis and increase internal validity and reliability (O'Connor, 2006). First, audio recordings were made of each focus group, which allowed the researcher to have a verbatim transcript of each focus group of analysis. Second, minimal notes were taken by the primary researcher during each session. These notes were minimal as to not distract participants during the focus groups, and served only as brief reminders for follow-up questions to ask participants. These notes were note used in the eventual data analysis. Third, the research assistants took more extensive notes throughout the sessions which helped reinforce validity during data analysis. The research assistants were trained in observing focus groups as well. Fourth, at the end of each focus group discussion, participants were asked to reflect on the discussion and answer the primary questions under investigation: "Of all the things we have discussed today, what was the most important thing ever said to you about college and who said this?" These responses provided additional data and aided in assurance of the validity of participant response (O'Connor, 2006).

Data Analysis and Interpretation. After all focus groups concluded, the researcher transcribed the sessions and assigned pseudonyms during transcription to ensure confidentiality.

After complete transcription, the researcher read through all transcripts thoroughly to become familiar with the data before pre-coding began (Saldaña, 2009). Pre-coding is the process of highlighting significant words, phrases, or sentences that are worthy of further attention (Saldaña, 2009) before coding begins. After pre-coding, a line-by-line analysis (Charmaz, 2006) was performed on the focus group transcripts for each research question.

For the first research question, a deductive approach using closed coding was performed based on Jablin's (2001) five sources of VAS: parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, part-time jobs, and media. Though a deductive analysis uses prior codes, it is important to "work at trying to improve the ones [codes] you started with, and develop new ones" (Gilgun, 2011, p. 2). Since this is an exploratory study with no prior research focused specifically on the source(s) of VAS messages FGCSs receive, Jablin's (2001) sources provide a good initial framework but particular attention was paid to possible additional sources of VAS messages as well. The transcripts were coded line-by-line (Charmaz, 2006) to examine sources of VAS messages. A total of 2361 lines were coded.

For the second research question, an inductive approach was taken beginning with *initial coding* (Saldaña, 2009). According to Saldaña (2009), *initial coding*, sometimes called *open coding* (Strauss, 1987), "involves breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (p. 81). In this beginning phase of coding, particular attention was paid to in-vivo codes (Strauss, 1987) in order to keep VAS messages relayed by participants in their own voice. A codebook with category descriptions was developed to avoid repetition and possible human error (Saldaña, 2009). After all transcripts had been read and initial concepts had been highlighted, a list of themes was created. A theme is a phrase or sentence that describes and organizes units of data in order to

seek out meaning (Saldaña, 2009). Sub-themes were also used to expand a theme when seeking to differentiate between characteristics (Saldaña, 2009; Strauss, 1987). Once initial themes were discovered during initial coding, *axial coding* began.

Axial coding involves in-depth analysis of categories developed during the initial coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009; Strauss, 1987). While initial coding fractures data into separate pieces, axial coding brings pieces together into a coherent whole (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009; Strauss, 1987). Each category is analyzed one at a time (Strauss, 1987) and decisions are made regarding "which initial codes make the most analytic sense" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). *Axial coding* results in the emergence of knowledge regarding relationships between categories as well as categories and subcategories (Strauss, 1987). The purpose of axial coding is to "sort, synthesize, and organize large amounts of data and reassemble them in new ways after open coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). When ideas are repeated within categories, the repeated ideas can be grouped into a singular theme, which helps to reduce the number of initial codes developed previously (Saldaña, 2009). After initial axial coding has concluded, the researcher repeated the process to analyze and sort data using initial and axial coding. This process continued until no new concepts were found. A total of 2361 lines were coded.

Conclusion

Due to the nature of focus groups allowing for free-flowing discussion between participants and extended reflection, focus groups were chosen for this study. Discussion with FGCSs and analysis through initial and axial coding will hope to reveal the VAS messages FGCSs receive that influence their decision to pursue higher education, as well as the source(s) of these messages.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The research questions guiding this study sought to create an understanding of the socializing messages that influence FGCSs' decision to pursue higher education as well as the source(s) of these messages. The results of this study suggest that while there are a variety of VAS sources that communicate with FGCSs regarding college attendance, parents have the greatest influence. Additionally, the way the message is delivered (direct, indirect, and/or ambient) and the content of the message differs between sources.

Once focus groups reached theoretical saturation due to patterns and replication of content occurring, the researcher transcribed and both deductively and inductively coded the transcriptions. Written responses from the last question posed in the focus group, which asked participants to reflect on everything discussed through the focus group and identify which source had the greatest impact on their decision to pursue higher education and what message was received from this source, was coded separately and compared to the transcriptions to help ensure internal validity. A total of 2242 lines were coded from transcripts and a total of 119 lines were coded from written responses. A total of 2361 lines were coded. When reporting the frequency of sources, transcription totals and written response totals were combined.

Research Question 1

The first research question sought to identify the source(s) of VAS messages FGCSs identify as having an impact on their decision to pursue higher education. The initial sources used for closed-coding were based on the five sources of VAS identified by Jablin (2001), which include, parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, media, and part-time jobs. Since this is an exploratory study with no prior research focused specifically on the source(s) of VAS messages FGCSs receive, Jablin's (2001) sources provided a good initial framework. However,

particular attention was paid to possible additional sources of VAS messages or changes to Jablin's (2001) sources.

To identify possible sources of VAS messages, participants were asked throughout the focus groups to discuss where they had heard about college and from whom. It should be noted that in order to be coded as a source, participants had to mention a specific source (e.g. mother, father, sister, teacher, friend, etc.). Additionally, a source may have been referenced more than once by a participant and was coded separately each time it was referenced. The rationale behind this was to accurately represent the frequency of the source with the idea being the more it was referenced, the more memorable, and thus possibly influential, the source was on the participant. Finally, the purpose of the first research question was to understand the frequency of sources referenced and not to interpret VAS messages. Therefore, a source was coded even if no message was provided. For example, some participants discussed a source but did not describe a VAS message the source gave them. The seven sources that emerged from this study, in order of frequency, were as follows: parents, educational institutions, family members, peers, the others, employment and media.

Sources of VAS Messages

Parents. The first and most prevalent source to emerge in focus groups as well as written responses was parents (N = 126). Parents include the mention of parents in general (n = 40), mother (n = 41), father (n = 40), step-father (n = 4), and/or step-mother (n = 1). Often, when participants discussed an influential source, parents in general were mentioned. However, when asked to expand on the specific VAS message they received from parents, many discussed either their mother or their father.

Educational Institutions. Educational institutions were the second most frequent source of VAS messages regarding higher education (N = 54). Though educational institutions were mentioned as a whole the second most frequent of all sources, when isolating focus group responses from written responses, educational institutions were the fourth mentioned source in written responses. Educational institutions were further divided to include teachers (n = 27), school in general (n = 11), college representatives, including students already in college that return to their high school to speak to high school students about their college experience (n = 8), school sponsored extracurricular activities (n = 5), school janitor (n = 2), and/or college materials, including college brochures, pamphlets, etc. (n = 1). Similar to parents, participants often mentioned school in general when responding to a source of VAS messages about college. However, when asked for an explicit message they received, specific teachers where mentioned. Teachers also include high school career/guidance counselors (n = 4) and an ROTC instructor (n= 1).

Family Members. The next most discussed source of VAS messages was family members outside of parents (N = 51). Family members were the second most mentioned source when analyzing written responses on their own. Family members include siblings (n = 19), aunts/uncles (n = 12), grandparents (n = 9), family in general (n = 5), cousins (n = 4), husband (n = 1), and/or children (n= 1). When discussing siblings, participants referred to messages coming from older siblings, many of whom had attended college themselves. Younger siblings were never mentioned.

Peers. Peers represented the fourth most frequent source of VAS messages (N= 41) and were the third most referenced source in written responses. This includes individuals specifically referred to as friends (n= 30), individuals specifically referred to as peers (n= 10), and/or

girlfriend/boyfriend (n= 1). When discussing friends, a few participants (n= 4) mentioned friends that were already attending college. This was included in the sub-category of friends. Peers and friends were analyzed as separate sources due to participants discussing them in isolation from one another.

Others. Others (N = 21) include those sources that do not align with one of Jablin's (2001) sources of VAS. Others had the same level of frequency as educational institutions when examining written responses. The sources reported were society (n = 8), parents' friends (n = 5), friends' parents (n = 4), observed strangers (n = 2), neighbor (n = 1), and/or community member (n = 1).

Employment. The next source of VAS messages was employment (N =13). Employment was the only source that had the same order of frequency when examining written responses. Forms of employment include supervisor/boss (n =6), job in general (n =4), and/or co-worker (n =3). Military leaders were mentioned specifically by a few participants (n =3) and were grouped under the sub-category of supervisor/boss.

Media. Media (N = 11), the least frequent source of VAS messages regarding higher education, was referenced throughout focus groups but was not referenced by participants in written responses. This was the only source to not be mentioned in written responses. Forms of media include television (n = 7), celebrities/political figures (n = 2), newspaper (n = 1), and/or movies (n = 1). When discussing television as an influential source of VAS messages, participants typically discussed television in a general sense, however, a few participants mentioned news programs (n = 1) and sports shows (n = 2). These codes were grouped under the sub-category of general television.

The results of the first research question show there are a variety of sources FGCSs receive VAS messages related to higher education from including parents, family members, educational institutions, peers, others, employment, and media. While Jablin (2001) identified five sources from VAS, results of this study indicate that FGCSs receive socializing messages from sources that did not fit with Jablin's (2001) original framework. Therefore, a category of others was added to capture the sources that did not fall within Jablin's (2001) framework of VAS. Additionally, some of Jablin's (2001) sources needed to be adapted for the context of FGCSs including separating parents and family members into two categories and changing part-time employment to employment. Parents and family members were separated into different categories to allow for a deeper analysis into the impact parents and family members have in isolation of one another. Part-time employment was changed to employment to account for participants that discussed full-time employment experience as a source of VAS.

Research Question 2

The second research question sought to identify the specific VAS messages FGCSs received from the seven sources identified in research question one, as well as explore if FGCSs attribute certain sources to specific messages. Additionally, research question two sought to further examine the possible context for the message. Particular attention was paid to how each message was delivered (direct, indirect, ambient). Table 1 details each message type, possible sources of the messages, as well as an example of each message.

Participants were asked to highlight any messages they received regarding college attendance. Unlike the first research question, which counted a source even if a VAS message was not provided, research question two only counted a source if a VAS message was provided. Therefore, when comparing sources from research question one to research question two, the

Table 1

VAS Message Types and Sources of Messages Received by FGCSs

VAS Message Type and Source	Frequency of Report	Description of Message Type	Example of Message Type
Quality of Life Messages:	**157**	Can be direct, indirect, or ambient. Focuses on perceived positive outcome of a college degree such as good job, higher salary, job advancement, stability, etc.	"With a college education, you're going to have a better paid job."
Parents	81		
Family members	19		
Others	15		
Education	13		
Peers	12		
Employment	11		
Media	6		
Direction Messages:	**92**	Can be direct, indirect, or ambient. Provide guidance/direction to receiver. Direct messages are either dictated or delivered through gentle encouragement.	"My guidance counselor, she goes, 'You're in all these college classes. I don't understand why you're not going to a four-year, or why you're even looking at a two-year even.'"
Parents	44		
Education	20		
Family members	14		
Peers	7		
Others	4		
Media	2		
Employment	1		
College Life Messages:	**56**	Can be direct, indirect, or ambient. Focuses on what life is like as a college student (fun, freedom, continued support from parents, etc.)	"If you go to college, you're gonna' get lots of girls."
Peers	21		
Parents	17		
Family members	8		
Media	7		
Others	2		
Education	1		
Employment	0		
Negative Messages:	**56**	Can be direct, indirect, or ambient. Describes college as a negative endeavor. Discourages receiver from attending college. Direct messages are either warnings of responsibility or describe college as "a waste of money".	"He [friend] was like, 'Well, you're gonna' go to college and you're gonna' get fat, and you're gonna' be, you're gonna' get out and you're not gonna' have a job and you're gonna be in debt! And then what are you gonna' do?'"
Peers	18		
Parents	16		
Family members	11		
Education	9		
Employment	2		
Media	0		
Others	0		
Regret Messages:	**45**	Typically indirect. Direct/ambient communicated if with an indirect message. Focuses on source's regret or disappointment over not attending college as well as fear receiver will follow their same path.	"He [father] said it was one of the worst decisions of his life and how if he went, could have a better job and have more money and all of that."
Parents	35		
Others	4		
Education	3		
Employment	1		
Peers	1		
Family members	1		
Media	0		

Note. Source sub-categories were combined to calculate total source frequency. Sources were only counted if a specific VAS message was given along with the mention of the source. Some sources delivered messages with more than one VAS message type identified within a given statement. The source was counted separately for each message type.

quantity may not align but the frequency does. In other words, parents were still the most frequent source of VAS messages in research question two. A total of 1446 lines (or 61% of the data) were coded from the original 2361 lines to create the message categories. The five VAS message categories that emerged were as follows: quality of life messages (39%), direction messages (22%), negative messages (17%), college lifestyle messages (14%), and regret messages (8%).

Message categories were analyzed using Lucas' (2011) framework of memorable messages to examine how VAS messages were delivered. Lucas' (2011) memorable message types include direct, indirect, and ambient messages. Direct messages are those socializing messages that are specifically addressing the individual's educational goals and can be presented in the form of advice, encouragement, or feedback. In contrast, indirect messages discuss higher education in general and are not directly related to the individual's own future. Indirect messages are often presented in the form of family stories (including stories/adages about the sender of the message), rules of thumb, and common expressions. Finally, ambient messages occur not from a communicative exchange or dialogue with the receiver, but instead, when meaning is extracted from environmental and contextual cues. Ambient messages can be received by watching individuals go to work and deal with work-related problems as well as through eavesdropping.

The following account details each type of VAS message participants recounted. First, a summary of the VAS message is provided. Next, each message type is detailed based on the direct, indirect, and ambient messages participants described as well as the frequent sources of each message type. Finally, a description for the context of the message is provided. The reason for this explanation of context is because participants often provided a preceding or proceeding explanation for the message they received rather than only stating the explicit VAS message.

Since the data only revealed 61% of all participant responses as exact VAS messages, additional coding for context took place. An additional 23% of the data was categorized as context and is explored at the end of each VAS message section.

Quality of Life Messages. Quality of life messages were the most frequent type of VAS messages received by FGCSs (39%) and also had the most diverse array of sources (n = 21). Though many sources were mentioned when describing quality of life messages, parents (N = 78) were the most frequent source, specifically, mothers (n = 27). Quality of life messages are those VAS messages that focus on the perceived or expected future benefit of a college degree. Messages that fell under this category discussed a positive life post college graduation as an outcome, or direct result, of pursuing higher education. Elements discussed in quality of life messages include such things as a higher salary, financial stability, opportunities for advancement, a nice home, the ability to choose a job you enjoy and thus avoid "bad" jobs, and an overall feeling of happiness and success as a result of a college degree. Additionally, quality of life messages include not only perceived benefits to participants but the ability to help your family achieve a positive quality of life as well. These elements were treated as a direct product of successfully completing college, with no other element needed to achieve this idealistic life other than degree attainment. Quality of life messages were delivered in all forms including direct, indirect, and ambient.

Direct. Quality of life messages delivered directly from the source were often straightforward and to the point. For example, Peter noted how his father would tell him, "With a college education, you're going to have a better paid job." However, while increased pay in a job was often mentioned directly to participants, so too was the ability to find a "good" job that you

were able to choose freely and enjoy. Lindsey explained how her father would tell her how by going to college, "You'll be able to enjoy your job."

Some quality of life messages focused on the benefits others close to the participant, especially family members, would receive through their college attendance. This included relevant skills that could contribute to the family business, intellectual support and guidance, as well as general support in the future, which would help these individuals experience a better quality of life. Thomas, a young male whose family owns a farm, explained how his older brother, who did not have a college degree, often encouraged him to go to college through direct messages.

T: He [brother] was really encouraging for me to go because on the other hand, it's going to benefit him too.

H: What do you mean by that?

T: He told me that if I can take what I know and tell him how to apply that to farming, it's going to make me money for the fact that I'm doing the work and then make him money because he's going to get better yields and save money with paying a different agronomist at the same time.

Jordan, an international student, described how his parents have very little education and often struggle to understand the world around them. He recalled his parents describing themselves as "academically challenged" and telling Jordan, "The only way they can relate to the rest of the world is through, um, us, that is myself and my siblings." Jordan continued to explain how his parents encouraged their children to pursue higher education in order to help them (his parents) feel connected to the rest of the world:

> Supposed there was something to read or something to make academic sense out of, then it, it's going to be the kids that were supposed to sort of go through this and try to explain to them. We are in school purely because, uh, our parents have seen that they are not going to, they are going to lack that attach with the academic society and therefore we are some sort of link between them and their academic dreams.

Brooke also recalled direct quality of life messages she received related to how her future college degree could benefit her mother. She explained:

> She [mother] said, 'I don't want to end up in a nursing home. You have to make enough money so that you can afford to have in-house nurses to take care of me and blah, blah, blah!' I was like, 'Ok! Whatever you say, Mom.'

By sending direct quality of life messages to participants, sources were able to explain straight forward why the individual should pursue higher education.

Indirect. Unlike direct quality of life messages, which were typically short and used participants as the topic of the message, indirect messages involved a source crediting their college degree as the reason for their positive quality of life. For example, Sam described an older friend who had gone to college and graduated. He explained how prior to attending college, his friend was unsuccessful, did not take care of himself, and was overall unhappy. After returning from college Sam described the interaction between himself and his friend:

> I remember he came back and he told me he was so happy because he feels like his life is actually going somewhere now. Like he has an idea about what he wants. Like, his physical appearance got better because he was happier. He actually put more effort into himself. I remember he actually told me, if you actually find what you want, and you go

> to college, and you, like, do good at it, you'll be a lot happier and everything in your life will get better.

Sam went on to say that by hearing his friend's story regarding the positive quality of life he now experiences due to a college degree, Sam in turn became motivated to attend college.

Ambient. Quality of life messages received through ambient cues were largely based on observations of "bad" jobs. These "bad" jobs were equated to lack of a college education and thus, if the participant attended college, could be avoided. Jason discussed the observed difference between the ambient messages he received from society and the ambient messages he received from his father when he stated:

> Yeah, you can just see some people are wearing suits and working at desks making thousands of, hundreds of thousands of dollars. And it's just, that's what they do instead of, my dads a welder. He has burn holes in all his shirts from all the sparks and stuff and grinding.

Jason equated a college degree to a "good" job. One where you could wear suits, work in an office, and make a high salary. He came to this conclusion not by a direct conversation with a source, but instead, by picking up on ambient cues and observing his father in a "bad" job, or one that could be avoided with a college degree.

Brooke also realized college was a way to avoid a career she did not want through the ambient messages she received from her father. She explained how her father, a long-haul truck driver, is gone three weeks a month. While no one ever told her to go to college in order to avoid a career like her fathers, she stated:

> It was kind of forced into my head that you don't want to do this to your family. Be gone all the time. Growing up with basically, like, without a dad, you get that into your head.

You're like, I don't want to do that. I can't do it anymore. I don't want to do this to my own family.

Brooke continued by explaining how she knew she had to go to college so she could, "do better for myself than my dad, working his butt off so we could survive" and have an overall better quality of life than the one she was raised in.

While some ambient quality of life messages observed "bad" jobs that could be avoided with a college degree, other participants received ambient quality of life messages by observing sources of VAS messages struggle with job stability as a result of their lack of a college education. Dexter discussed how his father had recently been laid-off from his job and how he is struggling to find work because he does not have a college degree. He then noted, "So, that's a big reason I went to college." As evident from Dexter's message, seeing his father laid-off was a powerful ambient quality of life message that he thought could be prevented in his own life through attainment of a college degree.

Some ambient quality of life messages were not related to job stability, higher incomes, or advancement, but simply being able to experience happiness as a result of a college degree. For example, Dexter recalled quality of life messages he received by observing older co-workers who had not gone to college. He described how the "lifers", or the older employees who had been in the same position for much of their lives, were doing the same work as "a bunch of sixteen year-olds." "You watch the lifers walk in, the old people that have been working there for twenty years, and they just look sad and depressed every single day." For Dexter, a positive quality of life meant simply being happy. For happiness to occur, a college degree was needed.

While the definition of what constitutes success differed moderately from participant to participant, one thing that was agreed on was the idea that success is equated with a positive

quality of life, which was often interpreted through ambient messages. Participants tended to form stereotypes of what the future looked like for individuals that chose not to go to college. Zane described an older friend that chose not to go to college and seemed to be doing nothing with his life:

> I had a friend that graduated before me. He had a 32 on his ACT and he didn't go to school. And, um, he just drinks a lot now. And, you know, he was like, I think in the year book, most likely to be a doctor or something like that. You know? And, uh, just decided that he didn't want to do it and it was really strange. He was really kind of a shy kid and that sort of thing and ends up that now he's just sitting there, sitting at the same bar his dad did.

Zane continued by explaining how he equates this ambient message from his friend as a sign that by going to college, you can avoid an unsuccessful life like the one he described and thus achieve a positive quality of life.

Combination Messages. Some quality of life messages were presented through a combination of message types. For example, Jon explained:

> My step-dad would come home and he was filthy from, he works for a railroad company and they grind up railroad ties for fuel, and he comes home filthy. And he says to me, 'Do you want to do this for the rest of your life?'

Through a combination of ambient and indirect messages, Jon's observation of a "bad" job was reinforced through an interaction with his step-father, who used his own life as a reference of poor quality of life. Like Jason, Jon equated a lack of college degree to a poor quality of life resulting from a "bad" job.

Similarly, Dan recalled the combination of indirect and ambient quality of life messages he received when he was young from a neighbor who was a mechanic. While watching his neighbor change the oil in a car, Dan remembered the oil spilling all over the man. He then turned to Dan and said:

> Dan, you see, if I were to be going to, if I were young like you and going to school, I would never be like this. When you go to school, you will be designing this kind of car instead of sitting underneath and changing the oil.

The ambient message received by watching the oil spill on the neighbor, coupled with the indirect message sent when the neighbor referenced his own life, sent Dan the message that he could avoid "that" type of work with a college degree.

Quality of life messages are based on a glorified future as a result of higher education. Growing up, FGCSs heard these messages from a variety of sources on a regular basis. It provided them with an expectation (Meyers, 2012) of what life will be like with a college degree.

Context. When participants received messages regarding a positive quality of life due to a college education, they often felt the need to provide a justification for why their parents did not attend college and how college is now necessary to obtain a "good" job. For example, Zeek described how his parents told him that college would help him find a good job. He followed up this message by adding, "College wasn't like huge back when they [parents] were young, but now it's like, you need it to get a job." This follow-up statement acted as a justification for why his parents did not attend college but still managed to find stable careers but how it was now necessary for him to attend college.

Similarly, Thomas described how his parents told him he should go to college to bring back beneficial skills and knowledge that would contribute to their family farm. He noted how

neither of his parents "obviously" went to college, but how "times have changed". "The way technology is now-a-days, you have to have a degree to get into these jobs and back then it was more the trade jobs that were available." Describing how "times have changed" provided a context for why a college degree is now "necessary" for a "good" job that would benefit participants in the long run.

Direction Messages. While quality of life messages often came from parents, direction messages (22%) were more varied in source depending on the topic of discussion. Direction messages acted as a form of guidance for the participants. These messages were used to either determine the future of the participant or offer guidance when they were struggling to come to a decision regarding college attendance. Direction messages could be delivered through direct, indirect, or ambient messages. Additionally, two sub-categories emerged within direction messages communicated in a direct way and included dictated future messages and gentle encouragement messages.

Direct. Direction messages delivered directly to participants came in the form of sources dictating their future or through encouragement. Due to the extreme contrast between the type of direction message received in a direct way, two sub-categories emerged: dictated future and gentle encouragement. Direction messages involving a dictated future were focused on the sources' decision. By contrast, direction messages involving gentle encouragement allowed participants to realize college was part of their future on their own.

Dictated Future. Participants often described dictated future messages as making them feel as if they had no other option and a plan was already laid out for them. Similar to quality of life direct messages, dictated future messages were also often brief in nature and typically came from parents (N = 29), especially fathers (n = 11). For example, Abby noted when the topic of

college would come up, her father would simply say, “You’re going to college!” She continued by explaining how it was never really an option not to go. Similarly, Zeek described how his parents would not have an in-depth conversation with him about college. Instead, his parents would directly state, “You’re going to college. You don’t have an option.”

For some participants, the plan included not just college, but what would occur after successful attainment of a college degree. For example Ashley explained:

A: For me, it was kind of like as long as I can remember, since elementary school, my dad said, like, ‘You will get your high school degree, go to college, get a job, get a house, and then get married.’

H: In that order?

A: In that order! [laughs] No changing anything!

While Abby had a plan laid other for her, other participants were only told that college was required. After they finished college, the rest was up to them. As Debbi stated, “My parents always told me that I could grow up and work at McDonald’s, but only after I got a college education. They didn’t care what I did after that.”

Again, there was typically little room for negotiation with direction messages delivered in a direct way. No participant indicated however, that they ever disagreed with being directly told to go to college and not having a say in the decision.

Gentle Encouragement. While direction messages related to dictating a future for participants often came from parents (N = 29), direction messages through gentle encouragement often came from educational institutions (N = 13). Direct gentle encouragement messages came in the form of questioning the participant about their future goals and directing them towards college by discussing their potential to succeed. Questioning occurred during a discussion of the

participant's interests or a discussion of their future goals/aspirations. While college was the eventual outcome of these discussions, it was not necessarily the reason for the discussion to occur. For example, Sam explained how his high school teachers often discussed with students their future plans post high school graduation. Similarly, James remembered meeting with a guidance counselor in high school to discuss his plans after high school:

> Basically, he [guidance counselor] would ask things like, 'what's your plan to go to college? How are you going to pay for it? Are you taking out student loans?' If you didn't say which college you were going to, you're coming back in a couple of weeks and talking to him.

James continued by explaining that the goal of these discussions was not necessarily to go to college, but instead, to have some sort of plan after high school. This was similar to Julie who discussed her interactions with teacher in high school regarding her future plans. "They asked us what we wanted to do next."

Gentle encouragement also allowed those participants that did not immediately see college as an option for them to realize their potential to succeed. Their eventual decision to pursue higher education was greatly influenced by messages where various sources highlighted specific qualities of the individual, including high grades in high school and levels of intelligence. These qualities were then equated with a necessity to attend college. For example, Melissa described how a four-year institution was not her original plan:

> Well, in high school I had toured a couple of two-year schools. And my guidance counselor, she goes, 'You're in all these college classes. I don't understand why you're not going to a four-year, or why you're even looking at a two-year even.' I mean, I guess

> that kind of pushed me to go, you know. Yeah, I can do better than that. That's what pushed me to go.

Jordan recalled a similar experience when he was originally planning on attending a two-year technical college in his home country. When he was ready to apply to the school, Jordan went to his high school to pick up his records for the application. In the process of picking up his records however, a teacher sat him down for a conversation about his future. The teacher said to him:

> Jordan, you are not going to go into that school. Your results are too high. You can get into any one of these universities in this country, any one of the premier universities in the country. You only need to apply.

Jordan continued by stating, "He [the teacher] simply let me see why I was even better than my original intentions."

Additionally, many participants noted how sources in their lives would tell them they were smart and as result, should attend college. For example, Matt mentioned how his grandmother would always tell him he should be a lawyer because he was smart. Similar to Matt, Julie describes how her mother would tell her on a regular basis that she was smart and she could go further, "So why not try?" This direct form of encouragement provided direction in participants' lives and was influential in their eventual decisions to pursue college.

Indirect. Direction messages received through indirect methods of discussion were received most often by friends/peers (N = 8). Jared described how in high school he had a close group of friends that were very competitive with one another. When his friends started talking to him about the colleges they were planning on attending, Jared felt as if he should go to college too in order to keep up with them. "Seeing them show a big interest in going to college definitely

influenced me," he noted. By hearing his friends discuss college and explain to Jared their own plans, he in turn felt that college might be the right option for him as well.

Ambient. Direction messages received through ambient cues were presented by the media. Observing media images of individuals attending college made Zane feel as if everybody goes to college. He noted:

> I guess that, um, really when we talk about things that influenced us to go to college, um, it really was just everything you watch, everything you see, any TV show that you're watching, anybody that you see, any form of media is having you go towards college, towards getting a degree, and that's how it is supposed to be. Everybody that, it's just that everyone does it so you hear about it everywhere. You know, on TV, on the news is talking about people going to school, or talking about the best schools.

Observing media images and shows of students attending college fueled the feeling that Zane articulates; growing up with the notion that everybody goes to college and that is the direction he should take with his life as well.

Context. Participants often discussed how they received direction messages about college attendance when they seemed confused about what they wanted to do with their lives or if it was perceived by the source of the message that the individual was heading down a bad path. This was especially true if it seemed the participant was doing something that would prevent them from attending college. For example, Jim described how he received direction messages about the importance of attending college from his mother. Prior to stating the direct message he received from his mother, Jim described how he considered entering the military after high school rather than attending college. His mother was not supportive of this idea and discouraged Jim from going into the military by providing direct messages dictating his future. Jim's mother

told him how entering the military was not the right option and instead told him directly, "You're going to college."

Negative Messages. Unlike previous VAS message categories that served to encourage pursuance of a college degree in participants, the next category of VAS messages to emerge were those that made pursuing a college degree seem like a negative endeavor (17%). When participants received negative messages, it made them question whether college was the right option. However, when participants discussed these negative messages, they typically followed up with a rationale of why they still decided to pursue higher education. While results of this study indicate parents as the most frequent source of VAS message in general, parents were only a prominent source of negative messages that involved monetary concerns. Other sources such as older siblings, friends, aunts/uncles, etc. were more common sources of negative messages. Negative messages could be direct, indirect, or ambient. Two sub-categories emerged from direct messages to include warnings of responsibility and college as a "waste of money" [in vivo].

Direct. Negative messages delivered in a direct way were delivered by a variety of sources, excluding parents. Due to the stark contrast in the direct negative messages delivered, two sub-categories of direct negative messages emerged. In the first sub-category, warnings of responsibility, sources discussed the challenge of attending college and cautioned participants from jumping into an academic endeavor they were not prepared for. The second sub-category, "college is a waste of money" participants were told how spending money on a college education was pointless.

Warnings of Responsibility. Though sources varied, the most common source of direct negative messages regarding warnings of responsibility were teachers (n = 5). Warnings were negative because the messages made participants question if they could handle the academic

rigor of college and the responsibilities that came with being independent. For example, Jake described how his high school teachers would warn students about responsibility of college and the importance of taking coursework seriously:

> Um, some of my high school teachers basically said that if you're going to, like, if you're really serious about going to college, like, you know, you have to be self-driven, like, have motivation, because, like, they know a lot of people that, like, have, uh, have gone to college and then, like dropped out right away.

April shared a similar experience when she described the messages she received from high school teachers and family. These sources would tell her, "Make sure you know what you want to do. Make sure you aren't going to start something and then not like it and quit and have to restart something else." For her, the messages she received related to certainty and being sure of your future before you enter into higher education. April went on to describe how this was very "nerve-wracking" because she felt like she needed to know exactly what she wanted to do with her life before committing to college.

"College is a Waste of Money". Some participants received direct negative messages regarding college as a "waste of money" due to the extreme cost of tuition and debt that would result. Waste of money messages were most commonly sent by friends, who had no plans on attending college (n = 4). For example, Abby received a waste of money message from a friend in high school who was not planning on attending college:

> He [friend] was like, 'Well, you're gonna' go to college and you're gonna' get fat, and you're gonna' be, you're gonna' get out and you're not gonna' have a job and you're gonna be in debt! And then what are you gonna' do?'

While this message had other negative associations related to college attendance, Abby explained how the financial element was really what concerned her, and for the first time, she began to question if college was the right option. Zane described a similar conversation with his uncle:

> Z: I had an uncle that like completely thinks that college is a sham. I'm sure you all have heard that argument before, that, like, 'It's stupid! It's a waste of money!'
>
> H: Did he ever say why?
>
> Z: That was basically the argument. 'It's stupid! It's a waste!'

As evident from Zane's description, *"College is a waste of money"* messages were direct negative messages criticizing higher education due to the amount of money that would be spent and the lack of valuable skills or knowledge that would be gained.

Indirect. Negative messages delivered indirectly detailed stories involving individuals who had gone to college and had not benefited from it. These adages focused on a lack of "practical" knowledge gained through a college degree. For example, Peter, an international student, described and interaction with his father over whether Peter should pursue a degree in the social sciences or whether he should go towards a technical field. His father, who was eager for him to pursue a technical field, explained, "A lot of people who go to the highest level of University, they know all about the theory but when they're actually in a company after they got their degree, they have no idea about anything."

James described an indirect message he received from his uncle. His uncle told James about an interaction he had with his daughter (James' cousin). His cousin, who is also a FGCS, had recently graduated from college and was working on the family farm the summer after

graduation while she was searching for a job. James' uncle recounted how his daughter was mixing chemicals for the farm sprayers and was struggling to convert measurements:

> Well, she [cousin] didn't know what the conversions were off the top of her head. And he [uncle] was like, 'What the hells the point of sending you to school for four years? You don't even know the dang conversions and what not!'

While the message did not concern James directly, the indirect recount of the story made James question whether attending a four-year institution was the right option for him. He was unsure if he would be able to find a job after college because of what his uncle had said. Similar to James, Thomas described the indirect messages he received from his older brother related to why college was a waste:

> My one brother went for two-years for HVAC and he went on a job and said they taught him nothing in school that he needed to know. He told me, um, 'you learn more in two-weeks on the job then you do two years going to school.'

Again, hearing his brother's negative experience related to the lack of valuable skills he gained by attending a two-year school made Thomas question whether or not college was worth pursuing. He elaborates on this concern by stating:

> I've heard that most of the people who are going to college are just going for that little piece of paper that says, 'I finished!' So they can get a job. And then you learn all the stuff that you're supposed to know on the job.

Igor echoed the messages Thomas heard when he detailed the conversations he had with his lieutenants in the military. "They [lieutenants] were like, 'It's all about that paper! I spent four years of my life getting that piece of paper just so I can work!'"

Though indirect negative messages did not involve the participant, hearing second-hand stories about the negative aspects of college made them question the value of a college education, the worth of their money, and their ability to successfully accomplish their goal of becoming a college graduate.

Ambient. While negative messages related to college being a "waste of money" focused on the financial burden of college not being worth the outcome, ambient messages related to finances focused on the financial strain that would occur but college still being worth it. Parents were the most frequent source of negative messages related to monetary concerns. However, no participant ever indicated their parent directly telling them to not attend college because it is expensive. Instead, participants picked up on ambient cues by observing or eavesdropping on conversations about finances. Brittany described a situation in which her parents encouraged her to go to college. However, later she eavesdropped in a conversation where they discussed the monetary concerns of financing her education. Brittany explained:

> For me, my parents were, like, they wanted me to go to college for sure but it was really hard because, like, money is an issue all the time. So, my parents would give me positive, like, 'Yeah, go to college,' and then, like, I would hear them talking later on. They were like, 'Oh, yeah we have to move this money around and this money.' So, like, it was really hard for me to hear that. I sometimes was like, well, what's the point when I can just stay here and save money?

As evident from Brittany's story, discussions related to college expenses were not directed at the participant. However, through ambient messages participants still understood the stress money-related issues caused themselves and sources close to them and this made them question their decision to pursue college. Similarly, James recalled how a discussion related to the cost of a

college education never occurred with his parents. However, through omission messages, which is a sub-category of ambient messages (Lucas, 2011), James knew that asking his parents to help finance his education was not an option:

> I just looked at it as, well, that my parents didn't have the money to help me out. I didn't ask them about it but I just knew. I figured if I asked them, they would say they would do the best they can. But, I just knew. I just knew they didn't have the money to spare to help me out.

Monetary concerns seemed to plague FGCSs prior to entering college and sustained once they arrived. However, negative messages related to financing education were communicated through ambient cues rather than direct or indirect dialogue.

Context. When participants received negative messages, whether direct, indirect or ambient, they often described how they responded to these negative messages. The description of response to negativity was the only time participants described how they reacted to a message. No other VAS message type evoked the need for an explanation of response in participants. Zane discussed how his uncle told him college was a "sham" and said, "Kids that graduate college don't go anywhere! They're stupid when they start working for me! You have to reteach them everything!" After describing this direct negative message he received, Zane proceeded to explain his response:

> I'm like, you're a landscaper, you know? Yeah, I mean he wasn't talking about like, uh, like working with advanced technology or anything like that. [laughs]. It's the dummy work, you know? It just takes hard labor to do it.

Similarly, when James described the indirect negative message he received from his uncle (detailed on previous page), he preceded the description of the VAS message with a

description of his uncle. “One of my uncles, I mean, he thinks education is important but at the same time, he doesn’t. I mean, he’s lived and worked on his farm his whole life. I mean, that farm’s all he knows.” This response was not uncommon when detailing negative messages. Participants often provided an explanation for why they received the negative message either before or after describing the explicit message.

College Lifestyle Messages. While quality of life messages focus on positive outcomes post-college graduation, college lifestyle messages (14%) focus on positive experiences during participants’ time in college. When sources discussed what it was like to be a college student or make life as a college student sound fun and appealing, the source was delivering college life messages. These messages focused on the appealing college student lifestyle, as well as continued support or incentives that were often presented to participants from various sources if they attended college. While college student lifestyle messages typically came from sources already in college, continued support/incentive messages came from parents. College life messages could be direct, indirect, or ambient.

Direct. Direct messages related to college life were communicated by descriptions of “perks” that would be enjoyed by attending college and were presented by individuals already attending college. Jake recalled talking about the college lifestyle with his older cousins who were college students themselves. He was told directly, “If you go to college, you’re going to get a lot of girls.”

By contrast, college lifestyle messages related to the continued support participants would receive if they attended college, were always communicated by parents. These direct messages focused on continued parental support if the participant attended college. Forms of support included monetary support, such as paying bills, as well as an ability for participants to

avoid "growing up" until they graduated from college, which included finding a "real" job. For example, April discussed how her parents urged her to go to college and in return, they would pay her phone bill and car insurance. Similarly, Zane described how he was debating whether or not to wait a year to go to college in order for his girlfriend, who was a year younger, to finish high school. He explained, "My mom told me, 'Well, you're not going to live here if you don't go to college.' So, I chose college." Jake explained how his parents told him if he chose to not attend college, he would have to move out of their house and move into his own apartment. However, they always followed up this threat by stating, "As long as you go to college, we'll always support you." These messages encouraged participants to pursue college in order to have the continued financial support of their parents.

Indirect. Older college students, including older siblings and friends, were common sources of indirect messages. Sources used their own college experiences as examples of the fun participants would enjoy if they attended college. In high school, Jessica remembered having current college students come in to one of her classes and discuss their college experiences so far. She explained, "That was kind of cool, to see what they were going through when we were about to graduate. It was exciting!"

Similarly, Zane explained how his older brother went to college and came back home on semester breaks or holidays and talked about his experiences and adventures as a college student. Zane recalled a specific instance when his brother called him from a New Year's party at college:

> I remember he had to go back for New Years and, uh, he called me, and I was really, I was only like thirteen. He was at a New Year's party and you could just hear everything

behind him and he was like, 'This is awesome!' And he was just, like, talking to his little brother on the phone. It made me excited.

Hearing indirect experiences from individuals already in college made participants want to experience a similar lifestyle and thus, attend college as well.

Ambient. Some messages about the fun college lifestyle were not told directly to the participant, but instead, were received through ambient messages and interpreted by the participant. For example, Igor grew up in a college town and remembered walking by fraternity parties when he was young. For him, that early image of what life was like for a college student was very appealing. Similarly, Adam remembered watching college sports on TV when he was young. He described how he first heard about college by watching his favorite college football and hockey teams. When he would watch the sports on TV, it made him want to go to college to play or even just go watch the games in-person and be part of the crowd that always looked like they were having fun.

Combination Messages. Some participants received messages regarding college life in multiple formats. For example, Lindsey described conversations she had with her older friends who had gone to college and returned home. "A lot of my friends that went [to college] would come back and say, like, 'Oh, it's so much fun! You'll meet so many people! You have to go!'" In this example, Lindsey describes both indirect and direct messages she received. The indirect message was communicated when her older friends discussed their own experience or fun they were having at college. A direct message was communicated when they encouraged Lindsey to pursue college herself in order to have similar experiences.

Context. Some participants in this study mentioned how they grew up and attended high school in rural communities. These small towns were referenced quite often, especially when

discussing messages participants received regarding the "fun" college lifestyle. For example, Thomas received messages from his older college friends describing the new people he would meet if he attended college. Leading up to his account of the direct college life message, Thomas stated:

> I don't know about you guys, but I came from a school with, I graduated with, like, thirty-six people. And, you'd come here and, in high school you knew those thirty-six people personally and you had to be with them. At college, if you don't like somebody, you don't have to seem them or you don't have to talk to them.

Similarly, Lindsey explained how many of her older friends that were already attending college would come back to her hometown and tell her directly how much fun she would have if she attended college. Lindsey followed up her account of these messages by stating, "So, I came from a small school too. Everybody is, like, really excited their senior year when they got to leave and get out of the dinky town and go somewhere else." Providing a description of the small town in which many participants grew up provided a context for VAS messages regarding college attendance, especially messages emphasizing the appeal of the college student lifestyle.

Regret Messages. Regret messages were the least prevalent form of VAS message received by FGCSs in this study (8%). However, the messages still seemed to have an impact on participants. Parents (N = 41), and especially fathers (n = 20), were the main source of regret messages. Regret messages were always presented indirectly from the sources' perspective and encouraged participants to pursue higher education based on the sources' regret over not attending college.

Direct. There were no direct regret messages found in the results of this study.

Indirect. Some regret messages focused on the sources' fear the participant would follow down their same path of not attending college. These messages encouraged participants to pursue higher education as to not end up like them or because they wanted more for the participant. For example, Brooke described a conversation she had on a regular basis with her father where he would discuss how if he had gone to college, he would have been able to provide a better life for himself and his family. Brooke's father did not want her to live a life full of hardship like his own, and college was a way to avoid it. Similarly, Jake remembered his parents discussing how they dislike their own jobs and never wanted him to have the feelings they have experienced of being "stuck in a job you don't like."

For Ashley, the regret messages she received from her parents were more detailed. She explained how her parents would send indirect messages based on their own lives as an example of why she should attend college:

> My mom was seventeen and my dad was eighteen when the got married. And so, they moved out, like, young and didn't go to college. Just got jobs and, I don't know, kinda struggled after that I guess. They realized that if they'd gone to college, it would have helped them a lot. They don't want me or my siblings to do the same thing. And they, I don't know, wanted to make sure I went to college and didn't just get married right out of high school.

Through the indirect messages Ashley received about her parents' own experiences, Ashley was encouraged to pursue college in order to avoid her parents' "mistakes".

Nate also remembered his father describing how his biggest life regret is not going to college. "He [father] said it was one of the worst decisions of his life and how if he went, could have a better job and have more money and all of that."

For participants, the regret messages they remember receiving were when sources described their own life hardships and equated these hardships to a lack of college education. This was often related to a lack of money or dissatisfaction with the sources' current job. Hearing these indirect regret messages made participants want to pursue college as a way to avoid hardship.

Combination Messages. Some regret messages were communicated through ambient and indirect messages. For Sam, the visual image of seeing his father come home from a hard day at work, as well as hearing him discuss his current dissatisfaction with life and regret over not attending college, motivated Sam to pursue higher education and avoid a similar outcome. Sam recalled:

> My father came home from work as a construction worker. His back ached and he had cuts all over his hands. He is currently miserable, and he would say that if he could, he would have for sure pursued college. That is what influenced me the most because I never wanted to be in his position.

While direct regret messages did not exist by themselves, direct messages followed by indirect messages did emerge. For example, Dexter described how his father lives a life "full of stress" due to monetary struggles, job frustrations, etc. He recalled his father stating, "Go to college. If not, you'll live a life of regret." This statement is a direct message urging Dexter to go to college in order to avoid regret in his future. Dexter followed this account by explaining how his father equates a lack of college education to his life stressors:

> He [father] said that he was really disappointed in himself. I mean, he'd tell me that four years of his life would have been the hardest time of his life but it would make the rest of his life easier.

This shows that direct regret messages need to be followed by indirect messages in order to explain why a feeling of regret would be experienced. In other words, Dexter's father is the one experiencing regret and needed to convey why Dexter would feel regret (direct message) using his own life (indirect message) as a reference.

Context. Some participants felt that providing a context for why their parents were unable to attend college before presenting regret message was necessary. It is important to note that this context was always focused around parents and discussed their inability to go to college due to unfortunate events in their lives rather than a choice to not attend college.

When Holly described the indirect messages she received from her mother regarding her regret over not attending college, Holly first explained how her mother, "came from kind of a poor farmer family." Holly then detailed how her mother regretted not attending college but really never had the opportunity to be able to do so due to her difficult upbringing.

Summary

Overall, participants were able to identify multiple sources of VAS messages as well as the specific VAS messages they received regarding college attendance. Seven sources of VAS emerged including parents, educational institutions, family members, peers, others, employment, and media. These seven sources are an adjustment of Jablin's (2001) original five sources of VAS. Changes were made to Jablin's (2001) sources by separating parents and family members, adding others as an additional source, and changing part-time job to employment in order to appropriately target relevant sources FGCSs come in contact with. Five different VAS message categories emerged: quality of life, direction, negative, college lifestyle, and regret. Though each VAS message type had a variety of sources, participants discussed receiving some VAS messages more often from specific sources. Overall, parents were the most common source of

VAS messages. However, when analyzing message types in isolation from one another, other sources emerged as frequent senders of certain VAS messages. For example, though parents were the most frequent source of direction messages, teachers delivered direct gentle encouragement messages most often. Similarly, college lifestyle messages were often delivered by friends and peers rather than parents. This shows that the topic or subject area of the VAS message, as well as how the message is delivered (direct, indirect, or ambient) is indicative of the source of the message.

In addition, the majority of all VAS messages focused on the perceived positive quality of life that would occur if participants received a college degree. Many participants felt it necessary to provide a context for the messages they received rather than simply presenting the explicit VAS message. The context for the messages depended largely on the source of the message as well as the type of VAS message that was being discussed. Taken together, these results suggest that the source of the message, the type of message being received, and the context of the message, is largely indicative of the influence the message has on the individual.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to uncover the VAS messages FGCSs receive that influence their decision to pursue higher education as well as identify the source(s) of these messages. By identifying the source(s) of the VAS messages, it is possible to see which source is the most frequent source of messages regarding college attendance. This research represents the first effort to integrate VAS messages and FGCSs. VAS messages have a lasting impact on an individual's future career trajectory. By understanding the VAS messages FGCSs receive, as well as the source(s) of these messages, researchers and practitioners may provide outreach to FGCSs to help improve the likelihood of college success and lower attrition rates. Additionally, this study helps further the initial VAS message research by Meyers et al. (2011) by following their merger of memorable message literature with VAS literature rather than studying the concepts in isolation from one another. The results of this study provide insight into the socializing process of FGCSs towards higher education. This chapter will discuss the unique findings from this study, the theoretical and practical contributions of the findings, areas of limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The findings in this study make several contributions to our understanding of the socializing process of FGCSs towards college attendance. First, changes to Jablin's (2001) sources were made in order to accommodate older demographics of FGCSs. Additionally, Jablin's (1982; 1984; 2001) framework of organizational assimilation provides insight into the vocational socialization process of FGCSs. Next, an expansion on Myers et al.'s (2011) initial research in VAS messages paved the way for a more in-depth analysis of the VAS messages FGCSs receive as well as the source(s) of these messages. Finally, the results of this study lead

to a greater understanding of FGCSs, which can provide practical resources for targeting FGCSs in order to help lower attrition rates and increase graduation rates.

Changes to VAS Sources. By using Jablin's (2001) sources of VAS as an initial framework for studying FGCSs, additional insight was gained in the necessity of adapting VAS sources to different groups of individuals especially those aged eighteen and older. This finding may be of particular interest to researchers examining the socialization process of demographics outside of childhood range. As a result of this finding, it became evident that the five original sources of VAS do not suffice when studying FGCSs and modifications to Jablin's (2001) sources had to be made. For this study, three changes were made to Jablin's (2001) sources of VAS: dividing parents and family members into two separate categories, renaming part-time jobs to employment, and adding a category of other.

First, parents and family members were studied in isolation from one another. Though Jablin (2001) combines parents and family members into one category of "family", this study separated the two categories. In doing so, parental messages and family member messages could be compared to one another to provide a more in-depth analysis of each source. Additionally, by isolating the two sources from one another, further analysis of individual sub-categories (e.g. mother, father, aunt, uncle, etc.) could be made.

The second adjustment made to Jablin's (2001) sources of VAS in order to represent FGCSs was changing part-time jobs to employment in general. Jablin (2001) used the concept of part-time jobs due to the age of participants he studied. Since VAS often begins in early childhood (Bullis, 1993; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1982; 2001), Jablin (2001) and other researchers studying VAS (Bullis, 1993; Levine & Hoffner; 2006; Medved et al., 2006; Myers et al, 2011) often focus on children age eighteen and younger. As Jablin (2001) notes,

"Approximately one half of all persons of high school age are employed in part-time jobs, and about 80% of the nation's high school students will have been employed in part-time jobs prior to graduating from high school" (p. 738). By contrast, FGCSs are often older than non-FGCSs (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). It is not surprising then that many of the FGCSs in this study had full-time employment experience. These full-time employment opportunities influenced their decision to pursue higher education. Interestingly, four out of the thirty-five participants in this study (or 11%) had full-time military experience prior to entering college. As a result of the impact both full and part-time jobs had on participants, part-time jobs was changed to employment in order to accommodate FGCSs with both experiences.

The final change made to Jablin's (2001) original five sources of VAS was to add an additional category of "other". Participants often noted influential sources of socialization in their lives that did not fit within Jablin's (2001) framework. The additional sources included community members, society, neighbors, parent's friends, and friend's parents. To accommodate the additional sources, an additional category was needed.

These changes indicate that Jablin's (2001) five sources of VAS (parents/family members, educational institutions, peers, part-time employment, and media) are not sufficient when evaluating the sources of VAS amongst FGCSs. This could possibly be due to Jablin's VAS research mainly focused on childhood socialization rather than the anticipatory socialization process of older demographics. This means that FGCSs come in contact with more than five sources that have a significant impact on their decision to pursue higher education.

FGCSs and Organizational Assimilation. This study provides a greater understanding of the organizational assimilation process of FGCSs by focusing on the anticipatory socialization phase of Jablin's (1982) framework, and more specifically, VAS. Many participants discussed

messages that created an idealistic view of the life they would experience as a college student, as well as the life they would experience post-college. This is disconcerting because participants failed to recognize or acknowledge any possible struggles that could arise once they enter college, such as challenging courses, as well as the challenges they could face even with a college degree, such as an inability to find a job in their desired field immediately post-graduation, as well as the time it takes to establish a stable career and accumulate disposable income. In reality, about 54% of bachelor's degree-holders under the age of twenty-five were jobless or underemployed in 2011 with many holding jobs that only require a high school diploma or less (Associated Press, 2012). This idealistic view of how life will be, also called inflated expectations (Jablin, 1984), could possibly set FGCSs up for disappointment once they enter college and/or once they enter a workplace post-graduation.

Jablin's (1984) research in the socialization process of newcomers to an organization notes that if a newcomer to an organization has inflated expectations of what life will be like within that organization, and they are unable to reconcile their expectations with reality once they enter, extreme turmoil within the newcomer can result, causing them to leave the organization. If FGCSs are unable to reconcile the messages they receive during the VAS process with the reality of life once in the encounter phase (Jablin, 1982) of their organizational assimilation process, they may drop-out of college prior to graduation or leave their first job shortly after entering.

Newcomers to an organization that were provided with realistic job previews prior to entering, have been shown to have longer retention rates than those with unrealistic expectations (Fonner & Timmerman, 2009; Jablin, 2001). Realistic previews of what FGCSs will experience once they arrive at college, as well as once they graduate, may help lower inflated expectations

and increase graduation and retention rates. Due to the resounding affect VAS messages have on individuals (Myers et al., 2011), sources should use them as a mechanism for the distribution of realistic previews for what FGCSs can expect from college attendance.

Expansion of VAS Message Research. The third contribution was expanding on Myers et al.'s (2011) initial work of VAS messages through the integration of FGCSs. Specifically, Myers et al.'s (2011) findings examine the VAS messages younger children receive about STEM careers. By contrast, this study expands VAS message literature to include an older age group as well as messages related to higher education. It also draws strongly from Lucas' (2011) work in memorable message types (direct, indirect, and ambient) in order to bridge the gap between VAS literature and memorable message literature and examine how VAS messages are communicated. Through the merger of VAS and memorable messages, a more in-depth analysis of the socializing process of FGCSs was able to occur including a more significant evaluation regarding the sources of VAS messages as well as the types of VAS messages each source delivered.

First, results indicate that the frequency of VAS messages FGCSs receive differs between sources. Most significant were the findings related to parents. Surprisingly, parents were found to be the most frequent sources of VAS messages amongst FGCSs. While this finding aligns with previous research indicating parents as the most frequent source of VAS (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1982; 2001; Lucas, 2011; Myers et al., 2011), it was surprising to find this result in the context of FGCSs due to past research indicating VAS messages sent by parents often encourage career replication (Adya & Kaiser, 2005; Berkelaar et al., 2012; Buzzanell et al., 2011; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lucas, 2011), especially among working-class families (Gibson & Papa, 2000; Lubrano, 2004). Messages regarding career replication encourage children to follow in their

parents' career footsteps, rather than paving their own path. Past research in the area of FGCSs show parents often encouraging career replication and discouraging or ignoring collegiate endeavors for fear of the metaphorical divide that could result between parents and their children (Lubrano, 2004). By contrast, this study found parents of FGCSs delivering VAS messages actually discouraging career replication. In fact, no participant ever indicated feeling as if their parent discouraged them from pursuing higher education and advanced career opportunities. This shows that even though FGCSs are choosing a path that differs from that of their parents, FGCSs still indicate parents as the primary source of VAS messages regarding higher education.

Additionally, some sources of VAS are more prone than others to deliver certain types of VAS messages. This finding aligns with VAS research (Bullis, 1993; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Jablin, 1982; 1985a; 2001) as well as memorable message research (Lucas, 2011; Medved et al., 2006; Smith & Butler Ellis, 2001). This similarity between results provides further support for the unification of VAS literature with memorable message literature towards VAS message research. Most notably were the messages parents of FGCSs deliver. Mothers deliver more direct quality of life messages, while fathers of FGCSs deliver more regret messages as well as more general ambient messages. This finding supports research showing mothers are more likely to deliver direct messages and fathers are more likely to deliver indirect messages or messages by example (Bradford, et al., 2001).

The number one type of VAS message FGCSs received, including the number one VAS message type sent from parents, and especially mothers, discussed a perceived positive quality of life as a direct result of successful college degree attainment. This result supports Levine & Hoffner's (2006) findings crediting parents as the largest source of messages regarding the benefits of having an enjoyable job, the importance of having a job, etc. Mothers seem to equate

a college degree an overall better quality of life than their child would experience without a college degree. The FGCSs in this study indicated the quality of life messages they received convinced them that their life would be overall better with a college degree; again leading to the possibility of inflated expectations (Jablin, 1982) once they graduate.

While mothers often deliver quality of life messages, regret messages were often delivered indirectly by fathers referencing their own life experiences as examples of paths FGCSs should not follow. Additionally, participants observed their father working in an unsatisfactory or "bad" job. This ambient message, often coupled with an indirect regret message from their father, taught participants that a college degree could help them avoid their fathers' unsatisfactory lives. When comparing fathers to mothers, it is interesting that fathers use themselves as examples of path participants should not follow, while mothers tend to make statements related to the future of the child but leave their own experiences out of the conversation.

Greater Understanding for Greater Support. The final contribution of this study provides insight into the reasons FGCSs decide to attend college. This is of particular importance for researchers and practitioners working with FGCSs by expanding beyond descriptive characteristics of who FGCSs are, and beginning to examine why they attend college. By understanding the reason behind FGCSs' decision to attend college as well as the influential sources of VAS messages in their lives, researchers and practitioners can work to provide additional support and outreach to FGCSs. This support could work to ease FGCSs' transition into higher education, increase targeted support services once they arrive, and hopefully, lower attrition rates and increase graduation rates.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, there are limitations. However, the limitations help pave the way for future research. First, this study contains elements that make it difficult to generalize findings across demographic groups. The participant ethnic makeup, though comparable to the ethnic-makeup of the region where the university the study took place is located, was particularly homogeneous with 74% of participants identifying as white/Caucasian. Prior research on FGCSs shows they are more likely to be an ethnic minority (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), and thus, the current study may not be representative of FGCSs in other regions of the country. Future research may benefit from sampling FGCSs from more diverse regions. Additionally, the extreme age range of participants in this study (18-47), may have had an impact on the findings. Future research needs to address age as a possible factor of influence when recalling not only important source(s) of VAS messages, but also, determining if age is a factor when a FGCSs recounts the content of VAS message. For example, would a parent's VAS message have the same impact on an eighteen year old FGCS as it would on a forty year old FGCS?

Though not asked to identify on the demographic survey the population of the town they were raised in, it became evident that many participants came from rural, agricultural, communities. Future research should examine if the VAS messages FGCSs from rural communities receive, as well as the sources of these messages, align with the VAS messages FGCSs from urban communities receive. Similarly, participants were not asked to identify specific information about their parents other than education levels. A greater analysis of the role parents play in the socializing process of FGCSs may benefit from a more in-depth analysis

involving parents' occupation, relationship status (single, married, divorced), as well as participants' primary caregiver (e.g. both parents, mother, father, grandparents, etc.).

Finally, research shows that attrition rates of FGCSs are higher than attrition rates of non-FGCSs, especially within the first two years of college (Billson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; Nunez & Cucco-Alamin, 1998). Due to the nature of the study, focus groups took place within a one-week span of the academic year. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal examination of the VAS messages FGCSs receive and their likelihood of attrition in order to target those that are in particular danger of leaving college prior to receiving a degree. Additionally, it may be of value to compare the VAS messages FGCSs receive to the VAS messages non-FGCSs receive in order to compare source influence and VAS message type.

The focus of this study was to determine the source of VAS messages as well as the content of the VAS message. Participants were asked to describe the VAS message they received, but were not asked to explain why the message was memorable for them or if the source of the message was someone they considered influential. Future research may benefit from further examination into memorable message literature and the socializing process of FGCSs in order to gain a greater understanding of the elements that influence an individual to pursue higher education.

Conclusion

More young adults are choosing to attend a four-year college or university than ever before. Of these individuals choosing to pursue higher education, 38% of all incoming first-year students identify as FGCSs, with the number expected to rise over the next few years. Unfortunately, the likelihood of FGCSs successfully completing their college degree is drastically lower than that of non-FGCSs. In order to provide outreach to FGCSs and help

improve their chances in obtaining a college degree, additional research is needed to understand why FGCSs choose to pursue higher education. This study sought to begin filling this void by identifying sources of VAS and the socializing messages FGCSs receive that influence their decision to attend college.

First, participants were asked to identify any individuals they felt were influential in their decision to pursue college. The study revealed that FGCSs identify parents as being the most influential source in their decision to attend college, followed by educational institutions, family members other than parents, peers, other sources, employment, and the media. Jablin's (2001) initial sources of VAS were adapted in this study to accommodate FGCSs. Changes made to Jablin's (2001) sources include: parents and family members isolated from one another, part-time employment changed to employment, and a category of others added.

The second research question sought to identify the specific VAS messages FGCSs receive from the seven sources, taking into consideration any contextual information presented with the message. Five VAS message types were revealed to include quality of life messages, direction messages, college lifestyle messages, negative messages, and regret messages. All but regret messages were delivered using direct, indirect, or ambient messages. Regret messages were only sent through indirect dialogue unless presented in combination with other memorable message types.

When examining common sources VAS messages, parents were found to be common sources of all VAS message types other than negative messages and college lifestyle messages. Both negative messages and college lifestyle messages were sent most often by friends/peers or other family members, including older siblings, aunts/uncles, etc. Though there was a high frequency of negative messages, participants did not indicate the negativity had a significant

affect on their decision to attend college. This supports the results of parents being the most frequent source of VAS messages and perhaps, if parents had been a greater source of negative messages, a larger impact from negativity would have resulted.

What this study showed was twofold. First, FGCSs are strongly influenced by their parents. Second, the messages they received are more about job outcomes and less about the value of a college education nurturing personal and professional development. Over the next few years, as more and more FGCSs make the decision to attend college, additional support services are needed for FGCSs in order to ease the transition to college life. Some of these support services may want to attempt to adjust the assumption that a college degree is only about finding a "good" job and seek to reveal to FGCSs the additional value of personal and educational development. Hopefully in the future, FGCSs will see college as less about getting that "piece of paper" and more about celebrating their achievement in overcoming the barrier of being the first member of their family to obtain a college degree.

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APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear student:

My name is Hailey Adkisson and I am conducting a research study for the Communication department along with Dr. Amy O'Connor, examining why first-generation college students' decide to attend college.

Participation in this focus group study requires you to hold all of the following characteristics:

- At least 18 years of age or older
- Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at NDSU
- First-generation college student

A first-generation college student is any individual who's parents'/guardian's highest level of education is a high school diploma or less. **Both** parents/guardians must meet this requirement for you to be considered a first-generation college student.

The focus group will take approximately 60 minutes. Completing this study will count toward 10 points of your research participation for COMM 110.

If you are interested in participating or have additional questions regarding this study, please email Hailey Adkisson at hailey.adkisson@ndsu.edu and sign up for a date and time in Minard 224. These sessions will be filled on a first-come, first-serve basis.

If you have any questions about the rights of human participants in research or to report a problem, contact the NDSU IRB office at (701) 231-8908, or ndsu@irb@ndsu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Dr. Amy O'Connor
NDSU Department of Communication
amy.oconnor@ndsu.edu

Hailey Adkisson
NDSU Department of Communication
hailey.adkisson@ndsu.edu

APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions. Do not put your name on this form. All of your answers will remain confidential. Completion of this survey is voluntary.

1. **Age: _____**

2. **Sex:**
   What is your sex?

   ☐ Male ☐ Female

3. **Major:**
   What is your major at NDSU? If you are undecided, please write "undecided" in the space below.

   _____

4. **Ethnicity:**
   What ethnicity best describes you?

   ☐ White/Caucasian
   ☐ Hispanic/Latino
   ☐ American Indian
   ☐ Asian
   ☐ Black/African American
   ☐ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
   ☐ Other

5. What is your mother's/female guardian's highest level of education?

   ☐ No formal schooling
   ☐ Some high school without completion (9^{th}-12^{th} grade)
   ☐ Elementary school (K-5^{th} grade)
   ☐ GED
   ☐ Middle school (6^{th}-8^{th} grade)
   ☐ High school diploma

6. What is your father's/male guardian's highest level of education?

   ☐ No formal schooling
   ☐ Some high school without completion (9^{th}-12^{th} grade)
   ☐ Elementary school (K-5^{th} grade)
   ☐ GED
   ☐ Middle school (6^{th}-8^{th} grade)
   ☐ High school diploma

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Study overview: Welcome, and thank you for your participation in this focus group. My name is Hailey and I will be moderating this discussion today. You were asked to participate in this study because each of you is a first generation college student, meaning your parents/guardians did not go to college. What I am interested in learning is why you chose to be the first in your family to go to college, the messages you received that influenced your decision and how you received those messages. This information can hopefully help other FGCSs as they transition into higher education.

Guidelines/Ground rules: We are tape recording this discussion to listen to later but no names will be attached to any report. My role is to serve as the moderator and to guide the discussion, but I am interested in hearing you all talk and learning about your own individual experiences. There are no wrong answers. This is a discussion setting, so please feel free to talk to each other but please be respectful while others are talking and try not to talk at the same time. If you haven't already, please remember to turn off your cell phone. We will be done in about 1 hour.

Opening: Tell us your name and your major here at NDSU.

Introduction question: How did you decide to go to NDSU?

Key 1: Who talked to you about going to college?

a. Do you remember when those conversations happened? **(Sources/message type)**
b. Did certain people talk to you about college more than others? **(Source)**

Key 2: Can you share with me some of the things you remember being told about college?

a. Can you tell me more about those comments and how they came up?
    a. What was the situation when you received the messages about college?
b. Were all the messages you received about college positive?

Key 3: From the messages that you received about college, why do you think you still remember them? Why were they memorable? (type of message that becomes memorable)

Ending: Of all the things we have discussed, what was the most important thing ever said to you about college and who said this? (Write this down on a piece of paper).

Final: Summary of what was discussed.

a. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you want to share?

APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

NDSU **North Dakota State University**
Department of Communication
Ehly 202
NDSU Dept. #2310
PO Box 6050
Fargo, ND 58108-6050
701.231.7705

Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS) Messages Received by First-Generation College Students (FGCSs)

You are invited to participate in a research study involving the messages first-generation college students report receiving that influence their decision to attend college. This study is being conducted by Hailey Adkisson, a graduate student in the NDSU Department of Communication, and Dr. Amy O'Connor, associate professor in the NDSU Department of Communication.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to examine the memorable messages first-generation college students receive that had an impact on their decision to pursue higher education. Additionally, we wish to learn the source(s) of these messages.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study
You participation is entirely voluntary. During the questionnaire or the focus group, you may skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time.

Explanation of Procedures
As a participant, you will be asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire. Additionally, you will be asked to engage in a discussion with other first-generation college students related to messages you received about college while growing up. The focus group should take about one hour to complete.

Assurance of Confidentiality
Only the researchers will see your questionnaire; your focus group responses will be given in a group of 6-10 people. We will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, however, it is possible that participants may repeat comments, outside of the group, at some time in the future. Therefore, we encourage you to be as honest and open as you can, but remain aware of our limits in protecting confidentiality.

Focus groups will be digitally audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Digital recordings and digital copies of transcriptions will be stored on a password-protected computer and only accessible to the researcher for this study. Any printed transcription data will be kept in a locked desk and only Hailey Adkisson will have access to the files. For the purposes of transcription and

reporting, a pseudonym will be used in place of your real name, and any identifying information will be removed from final transcripts and study results.

The university and principle investigator own the data and records created by this project. You may view any information collected from you by making a written request to the principle investigator. You may view only information collected from you, and not information collected from other participants.

Potential Risks and Benefits

It is possible that you may feel uncomfortable when asked to explain messages that had an impact on your decision to attend college. Beyond this discomfort, there are no significant risks associated with your participation in this study. A possible benefit in your participation with this study is finding common ground with other first-generation college students at NDSU.

Compensation

Participating in this focus group will count for all 10 research participation points required in the Communication 110 course. If you opt not to participate in the study, your communication 110 instructor can provide you with an alternate assignment to complete for these points.

Questions and Information about the Study

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed below:

Principle Investigator:
Dr. Amy O'Connor
NDSU Department of Communication
(701) 231-8585
amy.oconnor@ndsu.edu

Co-Investigator:
Hailey Adkisson
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All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at (701) 231-8908, by email to ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu, or by mail at: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

Consent Statement

By signing below, you are stating that you have read and understand both this form and the research project, and are freely agreeing to be a part of this study. If there is anything you do not understand about this study, please ask one of the researchers before you sign the form. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Participant's Signature	Printed Name	Date

Researcher's Signature	Printed Name	Date