Saying *No* to College: First Generation, Low-Income Students and the Decision to Not Attend College

Deena M. Curtis

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, phsatc@gmail.com

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Deena M. Curtis, Ed.D.

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Advisor: Jody Isernhagen

The transition of first generation, low-income students from high school to

college has been studied in depth but not necessarily from the viewpoint of the

students who chose not to attend college or those who fail to complete the processes

necessary to attend college. This study focuses on the students attending an

alternative/charter school in a large, Midwest metropolitan area and the decision

process they have used in making their higher education plans. This qualitative case

study follows a unique methodology designed to identify the bounds of the case

rather than having predetermined boundaries for the case.

The findings of this study have provided insight into the thoughts of the

students exiting high school regarding their ideas and plans for their futures. The

information provided by the students presented some potential solutions for the

students, school and higher education institutions that can be implemented to help

to facilitate the transition of the students of Midwest Academy to college. The

tremendous staff of the Academy genuinely cares for their students and can be

instrumental in changing the trend of these students falling short of the school's goal

of sending 92% of its students to college.

This dissertation is dedicated to my special boys, my nephews:

To Calvin, my special angel, thank you for teaching me what is important. You have taught me to embrace life, love unconditionally, and leave a legacy.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The status of educational equity, although improved in the 60+ years since

the landmark ruling of Brown v. Board of Education, remains an area of interest

when examining the educational successes of first generation, low-income students

and students of color (Hanson, 1994). One area of concern within the educational

setting is the lower numbers of these students transitioning from high school to

college (Hanson, 1994). As colleges and universities across the country look to

increase their enrollment, tapping into this under-represented student pool is

important. In order to increase access, it is valuable to understand the institutional

and social barriers that exist. The purpose of this research was to examine how first

generation, low-income (as defined by the TRIO federal guidelines) high school

students, who have been identified by their school district as choosing not to attend

college, describe their post-high school educational plans. By looking at these

descriptions provided by the students, the hope was that educational entities can

create programming specific to the identified barriers to increase college access for

all.

When looking at the perceived institutional and social barriers remaining for

first generation, low-income students and students of color to transition, from high

school to college, present specific obstacles for these students to traverse. Even in

the era of college outreach and college promotion, the numbers for first generation,

low-income children and children of color participating in outreach programs and

attending college falls significantly behind children of a more privileged

background. Only six percent of first generation, low income students enrolled in

public high schools participate in college outreach programming (Domina, 2009).

Even more troubling is the fact that only ten percent of all poor sophomores

participate in college outreach programming (Domina, 2009). This lack of

participation in programs designed to assist in the transition to college further

highlights the need to determine why this is happening.

Why College?

The importance of college attendance has been well documented. Workers

possessing only a high school diploma earn on average 15% less over a lifetime than

those who have achieved a college degree (Thompson et al, 2006).   According to

Doubleday (2013), the yearly earning potential for a high school graduate is 27%

less and 74% less when compared to a bachelor's degree. As a student progresses

through the college educational process, especially towards the completion of a

bachelor's degree, the potential economic implications grow exponentially.

Individuals holding a bachelor's degree earn 9% more per year and those achieving

a graduate degree increase their earning potential by nearly 30% (Thompson et al,

2006). All told, a student who fails to obtain a bachelor's degree earns 40% less

than a college graduate (Thompson et al, 2006). It is this significant earning deficit

that makes having equitable distribution of students so important.

The college choice literature describes choosing to attend a college, as a

multiphase process where individuals develop aspirations to attend college and

progress through a three-stage process to decide upon a specific college to attend

(Bers, 2005). Bers goes on to describe the beginning of this process as developing a

predisposition to attend college. This is often begun long before the student enters the secondary school level. Next, the student must determine what attributes the student wants in their college experience. Finally, the student makes their choice of colleges and goes through the application process (Bers, 2005). The question persisting for this researcher is why do some students fall short in this process?

When studying the barriers to college attendance presented to first generation, low-income students and students of color, one can look at either the secondary level or the higher education level. In the area of secondary preparation, much of the documented research focuses on the students who transition to college, (Goldrick-Rab, Carter, Winkle-Wagner, 2007), but a scarcity of information exists for those who choose not to attend college. For this particular study, the focus was on evaluating the described reasons for failing to transition to college from the perspective of the high school student who has decided not to attend college. For this critical group, the perceived barriers to transitioning were examined qualitatively to facilitate a more comprehensive description of the decision making process of said students.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of the proposed research was to examine how first-generation, low-income (as defined by the TRIO federal guidelines) high school students, who have been identified by their school district as not attending college, describe their post-high school educational plans? The overall research question was, specifically, how do first generation, low-income high school seniors, in their second semester of the senior year in high school and who have been identified by their school district as

not attending college, describe their decision making process regarding college attendance and the factors that influenced their decision to not attend college? Sub-questions derived from this question are:

➢ Were the students aware of their post-high school educational plans, whether consciously or through their actions?

➢ If they were aware, how did the students determine whether to attend or not attend higher education?

➢ When was their first thought about not attending college?

➢ How do students describe the guidance they did or did not receive from the school system?

➢ What role did the support of family, both emotional and financial, play in the student's decision?

➢ What, if anything, would have made the student decide to attend college?

Case Study Methodology

A case study methodology, described by Luker (2008), was the predominantly used method for this study. This is not case study in an exact sense. Luker's methodology allows for looser boundaries for the case as the researcher is trying to determine "what is this a case of" rather than having set a predetermined boundary (Luker, 2008). One of the tenants of this methodology is the ability to be more general at the beginning of the study yet through that generality, the specific boundaries of the study become clear (Luker, 2008). The thought initially is not a vertical cause and effect scenario but rather a horizontal, holistic scenario that eventually becomes more of a vertical entity (Luker, 2008). Luker (2008) further

describes the methodology as being an iterative process with set steps to be repeated throughout the process. The study was framed by the research question, which hopes to tell us something about the ways of the world rather than a clearly bounded case study.

Research Participants

By the second semester of the senior year, whether a conscious decision or not, a student's fate has been set by their pursuit of the necessary steps for college admission. Part of the selection process was be based on failing to complete one of the 3 critical tasks high school students must complete to transition to college: taking a college preparatory curriculum, be on track to graduate, and completion of the college application process including financial aid paperwork and the college application (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Additional selections were made based on the local knowledge of the high school guidance office, community support organizations, and outreach groups utilized by lower socioeconomic class youth in the neighborhood of the individual secondary school. Incentives were provided to the participants in the form of education regarding support services based on their post-secondary life decisions, whether it is referrals to career service organizations or guidance on the necessary steps they need to complete in order to attend college. Ongoing support was provided to those needing additional assistance in finding appropriate career guidance or educational support through the utilization of local community resources.

The Research Site

The selection of a state classified alternative urban secondary school as the research site was based on the relatively low college transition rate of first generation, low-income students to college from underperforming schools (Cabrera et al, 2001). Although the study ultimately focused on the student, the school played a significant role. Part of the selection of the research site involved observation of the school atmosphere to get a sense of the educational attitude of the school. These observations are included as part of the data record. Observations provided an opportunity for the researcher to see the learning environment the students are exposed to on a daily basis, which enriched the data with first hand description (Merriam, 2009). Due to the fact that the study utilized the guidance offices as the primary recruiter of the students, gaining access to the school district and its staff was important. In order to accomplish this, permission was obtained from the building CEO, building principal, and finally, the guidance office. This research design was provided to each entity for their approval.

One important consideration when selecting this research site was the concept of "the school." It was possible that students who have decided not to transition to college are doing so due to a less than ideal educational experience. The alternative to conducting interviews in the school was the in home interview. Although more hurdles are presented with changing the interview site, this was not necessary based numbers of students recruited. This was not a bridge that had to be crossed after attempting initial sampling.

Interview Methodology

The interviews conducted in this study utilized the guided and follow-up questions found in Appendix A in a semi-structured style (Merriam, 2009). All interviews were recorded and transcribed at a later date. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews continued until the data becomes saturated with prevalent themes (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis and Validation

For the data gathered through the interview and observation process, a cursory reading of the transcripts occurred prior to any advanced analysis. Following the initial reading, basic coding techniques described by Carspecken (1994) were utilized. Working from the individual interview transcripts, chunks of data, a group of sentences or a paragraph, were initially labeled using the individual's words verbatim. After the initial analysis, the in-vivo codes were grouped into categories based on topic of the code and context within the interview. Under the categories, the individual code phrases were listed based on lower code and higher (inferred) codes. The categories were then further classified by theme and sub-theme with notations made within the original interview transcript as to the assigned theme. Finally, the recurrent themes were grouped as part of the reported data looking specifically at how the themes related to the original research question (Carspecken, 1994).

Primarily, the data told the story of the decision process of students choosing to not attend college. After the initial transcription of the interview, the participants were provided the opportunity to review the data and make corrections as they see

fit. As it was their story, it is important for them to be sure it is the one they want to tell. This may make the data unusable for the study, but accuracy of reason for not attending college is more important than the sheer number of interviews included. For data that has significantly changed, a compromise between the participant and the researcher was attempted prior to data being excluded (Merriam, 2009).

<u>Limitations and Justifications</u>

In the text, Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation, Merriam (2009) describes several limitations in using qualitative case study design. The use of the case study design provides a description of a particular situation in a given moment in time. The results, therefore, cannot be predictive in nature (Merriam, 2009). Case study design can at times be too general, a quality Merriam eliminates by using the rich descriptive nature of the researcher's reporting. This thick description can be easily interpreted by the reader for use in their individual experiences. Stake (1995) elaborates on the interpretation of data by the reader as "reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it . . . more likely to be personally useful." The internal construction of meaning adds specificity to the research results.

Merriam (2009) further identified time as a limitation for qualitative research and specifically, case study research. Producing a quality description of the case being evaluated can be quite tedious and time intensive. This may not be a practical form of research for a subject needing swift, concise results. To remedy this situation, the researcher should evaluate the amount of material to be included in an executive summary to make it practical for use in the field (Merriam, 2009).

The researcher is the next limitation as she will be the primary vessel for the provision of data. Unfortunately, training of researchers to observe, interpret and report, in the qualitative research field is lacking, leaving the researcher alone in the wilderness of data. The researcher must rely on their own skill and on trial and error in not only collecting the data but in interpreting the data for the final report (Merriam, 2009). As a means of lessening this limitation, the research has undertaken a rigorous series of courses regarding not only the transition to college but in a variety of research methodologies as well. The researcher to further validate the data collected will heavily utilize this acquired knowledge base.

Definitions

- First generation student – "a student whose parents have never earned a bachelor's degree but may have some postsecondary experience" (Nunez & Cuccaro, 1998).

- Low-income student (TRIO Guidelines) – "individual whose family's taxable income for the previous year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty amount as defined by the US Census Bureau and published by the US Department of Health and Human Services" (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013).

- Cultural heterogeneity – "presence of a wide array of competing and conflicting cultural models" (Harding, 2009).

- College – "a school in the US that one goes to after high school: a school that offers courses leading to a degree (such as a bachelor's or associate's degree)" (Merriam-Webster).

Expected Outcomes

It was the hope of the researcher that common themes, regarding the reasons students decide to not attend college, would emerge through the analysis of the interview transcripts. It was possible that the factors for not attending college would mirror those in the literature, specifically, the barriers to students not attending college relating directly to income, parental involvement, and the "noise" of the neighborhood. If these are in fact causative in nature, then the findings of the previous studies can be utilized to craft a strategy to change behavior as well as providing direction to the higher education professional regarding college access programming.

Implications for Further Research

It is the hope of the researcher that this study will become part of a larger longitudinal mixed methods design. If common themes emerge from this case study, then an attempt to develop a survey instrument to measure the effects of the identified barriers will commence. This survey attempted to quantify the effects the identified barriers have on the first generation, low-income students and students of color and their decision not to attend college. The longitudinal portion of this continued study relies upon the ability to do prevention programming based on the thematic discoveries, which would provide the epidemiology for said programming. It is the belief of the researcher that this educational model may be critical to changing the educational opportunities for the first generation, low-income students and students of color, as well as the conditions of the neighborhoods where these students reside.

<u>Summary</u>

In beginning to explore the reasons first generation, low-income students choose not to attend college, it is important to not only understand the value of college attendance but also what the literature describes as potential barriers to college attendance. In the next chapter, the literature is explored to highlight some possible barriers that exist. Although, the barriers listed are not specific as barriers by the study population, they do warrant some consideration going forward. After the review of literature and methodology sections, the findings regarding the reasons students consciously and unconsciously had for not attending college. This information provides a starting point when looking at the potential changes that can be utilized to improve the transition for all students desiring to attend education after high school.

Chapter 2

Introduction

College attendance, whether a four year institution, junior or community college or a trade school can prove invaluable in helping the first generation, low-income advance in their chosen career. The possession of any education beyond the high school education and the financial benefits will be discussed in depth in this chapter. Barriers to the advancement to higher education will also be discussed in length.

The Importance of College Attendance

The United States has undergone a transformation from a job force primarily begun in the industrial revolution, where a high school diploma was a predictor of success in a globally diverse market force, to one where some form of post-secondary education is not only predictive, it is required (London, 2006). In fact, in a comparison of earnings from 1979 to 1999, high school graduates between the ages of 30-59 earned 15.9% less in 1999 than their predecessors in 1979 (Thompson et al, 2006). Conversely, individuals holding bachelor's degrees saw their earning potential increase 9% and individuals holding graduate degrees increased their earning potential by 30% (Thompson et al, 2006). Simply put, an individual with a college degree earns approximately 40% more than an individual with a high school diploma (Thompson et al, 2006). But how does a student garner the necessary tools, which students begin to develop as early as the eighth grade for college attendance, and what does lacking tools set the student up for? This question requires looking at some basic tools necessary to transition to college.

Three Critical Tasks for Attending College

In order for students to transition to college, they must develop a basic skill set to manage the demands of the college admission process. This process requires the student to develop a predisposition to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Students begin to make appraisals of their academic skills and abilities, in conjunction with their perception of the family's financial resources, as early as eighth grade (Cabrera et al, 2001). Without a proper appraisal and without substantive information on college choice, financial aid, and academic requirements for college attendance, many students fail to develop this important first characteristic – the predisposition to go to college (Cabrera et al, 2001). Without the predisposition to attend college, the student is less likely to search out information regarding college attendance. Without knowledge of the basic requirements to attend college, the student is less likely to obtain the requisite skills needed for college success (Cabrera et al, 2001).

What then are the three critical skills students must possess to transition to college? First and foremost, the student must pursue a curriculum at the secondary school level to meet admission requirements of the college and university system (Cabrera, 2001). These requirements include four years of English, three to four years of math including algebra I and II and geometry, three years of science including biology, chemistry and physics, three years of social studies, and two years of foreign language (ACT, Inc., 2013). According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), obtaining minimum college qualifications is a defining characteristic. In fact, those students who acquire the requisite skills to attend college enroll immediately after

high school graduation at a rate of 69%, compared to only 30% of those who gathered only basic skills in high school (Cabrera et al, 2001). Once the student has earned the basic requirements for college attendance, they must next begin the second critical task.

After obtaining the basic requirements for college admission, the student next has to graduate from the secondary school (Cabrera et al, 2001). Of the students who achieve the minimum standards necessary for college, nearly all will meet the basic requirements for a high school diploma, where as, those who did not meet the minimum college requirements graduate at a rate of approximately 77% (Cabrera et al, 2001). Having a high school diploma is a significant accomplishment and has socioeconomic effects for the students when looking at earning potential (Day & Newburger, 2002). In the 2002 report, Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings, Day and Newburger utilized census information to provide the following earning numbers: High school graduates earn on average $25,900 versus a high school dropout who earns only 18,900. This is a significant difference in earning potential and should be used as encouragement for a student to stay in school and graduate (Day et al, 2002). This, however, is not the end of the critical tasks.

The final task for college attendance may be one of the more obvious tasks identified by Cabrera and La Nasa (2001). In order for students to attend college, they actually have to go through the steps and apply for admission to the college of their choice. This process is, however, quite daunting to many students. According to Cabrera et al (2001), first generation, low-income students are frequently

overwhelmed by the forms necessary to apply to a particular college, filling out

financial aid forms, and the overall cost of attending college. In fact, at least 18.2%

of the most qualified students, independent of all other variables, do not apply for

college (Cabrera et al, 2001). Hanson (1994) describes this phenomenon as "lost

talent". Meaning simply, the lost talent is the extent of the loss of educationally

talented individuals to the complexities of applying, attending, and achieving in

college (Hanson, 1994).

Potential Barriers

Parental Involvement

Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), through use of a logistical regression model,

examined the ease of accomplishing the three critical tasks as they related to first

generation, low-income students. This group is often the one level of society where

the transition to college is most difficult. First generation, low-income students fail

to meet the academic requirements for college at a rate of 71% versus 30.3% for

other students (Cabrera et al, 2001). When applying to college, qualified students

from the lowest socioeconomic class apply to college at a rate of 65.5%, which is 15-

20%, lower than that of similarly qualified higher income students (Cabrera et al,

2001). When looking at these numbers, it begs the question of why? Why are

students, in most need of higher education, not applying and transitioning to the

college campus? Through their analysis, Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found

parenting and a parent's understanding of the system of higher education plays a

significant role in children meeting the critical tasks. It was estimated through this

study that, at best, 23% of parents could provide the necessary guidance to

encourage their child to attend college (Cabrera et al, 2001). Unfortunately, much of

the compilation of knowledge regarding college attendance begins at home.

Parental involvement contributes to their child's academic achievement

through two general sociological mechanisms: increasing social capital and

increasing social control (Hill et al, 2004). Parents involved in their child's school

have improved parenting skills because they are equipped with more information

from the school on how to assist the student with school activities (Hill et al, 2004).

Perhaps just as important, however, are the relationships the parents build between

the staff of the school and other parents. Through these relationships, parents are

able to learn school expectations for behavior and homework completion, how to

assist with learning at home, and develop a support network of like minded parents

for constructing the educational "cocoon" around their child, thus increasing their

social capital in the school community (Hill et al, 2004). As far as social control,

parents are instrumental in working with the school to establish a consensus

regarding appropriate behavior that is reinforced in school and at home. Through

this process, a system of social constraint is developed and reduces problem

behaviors both at school and at home (Hill et al, 2004). As part of these social

constraints, children are bombarded by messages regarding appropriate behavior

and the importance of schooling, which translate directly to improved educational

competence, motivation to learn, and overall engagement in school (Hill et al, 2004).

With the importance of these educational and social variables, it would only seem

logical that every parent would want to be a "joiner" in their child's education.

There are, however, two significant predictors of parental participation in their

child's education – parental education level and parental social class (Hill et al, 2004). Parents with higher education levels and higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be actively involved in their child's education. They are advocates for children being placed in honors courses, actively involved in booster clubs, PTO organizations, and help reinforce positive behavioral concepts learned in the educational process (Hill et al, 2004). This heightened level of involvement directly correlates to students aspiring to college, as if it was a foregone conclusion, with the skill set to succeed once they reach higher education (Conklin et al, 1981). Why then do parents of lower educational and socioeconomic status fail in the area of school involvement, if indeed it is so important to student success?

Parent Socioeconomic Status and the Neighborhood

The relationships between parents, children and the school do not occur in a vacuum (Hill et al, 2004). Parents from a lower socioeconomic class, single parents, young parents and parents who have multiple children tend to display less warmth and thus, less positive encouragement for educational attainment (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001). Parents also bring with them a plethora of personal attitudes and beliefs about schooling from their own personal educational experiences or their perceived lack of education (Hill et al, 2004). These parental attitudes add to the sociological context of their child's education (Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001). The context in which the parenting occurs contributes greatly to the parenting given (Pinderhughes et al, 2001). In their study, Pinderhughes et al (2001) posited that the neighborhood is one of the most specific influences on parental behavior. Parenting is affected by poverty, residential instability, public

services or lack there of, limitations of the parent's social network, and the danger,

whether real or perceived, in the home neighborhood (Pinderhughes et al, 2001)

(Hill et al, 2004) (Rankin & Quane, 2000). Dangerous neighborhoods tend to mute

positive parenting behaviors such as warmth and nurturing, consistent discipline

and quality interaction with the child. Instead, the dangerous neighborhoods cause

more harsh interactions and caustic parent/child relations (Pinderhughes et al,

2001). Using parents recruited from predominantly poor neighborhood schools,

Pinderhughes et al (2001) conducted site visits to the home during the school year

and summer break. The parents and children were interviewed regarding parenting

behaviors. In analyzing the results of the hierarchal regression models, the effects

of locality, neighborhood characteristics, family context, and child behavior

accounted for significant differences in parenting behavior (Pinderhughes et al,

2001).

Parents raising their children in lower socioeconomic class neighborhoods

have measurable differences in the type of parenting conducted (Pinderhughes et al,

2001). Children in poverty areas, in general, receive less parental warmth and more

discipline that could be described as harsh (Pinderhughes et al, 2001).

Neighborhoods with higher unemployment or underemployment rates seem to limit

parent interaction with others and thus provide fewer opportunities to learn

positive parenting behavior and build stable support groups (Hill et al, 2004)

(Rankin et al, 2000). Neighborhoods displaying instability tend to isolate parents

and children alike and that isolation makes parenting less warm (Pinderhughes et

al, 2001). Finally, as is often the case in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, the

quality or lack of quality public services greatly affects parenting. Lack of

convenient public transportation, safe play areas, community centers, and quality

public services create both real and perceived barriers for quality parenting

(Pinderhughes et al, 2001). Simply put, the more frustrated the parent is by life's

inconveniences, the more they take that frustration out on their children.

The Role of the Neighborhood

The neighborhood a child grows up in plays a significant role in the

socialization of the child and thus, the education of the child (Crane, 1991). The

increased concentration of abject poverty in the urban areas in the United States has

made the effects of the neighborhood on its residents a point of focus when

addressing social problems (Ainsworth, 2002). Crane (1991) describes

neighborhood effects as it relates to the susceptibility of children who grow up in

single parent homes in disadvantaged neighborhoods. These children are more

susceptible to peer influence and peer pressure to engage in antisocial behaviors.

For males, the child migrates to peer groups exhibiting strong subcultures that value

behaviors that tend to generate social problems (Crane, 1991) (Harris, 2006). For

female children, a predisposition to entering into sexual relationships to show their

relative maturity to their social group develops more frequently (Crane, 1991)

(Harris, 2006). Peer influence spreads these behaviors at an alarming pace, setting

the neighborhood up for a significant social change, which completely changes the

dynamics of the neighborhood (Crane, 1991)

Crane (1991) also describes the rapid spread of these behaviors in a

neighborhood like an epidemic progressing through a poor neighborhood and

transforming said neighborhood into a ghetto, which are in fact two different kinds of neighborhoods. A ghetto is defined as a poor neighborhood with a significant level of extreme social problems (Crane, 1991). Using epidemiology terms, as it appears social problems can and often do spread in a contagion model, a ghetto would be an area of prolific infestation of the social problem (Crane, 1991). Crane (1991) examined the United States Census and a government database, Public Use of Micro Data Samples, through a contagious disease framework utilized in epidemiology. The results fit within the contagion category as an epidemic, especially for dropouts (Crane, 1991). Thus, as social problems infect the social institutions of the neighborhood, such as schools, churches and the family, negative consequences soon follow (Crane, 1991) (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). This school of thought fits well with Wilson's theory of neighborhood effects.

William Wilson's Theory of Neighborhood Effects

In his work, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, William Wilson outlines the effects a neighborhood has on the achievement of its residents (Stewart, Stewart, & Simmons, 2007) (Small & Newman, 2001) (Tigges, Brown, & Green, 1998). In the lower socioeconomic class, the neighborhood exudes tremendous consequences for its residents. The first effect described by Stewart et al (2007) focuses on the changes within a neighborhood as it progresses from a middle class designation to lower class designation. In these neighborhoods, as the middle class standing evaporates, an area of de-socialization prevails and the culture of the neighborhood becomes more isolated. The family dynamic begins to shift from two parent

households to households headed by a single female (Stewart et al, 2007). As this change progresses, a social buffer is created by a continual exodus of the middle class families away from the economically disadvantaged area. Gradually, jobs in the area begin to evaporate causing acute poverty, joblessness, and alienation from mainstream society. This change in society is apparent in every aspect of the community from the individual household to the educational system (Stewart et al, 2007). Educationally, as the neighborhood spirals downward, so do the educational achievements of its children. In distressed neighborhoods, the school dropout rate is three times higher than a middle to upper class neighborhood and for those dropouts; the jobless rate is over 80% (Ainsworth, 2002). How then does the neighborhood effect educational achievements and thus create a continual cycle of poverty and social disconnect?

Ainsworth (2002) identified five mechanisms within a neighborhood that affect the educational achievements of its students. First, as employment opportunities evaporate, structure within the neighborhood erodes (Ainsworth, 2002). As structure erodes, residents look to succeed through any means necessary and not necessarily through general accepted societal means. This disregard for structure puts children in these neighborhoods at a social disadvantage, as they do not learn important behaviors and attitudes necessary for success in the academic arena. Without the skills necessary to succeed at school, students begin to realize that their aspirations do not match the reality of opportunity for employment (Ainsworth, 2002). Without a perceived benefit of education, the desire to put effort into educational achievement is dampened (Ainsworth, 2002).

There is a particular uniqueness, noted by Ainsworth (2002), to the student

learning and living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. They commonly recognize the

concept of working hard and the payoff that comes from effort, or, in part, the idea

of the American dream (Ainsworth, 2002). What they are unable to do, however, is

reach their goals through legitimate means because of restricted means, restricted

opportunities, and other social constraints (Ainsworth, 2002). In analyzing data

from the National Education Longitudinal Study, Ainsworth (2002) examined the

students who lived in the same neighborhood for a period of four years. This

allowed researchers to examine family background, school characteristics, student

measures and educational outcomes (Ainsworth, 2002). The results empirically

linked neighborhood structure with individual educational outcomes (Ainsworth,

2002). In fact, the data confirmed that having citizens of higher socioeconomic

standing, having parental or neighborhood influences encouraging students to

complete their homework, and having expressed high level educational expectations

improved student performance (Ainsworth, 2002). This study provided a linkage

between individual process and structural factors of the neighborhood. Specifically,

it provided a direct relationship between the "social noise" of a neighborhood and

the educational attainment of its students (Ainsworth, 2002).

Cultural Heterogeneity

Another possible way of looking at the neighborhood's effects on schooling

is to utilize the concept of cultural heterogeneity. As defined by Harding (2011),

cultural heterogeneity is "the presence of a wide array of competing and conflicting

cultural models, most of which are mainstream or middle class models but some of

which are ghetto specific and oppositional." A heterogeneous neighborhood has

many defining characteristics. First, the neighborhood has a very diverse grouping

of citizens. Residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods have different occupation

statuses, income levels, educational levels, and needs for public assistance (Harding,

2011). Simplified, the heterogeneous neighborhood has a decreased capacity for

informal social control leading to greater signs of social disorder, ghetto related

behaviors, street orientations (Harding, 2011). This neighborhood becomes reliant

on informal social control and as the deviant behaviors are more visible, many

residents retreat into their homes for solace from the dangers of the streets

(Harding, 2011). One way to think of this is, simply, there is more social "noise" to

distract the residents of the disadvantaged neighborhood, just as white noise can be

a distraction for a time, until one adjusts to it, as it is always present.

Youth in these culturally heterogeneous neighborhoods have an enormous

selection of cultural models to follow and social noise to sort through. They can

draw from their parents, the neighborhood elders, or from their peers (Harding,

2011). The complexity of the neighborhood influences lead directly to students

aspiring to college attendance but falling short on following through with the

necessary tasks. Simply, adolescents have difficulty navigating educational

institutions and opportunities because they lack a singular direction provided by a

stable neighborhood environment (Harding, 2011). Also, lacking for many of these

students is a pool of quality role models from whom they can draw advice. Parents,

who have not attended college, struggle to effectively advise their children on how

to enroll and complete a college course of study (Harding, 2011). With the parental

resource regarding education lacking in the home, the student will seek advice elsewhere. In a disadvantaged neighborhood, students often draw their references from the media, their peers, and the streets (Harding, 2011). In these neighborhoods, because the positive role models retreat into their homes or vacate the neighborhood all together, parents are less able to shield their children from the alternative lifestyles of the disadvantaged neighborhood as the signs of disordered socialization begin to pervade (Harding, 2011). As ghetto behaviors become more visible, more of the adolescent's peers begin to gravitate to the socially deviant. With the parents increasingly out of the home, the path to higher education becomes more difficult to traverse as there are forces pulling the child in many directions (Harding, 2011).

Cultural Heterogeneity and College Enrollment

The trials and tribulations of the precarious nature of adolescents have been well described in the literature. This life period is marked with experimentation, invincibility, and continual risk taking as the youngster attempts to find their identity. Much of the individual's identity is derived from individual interactions and the individual's observations of the world around them (Harding, 2011). It would then seem that exposure to a greater number of conflicting messages, as is the case in the heterogeneous neighborhood, would open the impressionable mind of a youth to an overload of potential educational outcomes (Harding, 2011). As a consequence of this diversity, students have more to consider. One known consequence, described by Harding (2011), is the more diverse the decision pool,

the less information there is available to make an educated decision (Harding,

2011). To quote Harding (2011):

"When fewer neighbors have successfully enrolled in college, how to go about doing

so will be less clearly defined. Less information will be available about how

admissions and financial aid processes work. (p. 328)"

Without this valuable information, many students will be discouraged by the

complexities of the admissions process and have misperceptions about their ability

to afford a post-secondary education. A second identified consequence of cultural

heterogeneity described by Harding (2011) involves the ability of the student to

make and follow through with educational plans. The heterogeneous neighborhood

neither encourages nor discourages students (Harding, 2011). Hence, the student's

educational plans are more variable and are able to be easily deterred by any

setback, no matter how minor, in the process.

To confirm these consequences of heterogeneous neighborhoods and their

implications to college attendance, Harding (2011) collected multiple waves of data

from a sampling of 150 middle, junior high, and high schools through pairing high

schools with their feeder middle or junior high school. Students in grades seven

through twelve were followed through a three-phase evaluation of educational

attainment. The first wave data included a school administrator survey pertaining

to school characteristics and policies, a student completed an in-school survey and

provided in home student and parent input. The initial sample size was

approximately 20,000 students. Wave two followed those students interviewed in

their homes and involved another student home interview, this time without their

parents. A school administrator survey was also conducted with wave two

(Harding, 2011). Finally, in wave three, a second follow-up to the in-home students

was conducted. This study was one-dimensional in that it focused only on college

enrollment. This variable was selected for two reasons:

"Goals for college enrollment are more consistent with the cognitive view of

culture…and… as discussed earlier, the mismatch of between educational goals and

outcomes is a core concern in the educational attainment literature," (Harding,

2011, p. 329).

Using bivariate analysis, Harding was able to show the relationship between

the neighborhood and the student's college goals. Students maturing in a

homogeneous neighborhood, often the middle to upper class, have a decided

advantage when it comes to matching aspirations of college attendance with

attainment of a college degree (Harding, 2011). Even when accounting for the

family, culture, socioeconomic standing and secondary education opportunities

provided to the student regardless of social class, the diversity of the neighborhood

had a significant negative effect (Harding, 2011). The concept of cultural

heterogeneity provides an alternative to oppositional culture theories. Simplified,

heterogeneous neighborhoods have more "clutter and white noise" that distract

students from their task of attending college.

Exposure to Guidance Counselors

Often overlooked, the high school guidance counselor plays a significant role

in the distribution of information regarding college attendance. McDonough and

Calderone (2006) posit that regular meetings with a high school guidance counselor,

specifically discussing college attendance, increase the likelihood of a student enrolling in college. The high school guidance counselor influences a student's college decisions in several ways. First, they are able to organize activities to improve the student's knowledge base of why college is important and how to get there (McDonough et al, 2006). Counselors provide invaluable service to parents by helping them take a leading role in encouraging their students to attend college (McDonough et al, 2006). Finally, the guidance counselor can define a schools academic focus on college attendance, enhancing the motivation of all involved to push students toward a college path (McDonough et al, 2006). In the case of the first generation, low-income student, there is a lack of counselor availability for college advice (McDonough et al, 2006). Counselors in public schools, especially those in low-income areas, spend a majority of their time on anything from scheduling to lunchroom duty, leaving little time for the promotion of college attendance (McDonough et al, 2006).

McDonough et al (2006) describes the counselor to student ratio as "478:1" on a nationwide average (p. 1705). Locally, the numbers may stretch to "994:1" and in poor neighborhoods; the numbers are closer to "1056:1" (McDonough et al, 2006, p. 1706). In fact, guidance counselors only spend 13% of their workday on college guidance (McDonough et al, 2006). Accordingly, students, especially in the poor neighborhood, have the least exposure to college guidance. This lack of information makes these students, who are already falling behind academically, to fall behind in the overall process of applying to and attending college (McDonough et al, 2006).

Why This Study

When exploring the literature on why students choose to attend college or not to attend college, there is a plethora of information on why students choose to attend college and the barriers they overcome. The earliest studies on students choosing not to attend college dated back to the 1950's. It is the contention of the researcher that due to societal changes the reasons for not transitioning to college are significantly different in the modern age than those in the era of the 1950's. This country has undergone significant change and thus the student, school and higher education are reflective of modern society rather than the cookie cutter era of earlier time. It is the modern reasons that this study on which this study will focus.

Summary

Of all the barriers presented in this review, none has been described by students who have chosen not to attend college. It is very possible that one or any combination of these barriers are behind a student's decision to forgo higher education. The problem, however, is there has been little research into asking the questions proposed in this study. It is the hope of the researcher to identify actual described barriers from this student pool.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Developing the Question

Despite the plethora of information presented in the literature review, there exists a gap in the knowledge base regarding college access for first generation, low-income students and students of color. Much of the information gathered by the esteemed researchers looks at potential barriers to college attendance without performing a very simple task – asking a specific series of questions to the student themselves. Very little research exists as to what first generation, low-income students and students of color describe as the reason they choose to not attend college. It is the answers to this question that this study hoped address.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to examine how first generation, low-income (as defined by the TRIO federal guidelines) high school students, who have been identified by their school district as not attending college, described their post-high school educational plans. The overall research question was, specifically, how do first generation, low-income high school seniors, in their second semester of the senior year and who have been identified by their school district as not attending college, describe their decision making process regarding college attendance and the factors that influenced their decision to not attend college? This line of questioning lends itself to several sub-questions. In particular,

➢ Were the students cognizant of their post-high school educational plans?

➢ If they were cognizant, how and when did the students determine whether to

attend or not attend college?

➢ How do students describe the guidance they did or did not receive from the school

system?

➢ What role did the support of family, both emotional and financial, play in the

student's decision?

➢ What, if anything, would have made the student decide to attend college?

The Qualitative Paradigm

Qualitative methodology was used to define not only the data collection but

the analysis of results as well. Merriam (2009) defines qualitative research as the

desire of the researcher to understand meaning constructed by humans. In other

words, Merriam further defines the qualitative genre as an attempt to understand

"people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world"

(Merriam, 2009, p.13). There are several guiding characteristics of qualitative

research:

1. Focus on Meaning and Understanding – Qualitative research looks at interpretations of human interaction, how those interpretations are then used to construct the world, and how they attach meaning to those interactions. Simply, how do people determine what makes sense in their world. A key component of this characteristic is the explanation of the participant's experiences from their unique individual perspective (Merriam, 2009).
2. Researcher as the Primary Instrument – Simply stated, the researcher is the vessel for data collection and analysis. There is not a data-gathering tool, such as a survey, that is frequently the source of data in the quantitative study (Merriam, 2009).
3. Inductive process – As there is often no clear-cut theory or hypothesis in qualitative research, the researcher gathers information leading to a particular theory or hypothesis. Observations, interviews, and documentation are combined and analyzed to look for common themes. These themes start out as specific to the individual study and then are broadened to fit within a larger identified thematic concept (Merriam, 2009).

4. Rich Description – Rather than having a numeric result, qualitative research is a collage of words, describing the experience of the subject in their own words (Merriam, 2009).

These defined characteristics make the selection of qualitative methodology the optimal method for this study.

In addition to the overall utilization of qualitative methodology, this study was based on the transformative (critical) framework described by Creswell (2013). Because the focus of the study was a marginalized group (first-generation, low income students or students of color) traditional post-positive frameworks fail to adequately address social injustice. Social injustice, for a variety of reasons, is not logical (Creswell, 2013). It is often not cause and effect. In fact, social injustice is complex with nuances unique to each situation. Additionally, a transformative framework allowed for advocacy by the researcher, as the goal within this particular framework is to advocate positive change in society (Creswell, 2013).

Why Qualitative Case Study Methods?

Qualitative methods allowed for a more comprehensive description of the perceptions of the selected group of students as it is, as Luker (2010) describes, the process to a "voyage to discovery" of the reasons described by the study participants. The qualitative case study, in particular, allowed the researcher to look at a particular phenomenon within a set period of time (Luker, 2010). In this case, first generation, low-income students and students of color in the second semester of their senior year who have been identified by the school district as not transitioning to college are examined as subjects. Simply, this is a perceived case of students, secondary schools, and universities failing in the process of transitioning

students to college. Determining whether that perception is true is a possible

outcome of this study. Selection of the qualitative method revolves around the idea

of telling a story, in particular, the story of first generation, low-income students and

students of color deciding against transition from high school to college (Luker,

2010). Although the numbers of students failing to transition to college are

important, for this study, learning the "why" was more important than the "how

many" and qualitative case study methodology provided the best avenue to answer

this question (Luker, 2010).

   Merriam (2009) does an excellent job of breaking down the differences

between qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative methodological design

focuses on prediction, control, confirmation, and hypothesis testing (Merriam,

2009). This design is more structured and the selected sample is quite large.

Simply, the data collected is more precise and numerical than qualitative

methodology (Merriam, 2009). The numbers of first generation, low-income

students and students of color not attending college are well established in the

previous literature (Cabrera et al, 2001). This study focused on the why and when

the students decided to not attend college as directly described by the study

participants. Merriam (2009) describes qualitative methodology as a flexible means

of gaining understanding. She further describes the qualitative methodology as

allowing the researcher to utilize fieldwork to "build toward a theory" (Merriam,

2009, p. 15). The quantitative method tends to work from theory to hypothesis to

proof in a more linear fashion, which is not conducive to working with the chosen

research subjects (Merriam, 2009). The sample in this qualitative study is non-

random, but is purposeful; specifically, second semester seniors, at a selected

alternative, urban high school, who have chosen not to attend college (Merriam,

2009). Although all qualities of the qualitative study are important, for this study,

the idea of the method being richly descriptive is the draw to the methodology.

Learning why students have chosen not to attend college is significant and

qualitative methodology best allows for their story to be told, which to this point has

not been the focus of the college choice literature (Bers, 2005). Qualitative

methodology allows for a more fluid exploration of the topic by seeing what

questions students ask in the process of college decision making of these select

students (Luker, 2010).

Methodology

The study utilized interviews of students who are in the second semester of

their senior year at an accredited, alternative high school located within or servicing

students from an urban area. Interviews, according to Merriam (2009), provide an

opportunity for conversation between the researcher and the participant. In this

case, the interviews were semi-structured as guiding questions were used for

format but the conversation was flexible based on the responses of the participants

(Merriam, 2009). Students, who are eligible to attend college, were selected based

on their indication through their own admission to the high school guidance office

that they will not attend college immediately following graduation or by being

identified by the school district as not preparing to transition to college. The

researcher sent emails to eligible participants and in-school recruitment at a

designated time was continued until a significant participant pool was generated.

Participants were recruited until the interview data reaches saturation, at which

point the interview process ceased (Merriam, 2009).

By the second semester of the senior year, whether a conscious decision or

not, a student's fate will have been set by their pursuit of the necessary steps for

college admission. Part of the selection process was based on failing to complete

one of the previously identified three critical tasks high school students must

complete to transition to college: taking a college preparatory curriculum, be on

track to graduate, and completion of the college application process including

financial aid paperwork and the college application (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

Additional selections were made based on the local knowledge of the high school

guidance office, community support organizations, and outreach groups utilized by

lower socioeconomic class youth in the neighborhood of the individual secondary

school. Incentives were provided to the participants in the form of education

relating directly to support services regarding their postsecondary plans, whether

was referrals to career service organizations or guidance on the necessary steps

they will need to complete in order to attend college. Ongoing support was

provided to those needing additional assistance in finding appropriate career

guidance or educational support through the utilization of local community

resources.

Researcher Positioning

In qualitative research, defining the researcher's role in the study is of some

value (Merriam, 2009). Stake (1995) described the various roles a researcher can

take in case study research. For this study, the primary role of the researcher was

initially as an observer. This was primarily because there will be racial and

socioeconomic differences between the participants and the researcher (Winkle-

Wagner, Ortloff, & Hunter, 2009). Ultimately, however, the role would shift to that

of an advocate, as the goal of the study was to provide guidance in assisting first

generation, low-income students and students of color to transition to college.

The Research Site

The selection of a classified alternative urban secondary school as the

designated research site was based on the relatively low college transition rate of

first generation, low-income students to college from underperforming schools

(Cabrera et al, 2001). Although the study ultimately focused on the student, the

school played a significant role. Part of the selection of the research site involved

observation of the school atmosphere to get a sense of the educational attitude of

the school. These observations are included as part of the data record.

"Observations provided an opportunity for the researcher to see the learning

environment the students are exposed to on a daily basis, which enriched the data

with first hand description" (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Due to the fact that the study

utilized the guidance offices as the primary recruiter of the students, gaining access

to the school district and its staff was important. In order to accomplish this,

permission had to be obtained from the school CEO, building principal, and finally,

the guidance office. This research design was provided to each entity for their

approval.

One important consideration when selecting this research site was the

concept of "the school." It was possible that students who have decided not to

transition to college are doing so due to a negative educational experience. The

alternative to conducting interviews in the school was the off-site, neutral location

interview. Although more hurdles are presented with changing the interview site,

this could have been necessary should the numbers of students recruited be

minimal or if the students are uncooperative when the interview was conducted in

the school. This was a bridge to be crossed after attempting initial sampling.

Interview Methodology

The interviews conducted in this study utilized the following guided and

follow-up questions in a semi-structured style (Merriam, 2009). Interviews will be

conducted in the school setting initially, were recorded and transcribed at a later

date, and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews continued until the data

collected became saturated with prevailing themes (Merriam, 2009). The interview

questions are contained in Appendix A.

IRB/Ethical Considerations

Primary consideration relevant to the institutional review board was the age

of the students being interviewed. As most of the students were under the age of

majority, as defined by the Midwestern state where the research was conducted,

parents/guardians were notified and provided written/oral consent to allow

participation. The assent of the child was also needed for the completion of the

study. The nature of the questions in this study presented minimal risk, thus the

study was considered for expedited review by the board (Research Compliance

Services, 2010).

Ethically, the researcher employed the "do no harm" doctrine as the primary guidance for conducting this study (Merriam, 2009). Exhaustive effort was directed toward maintaining the anonymity of the subjects and every protection was employed to prevent deception in the interview process. The researcher ensured that the participants felt empowered by their participation in the study. This was accomplished through providing educational and career guidance for the subjects to assist them in changing their educational dilemma, if they so desire.

Data Analysis and Validation

For the data gathered through the interview and observation process, a cursory reading of the transcript occurred prior to any advanced analysis. Following the initial reading, basic coding techniques described by Carspecken (1994) were utilized. Working from the individual interview transcripts, chunks of data, a group of sentences or a paragraph, were initially labeled using the individual's words verbatim. After the initial analysis, the in-vivo codes were grouped into categories based on topic of the code and context within the interview. Under the categories, the individual code phrases were listed based on lower code and higher (inferred) codes. The categories were then be further classified by theme and sub-theme with notations made within the original interview transcript as to the assigned theme. Finally, the recurrent themes were grouped as part of the reported data looking specifically at how the themes related to the original research question (Carspecken, 1994).

Validity of the data was to be established initially by participant review of the interview transcript. This member check was to provide an opportunity for the

participants to validate their statements (Merriam, 2009). This proved impossible

as none of the interviewees responded to requests to verify the transcripts. This

was followed by peer discussion based review of the original interview transcripts.

Peer discussion based review was also be done on the coding sequences to look for

correct linkages and thematic agreement. This second form of external analysis

completed the process of triangulation also cited by Merriam (2009) as a validation

technique.

Primarily, the data told the story of the decision process of students choosing

to not attend college. After the initial transcription of the interview, the researcher

attempted to provide the participants with the opportunity to review the data

transcripts and make corrections as they see fit. None responded to the

opportunity. As it is their story, it was important for them to have the opportunity

for them to verify it was the one they wanted to tell. This may have made the data

unusable for the study, but accuracy of reason for not attending college was more

important than the sheer number of interviews included. For data that significantly

changed, a compromise between the participant and the researcher was to be

attempted prior to data being excluded (Merriam, 2009).

<p align="center">**Summary**</p>

The selection of qualitative case study methods, described by Luker (2009),

provided an appropriate method to gather the actual descriptions the interviewees

provided. The ability to carry on a semi-structured conversation provided the

researcher with countless ways to explore the thought process of the selected

students. With this narrative and analysis, it was the hope of this researcher that

themes developed to provide guidance in how best to change the education

provided in the area of college access.

Chapter 4

Introduction

The History of the Research Site*

The school, here after referred to as Midwest Academy, is located in a medium sized metropolitan area and specifically is located at the center of the urban core as defined by the city. Founded in 1971, the original 15 students were exposed to the concept that solid education was critical to escaping poverty and the lack of direction that plagued the core as family income continued to decrease. Based on the innovative model developed to deal with the ever increasing poverty and all that goes along with it, the U.S. Department of Education recognized the innovation of the school and the school curriculum design has been utilized in developing over 70 alternative schools throughout the country.

The 1980's and 1990's were quite productive in the development of the Midwest Academy enrollment. In 1985, the Attorney General of the state allowed the school to receive public school funding by contracting with other public districts in the state. In 1989, the U.S. Department of Education funded a 4-year program based on the innovative Midwest Academy model and created another 70 alternative schools. The first contract, created under the 1985 directive, with a suburban school district gave the school the duty of overall management of a county Family Court School. This was followed by a contract to administer the Court's Detention Center School. Midwest Academy continues to serve students from these court appointed school districts as well as from other schools both in the metropolitan and suburban areas.

In 2007, Midwest Academy added the concept of team care by enhancing the

mental health services available to the students within the school building. Within

this innovative change to the educational model, students receive alternative

education and behavior health services side by side. In 2010, the Academy was

recognized as an official charter school sponsored by a local higher education

institution's Charter School Center, opening the school to increased public funding

and additional state resources. In its current incarnation, Midwest Academy is a

tuition-free, charter high school serving students age 14-20 who need an alternative

to traditional school.

Information generated from the website of the school, which cannot be identified to

protect the identity of the school and the participants

School Demographics*

Midwest Academy has a diverse population as indicated by the state of the

schools report produced by the State Department of Education. The school

demographics for the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 are represented in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 – Midwest Academy Basic Demographics

	2013	2014
Total Student Enrollment	216	254
% of African American Students	78.7	83.1
% of Latino American Students	18.5	13.8
% of Free and Reduced Lunch Students	82.3	85.1
% of Other Ethnicities	2.8	3.1

* Information gathered from the State of Missouri Department of Education State of the Schools Report

<u>School Performance Rates*</u>

Midwest Academy has had mediocre academic performance at best as is to be expected with the nature and make-up of the school. The trend exhibited by the school is to fall short of the major benchmarks of the state testing although they are given some leeway on test performance, as they are a classified as an alternative charter school and the sheer numbers of free and reduced lunches served by the school. The school performance rates on college going benchmarks for the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school year are broken down in figure 4.2. As far as college readiness is concerned, the students at Midwest Academy fall short of the ACT scores of the state and those required by 4-year institutions within the state.

Figure 4.2 – Midwest Academy's College Going Academic Results

	State	2012-2013	2013-2014
4 Year Graduation Rate	92% State Target	56.16%	57.81%
4 Year Graduation Rate – FRL	92% State Target	50%	59.26%
5 Year Graduation Rate	92% State Target	72.13%	72.22%
5 Year Graduation Rate – FRL	92% State Target	72.37%	70.37%
Graduates Going to 4 Year Institutions	Not Available	4.0%	17.9%
Graduates Going to 2 Year Institutions	Not Available	19.6%	52%
Graduates Going to Technical Institutions	Not Available	4.0%	10.7%
% Taking ACT	75% avg. 2 year	23.21%	12.73%
ACT Composite	21.7 avg. 2 year	16.3	14.7

* Information gathered from the State of Missouri Department of Education State of the Schools Report

In the above chart, several things are worth noting. First, although the enrollment of the school increased in 2014, the ACT performance rate dropped further behind the state average of 21.7 to 14.7. The 14.7 number is a drop from the 16.3 aggregate score the year before. This is in contrast to the numbers of those pursuing education beyond high school. In 2013, 27.6% of students pursued additional education which is significantly lower than the 80.6% of students pursuing education beyond high school. This is encouraging for not only the school but the student as the Academy strives to reach its target rates.

Three-Day Immersion at Midwest Academy

In order to get a better idea of the daily goings on at Midwest Academy, the researcher spent three days immersed in the school in the ethnographic tradition. The reporting that follows looks at the day to day challenges of the staff, students, and administrators as they navigate the process of educating their scholars. These rich descriptions were made possible by the school giving the researcher free reign over the school and ensuring that access was granted to a variety of classes and school activities including the rehearsal for graduation.

Day 1 – Graduation Rehearsal

Due to the size of the school, graduation is not held on the premises of the school but rehearsal is held in the gymnasium at the school. As I arrived at the school to observe rehearsal, I noticed that there was little order in the gym, in fact, it was total chaos, exemplified by the scattering of students who neither cared to listen

to the adults or who were oblivious to the activities surrounding them. As the staff tried to get the students in line to begin practice, I was reminded of the television commercial where cowboys were attempting to herd cats. At final count, twelve students were missing for the practice and place holders are taped to their chairs so as to present a true representation of what the ceremony will entail and to ensure that the students are in the order of the program upon which the announcement of names will be based. As practice continued, a steady stream of late students began to filter in not to practice but to get their graduation tickets. Practice seemed like a nuisance to the late students, as they sauntered in and had little regard for the clock or the commands of the adults running the practice. Based on my observations, they were simply there to get their graduation ticket.

As practice began, getting the students in a single file line took at a minimum five minutes as the students tended to cluster and chat with their friends. The first attempt at the grand march into the seats of honor resembled a hundred yard dash rather than a controlled, orderly march befitting the honor of the day. It reminded me of a Mardi Gras parade with countless performers, court jesters and a noise level that rivaled the celebrants along Bourbon Street. At this point, the school executive stepped in for the first time and began addressing the students using athletic based clichés, such as "you play how you practice," reminding me of the many times I hear the same saying in all of the gymnasiums I have previously spent time. He reminded the students that this was the celebration of their accomplishments and they should relish this opportunity to march slowly and quietly in front of their families with their heads held high to show their pride in this great accomplishment. This was

just the beginning of the pep talks and direction given by the school executive.

Following the pep talk, there was a five-minute practice of sitting down in unison.

After about the fifth time of trying to get the students to sit at the same time, the

frustration level of the staff was building to almost a fevered pitch. Finally, one of

the guidance counselors stepped in and took the lead and the group was able to sit

all at once.

At the conclusion of sitting practice, the school executive again stepped

forward and provided details of the ceremony and defined the behavioral

expectations the school has for the students. The ceremony was to be held at a local

Holiday Inn where the graduates were treated to a banquet followed by the actual

ceremony. The students are informed that not only will their families be in

attendance but so will alumni of Midwest Academy and donors, who have made the

running of the school and the recently opened new addition possible. The school

executive then began to discuss the behavioral expectations the school has for the

graduating seniors. First and foremost, the students are expected to behave like

young ladies and young gentlemen and walk across the stage with dignity and class.

If they stray from this expectation and "clown around" as they are crossing the

stage, the school will hold their diploma until community service hours are

completed. These hours could be as few as 10 but as many as 30 depending on the

offense. The purpose of these hours was to serve as a negative deterrent to bad

behavior. This draws a concert of grumbles from the students but it doesn't appear

the school executive or the faculty and staff are going to budge on this requirement.

Following the graduation practice, a survey was distributed to the students. Completion of the survey was required to get the golden tickets – the tickets to the graduation ceremony. Each student was allocated four tickets to the ceremony. People, including family, who did not have tickets to the ceremony, would be turned away as space was limited and in fairness to all students, the number had to be consistent. Those students who had not gotten their senior cap and gown pictures were denied the surveys until the pictures were taken. Needless to say, the heckling taking place during the pictures created quite a racket and nearly drowned out every conversation in the gym. One by one, the students completed the survey and received their tickets to the ceremony. Most stood looking at them awestruck as if they couldn't believe the day had finally come. In fact, they loitered in the gym as if they were unsure if they wanted to leave the school they had known and that had facilitated them reaching this day. They carried on idle conversation, sat in the bleachers in groups without much being said, or they grabbed a basketball and just started shooting. It appeared as though they were finding ways to kill time within the confines of the school. The trepidation and delay in leaving the school was different than anything I had witnessed during my time working with high school seniors, but the longer I thought about it, it occurred to me that this may have been the only safe place for many as the neighborhood from wince many of the students came from was notorious for violence and other socially unacceptable behaviors and for others was their saving grace and last chance to complete high school. They appeared to revel in their accomplishment before they left the building. I felt

privileged to witness this student life experience and it gave me a greater

appreciation of the students I would be interviewing in the near future.

When the observations were completed and I sat down to write my notes

and this section of the results, it struck me that for may of the students, this may be

the last contact they have with the educational system. The uncertainty of their

future made me as a higher education researcher want to pull each individual aside

an help them apply for any kind of higher education, whether it be 4-year

institution, community or junior college or technical trades school. If not school, I

wanted to drive them personally to the job center to connect them with services that

could help them make the transition to society easier. Unfortunately, it was not my

job to save them all but to observe their actions and thus I had to respect their

decisions about their future. I wondered, however, if they had been exposed to

college information earlier, if that would have changed their path. It is definitely

something to be explored at a later date.

Classroom Observation

Part of examining the educational decision-making of the students,

involved examining the academic background or environment in which their

education was occurring. To accomplish this goal, a three-day immersion into the

school atmosphere was conducted. During this immersion, the researcher became a

student for three days. This included rotating classes with the students and

basically following day-to-day life of the students at Midwest Academy. This

included observing any where from 6-8 classes, following the bell schedule and

allotting time to make it up and down several sets of stairs to be on time for classes.

In fact, the researcher even got in trouble for going down the up staircase.

Day Two – A Regular Day at Midwest Academy

Day two started in an English classroom. The classroom was painted a distinctive lime green color that seemed unusual for a high school classroom and more resembled the bright colors one would see in an elementary school or preschool class. The room was arranged in multiple learning stations, with computers outlining the room for individual work and desks arranged in the middle for traditional classroom instruction. As the students filtered into the classroom, there was a playful banter amongst them about nothing in particular, as topics ranged from the awards ceremony at the end of the day, to the lunch menu, to the music on someone's iPhone, and the raining weather outside. As they filed to their assigned seats, one student noticed the presence of the researcher and proclaimed, "we have a visitor today. She is very important." As I sat there I thought, "so much for remaining anonymous in this class." The class began in the usual manner, with the focus being the use of attention getters to drive readers into a story.

In order to control the classroom, the classroom teacher used a technique where he would hold his closed fist just above his head until the class quieted down. This quiet was short-lived, however, as a late arriving student, donning a surgical mask burst into the room creating a rather large ruckus and causing the class to become like a group of preschoolers arguing over a new toy. A lively exchange between the students about the medical mask, "see he has Ebola," stated a random student referring to the recent African viral outbreak. The teacher pointed out to the student in the surgical mask "that mask is not real inconspicuous." The student

in the surgical mask followed up with "the disease is scary, but it's not Ebola!"

The casual uncontrolled atmosphere of the classroom was a bit concerning as it seemed to detract from the educational process. Students addressed the teacher by first name and headphones and iPods were regularly out and drew attention from the learning process. In fact, several students worked legitimately on absolutely nothing except comparing their playlists on their musical devices. One student looked out the window and announced to the class it was still raining. Along with pronouncing it was still raining, the student analyzed what his morning would've been like had the power gone out "I wish the power was out this morning. I'd still be in my bed and not here." It was at this time that the researcher observed the teacher go through the first re-direct process. Midwest Academy uses a three-step redirect process. On the third redirect, the student is sent to the principal's office. This particular student was belligerent, loud and generally, disruptive to the learning environment. The first redirect was given due to the student talking loudly about everything but the lesson they were supposed on which they were to be working. The second redirect was necessitated when the student pulled out her iPhone and began listening to music. The final redirect was issued when the student began a conversation with students in the hallway and resulted in the student being sent to the principal's office for behavioral adjustment. This discipline sparked a thought about the messages being sent to those students who were constantly being sent out of the classroom. What message was being portrayed to these students? My thoughts on the matter dealt with the overtone of failure, a negative attitude toward education and a general lack of respect for authority. This brought up the

question that if these students could be redirected, they may be college candidates but they are not getting the message as their behavior is a distraction in the classroom. It also made me consider whether the acting out had something to do with the student being bored by the content and felt marginalized by the remedial nature of what they were being asked to work. These would be important considerations as the student's educational career went forward.

The next class of the day was chemistry. In this classroom, the teacher stood out immediately, as she tried to make a connection with each student as they entered the classroom. She made a concerted effort to greet each student as they arrived for the day.   As class began, the students' lethargy was highly noticeable in stark contrast to the energy level of the teacher. To counteract their lack of energy, the teacher instructed the students to raise their heads and to listen to the instructions as she gave those for the next day. The instructions were important as the teacher was going to be gone at a wedding the next day. Once those instructions were given, she moved onto explaining the quarter quiz, which the students were to take on this day. There was a general consternation that reverberated through the room as the students thought the quiz was on Friday. Using a soothing voice, the teacher redirected the students to pay attention to the instructions. What was striking in this class was the amount of time the teacher spent attending to the general affect of the students.

In contrast to the English classroom, this classroom is in the new addition of the building. It is bright, inviting and one in which you would expect to see in a traditional American high school. One whole wall was covered by a wall to ceiling

whiteboard and scattered about the room were student projects, as this is also a French classroom. The teacher uses the concept of THINKing before you speak. The T - reminds the student is it time, H - asked the student is it helpful, I - asked is it inspiring, N - asked is it necessary, and the K -asked is it kind. It is this philosophy the teacher uses as the general means of running her classroom.

As the teacher hands out the quiz, the students are for the most part engaged. The teacher walked around and gave encouraging and helpful post-it-notes to the students, especially for the questions they were struggling with. One thing of note was the amount of time the teacher worked with individual students to keep those students focused and on task. In fact, the teacher spent at least five minutes with one student who displayed a negative attitude towards the test. She spent a great deal of time whispering encouragement into the student's ear in order to get him to work on the test with a better attitude. To encourage the students, the teacher made it a point to say, "I'm very proud of everyone's efforts, but solving every problem, working on vocab words, analyzing data, I am very proud of you guys!" In general, the students in this class left with a heightened sense of positive self worth as they accomplished high school chemistry to the approval of the teacher. This positivity in a college preparatory class may make them believe that they are capable of so much more.

As the first students completed the quiz, the teacher had to take one student out of the classroom in order to have a discussion about his behavior. The researcher was impressed by the fact that the teacher chose to have this discussion away from everyone else. Unfortunately while the teacher was out in the classroom,

another student fell asleep and was no longer working on the quiz. In addition to the one who decided to take a nap, another student gave up on the quiz altogether. When the teacher returned to the classroom, she had to redirect the student and returned the quiz to the student for his completion.

The students completed the quiz prior to the class ending. The teacher then began a conversation with the students about a variety of topics. The teacher began by asking everyone's weekend plans. The answers were "take people stuff," "go to a friend's house," "work at the Salvation Army," and the final response was "nothing." From those answers, as well as what she saw of the students as they performed on the quiz, she began to break down the positive things she saw from not only the person but their performance on the recent quiz. The teacher started by saying, "I thought, in general, you all started out slow on the quiz, but you all were trying and attempting to do well on the quiz. That shows an amazing amount of perseverance and maturity. We're going to look at one thing you're all good at." The teacher then went around the room and asked each student what they thought they were good at. "I'll start," began the teacher," I think I'm a good friend." The next person stepped up and stated, "I'm a good mom." One by one the students began by stating "I'm a good student," "I'm a good writer and good at bargaining," "I'm good at basketball and presenting," and "I'm good at smiling and I'm a positive leader." As most of the students come from low income poverty-stricken neighborhoods, I thought it was an enlightened way to send the students on their way thinking something positive about themselves.

Following the lunch break, the English 9 classroom was the next to be visited.

This classroom was also lime green, as were several others within the school. It appeared to the researcher that they may have gotten this florescent green paint at a hardware end of the year sale, as many of the rooms were painted the same color. The teacher, in this case, decorated the room with brightly colored posters, which pointed out various language arts skills. As often occurs after lunch break, there were several late students and the teacher had difficulty getting the class organized, due to the students reacting as people do after eating a meal, the students were either sugar buzzed or lethargic. Many students didn't have their books and had to get up and get them from a box of common books to be shared. In this particular class, as it is a freshman level class, they were reading the book the ***Lord of the Flies***. The set up for this class was to read aloud, in the round, with the teacher periodically stopping to define words and point out important elements of the plot. Each student was expected to read when their time came. One student spoke up and protested by stating, "my throat is sore so I can't read." The teacher replied, "then you can stay after school and read quietly to me one-on-one." It was amusing how quickly that student was cured.

The teacher in this classroom struggled to keep the students engaged in the reading aloud project. As one student, who had particular trouble reading was attempting to read this passage, another student was wrestling around and sniffing a bottle of lotion. One student just got up and left, causing the teacher to step into the hallway to check on him. She then returned to the classroom and faced the challenge of waking 2 to 3 students up from their after lunch nap. As she is juggling these many tasks, she is stopping the reading to point out important characters and

important pieces of the plot of the book. Approximately five minutes after he

walked out of the classroom, the student who left returned. This created another set

of distractions for all of the students. As one observed the things going on in this

class, it is clear to see the teacher getting frustrated to the point that when a student

doesn't know where they are in the book, the teacher exasperatingly proclaims, "this

is why we follow along to not waste time."

The teacher gave the class time to begin group work on a plot and characters

worksheet that she had previously handed out. Unfortunately, when the time is

given, no one moved into their groups. The teacher was forced to exact discipline

which changed the positive vibe of the classroom to one of tension between the

teacher and the students. It was startling how quickly the mood changed and how

the students attitude toward the teacher and the assignment took on a dark tone,

much like the book they were reading. After some threatening encouragement, the

class did break up into groups and sit in their group. As the group work was being

observed, it was noticed that very little work was being done, as no one had their

books open, had notebooks or even had in their possession a writing implement.

The teacher reminded the class that the assignment they were working on was due

tomorrow and that they may not have class time available the next day to finish the

project. The teacher also reminded the class that grades must be completed by

tomorrow and that there would be a notebook check, in addition to the group work

they were trying to complete. She again tried, somewhat successfully, to get them

on task and to get them to focus on completing their work. All in all, in this

particular classroom there was a lot of wandering around, very little engagement,

and a very frustrated teacher. After she had restated the questions and assignments for the seventh time and reminds the class of their binder checks for the fifth time, the teacher basically gave up for the day.

The final class observed for the day was an English Language Learning class. This class was held in a converted custodial closet, which the teacher had attempted to dress up, using brilliantly colored posters and other accompaniments of the Latino culture. The class was focused on the discussion of a murder case, which was made up of interviews, police reports, and evidence reports and was explained by the teacher as containing some explicit content. As the teacher began his discussion of the previous day's lessons, the cell phone on his desk went off causing the students to jump on the class punishment of a $10 fine. The teacher jokingly agreed to the fine as he appointed note takers for each group.

As the audio began, one of the note takers had fallen asleep only one minute into the presentation. And fact, two of the six students have their heads down and are not actively engaged in listening to the interview. The teacher proceeded around the classroom and aroused each student and attempted to get them engaged in the class. The classroom is arranged in the round and students who had missed the previous day were actively integrated into groups with stronger students, who were there the day before. What was interesting about this particular class is that the students tended to self-police. In fact, one student spoke up and to quiet the rest of the class down by saying that this was "class time, not talking time." Although there was a question as to the appropriateness of using a real life murder trial as part of the classroom curriculum, this was the bright spot of the day as far as

student engagement and classroom participation. It helped to end day one on a

bright note.

Day Three – End of the First Quarter

Unfortunately for the third day of immersion, the highlight of the day

occurred in the first hour observed. The English Language Learning classroom was

observed for a second time due to a scheduling mix-up by the school. This

classroom of English Language Learners was completing a self-evaluation rubric of

themselves as well as an evaluation of the teacher. Spanish was spoken frequently

in this classroom, although all assignments were handed out in English. Students

were very actively engaged in filling out these assessments and asked questions

such as "what if I fall in between the numbers?" To which the teacher responded,"

explain why you fall between the numbers." As the students turned in their self-

assessment, they were handed out raffle tickets for good attendance and behavior.

After they picked up the raffle tickets, they were given the evaluation of the teacher,

to which the teacher pleaded for the students to "be sincere." At the completion of

the evaluation, the teacher took time to address with the students things they felt he

was doing well as well as the things that they thought he could improve.

This teacher had amazing control of his classroom.   There was a genuine

level of respect between the teacher and the students. This was exemplified by the

way the teacher addressed the students as well as the way the students addressed

the teacher. In fact, if there was a disagreement between the students and the

teacher, the teacher took the student one-on-one into the hallway as to not

embarrass the student in front of the others. The teacher was quick to apologize for

noise coming from the library, even though he had no control over the class that was utilizing the library. In every interaction observed between this teacher and his students, a supportive learning environment was fostered and deemed to be the most important role the teacher could play. This positive environment allowed for the students to be enthusiastically engaged in the lesson and to participate with vigor in the case presented to them. The constant encouragement of the teach also worked to increase the self-esteem of each student, even those who were not actively involved in the lesson. This positivity carried outside the room as every student left with a big smile on their face. This was refreshing to see.

In the next classroom, the researcher was greeted by a bright and cheery yellow paint with various math procedural posters on the wall. The class instructed during this time was personal-finance. This was the first experience with the Plato lab-based educational system. Students sat at individual computers wearing headphones and working at their own pace. Or at least that was the goal. To begin with, the teacher had to give the instructions several times as the students were speaking over each other and asking, "where it be at?" The teacher pointed out that students could work on the Plato system at home to improve their grades, which the researcher found humorous, as the students pointed out many of them did not have computers at home.

This class also gave the researcher a chance to see firsthand the difficulties confronting the teachers when dealing with difficult students. After a lengthy discussion of personal space with a particular student, the teacher had to redirect the student from Facebook to the identity theft loss lesson. In the process of the

redirect, the teacher touched the student, which caused the student to question in a very loud attention seeking voice, "why do I have teachers who insist on touching me?" This proceeded into a heated debate between the teacher and the student about preferring to do work at home and eventually lead to the student leaving the classroom and the teacher walking off. As the scene unfolded, an entire side of the room was now surfing Facebook. The general attitude of the students, in this class gave some insight into the difficulties confronting the teachers, who have students with behavioral issues in their class. It also showed how disruptive said students could be.

The next class observed was physical education, which was held in the school gymnasium. A substitute teacher was instructing this class on the day of observation. This class was a perfect example of chaos in action. I have witnessed overcrowded daycares that had more control than the teacher in the gymnasium. To begin the class, there was to be a formation in the middle of the gym, where stretching and basic warm-up procedures were to take place. This never happened, as students continued to wander aimlessly about the gym, get out sports equipment, and a variety of students sat in the bleachers and begin taking naps. Students not in the class were problematic as they wandered in and out. Students hid in the hallways and some set very close to each other gossiping about other students, A couple of young lovebirds couldn't keep their hands off of each other. Music played in the background until one of the students "jacked with the volume" at which point the music was turned off. By the time the class ended, half the class was missing. I have never observed a human as relieved as the sub was when the bell rang.

"Three, two, one voices off!" If these words were heard once in this classroom, they were heard at least 30 times during the one-hour class of theatre staging, the next class observed. At first impression, it is obvious that this class has a large number of students with big personalities. The room itself is decorated with several theater posters, bulletin boards with theatrical terms, and theater masks prominently hanging from the wall. Movable set pieces are spread out throughout the room. The students were very distractible and seemed even more unruly once they noticed the researcher's presence.

This is the first time that class self-regulation was observed albeit unsuccessfully. The teacher was constantly redirecting students to listen as she explained the lesson on set design and layout. The teacher proclaimed exasperatingly' "you guys are acting like it's a full moon on Friday!" Which led another student to proclaim" did you see the blood Moon? I seen it!" As the assignment was given and class progressed, the students became more focused and more engaged in the overall lesson. They were asking relevant questions and putting significant effort into designing a set that resembled their living room or a living room that they hope to have. It was a depressing thought that students had to wish to have furniture in their living rooms.

The next class observed began like this:

"Zero talking! I'm very angry right now!"

One student was removed immediately.

"I'm angry as hell! I have zero tolerance for talking!"

Second student was removed

Third student left for drug counseling. Fourth student leaves the classroom.

Fifth student leaves the classroom. This mass exodus showed all of the other students in the class that there are consequences for bad behavior and that doing right goes much further than clowning around. The concept of consequences is a valuable lesson that all persons need to learn as they move from the comfort of the high school and into society. Without an understanding of consequences, the life to be led by these students may have dire consequences.

All of these students have been sent to team discipline as they had behaved poorly for the sub the day before. Had notification not been given to the researcher prior to this class beginning, there would have been a general feeling of shock and awe at the tactics of this teacher. Fortunately for the teacher, the tactic worked as the rest of the class was quiet as a church mouse and engaged in their activities. This was the self-paced Plato classroom where students took classes in criminal justice, psychology, medical terminology and a variety of other classes necessary for graduation. Toward the end of the class, invitations to the parent teacher conferences were handed out by the teacher. At the end of class, students who had received 95% attendance and no referrals for the previous week were invited to, Madera where raffles and a celebration of their good behavior was held. It should be said for this teacher having observed her previously and found her to be one of the better teachers at the school, her frustration with the students' lack of respect for her classroom, in her absence, was understandable. She apologized profusely for having to lash out at her class on this particular day, as this was not typically how she acted. She was reassured that the behavior although shocking was understood.

After spending two days immersed in the student life at Midwest Academy, the educational challenges presented to not only the students but also the staff in getting these students to graduate from high school, let alone go to college. That being said, there are a lot of quality educators and administrators, who genuinely care about the well being of their students. This includes the desire for those students to attend higher education. It then becomes an issue of overriding themes present, within the school and in the student body, which prevents the students from choosing college.

<u>Interviewee Demographics</u>

Due to the timing of the interviews, gathering students presented a challenge but a pool of 12 students volunteered to be interviewed for this preliminary study of college transition plans and direction. The ethnicity of the volunteers fell along two lines of students – African-American and those of Latino or Hispanic dissent. They were equally divided with six students falling within each ethnicity. Seven of the students interviewed were female while five were male. Of each gender, one male was African-American and four were of Latino or Hispanic dissent. Each student expressed college aspirations but Figure 4.3 examines the ethnicity of each student and the preparations they have made to make the transition from high school to college. Pseudonyms and brief un-identifying descriptions of the students precede their college preparation.

Figure 4.3 – Student Demographics

Pseudonyms	Student Ethnicity and Description	College Readiness Step Completion
Trey	African-American male	Has applied and been

	student, suffered a near death experience that shaped college decision process	accepted to a Community College with a scholarship offer, graduating a semester late
Jackie	African-American female with a bright smile and a signature fashion style	Has not applied to college or completed the FAFSA, contemplating a career in the military prior to attending college, graduating a semester late
James	Latino or Hispanic-American male student, very quiet and soft spoken	Plans to work before attending college, has not completed the ACT or the FAFSA, has not met the math requirements for 4-year institutions
Erin	African-American female who lives with grandmother as parents are inconsistent in their ability to parent	Taking spring off after graduating a semester late, planning on attending a 4-year institution in the fall of 2015, has not taken ACT and unfamiliar with the ACT process and dates
Calvin	Latino or Hispanic-American male, very soft-spoken and polite, boxer	Graduating in 4 years, has not completed the FAFSA, does not know the order of college degrees, plans to complete an associate's degree and progress directly to a master's degree
Kate	African-American female, has 2 year old son, skipped freshman and sophomore year	No college applications or FAFSA completed, short of the academic requirements for a 4-year institution
Mike	Hispanic or Latino-American male, MMA fighter, soft spoken and very quiet	Has not applied to colleges or completed FAFSA, unsure of career, deciding between plumbing and certified nursing assistant
Jane	African-American female, wants to wait approximately four years before attending college	Has not completed college applications, FAFSA or ACT, original plan was to not attend college at all
Alexandra	Hispanic or Latino-American female, main focus is finishing high school	Has not completed applications, FAFSA or ACT, overwhelmed by the process of attending college, graduating a semester late
Pete	Hispanic or Latino-American	Plans attending in fall, 2015,

	male, very quiet and slightly built, ELL student	will enter the workforce and asked for assistance finding jobs, no ACT, FAFSA or college applications completed
Kimberly	African-American female, ambitious and fiery, very direct and provided only short, direct answers	Has participated in a mentoring program at a local college, short on math requirements for a 4-year institution, no ACT or FAFSA
Nicole	Hispanic or Latino-American, may be moving to Florida, young mother of a 4 month old child	Has taken ACT and received a 23, no college applications completed or FAFSA

Consistent Educational Based Themes

Introduction to the Themes

When analyzing the data, several themes were recurrent in the interview

transcripts and the classroom observations. Students, who were interviewed,

consistently stated they were planning on going to college in the fall but had not

completed an application, the ACT, scholarship applications, or the FAFSA. As the

themes are explored deeper, it becomes a bit clearer as to not only the experience of

the students but ways to potentially change the problems identified.

The Information Black Hole

With a plethora of information available about what it takes to go to and the

steps in attending college, it's hard to believe that students were lacking information

about the process. Consistently, however, throughout the interviews the students

seemed to not understand the college going process. Whether it be a lack of

understanding regarding applying to college, failure to complete the academic

requirements to attend college, or a general lack of understanding regarding their

career choice, almost without exception the students responded to the questions

posed by the researcher, in a manner that led to the belief that there was an information black hole, occurring at the high school level. For this particular student demographic, this information black hole could be considered one critical theme as to why they choose not to attend college immediately after high school.

Several of the interview questions focused on what the student's plans were following completion of high school, what their career choice was, and have they gotten any information regarding colleges and the requirements to get in to their college. Of the interviewees, all but three plan to enter college upon graduation. The three remaining students plan to enter the workforce with college attendance occurring sometime further down the road. Jane stated in her interview "my current plans are to work full-time, get a job, and look for colleges for me to go to so I can become a radiologist in four years." I found Jane to be the exception rather than the rule.

When speaking with those students who chose to go to college immediately following graduation, there was a lack of information regarding what was going to be required of them to start school the very next semester. For example, in his interview, James pointed out that he plans to go to California State, but he did not know which one. In fact, He did not know that there was more than one. When asked if he was planning on going to school immediately following graduation, James stated that he planned to go to college right away but he had not applied to any colleges as of May. James stated, when asked about his plans to go to California to attend college and which California State Institution he was choosing to attend, "I don't know which institution of, I never really got there before. I just know I want to

go to California." This overall lack of information about the various educational choices within the state of California created the potential that James would be unsuccessful in his plan to attend college.

Along the same lines, Kimberly stated that she was planning on going to college immediately following graduation from high school. Unfortunately for Kimberly, she had not taken the ACT, which was required for admission to the historically black college and university she was choosing to attend. When asking Kimberly where she was getting her information regarding the requirements to attend college, Kimberly replied, "no one person gave me information." Kimberly went on to point out that she had spoken with numerous persons regarding attending college yet she had no knowledge of the ACT requirement for college attendance or the information necessary to complete financial aid paperwork.

The Role of the Guidance Counselor and the Educational Staff

What was remarkable about this portion of the interviews was without question each student could identify a member of the Midwest Academy professional staff that they spoke to on a regular basis. What makes this remarkable is that college was not often one of the topics addressed by the professional staff. Midwest Academy employs a college counselor as well as an army of guidance counselors and mental health counselors. Additional resources available to the students are the numerous teachers in the classroom with the students everyday. The answers to the questions focusing on meaningful interaction with the School staff were a bit troubling.

All but one of the students interviewed had a substantive conversation with a

member of the school staff within the previous two weeks of the interview. Mike,

for example, could not recall the last time he spoke to a member of the school staff,

regarding going to college. Calvin stated "he spoke to his counselors every day" but

that college was not commonly the topic discussed. The discussions focused on

everything from life to high school to the occasional college conversation." In

discussing his interactions with his school guidance counselor, Trey pointed out that

his initial conversations with his guidance counselor were arguments rather then

discussions about going to college. In fact, initially Trey did not plan on attending

college. Alexandria gave the example of the difficult conversations that are

occurring between students and guidance counselors and the disjointed nature of

those conversations. "Well I talk a lot to my guidance counselor. And we talked

about like my credits and how I can advance getting more. Cause we like talk about

college but honestly I don't know my plans. Like I plan on going to college, I really

do, like that's my plan, it's like I'm going to college. But I don't know how or what

scholarships I can get because it's overwhelming thinking about all that. Cause my

main focus right now is just finishing my credits in high school."

There are some issues to be taken when evaluating the students' comments

regarding their interaction with the school staff. The college counselor for Midwest

Academy teaches a senior seminar class regarding college attendance, the steps to

get there, as well as many other life skills that the students will need when they

leave the academy. Some of the students also mentioned that their interactions with

members of the school staff were extremely beneficial in changing their mind to

reconsider college. Aaron described an interaction with one of her teachers that

greatly shaped her desire to attend college. "So as I got my work she starts talking to me about college stuff and if she's seen how smart I was and how fast I got done with, so she's like college would be perfect for you. I think you should do pathways this year but she was trying to get me more involved in school. And of course, I didn't want to get too much involved in school because I didn't know anyone. So then this year, I had told the college counselor but I would like to do pathways but I asked to late because I started I guess is started when the school started, so I wasn't really prepared or didn't say too much about it. So she enrolled me for spring semester and when I did that, it seemed as if everything was good for me everything was going on the right path."

Completion of the Three Critical Tasks

As previously identified there are three critical tasks that must be completed in order for students to transition from high school to college. The first of these to be discussed is to graduate from high school. The students interviewed for the study will all graduate from high school, although for some it will be a semester late. Unfortunately for all of the students, this is the only step that 100% of them will have completed by the time the study is published.

The second critical task to be addressed here is the completion of a college preparatory school curriculum, specifically one that meets the admission requirements for a four-year institution. Most of the students interviewed did not begin their academic career at Midwest Academy so they started school at an academic deficit. Their focus then became meeting the graduation requirements for high school, which left them short of college admission requirements. With the

exception of two students, all of the interviewees fell short on the foreign-language requirement. Although they may have taken two years of foreign language, they were not two years of the same foreign-language. Five of the students fell short of the college admissions science requirements. Ten of the students fell short of the college math requirements. All but two of the students completed the college admissions English requirements.

The final critical task for a student to transition from high school to college is to complete the college admissions requirements. This includes completing the college application, the federal financial aid paperwork, and completion of the ACT. Of the things completed by the interviewees, only one had completed most of the an actual college application. As these interviews were conducted the weekend of graduation, this was a concern for those students planning on attending school in the fall. None of the students had completed the federal financial aid documentation. In order for this to be considered complete, the student must have not only completed the initial documentation but also the verification process paperwork. And finally of the students interviewed, only one had actually completed the ACT.

The First Generation Dilemma

All of the students who submitted to the interview process were considered first-generation as they had little knowledge of their parent's actual academic accomplishments. This creates a dilemma for the students as they are trying to accomplish something that few if any of their immediate family has accomplished, that is going to college. When asked whether the students knew anyone from their

family or close group of friends that had attended college most answered yes. When

asked if the experiences of those they knew who went to college had influenced

their choice to attend college, it was nearly a 50-50 split between yes and no. For all

of the students interviewed in this particular process, without question, they all

understood the pride their families would have should they accomplish graduating

from college.

> James made it clear "I made the decision to attend college for me and my
>
> nephews. Cause one of my sisters didn't finish school and they wanted more
>
> and gave me the drive so they all never have to worry."

> Jackie stated "because my grandma's health and also when I was, Mike, for
>
> my dental assistants, he really talked to me about my teeth was telling me a
>
> lot. So basically my grandma…she got high blood pressure she got on the
>
> borders of diabetes…..She had a stroke like two years ago and you got to eat
>
> healthy basically, you can't just be eating fast food all the time, as a dietitian,
>
> they take you there if you got an exercise to tell you what's good and what's
>
> not good to put on a food chart for you and basically I want to make sure I'm
>
> meant my grandma in good condition because I don't want to see her go."

> Katie replied, "that would mean a lot because my mama is only people that
>
> really went……to my mama my brother graduated from college. Anybody
>
> else in my home didn't graduate from college, nobody. Still, in beginning no

one graduate from high school. I didn't go to high school. And that like it did mean a lot to my grandmother."

Erin knew emphatically, "it would mean a lot. It would mean a whole lot. Cause my parents didn't go, my mom had a full ride to go to college, but she didn't go she had me, but she didn't know that you could bring me, so she regret her decision that you want the best for her kids. So she want all her kids to go to college, graduate and become something. My dad, he did graduate from high school so I want to at least do that for him and go on further my education. And my grandmother, I just want to make everybody in my family probably, coming from past bit where I had to go and where I am now."

Pete discussed, "it would mean a lot like because a lot of people my family don't really think been to college, message and then I'll be successful. A lot of us haven't when I want to go."

Trey professed," I know it would mean a lot to everyone but because like all the time I've been through, but the bad decisions I made, I, I've been a bad person, honestly and for me to graduate into my life around like it would be like "Wow never thought he could do."

Nicole expressed, "it be like, it means a lot because my mom out of, like grandma had 19 kids and because of pair with twins the other were triplets and the rest like I am not all who made it, but the triplets & so and all it ended up being like 11 or whatever but yeah I like out of all, they were all girls and one boy so out of all of them my mom was the only ones actually graduated went to college and stuff so like it kind of be like a big thing for me to graduate just like a go to college and stuff because a lot of them didn't go to college, just my cousin, and then the other ones, they were more like him getting into Hispanic culture like being stay at home mom so yeah it be really different."

These are just some of the examples of what it would mean to the families of the students should they go to college and be successful. This data has value as in my personal experience working with this student demographic, the support of the family is extremely critical as students find themselves strattling two very different world when they attend college. They must learn to balance the intellectual space of the college with the trials and tribulations of going home and dealing with those who chose not to leave the neighborhood. The best way for the students to get support in this endeavor is the have the parents on board to provide a safety net in the home neighborhood. This is only going to happen if we increase the knowledge available to the students, encouragement to complete the three tasks, and show them a way out of poverty and out of the urban core.

Summary of Findings

The most common finding when analyzing the data collected is that the students have a desire to go to college but lack information to do so. This creates a situation that perpetuates the myth that first-generation low income students do not want to continue their education. Not only so they lack information, they also are not prepared academically to tackle the rigors of 4-year institutions an for the most part would need remediation to be completed, most likely, at a community college. To best help the students understand where they stand both on the three critical tasks and the academic requirements necessary for 4-year institutions, it is and will be important to track where the students are at and provide constant information as to where they stand in the steps to attend college. Additionally, when the student falls short of academic requirements, it will be important to lay out the next steps to assist them in navigating the higher education maze. This can be facilitated by both the high school in cooperation with the surrounding colleges. Thematic issues which are presented as problematic can be eliminated if the school and higher education talk to the students and understand that these students have a firm grasp on what happens when they fail to transition to college. When summarizing the overall vibe of the interviews with the exiting students, I think this exchange between the researcher and Kimberly summed it up best:

Researcher: "Um, what has been the most hopeful for you and helped you make your decision to attend college?"

Kimberly: " I don't want to be a bucket."

Researcher: "you don't want to be a bucket?"

Kimberly: "yeah, you know, people who are out there begging you don't have no money or stuff so they have a bucket. No, they are called the bucket."

Kimberly knows the value of going to college in a primitive way as far as motivation is concerned. She doesn't want to be a beggar on the street banging on a buck to make ends meat. She wants to better herself to avoid the pitfalls of a neighborhood that is engulfed in poverty where many lack hope. Kimberly has hope, but she needs help to navigate the maze that is college.

Chapter 5

Summary

It was obvious, through the observations at Midwest Academy, the work facing the school is a difficult due to the student population attending the school. However, there were several opportunities that could have been utilized to promote a greater understanding about the importance of attending higher education. It is those observations of missed opportunities that generated themes from not only from the observations and the time spent in school, but from the insight produced during the interviews of the outgoing seniors. Through the analysis of all data, there are several areas that could be improved through collaboration between Midwest Academy, higher education institutions within the metropolitan area of the Academy and through concerted outreach to feeder schools not only at the junior high level but also at the elementary level within the urban core of the city.

As a charter school of one of the universities within the Metropolitan area, there appears to be an opportunity for more interaction between Midwest Academy and the University. Promotion of higher education to the students of Midwest Academy does not need fall only to the charter host institution. There are approximately 23 institutions of higher education within the Metropolitan area of Midwest Academy. With the exception of a wall of college pennants, there is minimal advertisement of higher education institutions within the walls of Midwest Academy. This creates an overall lack of exposure to the concept of college attendance for those exceptionally bright students that attend Midwest Academy and that would be more than capable of handling the rigors of higher education.

<u>Conclusions</u>

When examining the results obtain from observation interviews with students, it appears that the educational process regarding higher education attendance provided those students at Midwest Academy could be improved through several different avenues. This conclusion comes from the fact that the students at Midwest Academy often fail to complete the basic procedures described by Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) as necessary to successfully transition to college. There are multiple entities having responsibilities in introducing a new level of preparation that could be instituted at Midwest Academy. These are detailed in Appendix B. The implementation of the plan described in Appendix B could greatly enhance the Academy's ability to prepare their students to transition to higher education or at the very least to have a better understanding of what the process is. Higher education institutions must accept some responsibility as their ultimate goal is to increase enrollment but they are doing little to facilitate the transition to higher education of the first-generation low-income student. Without this education, higher education institutions are missing a tremendous opportunity to tap into the largest available student base for recruitment.

A concept relating directly to the students, who have aspirations of attending higher education institutions focuses on the ability of this particular student group to have self-motivation, self-confidence and the measure of resilience as they plan their future. Thus, some responsibility must fall on the students, as they are the true architects of their future. They must take the encouragement from the high-quality staff working at Midwest Academy and ask every question possible so that they

understand the process and start the process in a timely manner to ensure that they

meet the deadlines of not only institutions of higher learning but also scholarship

and Financial aid deadlines set forth by the government. This conclusion was

garnered from the interviews, conducted in May, where students had yet to apply

for college or federal financial aid. This late start in the process potentially

eliminated the ability of the students to receive Pell grants and need-based

scholarships.

Finally, the school and the community surrounding must make an effort to

educate the next generation and their parents regarding the necessary steps for to

attend college. Part of this process involves Midwest Academy reaching out to the

junior highs, middle schools, and elementary schools within the urban core, which

provide the future students for the Academy. They say that it takes a village but in

reality, education in the home goes a long way in encouraging students to push to

achieve. Due to the population base that feeds Midwest Academy, it is important to

get parent buy into the process as many of the parents did not themselves attend

college. As the primary advisers to their students, it is important that they have

adequate information to assist their students achieve their goal to attend college.

Discussion

Plato education system

The Plato integrated education system has had a significant effect in allowing

students, who have fallen behind in the educational process, to catch up with their

peers. It has not, however, shown significant effect in the research, due to the blight

of research regarding the efficacy of the Plato methodology, in allowing students to

take the information gained and translate it to meeting and exceeding the requirements necessary to transition to college. There are, however, some things that could accentuate the education provided by the Plato system.

For those Plato courses considered college preparatory in nature, several things could be done to promote a more collegial atmosphere between students and allow the students to relate the information they are learning to the potential to attend college. A relatively minor change that could be undertaken is to integrate small group discussion between students, who are completing the same courses. The small group discussions, led by the lead instructor in the classroom, would allow for a more traditional classroom setting, but also give the teacher the opportunity to present to the students how the particular course relates to the requirements to attending higher education.

One final consideration that can greatly enhance the student experience with the Plato integrated education system is the continued encouragement from the school staff regarding the potential of every student at Midwest Academy. It is possible, due to the very nature of individualized, integrated educational systems, that students may not always have quality one-on-one conversations with their teachers. This is through no fault of either party but rather a consequence of individualized instruction being provided by a computer. From the observation of the researcher, it was readily apparent that the vast majority of the staff have a sincere concern about the well being of the students under their care. It is this concern and caring that can be turned into a veritable cheerleading squad for the

students to encourage a belief within them that they are capable and have the potential to be successful in higher education.

Social Norming

The concept of social norm is not a new one. It has been successfully used on college campuses for many years as a way to curb unwanted behaviors within the student body (Berkowitz, 2005). Although often used to combat negative issues it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it could be used in the situation to promote a positive outcome such as transitioning to higher education. With this particular solution, there is far more research that can be utilized to justify its use as a possibility. It is the belief of the researcher based on the observation of the students within the Midwest Academy school building itself that social norming could be a worthwhile attempt to further encourage students to reach their maximum potential.

In "An Overview of the Social Norms Approach (2005)", Alan D. Berkowitz described the theory behind the concept of social norming. The theory promotes the idea that by accentuating the positive, desirable behavior, individuals will make the choice to follow that positive behavior (Berkowitz, 2005). In this particular case, looking at students at Midwest Academy, it is the belief of the researcher that promoting the chance to attend college is a positive behavior. Part of the success of the social norming approach has its origin in the concept of cognitive dissonance or generally the concept of being uncomfortable with one's decisions when they don't meet the expectations of the norm (Berkowitz, 2005). Through this introduction of being uncomfortable, there exists an ability to persuade the individual to make

different decisions based on suggestion, with that suggestion being the positive behavior. In other words, this approach "relies on indirect methods of persuasion that provide accurate information about what people think or do without telling them what they should do. (Berkowitz, 2005, 5)."

As stated previously when discussing the atmosphere of Midwest Academy, there was little actual promotion of college attendance within the decorative landscape of the school. There exists, however, great potential for this to change with minimal effort or cost on behalf of the school. While wandering the school hallways, the researcher noted several elaborate murals and artistic expressions that promoted positive thinking and positive behavior. The student inspired artwork provided real character to the hallways of the school. It could be suggested then, that students be commissioned to create a piece of artwork that promoted attending college. Another suggestion that would be simple in undertaking would be for each teacher to have the pendant of there alma mater hanging within their classroom to promote the idea that they are college graduates of a particular school and can be a resource to the students as they contemplate the future. Plus there exist the possibility that these pendants could spark a conversation between student and teacher regarding their experiences in college and why they made the choice to attend the college that they did.

Finally, with the highly successful print shop run by the school and it students, Midwest Academy has the potential to create their own social norming campaign designed and implemented by its own students. Having witnessed the design process that occurs within the curriculum of the design shop, it is not beyond

the realm of possibility that a promotional campaign designed by the students

would be more successful than one designed by the adults. This gives the students

further opportunity to tap into their creative talents and to expand their design

portfolios should they choose to attend college seeking a degree in design and

advertising. Midwest Academy through unique programs and dedicated staff has

the potential to create a program that could change the direction the student

chooses once they leave the Academy. Very few schools, in this particular design,

have this opportunity and the researcher hopes that implementation of a simple

social norming campaign could greatly influence the thought process of the students

with the talents and potential to be successful college students.

The High School and College Solution

Although many of the solutions presented thus far are changes that can be

made within the school, the host University of the charter can be of assistance in

encouraging the student population. With its close proximity to campus of Midwest

Academy, it would be beneficial for the students to spend more time on the campus

of a four-year institution to get some experience regarding the atmosphere of higher

education especially that of a research oriented University. It is the belief of the

researcher, that experience is a great teacher and the more the students experience

different environments than what they're used to the more they will benefit in the

long run.

In this particular situation, colleges and universities within the area need to

bear more responsibility in assisting this particular student demographic. There

must be willingness for all involved to enter into the urban Core and provide

ancillary support to all of the schools within the neighborhood. This includes

primary schools, middle schools, junior high and high school. The addition of this

interaction between the students and professionals within higher education who

have the ability and the knowledge to promote what is necessary to attend higher

education can only enhance the educational efforts within the neighborhood. It is

the hope of the researcher that further exploration of this particular student

demographic can help to provide a curriculum for all levels of students so that every

Child has the belief that they are capable and deserving of a college education.

Suggestions for Further Research

The first order of business in future research would be to expand the study to

include more interviews to further enhance the themes that became apparent with

the limited number of interviews conducted. With more interviews the chances of

developing a measurement tool for those students who choose not to go to college is

much more likely. With that research tool a larger sample size could be gathered

that would allow for the secondary school system as well as the system of higher

education to develop programming to best address the needs of first-generation

low-income students.

One area of exploration when considering programming to increase the

attendance of the student demographic into colleges and universities would be to

examine the possibility of using the public-health model that has been reasonably

successful in lessening gun violence in the cities in which it is been implemented.

This model developed by the Centers for Disease Control utilizes a community-

based learning system starting with the individual and branching all the way out to

the community that surrounds them. As research has shown, the neighborhood has a significant effect on the attendance of college for students, changing the dynamics of the neighborhood could show potential in changing the confidence level of the student and the belief in their ability that they can be successful in the realm of higher education. The description of this particular methodology is contained in Appendix 3 of this document.

One Caution with Regard to Attending College

Although much of this writing has covered the positives and potential for the first generation, low-income student attending college, this attendance does not come with out some risks, especially financially. Of the students interviewed, only one reported completing the FAFSA and thus making themselves eligible for federal grants and loans. The other students of the group would have to pursue either federal loans or outside loans to finance their education. This acquisition of unsecured debt could set the students back even farther into poverty conditions.

The Academy and institutions of higher education would benefit greatly by pushing the completion of the FAFSA by the April 1st deadline to open the students to the full gambit of financial aid through the federal government. They could also promote private organizations, such as the Posse Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Kauffman and other such philanthropic organizations to students as an additional funding source. These organizations provide not only financial support but also social support throughout the student's academic career. Utilizing these organizations could greatly reduce the need to rely on loans and make it possible for the student to graduate debt free.

Final Thoughts

The time spent by the researcher at Midwest Academy was eye opening to the conditions and difficulties that face students and teachers working within the urban core of a large, metropolitan area. That being said, there are a lot of positives, which can be gained from this experience. First and foremost, it was enlightening to see the desire of the students and the exceptional staff that works with them to make sure that they graduate from high school and accomplish one of the major tasks in attending college. It was also enlightening to see the potential for change that can occur at the school with relatively little effort or expense on behalf of the school and its constituents. I look forward to fostering this relationship further, at the discretion of the school, and presenting the results and potential to those dedicated educators who go above and beyond for their students. I am indebted to the administrators, staff, and students for the unlimited and honest access they provided me during this project. Thank you Midwest Academy for allowing this project to expose the quality work being done and hopefully, allowing me to present some simple changes that can expand the potential to reach students even further.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Opening Question for All Participants

➢ What are your current plans following graduation? Do you plan to go to college or enter directly into the workforce?

➢ Do you know anyone who has attended college? Has their experience in college shaped your thoughts on college?

➢ Describe a memorable interaction you had with a member of the school staff (guidance counselor, teacher mentor, principal).

- o Who was this person?
- o What did you discuss?
- o Did college come up in this conversation?
- o Why did you think it did/did not come up?
- o How did you feel about your future plans after this conversation?
- o Did this change you future plans?

Going to College Track

➢ The process of applying to college?
- o At what point in your academic career did you know you wanted to go to college?
- o What about your academic performance at the time influenced your choice to attend college?
- o Did you solely make the decision to attend college or did someone/something influence you? Can you explain this influence?
- o What was most helpful for you in making your decision to attend college?
- o What are you planning on majoring in? Are you familiar with the academic requirements for this major? What career are you planning to pursue with this major?
- o What makes you passionate about pursuing this career?
- o What classes have you taken to prepare to go to college?
- o How did you acquire knowledge about preparing for college?
- o Who guided through the process of preparing for college?
- o How are you preparing to pay for college financially?

Not Attending College Track

- ➢ If you are planning to enter the workforce, what career are you planning to pursue
- ➢ Is attending college a future priority for you? Why or why not?
- ➢ What grade were you in when you first thought about not attending college?
    - o What was unique about your life at this time of this thought?
    - o How were you performing academically in school at this time?
    - o Did your family financial situation at the time play a role in your early thoughts on attending college? How influential was this?
- ➢ Did talking to your school, your family, or your friends help or harm your attitude toward attending college? Why?
- ➢ Is there any way these groups could have provided encouragement to help you to reconsider your early college thinking?
- ➢ How, if at all, did this thinking change your approach to school?

- ➢ Are your close friends taking similar paths after high school?
    - o Would it have changed your mind if they decided to attend college?
- ➢ If you were to offer advice to a sophomore in the same situation as you, what would you advise that person to do if they want to attend college?
- ➢ When was the last interaction you had with your guidance counselor? Is there something they could have done to change your educational course of action?
- ➢ As graduation approaches, are you comfortable with your decision?
- ➢ What would it mean to your family for you to eventually go to college?
- ➢ Who did you consult when making your plans for next year?
    - o How did the conversation begin?
    - o How did you justify your choice?
    - o What was their response?
    - o Is there anything they could have said or done to change your decision?
    - o If this conversation has not occurred, do you anticipate having a similar conversation in the near future (2-3 weeks)?

Appendix B

School Improvement Plan Based on Themes

Midwest Academy has a very dynamic and caring staff that genuinely wants all of their students to achieve to the level of their potential. They work exceptionally hard at encouraging students to push beyond their limits and try new things. The suggestions below are a means of accentuating the quality work already being done by the school and are intended to enhance the academic performance and college going numbers for the students.

❖ **Information Black Hole**

- Construct a social norming campaign to promote attending college and the steps to get there
- Utilize the four-year institutions within the metropolitan area and get the students on campus and used to the college culture
- Empower the students to created a mural in the spirit of the others in the school promoting college and college attendance
- Provide a central but prominent location where college materials can be displayed, such as just as the students enter the school
- Have all professional staff display in some way their alma mater's in their classrooms

❖ **Role of the Guidance Counselor and Educational staff**

  ➢ **Guidance Counselors**
  - Have at least 2 meetings per quarter with each senior to speak exclusively about college and the process
  - Have one meeting each semester with freshman through juniors to discuss the college pathway
  - Actively advertise the ACT/SAT test dates, participation in the PSAT, college application and scholarship deadlines, and the FAFSA process and deadlines
  - Provide application days/nights for colleges and universities as well as for FAFSA – encouraging parental involvement
  ➢ **Educational Staff**
  - Continue to provide linkage between class content and careers as well as how class content could be related to a college major
  - Provide an area within the classroom to promote college attendance and careers from the particular subject area – bulletin board, wall hanging, etc.
  - Look for academic contests held at the campuses of local higher education institutions and look to create teams to compete in said contests

❖ **Completion of the Three Critical Tasks** (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001)

➢ **Graduate from High School**
- Continue to push to meet the State of Missouri standard goal of 92% high school graduation rate
- Continue to utilize the Plato integrated education system to get students on the same grade level as their fellow students and to complete the requirements to graduate from Midwest Academy

➢ **Take a College Preparatory Curriculum**
- Encourage students to take four years of math including Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II and a higher level math class
- Encourage students to take four years of English
- Encourage students to take three years of science including Biology and Chemistry
- Encourage students to take three years of social studies including American History, World History and Civics/Government
- Encourage students to take two years of the same foreign language

➢ **Complete the College Application Process**
- Set aside class time during the first semester to complete college applications – ask local colleges to come and assist with the process
- Set aside class time to complete scholarship statements and additional items needed to complete the college scholarship process
- Encourage/arrange for students to visit colleges in the area to assist in the college decision making process
- Have FAFSA days/nights for families to come in and receive assistance in completing the FAFSA process

❖ **The First Generation Dilemma**
- Create bridges between feeder elementary schools and junior highs/middle schools
- Engage local community centers to host family nights where activities are conducted for all ages but the focus would be on engaging parents in understanding the college transition process
- Create a student ambassador program to assist in the community action programs
- Consider a methodology, such as the CDC Violence Prevention Program, to engage the community as it takes a village to change the direction of the neighborhood and the children that live within it

Appendix C

Social Ecological Model as a Prevention Strategy

In examining the public health educational model, there are many successful organizations within the healthcare world that utilize the ideas behind the model. No one organization has more successfully implemented this methodology than the Centers for Disease Control in their community violence prevention program (Centers for Disease Control, 2013). This program utilizes a systematic methodology to examine on a large and small-scale level. From the individual to the society as a whole, this comprehensive program looks at violence as a multifaceted systemic methodology that focuses on the individual, relationships, community, and societal influences (CDC, 2013).

The primary base of the CDC's educational plan focuses on a social-ecological model of prevention. This framework defines tasks by levels of influence. The individual, relationships that influence the individual, the community that surrounds the individual and the societal factors that influence the community as a whole are critical pieces of this model as each area must be factored in when designing the educational programming (CDC, 2013).


With in the model, the individual is analyzed by examining both personality and

biological factors. The individual's thoughts, actions, and beliefs are examined to design an individualized prevention plan. For this level in the model, the prevention plan focuses on promoting positive messages to allow the individual to make better decisions. The relationship component looks at those relationships that increase the person's risk of becoming either a victim or perpetrator of violence. The relationships closely examined in this portion include but are not limited to close peers, partners whether business or romantic, and family. Interventions at this level of the model focus on providing a more appropriate means of developing positive relationships. Facilitating the provision of mentor and peer relations to the individual is done to head off problems, foster the ability to become complex problem solvers, and to work on developing healthy and stable relationships, remembering again that this model to trying to prevent further violent behavior by providing resources and education to those who are at risk. After the relationship component in the social-ecological model, the process examines the community that surrounds the individual. In this area, the interventions occur in the schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods and focus on impacting the climate, processes, and policies in a given community. Prevention strategies are promoted in ways that shape the entire community, such as social norm programming and blatant social marketing of prevention programming. One example of this is the common social norm programming presented by the major networks, specifically the "More you know campaign" presented by NBC. The final area of focus within the social-ecological model is the society as a whole. When examining the society, the model looks at societal factors such as traditions, racial attitudes, cultural

norms and general social policies. Prevention activities in this segment focus on

social policy changes and a creating tolerance as a normative process (CDC, 2013).

By understanding the components of this model and how all four areas are

related to social problems, it then becomes easier to grasp how using the public

health education model has validity as it is designed using the social-ecological

model as a guiding document.

The Public Health Educational Model

The origin of the Public Health Educational Model is rooted in the

epidemiology of societal ills that have long infected the nation as a whole (CDC,

2013). This is a prevention model that systematically attacks a problem through

a structures series of steps.
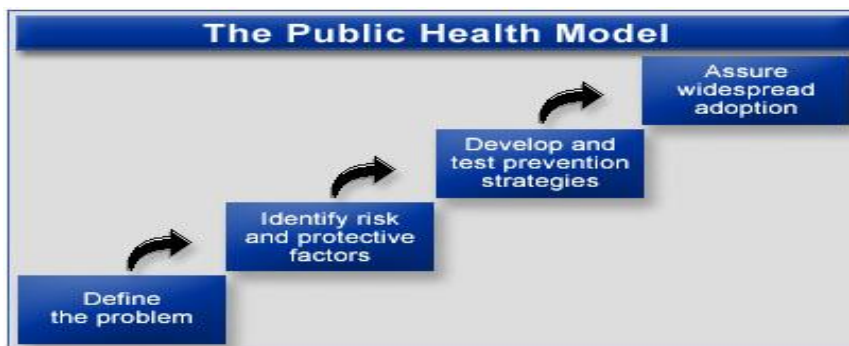
The beginning of any prevention programming using the public health education

model is to define the problem. In the case of the CDC, their problem was

neighborhood violence. In the case of this paper, the information will eventually

be related to education. When deciding the nature of the problem, the issue must

be explored from every angle. The frequency of the event, where the event is

occurring, situational trends, and victimology are all components that play into

the severity of the problem (CDC, 2013).

After the problem is defined, it is then important to identify both risk and protection factors that can be definitively linked to the problem. A risk factor, defined by the CDC, as "a characteristic that increases the likelihood of a person becoming a victim or perpetrator of an event (CDC, 2013)." The presence of a risk factor is not a guarantee that an event is going to occur, it is just makes it more of a possibility. A protective factor is defined as "a characteristic that decreases the likelihood of a person becoming a victim or perpetrator because it provides a buffer against risk. (CDC, 2013)." The important part of this step is coming to an understanding of what protects people and what exposes them to risk. It allows for the overall project to focus prevention where it is most needed.

With a defined problem and identifiable risk and protective factors, then an organization can develop and test prevention strategies. These strategies expand on previous research by the organization in the areas of community surveys, stakeholder interviews, and focus group interactions (CDC, 2013). By taking this gathered information and completing a thorough evaluation, a prevention program can be designed and implemented. Important in this implementation and plan is constant rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness. A plan without evaluation is a wasted effort at prevention because ineffective programming is just that ineffective at stopping the problem.

Once an effective program is developed and has proven successful, the final step is assuring the widespread adoption. The value of the evaluation in the small-scale program development is that evidence is available to provide a strong evidence based practice. As the organization promoting the program, the role shifts from daily implementation to more of a support role. The organization

provides training, networking, technical assistance and evaluation on a broad

base as programming spreads to other organizations (CDC, 2013).

The CDC Violence Prevention Program

One widely accepted use of the Social-Economic Model and the Public

Health Education Model has been the Center for Disease Control's school based

violence prevention program. The idea behind this model is to stop the violent

behavior before it happens. The strategies utilized by the program are school,

family and individual based. The main focus of this description will be on the

universal, school based program as it shows the most applicability to the current

issue being examined, the failure to complete a high school education.

The universal school based program is a school and grade specific program

that works on developing appropriate social skills to eliminate the need for

bullying, fighting or escalation to more extreme, weapon related violence (CDC,

2013). By emphasizing instruction in positive self-concept, the programs aim to

decrease the overall rates of violent and aggressive behavior in school-aged

children. The instruction includes the topics of emotional self-awareness,

emotional control, self-esteem, positive social skills, social problem solving,

conflict resolution and teamwork (Hahn et al, 2007). As stated above, the

effectiveness of any socially based programming must be evaluated for

effectiveness.

In a 2007 report, Hahn and the Task Force on Community Preventive

Services analyzed the effectiveness of school based programming to prevent

violence. Through systematic analysis of pre-program and post-program data,

the task force evaluated prevention programs based on grade level

implementation. At lower grade levels, the programs focused on disruptive and anti-social behavior. As the grade levels increase, the focus of the programming shifted to general violence and specific types of violence, such as dating violence (Hahn et al, 2007). Universal programming was assessed and to make comparison effective, the classroom was the primary research location (Hahn et al 2007). The task force utilized bivariate associations of the program characteristics with effect sizes to more cohesively report causal relationships.

The overall conclusion of the committee was that universal school-based programs were ultimately successful at all school levels and across all demographics (Hahn et al, 2007). The median effect was a reduction by 15% in violent behavior. The program evaluation also looked at program cost and the determination was made that the programs were ultimately cost effective. Substantial improvements were also made in other socially troubling behaviors, such as truancy, drug abuse, deviant sexual behavior, and property crime (Hahn et al, 2007). It is these additional benefits that lead to the belief that this Public Health Educational Model could be universally deployed to combat other socially significant youth problems, including the goal of lowering school dropout rates.