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# CAPTURING AWARENESS: THE PERCEPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT AN AT-RISK, URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Kristen M. Upp

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, kupp2@unl.edu

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CAPTURING AWARENESS: THE PERCEPTION  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT AN  
AT-RISK, URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

Kristen Marie Upp

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
For Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professor Debra Mullen

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 2014

CAPTURING AWARENESS: THE PERCEPTION  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT AN  
AT-RISK, URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Kristen M. Upp, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisor: Debra Mullen

The purpose of this study is to understand at-risk, urban middle school students' perceptions of higher education through the minds of young students from a diverse, inner city schooling background. This study sought to understand barriers preventing students from attending college and the positive contributing factors encouraging them to do so. Written interviews were conducted in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade urban middle school in the southern United States.

One hundred five (105) students voluntarily participated in the research study, writing their thoughts pertaining to higher education and their feelings on the topic. The following themes were found: Family Involvement, Financial Burden, Need for a Degree, Better Self/Give Back, and The Experience.

By better interpreting the perception a student has, professionals in the higher education setting can focus on implementations to ensure that all students are provided a fair opportunity to pursue a college experience, a career, and a life. This is a personal approach to make aware a vision of college access.

## **Acknowledgements**

Completing this master's degree and thesis project consisted of many frustrations, eye-opening experiences, and a view of education in new light. A sincere thank you to my inspirers and my educators during this unique journey. There are many encouraging individuals to thank for the motivation and passion that lies in this story.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my spirited and enlightening participants. Without them, this research would not have been possible. These students provided insight that helped me understand education in a new way. I am thankful for the opportunity to have learned from them.

I want to thank Dr. Debra Mullen, my adviser, lifesaver, and teacher. I learned that all things are possible if we make them happen. Thank you for guiding my thoughts and actions over the course of this process. You taught me so much about myself from your counseling course to your advising meetings. Thank you for challenging me to educate our world.

I am forever grateful to Dr. Wayne Babchuk, someone who taught me to see research as something fun(?). Thank you for communicating effectively and sharing a passion for college access with me. I would also like to thank Dr. Barbara LaCost for showing me how to work with such a unique and large amount of research results. Thank you for turning my overwhelming thoughts into proactive ones. Dr. Tim Alvarez, thank you for supporting my research, talking through the obstacles of higher education access, and teaching me to love and learn from any challenges that come my way. Thank you to

Cindy for flawless and efficient formatting lessons. You were truly a Godsend weeks before my preliminary thesis deadline.

A huge thank you to Dr. Tom Field and Dr. Lindsay Hastings. I was provided with two of the most incredible mentors during my graduate assistantship. Thank you for being proactive in providing learning opportunities and research opportunities for me. Thank you to my co-workers in the William H. Thompson Scholars Learning Community. Thank you for helping me keep my cool and for supporting me during the writing process while also teaching me to effectively serve college students.

Thank you to my own teachers, Lisa Hadenfeldt, Roxanne Thompson, Kathy Rueb, Patty Doll, Betty Tripoli, Judy Douglas, and Becky Kugler. Thank you for teaching me to love education and supporting me while I learned more. The coffee dates, lunches, and beers consisted of more inspiration and motivation than you will know. Thank you to my friends: my high school friends, my college friends, and my grad-school friends. Thank you for listening to me talk about education and helping me jump through the hoops of deadlines and chaos.

My family, Jerry, Stephanie, Megan, and Kyle have always been my number one supporters. Sometimes my degree is confusing, I know. Thank you for always trusting me and pushing me to be successful during my graduate experience and research opportunity. Thank you for supporting me while gathering my data. Thank you for understanding this passion and for providing more educational opportunities than the classroom could provide. I love you and I hope one day I can teach my own children as you have taught me.

Lastly, thank you Anneli Dudley. Thank you for keeping things light with the movie “Bad Teacher,” but for exemplifying *the* best teacher. Your drive and your passion for education will change the world. Thank you for welcoming me into your world in starting that change. Thank you for changing the lives of not only your students, but your friends. Thank you.

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## Preface

*Imagine. I've just completed my forty-seven minute walk to school. The bell is about to ring, there are teachers speeding into the fenced-in teacher parking lot. I am let in to the school through the locked gate. Stan, one of the overweight, underpaid security guards nods me inside. Today is hot. The shady hallways don't bring any relief to my warm skin. I shuffle into the auditorium, where the typical mass chaos is already occurring. Today, the yelling and running buzz is louder than normal. Maybe I am just tired. I hardly slept last night. Blue and red lights filled the bedroom I sleep in. There were gunshots not far down from our apartment. I hold my right book bag strap tight as a kid nails me from behind running with a group of other guys. "Man, get the fuck outta my way."*

*I look up at the clock right as the bell rings, relieved to head to my first class. Shuffling through the hallway is like trying to walk against millions of bodies heading fiercely every direction. I remember the first time I walked from class to class in the middle school, how frightened I was by the older kids and how strong they were pushing their way through the confusion. Teachers don't even try to stop the pushing, the pulling, the touching, and the leaning. They look away as if there is nothing they would be able to do. Every word around me is obscene. I don't even notice it anymore. Honestly, I don't even notice them coming out of my own mouth anymore.*

*As I fight my way up to the second floor, sweat drizzling down my left temple, I claw through to Ms. Williams standing outside her English classroom. She is one of my favorite teachers. She greets everyone with a smile, even though I know she isn't happy. How can any teacher at this hole be happy? She is tired behind her smile, but she continues to welcome students in, cutting into any physical fighting or loud arguing when it is necessary. Ms. Williams tries to teach us. She tells us she believes in us. Not like Ms. Rempel or Ms. Toffel. They just tell us how dumb we are. Ms. Williams comes to school early and stays late to talk with students. Sometimes I go into her classroom when I can't stand to be swallowed up by the mandatory auditorium morning space.*

*Ms. Williams talks about college. She tells us if we want to go to college, we have to try hard in school. She tells us that we have to get higher than C's to go to some colleges. She was in college not that long ago, but I can't tell how old she is. She tells us that we can go to college and get out of here. I don't think I want to go to college though. It is far away from my family and it is hard. The parties would be the only fun part. She tells us that college was the most fun part of her life and that we would become better people if we went to college. She didn't mean it mean. I know she means that we can get out of the hood and never come back. She knows we want to escape. She knows.*

*Ms. Williams will soon escape. No teacher stays here that long. No teacher can teach us that long. We will be here though, shuffling from class to class – going through the motions. If our parents want us to stay in school, they'll push us as long as they can. If our parents don't care, we may not even make it to the high school. Some of us won't*

*make it to the high school because we will get killed. Some of us will go to jail, maybe for a few months, maybe forever. Some of us will knock our girlfriends up and leave them. Some of us will make it through to the end of high school. Some of us will then work. Others of us will do nothing. An even smaller amount of us will go to this place called college. I wonder what that would be like. I wonder if I will go.*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The final semester of my undergraduate experience, I was preparing to student teach. I had heard of a handful of Texas student teaching opportunities where I could have an eye-opening experience, complete with seeing school districts unlike those I was exposed to in Nebraska. Nothing ever materialized, but I was excited to hear that I would student teach in the business department at one of the high schools in Lincoln where no other student teacher from my major had been. I had heard stereotypes about this high school. Before I started, I knew that there would be a wide variety of diversity at the school. Many of my fellow student teaching classmates joked about my selection, stating that the business department was not nearly what the other schools in the district had.

My experience was phenomenal. Many of my students had skin colors, hair colors, or eye colors different than mine. Some did not. Many of my students were raised very differently than myself, and others, some were raised very similarly. I had bright students, capable of so much, and others who struggled. One of the largest differences across all of the students was their perception of college. Even the highest performing students in my classroom knew so little about college and were unclear about their plans to attend. Although this was not true of all, the majority of the students I worked with had little to no idea what they would do after high school and were not in any hurry to develop goals. I then made it my goal to incorporate the discussion of college in every lesson I taught. Side conversations, examples, and assignments were all used to bring up this topic. I learned that not all students had educational conversation at dinner as I had

growing up. Even more importantly, I learned that challenges schools in Texas face, such as poverty, educational inequality, and cultural differences in the classroom existed in my very own safe and comfortable Midwestern, college town.

This thesis explores the feelings and thoughts students have on what a college experience would look like for them. By better understanding the perception a student has, professionals in higher education can focus on implementations to ensure that all students are provided a fair opportunity to pursue a college experience, a career, and a life. This is my personal approach to make aware a vision of college access.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand at-risk, urban middle school students' perceptions of higher education. Understanding their perceptions regarding importance, accessibility, and affordability of higher education will assist higher education professionals in understanding how this population views advanced education and help in recruitment techniques for this underserved population. 105 students responded via written interviews so the researcher could understand their thoughts relating to college. The results revealed how these 8<sup>th</sup> grade students view college based on the influencers around them. Their writing made for a clear understanding of how these students think about something foreign and very far off – college.

### **Significance of Study**

The findings of this study are valuable because they expand on the research on college access, a growing interest in our higher education world. Much of the research is focused on how to make college an option for particular populations at the high school



level. This study is significant in that it captures the thoughts of a population who younger at 13 years old. These students are energetic and unafraid. In fact, many of these students perceive they will in fact go to college.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question driving this inquiry was: “What is the understanding of higher education from the perspective of an at-risk, urban middle school student?” Sub-questions focused on three areas, college importance, college affordability, and college accessibility to lay a foundation for the perception. The research questions included:

1. How does the importance of higher education in a student’s life affect their perception of higher education?
2. How does affordability affect the perception of higher education for a student?
3. How does accessibility affect the higher education perception for a student?

In order to understand the research questions, the following interview questions were used in this study:

1. Are you planning to attend college? Why or why not?
2. What potential barriers keep you from wanting to attend college?
3. How do you think your family or your guardian would support you if you chose to go to college?
4. Describe what college life would be like.
5. How important is college to you? Why or why not?

These interview questions were designed to allow the students to reflect on a topic they may or may not have put much thought into previous to the interview. The analysis of the findings provided a deep understanding of how students perceived college and its role in their post high school plan.

### **Research Design**

A semi-structured, survey research method was used for this research. This allowed for depth and feeling to be analyzed regarding the experiences and thoughts related to higher education. A quantitative measure would not have adequately examined the students' perceptions and understandings. The written interview style allowed the students to take their time and work independently to express their personal higher education perception and how they would view themselves in an opportunity to attend college. Each written interview was analyzed by connecting emerging themes in the data. These data were then analyzed for sub-themes as well.

### **Definition of Terms**

To ensure an understanding of research methods, purpose, findings, etc., specific terms must be defined for the reader.

#### *At-Risk:*

used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school. The term may be applied to students who face circumstances that could jeopardize their ability to complete school, such as homelessness, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, serious health issues, domestic violence, transiency (as in the case of migrant-worker families), or other conditions, or it may refer to learning disabilities, low test scores, disciplinary problems, grade retentions, or other learning-related factors that could adversely affect the educational performance and attainment of some students. (Abbott, 2013)

*Urban:* term used to describe the area where the school was located: a city area with a population of 5 million.

*Perception:* term used to describe the ideas, thoughts, and feelings associated with student observations and awareness relative to interview questions.

*Higher Education:* term used to describe post-secondary education experience, typically known as ‘college.’ May include Universities, state colleges, junior colleges, community colleges, and technical schools.

### **Delimitations**

Few delimitations were used. The 105 participants came from an urban, at-risk middle school that was selected via a personal relationship between the researcher and one teacher. No specific restrictions were placed on participants other than the fact they had to have a parent assent form signed to allow them to participate.

### **Limitations**

The findings for this study are not generalizable due to the qualitative method used. Sampling was purposeful and the population interviewed was chosen due to knowing a teacher in the qualifying district. Only one middle school was selected due to the availability of the students and willingness of the administration involved. Although students did not have to be of minority status, the majority of the students were minorities. The student perceptions presented may not represent other populations in other parts of the country. Because I am an educated, White female, students may not have opened up with me due to our differences, however interviews were confidential and I established a solid understanding of my research before the written interviews

occurred. Additionally, only 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were studied. I served as the primary research instrument in this qualitative study by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data.

### **Conclusion**

Students from many backgrounds, particularly those who grow up in urban and at-risk settings, may not receive adequate preparation for a college education pathway. Views on affordability, accessibility, and importance of higher education contribute to whether or not a student sees college as an option. These views and feelings contribute to the future of our country. Understanding how students view college will help higher education professionals better prepare all populations earlier, for a future that could include a college degree. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the contributing factors of college access, challenges including the importance of higher education, the accessibility of higher education, and the affordability of higher education. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology used in this study, that including written interviews students answered regarding their ideas and feelings on higher education. Chapter 4 presents the major themes and sub-themes that emerged from the collected data. These themes specifically address the potential obstacles that must be overcome in order to attend college as well as the positive contributors and support systems leading young students to a college track. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the research and link them to current and relevant literature to offer implications for practice.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of higher education through the minds of at-risk, urban middle school students at a Southern, urban middle school. Data were through a written interview process exploring student perceptions of higher education. This chapter reviews relevant literature on the perceived importance of higher education and what contributes to this value of importance, the perceived affordability of a college education and the contributing factors regarding why affordability is a challenge for many students. The final section reviews literature focusing on the perceived accessibility to a college track and outlines the implications that accompany college access.

Today, almost half of all American public school students live in poverty and students living in urban regions of the country are a part of a poverty majority (Sparks, 2013). Educators and non-educators must have an understanding of the contributors to college access and the reasoning why students feel the way that they do not having to access higher education. This understanding is vital to addressing a national concern.

The majority of sources provided for this review come from online databases of peer-reviewed journals including ERIC, EBSCO, JSTOR, and NASPA Publications. Terms used for searching studies included: “at-risk AND college access,” as well as “college affordability AND low-income.” The following sections of the review include research on the many implications of college access for diverse and low-income

populations. Additionally, this research supports why students may feel the way they do about a college experience, whether they believe it is unattainable or hold false ideas of the experience. The criticism found most prevalent is the challenge of closing the gap between students attending and not attending some type of higher education. This issue is one that has not been fully grasped by our country. There are many proposed solutions in our education world, but this is a large problem, one that breaks through not only our education world, but our social world as well. Although there are many pathways and opportunities for students to take to escape a world of poverty, many of the proposed solutions are too late in helping students. Understanding students' perceptions is a first step in taking on the challenge of college access. See Figure 1 for an outline of the research currently available regarding access to higher education.

### **The Perceived Importance of Higher Education**

Generally, students that attend college because it is important to them. If it is not important to them individually, typically it is important to those around them whether that is family, friends, or society. If attending some sort of higher education institution is not important to an individual, it may result in the student not attending. Parental and peer pressure, society, etc. also plays into this scenario. The perceived importance of higher education is an indicator to test whether students will pursue a college track.

**Family impact on a child to attend college.** Family impact on a child to attend college is an important factor in the success of our youth. Today, families face family demands as well as demands from the work setting. Weiss et al. (2003) explored the

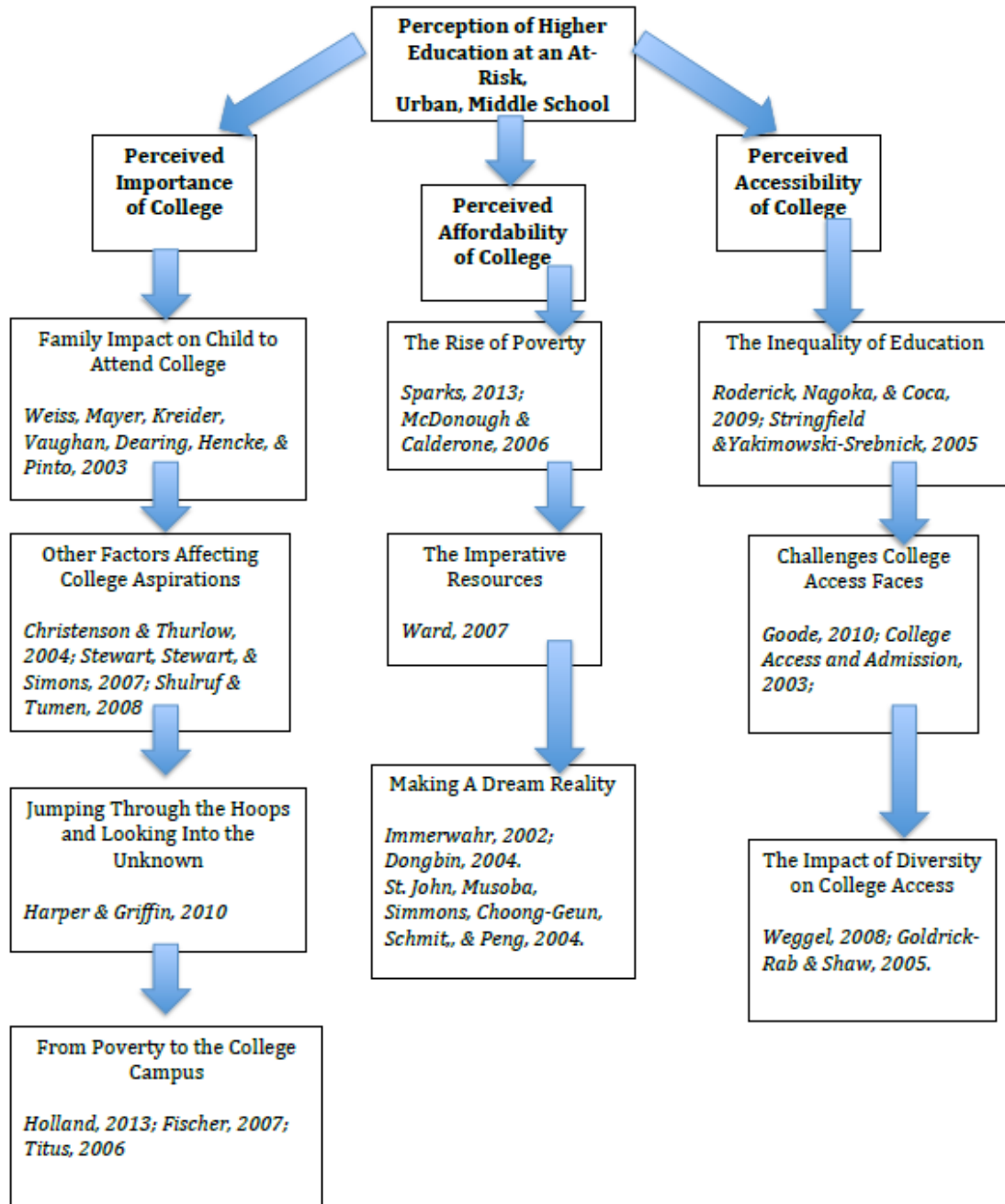


Figure 1. Literature Map.

relationship between employment and family involvement and its contribution to children's education, particularly for low-income females. The research suggests that work is a barrier for a mothers involvement in their child's education, thus the importance of education is lacking. Mothers who worked part time or attended school part time were found to be more involved compared to non-working or non-school attending mothers mothers in the study. Such involvement is a contributing factor to students being involved with having conversations based on higher education as well as actually pursuing a future that would include college.

**Many other factors affect the college aspirations.** Many other factors affect the college aspirations of students. Lack of school resources, unsupportive communities, and lack of academic preparation are hurdles students must overcome to reach further education. In 2001, of low-income students, only 66% of the academically capable and 35% of the minimally qualified students applied for a four year college in the United States (Shulruf, Hattie, & Tumen, 2008). Christenson and Thurlow (2004) explored the seriousness of students who do not complete high school and effective intervention programs to not only track these individuals, but continue a close look at educational standards during the high school years. Their research found that educators must take a strong lead in engaging students in a thorough evaluation of school-completion programs, as this issue has become more concerning in the last decade. It is much harder for students to access college if they do not obtain a high school diploma. Additionally, if students dislike their high school experience, chances are most will not be first in line to pursue a college diploma either.



Stewart, Stewart, and Simons (2007) researched academic aspirations based on the neighborhood the students belong to, specifically African American adolescents. The study results concluded that living in a disadvantaged or low-income neighborhood has a negative effect on the higher education goals of the students. This was a fascinating study where neighborhoods represented different parts of the country and primarily all clustered similarly. Something as simple, and as hard to control, as the neighborhood where one belongs does in fact have a significant affect on college access and students' perception of the importance of higher education.

Shulruf et al. (2008) identified school factors affecting achievements of high school and post-secondary levels of education. The purpose was to identify particular schools' attributes, specifically involvement, that directly contributed to the success of students in achieving a university level of education. For example, a sport or student council had a positive impact. If a school could not provide such involvement opportunities, students may not have a drive to move forward after high school. The study also found that demographic characteristics did affect students and their individual accomplishments in college. This is a valuable contribution to the perceived importance of higher education as engagement starts before the college career and it is not always in a traditional classroom setting. Extracurricular activities teach independence, teamwork, integrity, and confidence in ways a classic classroom may not be able to.

**Jumping through the hoops and looking into the unknown.** Jumping through the hoops and looking into the unknown is a task that can be extremely difficult for any student. Harper and Griffin (2010) studied the positive view, focusing on

underrepresented Black male undergraduates students growing up in low-income and working class homes who made it through the education hoops. Such obstacles included lack of financial support, family support, or academic preparation. These students enrolled at one of the top 18 higher education institutions and were able to do so because of policies and programs available to them. The study looked at these policies and offered implications. Students took part in a three-hour interview discussing financial resources, urban communities, the application process, etc. The schools the students attended included Brown University, Harvard University, Princeton University, Stanford University, and other liberal arts colleges, state universities, public research universities, and historically Black private and public universities. Their perception of higher education may actually have not been much different than the many low-income students that surrounded them. Because of the individuals and programming opportunities they were exposed to, these students were routed to a future of academic success.

**Moving from poverty to campus.** Moving from poverty to campus, was an outcome of students who were able to contradict the statistics and physically arrive on a college campus. Holland (2013) described the large endowments some schools have allowing them to offer financial aid packages at a price similar to public universities. The challenge faced is for institutions to make it known that all high performing students must have these opportunities. Wellesley College is an example of a college that provides a financial aid calculator for a quick view of an aid package offer for a potential student. Also studied were nonprofit organizations working to place high performing students coming from limited means in selective colleges. The researchers noted a student who

used a similar nonprofit organizations reported her parents were unable to help her with the college process “not because they didn’t want to, but because they didn’t know the system” (Holland, 2013). This is a common response for a student who comes from a first generation family. There are ways for students to access such an experience, but it takes more than a website, for them to succeed.

Fischer (2007) looked at the enrollment of minority students in college and the elements of their successful transition. The differences among students, whether that be ethnicity or other forms of diversity, must be taken into consideration for a smooth transition and high retention rate. Taking a step on a college campus, somewhere very unlike a home environment, can be a huge change and hard experience for many students. The fact that students are minorities in this situation brings on even larger challenges. The differences in adjusting to college and the consequences from strategies for doing so bring on different outcomes for students. Ensuring that students do get to college is just the first step in allowing them to be successful in the world of college access. As Fischer noted, the availability of role models and relationships must be present. In conclusion, this study determined college grades could be predicted based on race or ethnic group. The more that a student was prepared for college, the better the student performed. Involvement at the college level is also a key to success for students from minority backgrounds. As Fischer concluded, the perception of importance goes beyond attending college, but staying there and performing well – both academically and socially.

Titus (2006) discussed the “influence of financial context of institutions on the chance of college completion for low socioeconomic status (SES) students at four-year

colleges and universities.” The study found that institutions that enrolled low SES students actually had lower levels of institutional financial resources; therefore, the institution had a higher dependence on tuition as a total revenue source. Low SES students graduate college at lower rates than high SES students. College completion found to be influenced by the financial aid context of the institution. Institutional level data and student data were used to research how SES influenced college completion. Additionally, an institution’s financial patterns were estimated to help explain the difference in SES in the completion of a college degree. In conclusion, the study found that in order to benefit students in college access, the institution must not only fund students to get them to campus, but ensure that the aid helps a low SES student after the admittance at an institution. The perceived importance of college can be a factor when students look beyond college access and understand the financial burden that stays with a student throughout their four years.

### **The Perceived Affordability of Higher Education**

Financial challenges are a large reason college is perceived as an imaginary pathway. Students, just as adults, value money differently from one individual to the next. What may seem like a worthwhile investment to one, may seem like a foolish waste, to another. The perception of higher education in relation to affordability is vital in understanding the college access challenges we face today.

**The rise of poverty.** The rise of poverty has become a hot topic in the United States. Our economy has seen one of its worst periods in history. Sparks (2013) outlined poverty in schools and its affects on students, thus college access. Low-income families

are not having any more children than they were in earlier decades. High-income families are having fewer children. Therefore the report found a higher proportion of today's children live in poverty. The report also discussed how students in poorer areas typically attend a school with fewer resources. The education system today is "set up in a way that takes the kids who have the least outside of school and gives them less inside of school too" (Sparks, 2013). The study relays that most of the highest poverty numbers occur in our urban school systems. The perception of affordability for higher education is bleak in a school where poverty is on the minds of most families.

McDonough and Calderone (2006) reported on the differences between low-income high school students and middle-income college counselors, the individuals somewhat responsible for revealing a path to a college degree. Sixty-three (63) counselors at urban high schools and underrepresented, low-income students were assessed on the affordability of college. These two populations viewed higher education very differently, just as they viewed money, education, leisure activities, and even grocery shopping location choices differently. The article focused on the findings and explored options that included sociocultural understandings of finances. They described the disconnected relationship between low-income families and high school counselors when discussing college opportunities. "No professional is more important to improving college enrollments than counselors" (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). However, these counselors are middle income and have been able to afford college. Unfortunately, a college counselor takes on class schedules, testing, discipline, conflict management, and more. The conclusion of the article suggests looking at new ways to view college

affordability issues that will keep in mind a family's position in relation to money, spending, and investments. Financial aid communication is absolutely necessary to ensure college access and positive perceptions of the affordability of higher education.

**The imperative resources.** The imperative resources for funding an education must be available to a student. Ward (2007), president of the American Council on Education relayed his message that "college access and success have never been more critical to young people as individuals and to the United States as a nation." The article discussed the enrollment gap between high and low-income families and how it has continued to stay unchanged for 30 years, a key finding. He argued that the enrollment gap continues to be a topic of discussion for policy makers in Washington DC.

Additionally, financing college is not the only set-back in college access. Students are also under or unprepared academically. Information on how to succeed in college, to prepare for, and finance college is just not as available to low-income students.

Multimedia approaches are a new method in approaching the college access challenge. This campaign is an answer to provide opportunity for not only the higher education community, but to the low-income students participating.

**Making a dream a reality.** Making a dream a reality is a possibility and understanding the options and programming available for students adds relief to the challenges of college access. Immerwahr (2002) studied the perceived importance of higher education, concerns about higher education cost, beliefs that accessibility is possible, views on the government role, and views about keeping college affordable. One group studied was the general public and the other was a group of parents of high school

and college students, both from the Philadelphia area. Overall, Americans opposed approaches to reduce access through the rise of tuition or the admittance of fewer students. These individuals were more sympathetic to approaches that included greater state contributions or actual institutional savings. Opinions were divided on whether or not a higher education path is even worth the prices charged. “54% say a four-year college education is usually worth the price, 36% say that it is sometimes worth the price, and 9% say it is rarely or never worth the price” (Immerwahr, 2002). This was a study based on career success, not other forms of growth. On the contrary, the public felt that “qualified and motivated students” should be able to pursue higher education.

Additionally, government should play an important role in making this accessible by providing tax breaks and work-study opportunities. A fascinating quote comes from an older man interviewed when comparing buying a car to higher education:

It is like getting a new car. Almost everyone can get a new car, but now many people might only be able to afford a KIA. But suppose I want a Buick. That used to be a middle-class car, but it isn't any more. So now people in the middle class can't afford to buy what used to be the middle-class car, let alone something above like the Lexus. In the old days a middle-class family could afford a better college, but now you are going to have to trade down. That same person who would have been going full-time before is now going part-time, or going to a community college for the first two years. (Immerwahr, 2002)

Dongbin (2004) extends this argument by discussing the differences by racial groups and how this affects college choice based on financial aid offers. Certain financial aid packages impact student college choice based on this study. If a student does receive a grant or grants combined with loans, this has a positive impact on attending the students' first college choice. However, only having student loans negatively impact the decision, thus choosing a second or third college option. Further, White students ended

up attending their first-choice institutions if they received a grant-loan combination. Asian Americans were also strongly influenced by having loans or the grant-loan combination and typically opted for their first college choice. Latino students and African American students' college choices however were not influenced by financial aid. These students valued financial aid and if it was not available, the first college choice would typically not be chosen. Different types of financial aid offers also played into whether or not a student would attend the school. Ensuring a quality and realistic financial package for students of all backgrounds is an important factor in the perception of college affordability.

St. John et al. (2004) presented an additional solid point for making college an option in their discussion of an early intervention program, introducing college and its options for low-income middle school and high school students. Their study looked at the impact of "Indiana's Twenty-first Century Scholars Program" (St. John et al., 2004), an intervention program providing grant money and academic support for these students. It found that 8<sup>th</sup> graders who participated were more likely to apply for college. Encouragement from educators as well as family had a positive influence on college preparation. In conclusion, the grant aid had a significant impact on enrollment. Therefore, aid is a contributing factor for the success of an encouragement program such as the one studied. Students become more comfortable with the idea of college if they are exposed to the perception at a younger age, therefore making such an experience accessible.



### **The Perceived Accessibility of Higher Education**

Students must have a positive perceived importance and affordability image in order to break through the college accessibility barriers. “Many Americans, especially parents, are concerned about the price of higher education. Although they know very little about the details, they feel that rising prices threaten to make higher education inaccessible to many people” (Immerwahr, 2002). Accessibility begins before college, in the home and in the school. Sometimes, this does not occur at either location. This is the challenge the higher education community faces, particularly with low-income students and schools.

**The inequality of education.** The inequality of education does exist today. Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) looked into improving college access and readiness for low-income and underrepresented students who attend urban high schools. They stressed that policy makers must specifically outline the knowledge and skills necessary for college access and achievement. They noted that high schools must stress four sets of essential skills including: “content knowledge and basic skills; core academic skills; non-cognitive or behavioral, skills; and ‘college knowledge,’ to have the ability to effectively search for and apply for college” (Roderick et al., 2009). Indicators commonly used by colleges include test scores, grade point averages, letters of recommendation, etc. The study discussed that few school districts have the capability for this kind of preparation, particularly in poorer school systems. The view of college access is bleak if schools are unable to provide the proper education on college options.

Stringfield and Yakimowski-Srebnick (2005) revealed the long-term relationship of changing state and federal policies as it relates to the Baltimore City Public School System accountability requirements, organizational responses, and student outcome measures. This school system is a large, high-poverty, underrepresented, urban school system. They concluded that education reform in schools of low performance levels is a complicated process. Urban school districts with many at-risk students many times have not produced outstanding achievement excellence for years. College access is difficult to grasp when a student is a part of a low performing school, surrounded by low performing peers. The inequality of education is an obstacle our educators and higher education systems must take on.

**The challenges of college access.** The challenges of college access, students face is a large contributor to not having diverse populations on our college campuses. Goode (2010) discussed the gap of technological education of students on campus. Institutions provide applications, grades, course enrollment, etc. all online. Not all students understand or feel comfortable taking on this digital challenge, particularly students who came from schools that could not afford to teach technological skills. They do not have such resources at home. Students who do not have access to use technology are potentially at an academic disadvantage when compared to students who have had the proper preparation and knowledge pertaining to such technologies. College access programs must face the technological gap and address it as a challenge for students who do make it to a college track.

*College Access and Admission* (2003), an ASHE Higher Education Report supported the idea that economically and educationally challenged (EEC) individuals face academic hurdles long before enrolling in college. Evidence is presented that these students are less likely to attend college and also more likely to attend a less selective institution if they do choose to enroll. Depending on the SES level of a student, parental expectations and definitions of success vary. Students with higher SES levels are exposed to higher quality academic preparation and gain access to universities, sometimes of elite standings, at much higher rates than their EEC peers. Also outlined is the importance of parental involvement in low-SES students' college enrollment. College access takes on such challenges, but must be mindful of the parental involvement and the influences around students impacting them every day.

**The impact of diversity on college access.** The impact of diversity on college access is at large something for higher education institutions to consider. Weggel (2008) explored a program at the University of Washington called the Dream Project where education is provided for undergraduate students about higher education policy while the students help disadvantaged high school students apply for college. Students from the University are paired with first generation and low-income students in six high schools within the Seattle area. SAT prep, the college application process, and the scholarship application process are all worked on. The University of Washington saw a 6% increase in minority group freshman enrollment over a six-year period. The institution immediately follows up on scholarship support programs and programs including the Dream Project so that the diverse community feels and sees that they are being included

in such an aggressive recruitment. The perception of college access directly relates to diversity and its contributions to the classroom, even recruitment.

Goldrick-Rab and Shaw (2005) explored “work-first” federal policies that are said to threaten the advancement of college access to diverse groups including African American and Latino students. The 1996 welfare reform and the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) are evaluated looking at the effects on college enrollment for disadvantaged students. Such strategies have reduced welfare recipients, but have restricted access to education in the process. The findings show that these policies are actively limiting higher education opportunities to the disadvantaged populations. “Post-secondary education is no longer an accessible option for most individuals receiving either welfare or WIA services, and this is particularly true for Blacks and Latinos, especially those of limited English proficiency.”

### **Conclusion**

The perception of importance, affordability, and accessibility all are major contributors to whether or not a student will take the steps to pursue a college path. Higher education is not necessarily the route for all students, however it should not be denied equal opportunity from a student who is motivated and capable of attending. Many factors play into the accessibility challenge our country faces today, whether that is family, neighborhood, or schooling. Many strengths were included in the research and suggestions for enhancing the process were given. The rising price of tuition is truly on one small piece of the college access challenge. All individuals, including students, teachers, admission representatives, and school counselors must work together to ensure

that proper steps are being taken to prepare for the dreams of underrepresented and low-income students.

The purpose of my study is to understand the perception of higher education at an at-risk, urban middle school. This is a population whose college aspirations have not been studied. To better understand the aspects of their perception will allow for the opportunity to explore methods to ensure access for this group of students.

Based on the research outlined in Chapter 2, college access is a nationwide problem for students wanting to pursue higher education. College is accessible for those who have the financial means to do so as well as the support before, during, and after the experience. This study contributes to existing research providing clear answers to how students feel about higher education.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to understand the perception of higher education from the view of at-risk, urban middle school students. Specifically, this case study explored whether or not a college track was in the plan for these students.

#### **Research Questions**

One grand tour question was used to guide the research, as well as three sub-questions. The central research question was: What is the perception of higher education at an at-risk, urban middle school? The sub-questions were as follows:

1. How does the importance of higher education in a student's life affect their perception of higher education?
2. How does affordability affect the perception of higher education for a student?
3. How does accessibility affect the higher education perception for a student?

#### **Qualitative Research**

Quantitative research studies typically tests variables, whereas qualitative research aims to describe the lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, qualitative research aims to understand the thoughts and feelings from the participant while gaining a deeper understanding of the human condition (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research explores an area where there is a problem and develops a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon based on the research problem.

Additionally, the central phenomenon is the key component, idea, or process studied in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012).

In order to best understand the research questions, I set out to gain a deeper understanding of the perception of higher education from the participating students. To accomplish this goal, they had to be able to elaborate their thoughts through personal reflection.

Of the research methodologies that emerge through qualitative research, this study implemented semi-structured, survey research. This approach grasps the feelings and thoughts of participants to provide insight on an issue. Each of the individual interviews are compared respectively (Creswell, 2012).

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

Prior to the research investigation, I successfully completed the Consortium for IRB Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protections (CITI) to receive the required certification in research involving human subjects. In the research request letter to the middle school administrator (see Appendix A), permission was requested to study the perception of higher education with middle school students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classes. In the participant recruitment email, informed consent form, and parental consent form (Appendix B), all participants were provided with the IRB approval notice, case number, and contact information of the IRB for any concerns would arise before, during, or after the study.

**Research Site**

The study was conducted at an urban middle school in the South. The 105 participants were fulfilling the requirement to complete 8<sup>th</sup> grade English before the advancement to high school. Every 8<sup>th</sup> grade student in the district is required to complete the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English obligation. There was only one 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher.

The researcher selected the interview site of the classroom to ensure the participant felt comfortable and in a familiar space. This location was convenient, familiar, and comfortable for all participating students. Audio recordings were not used for this study. Students were able to raise their hands and ask questions regarding the written interview style.

**Participants**

Participants for this study were selected from an 8<sup>th</sup> grade English class. Students were given the research information in advance to decide if they wanted to participate in the study. One hundred five (105) out of the 150 students seen over a two-day range participated. Of the 105 students, one student was White. Other students ranged from a wide-variety of diversities including, but not limited to: African-American, Haitian-American, Chinese-American, Pacific-Islander, and Latino. This sample was a convenient sample selection because participants were “willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2012).

All participants were under the age of 18, therefore parental consent forms were filled out in advance. Recruitment efforts initially aimed to attain 40 participating students to serve as the sample of participants for this case study. Participants were



recruited through a letter sent by me and distributed at the middle school one week in advance of the research. Participants had until the research collection day to attain a parent signature for the study. Recruitment efforts resulted in 105 participants, all of whom met the participation requirement of *8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school student*. Specific demographic information was not gathered for this study, but based on my observations, all but one of the participants were not White. Additionally, there was an even mix of male and female participants. Names were not disclosed in the study. All written interviews were completed anonymously.

### **Data Collection**

Before interviews began, participants were able to look over and ask questions pertaining to the informed student consent form. I highlighted key areas of the informed student consent form to ensure each participant fully understood the purpose of the research as well as his or her rights regarding the interview questions.

Data were collected through five structured, written interview questions – all of which followed an open-ended question format. Participants were asked to write as much as they could regarding each topic of the question. Participants were able to answer questions regarding the questions to ensure they understood the question is intent. I was readily available to ask any questions as the participants wrote their answers quietly in the classroom. Those students who did not participate in the study received the same questionnaire with no consent form. These copies were delivered to the teacher once completed, not the researcher. Thus, all students who were present in the classroom thus were working on a classroom activity to eliminate any distractions.

Each class took 15-25 minutes to complete the 5 written interview questions. I did not take any notes or record conversation during the process. Participants were asked to ensure that their written answers reflected their thoughts relative to the interview questions.

### **Data Analysis**

Coding was performed to utilize each individual concept that emerged through the written interviews. Participant interviews varied on amount written for each of the five questions. Themes and subthemes emerged from the coding process and were documented in an excel file.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher plays a key role through the data collection and interpretation process. The researcher must be aware of her influence and presence during the interview process. The researcher in this study can be identified as an educated, European American individual. Additionally, the researcher was a friend to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade English instructor. The researcher had prior experience working with urban, at-risk students, therefore was familiar with the classroom setting and specific needs of students.

Furthermore, I was a student seeking a Master's degree in Educational Administration with a student affairs emphasis. This experience influenced the researcher's view of the perception of higher education, specifically from the minds of at-risk, urban middle school students. The researcher is passionate about this influence on

higher education, including college access and its effects on college campus populations and success.

This information was disclosed to participants if the individuals asked before, during, or after the written interviews took place. The researcher did not want to influence participant responses based on her own experiences with higher education.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting research, participants and the researcher must both be aware of any potential risks. Such risks may affect individuals personally, psychologically, professionally, etc. There were no known risks to the participants associated with this research study. The research site has been known in the last year to be the location of weapon carrying incidents, riots, and physical fights among the student populations. None of these examples were prevalent during the two-day period of research.

Participants were minors, so they were provided with the detailed informed student consent form before agreeing to become a study participant. This form was again reviewed before the written interviews were conducted. Participation was voluntary. It was not linked to any academic or financial incentive. Students were not required as a part of their English class to participate. Following the completion of the study, all students interacted with a college access presentation and college memorabilia prizes.

Based on my observations, interviews did not prompt any discussion of emotional distress. Participant names were not disclosed in the study. All research documents were kept on the researcher's personal office, locked. Participants had access to their own

transcripts in order to ensure accuracy at any time before the destroying of documents.

Additionally, the middle school administration team had access to results of the study.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed all methodology of research including IRB approval, research site, participants, data collection, data analysis, reflexivity, and ethical considerations. A written interview process was used to collect data to serve the study's purpose statement and answer the proposed research questions associated with the research. In Chapter 4, the researcher will discuss the findings discovered through the data collection and analysis process.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of higher education among at-risk, urban middle school students. Specifically, this study considered the direct choice as to whether or not the students would attend college – may that be a community college or four-year institution track.

#### **Description of Participants**

One hundred and five (105) 8<sup>th</sup> grade students from the middle school participated in this study. The students did not complete demographic questions as part of the study. Based on observation, the majority of the students were ethnic or racial minorities. Students were recruited via letter with assistance from their classroom instructor. The middle school is among one of the lower performing middle schools in the state of Florida. Its students are required to take the state standardized tests frequently as the state education department occupies the school. Each student filled out the open-ended questionnaire anonymously.

#### **Research Questions**

One grand tour question and three sub-questions were used to guide the research for this study. The primary question was: What is the perception of higher education at an at-risk, urban middle school? The sub-questions were as follows:

1. What is the perceived importance of higher education?
2. What is the perceived accessibility of higher education?
3. What is the perceived affordability of higher education?

### **Overview of Themes and Subthemes**

In this chapter, I discuss themes that emerged from the written interviews completed by participants about their perception of the perceived importance, accessibility, and affordability of higher education. The themes are reflected in Table 1.

The theme of “family involvement” reflected participants’ relationship with current family members and their support for them to attend college. “Financial burden” expressed the struggle participants see that attending college would place on their families if they were to have to pay for their tuition on their own. “Need for a degree” focuses on the understanding that the participants must obtain a degree before continuing on to their next step in life. The “Obligation to give back” theme speaks to the desire participants felt to help others and support those who will one day be in their situation. “Better self” serves as the theme representing personal achievements and successes in regards to understanding a college education would open doors. Lastly, the “Experience” theme depicts how students currently view college as and what specifically is associated with the term “college.”

Table 1

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
1. Family Involvement	a. Positive support to attend college b. First-generation recognition
2. Financial Burden	a. Negative barrier: Price of college b. Other concerns
3. Need for a Degree	a. Be something/Get Out c. Sports
4. Better Self/Give Back	a. Supporting others b. Good Career and More Pay c. Personal Success
5. The Experience	a. College is fun b. Partying occurs at college c. College involves studying and hard work

**Themes**

**Family Involvement.** Most participants in this study mentioned the word “family,” “mother,” “father,” or “grandma” at least once. This acknowledgement of such support lead to two subthemes, positive support to attend college and first-generation recognition.

***Positive support to attend college.*** Participants described how a parent or guardian would act if they found out the student would be attending college. One participant stated “My family would be proud of me. They’ll be happy for me. My family do all they can so I can finish college.”

Another student discussed the influencers in his own life helping him along the way stating, “My mom and grandparents influence me to go to college. But first I have to finish middle school. Then finish high school and get my GED, or degree.” This was not the only time that individuals other than a parent figure were mentioned. One student acknowledged that he or she is not the only one involved in the college process saying, “My mom has two kids in the same grade, so money for college maybe very tight.”

The students almost always mentioned their families in their written interviews. Family is a large part of who these students are and it is clear that their relationships are unmistakably strong. One participant stated “I think my family would be excited for me to go to college, probably they would be a little sad if I left for college. If I leave for college, I promise I would visit.” Other students also mentioned that their families would most likely be sad if they left for college, but would support them nonetheless. The majority of the interviews consisted of a statement explaining how overjoyed a parent or guardian might be if they found out their son or daughter would be attending college after high school. One student states “they would act very positive, happy, and excited for me. I think it would be an accomplishment for them.” This reiterates the next component of family involvement – the first generation student population.

***The First-Generation student population.*** *The First-Generation student population* was very pronounced in this study. The student who spoke about how their parents would find their decision to go to college an accomplishment speaks to their parents’ thoughts in more depth. This student stated that their “positive influences are my parent; on this situation they want me to go to college and be better than they are, so I can



make a better living.” This particular rationale was stated several times on several interviews.

One student said, “my mother will be very proud of me, she all ways tell me that she want me to be better than her.” Additionally, a different student stated, “They would be really happy that I went to college because my mother couldn’t go to college she I think it would be her dream to see me go to college.”

“Well no one in my family attended college so I want to be the one who goes and have a good education and job,” states one participant. Many times, students associated their experience with being a first-generation student to success or a “good job.”

Many of the participants felt the family support backing them to attend college, but the students also seemed aware of the challenges college would bring. Family support would not overcome the cost of attending an institution is no easy payment.

**Financial burden.** When asked what one of the potential barriers would be in attending a form of higher education, participant after participant listed “money” as the top barrier for attending. In today’s economy, the rising cost of degree attainment can be difficult.

*A negative barrier: The price of college.* A negative barrier: the price of college burdens many students, but was mentioned many times in the results for this study. “The cost of college is standing in my way right now but if I save some time to help my parents save money,” states one of the participants. Some students did mention, as this one did, that if they save money, they will be able to go.

Another student stated, “My barrier is also money. My mom always wanted me to go to college but she isn’t able to pay for my sister and I to both go so she wants us to earn scholar ships.” Scholarships are again stated by a participant, “Finical that why I’m focusing on to get a scholarship so my parents don’t have to worry about.”

Additionally, another student brings in the aspect of going to college out of town and the financial burden that might bring stating, “Is when I found out that none of my family on my dad or my mom side never went or they could not afford to go out of town for college.”

When asked if they would be going to college, one participant writes, “Yes, I am because I want to the be first one in my family to go to college. All of my family didn’t go to college because they did not have money for.”

*Other concerns.* Other concerns did arise in participant results. In addition to the price of college, the participants brought up other concerns including the transportation process in actually physically getting to college. One participant writes:

My family don’t got a lot of money for me to attend college. Away to get up their. The positive influences is that I want to go and my family want me to. So I can do some thing good in life.

Aside from financial concerns, other barriers keeping students from attending college were in fact the peers surrounding them each day. One student said, “Potential barriers: people around me hating that I actually want to do something with myself.”

Another student says, “The potential barriers my grades. I’m not very good at subject and also money.”

Another student stated that the support is there, but it would be difficult picking up and going to college somewhere. The participant states, “My mom wouldn’t really know she think might no be ready because she didn’t go. On the other hand my dad want me to finish school and go college.”

One student stated their concerns, “I probably don’t have enough money to go to college, Don’t have great have good grades.” Many influential factors contribute to whether or not students decide to go to college. Finances are a major concern as well as the other issues that arise from stressful living situations.

Overall, most participants expressed concerns in attending college and how their financial status plays into those burdens. Students are aware of their financial situations and understand that college is expensive. The participants expressed other concerns that would potentially add to this stress

**The need for a degree.** Participants were bold in stating their personal desire to obtain a college degree. The idea of obtaining a degree seemed to translate to success. Students understood that their idea of success was determined by whether or not they received a degree.

***To be Something.*** To be something was mentioned by multiple students. The idea of becoming someone or something better was attainable by attending college and earning a diploma. One participant states, “I want to be something in life.” Another writes [referring to his or her parents], “they want to see me come out of something in life.” Additionally, another participant reiterated, “going to college will allow me to do more then what people with only highschool diplomas can.”

In order to be something, students related this to success. One said, “I want to be something good in life I want to succeed. I want to become something that will provide for me and my family.” One student goes as far to state that, “I could get out of the hood!!! And become a better person. I could come back and help our future youth.”

Similarly by becoming someone by “getting out,” one participant wrote:

My positive influences are so I don’t have to stay in Miami. I want to be better in life and not a person on the streets. My parents want me to be better than they are. My parents wants to have the best for myself.

Last, one participant stated, “College is important because that where you go work hard how to follow your dreams and train to become something good.” Students understand that in order to be something and make an impact, they need a college diploma.

**Sports.** Sports were mentioned frequently in some form or another. Ironically, the school did not have any organized team sport, or any intramural sport. The fact that these students felt the need to obtain a college degree so they could support their sporting goals is fascinating.

When asked if they would be attending college, some participants simply stated, “Yes, because I would like to become an NBA player.” Additionally, a participant states, “Yes. Because I have to go to college to play basketball for Duke University, then, make it to the NBA.”

Another participant mixed up his sporting answer a little and said, “Yes, I do plan on attending college for my education, bachelor’s degree and my Nba career.” The NBA

wasn't the only professional sporting association mentioned. One student said, "It's important because I want to play football in the NFL. It's important to me to make it this far." Another student stated, "I want to play football. In order for me to play football I have to get good grades. I have to put forth maximum effort. If I don't I will not be able to go to college anywhere."

Sports reflected a very large portion of why students wanted to attend college. Sports provide an outlet and potentially an opportunity out of an old life. Students not only idolized athletes, but many of the famous athletes in the NBA and the NFL once walked through the halls of their middle school.

**Better Self/Give Back.** Students readily recognized that in order to better themselves, they need a college degree. As previously mentioned, students consistently stated their goal of becoming something. In their eyes, this can be determined by a college degree. To take this one step further, students recognized that obtaining a degree would give them the ability to give back.

*Supporting others.* Supporting others was a valuable subtheme within the results of this research. One participant states, "Seeing famous people making millions and I tell myself I want to be like them. I want to support my family." Many students spoke to the value of supporting themselves, but mostly their families.

"My mother and father would be proud. They did not attend college. If I go to college my mom would be proud for me to take care of my family and not struggle," one participant stated. Students associated struggle with not being able to take care of their families. Many of the students, as previously mentioned, brought up their families in the

results of this student – symbolizing the importance of family and support returned to them.

Another student stated why it is important for them to make it college, “because it is important to me because I can help my family with the bills. Fixing the house, and take them places they never been to yet.” Students additionally relate the idea of supporting their future families to obtaining an education. A participant stated, “It is very important to be because I want to be able to support my family if something goes wrong.” The participant continues, stating, “I want to let my kids have a good life when they grow up so they can have whatever they want.” This statement is indicative that in order to “have whatever you want” you must be successful and obtain a college degree.

*Good career and good pay.* Good career and good pay were two components of the research that were valuable to students. They understood that college would bring opportunities for a good career or job and one that paid better than just any job right out of high school.

“I wanna have a good job and be the smartest person I can be,” states one student in their interview. Another participant stated, “I want to become a vet. I love animals and I heard the make good money.” One participant was very specific stating:

College is important to be because I want to succeed in life and bring food to the table for my family and not be stressing about how I’m going to pay the bills and stuff the job that I’m going to get is going to be enuf to make my family happy.

“I want to go to college is because I would like to complete school so that I could get a great job,” stated another participant. Another said, “I want to go to college to get a real good job that I will enjoy and to show off my degree.” Students understand and see

the importance of a degree and how it will bring them success. Most participants stated something about a college degree and believe it is a magical key to providing a good job thus helping out their families. One student sums this up by writing, “They will love it I go to college because they want to see me succeed and get out of the hood, help out my community, and have a successful job.”

*Personal success.* Personal success is something that students talked about many times as they described how they can achieve their goals by attending college. Students understood that they would be successful with a college education and not as successful without one.

“College is very important because I want to be a successful woman and business woman,” stated a participant. Another expanded on this saying, “The positive influence I have is from my mom and dad they want me to achieve and be a successful football player.”

One participant wrote, “College is very important to me cause it can help me succeed in life and would make me smarter and then I can move on in life.” Students seemed to understand that in order to be successful and achieve their dreams, they must attend college. Another student reflected on how important college is writing, “very important because that’s my ticket to success. That’s my goal to become something good in life. Never look back in the pass look in the future.”

Students connected success to college. Students additionally connected achievement to a college education. If students are making these connections, they are understanding that without a college degree they are not as successful. They are

understanding that in order to achieve this success, individuals must continue education beyond high school to attain that degree. The goals, the dreams, the hopes for each of these students are powerful. What is even more powerful is their direct perception of what college might be like.

**The Experience.** Perhaps one of the most purposeful aspects of this study is what students directly believe their college experience might consist of. Students described what the college life would be like in a variety of different ways.

**College is fun.** College *is* fun. Individuals in this world who have attended college might say that among many other descriptive words, college is “fun.” The majority of the participants in this study wrote that “college is fun.”

“I don’t really know what it would be like because I have never experienced it, but I would want it to be fun and a great learning experience for me,” one participant stated. Another said, “It would be fun and I could get a great education and hopefully get a scholarship to my favorite university of Miami.”

One participant stated, “College life will be to first find a house, job. Then pick the right class, study, study, study, and have some fun.” Another participant wrote, “wild, fun, hard” as their response to describing the college life. On many occasions, students associated fun with hard work, describing the two together. One student wrote, “College would be fun and hardworking. I would enjoy myself but at the same time, I’m going to workhard to pass every class and not be a failure.”

**Partying.** Partying was another often-mentioned topic when describing college. Fun was also often times associated with partying. Many students expressed that college



would consist of parties. One participant wrote, “There will be parties, test, and a whole lot of work. I can’t play around I will have to buckle down and do my work so that I can pass all my classes and maintain a 3.0 GPA.”

One student described college in simple terms saying, “fine girls, parties, a lot of tests, ect.” Another stated, “In college there are a lot of parties at night there is a lot of drinking and dancing.” Students did associate hard work with partying as well. One wrote, “I would study all week and party on the weekend and visit my family for the holidays.”

A participant reflected on what college would be like stating, “I think college would be sorta fun. Like, in the morning and afternoon. But at night there would be parties. Lots and lots of parties.” Many students made partying a priority to their college experience or even stated how they may not have time for such fun. One said, “To me college life would be boring. Because I would always be doing homework. I would never have time to go to party. And I would have to study. I would hate this life.”

***Studying and hard work.*** Studying and hard work can be attributed as something very clear that students know college will consist of. Some participants, but not all understood that college would be more difficult than high school students. One participant wrote that college would be like, “Giant textbooks and working really hard because college is a place for education and its way harder than the schools I’ve been to.” Another participant stated, “Well just like regular school. Just longer classes. The professor don’t tell you anything. Just have to copy what you think is important.” A student reflected on what they thought college would be like:

I think college life will be hard at first, but tend to get easier. Managing money and getting all my work done and studying hard will be a challenge for me. I'm sure that that I will be able to manage after a while.

One student wrote about the seriousness of working hard in college. They stated, "You will have to work hard do your work on time. Make sure you be up and ready for your class. You can't be playing a lot or you give get kick out." Students connected hard work to success in this study. Students mostly understood that college would be challenging and much more challenging than the high school work that they were used to. Unfortunately, college academics are only one aspect of the challenge that comes with the experience.

### **Summary of Findings**

The themes that emerged from this study were significant thoughts represented by each 8<sup>th</sup> grade participant as they reflected on their perceptions of higher education. First and foremost, the majority of the participants stated that they would be attending college. Students linked success to a college degree and their future success would be determined by this. The students felt obligated to give back to their current or future families with the higher income they perceived they would be receiving with a college degree.

The students were well aware of the financial burdens college would bring to them as individuals and to their families. Most all participants recognized that college was expensive and that they would need a source of support, such as scholarships. Students felt that a college experience would better them. They wanted to become "somebody" through their college experience and get out of the neighborhoods they currently live in.

The students wrote that their college experience would be fun, but also hardworking. The themes that emerged show a connection between success and a college degree. Chapter 5 provides further discussion about the results for this study, the implications of the findings, and recommendations for future practice and research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this thesis was to understand at-risk, urban middle school students' perceptions of higher education. Their perceptions regarding the importance, accessibility, and affordability of higher education will add value to how higher education professionals can provide an adequate understanding to this population. One Hundred Five (105) student written interviews were conducted to understand their understanding of college. The results revealed a distinctive understanding of how these 8<sup>th</sup> grade students view college based on the influencers around them. Their writing made it clear these students think of it as something foreign and far off.

#### **Research Questions**

This qualitative open-ended, survey study focuses on a sole research question: "What is the understanding of higher education from an at-risk, urban middle school student?" Sub-questions focused on three areas, college importance, college affordability, and college accessibility to lay a foundation for the perception. The research questions included:

1. How does importance of higher education in a student's life affect their perception of higher education?
2. How does affordability affect the perception of higher education for a student?
3. How does accessibility affect the higher education perception for a student?

In order to understand the research questions, the following interview questions were used in this study:

1. Are you planning to attend college? Why or why not?
2. What potential barriers keep you from wanting to attend college?
3. How do you think your family or your guardian would support you if you chose to go to college?
4. Describe what the college life would be like.
5. How important is college to you? Why or why not?

These interview questions were designed to allow the students to reflect on a topic they may or may not have put much thought into previous to the interview. The analysis of the results provided a deep understanding of how students perceived college and their role for post high school graduation.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of this research study indicated that students are in fact thinking about higher education opportunities. The students studied in this research study were at-risk students, coming from an urban area in the South. These students have countless barriers keeping them from not actually attending college, but even thinking about attending. Emergent themes included:

- Students value and recognize the family involvement in their lives up to this point in their schooling experiences.

- Financially, college presents challenges to students. Participants recognized that many of their families would not be able to financially support them through college.
- Participants recognize that in order to meet specific goals and attain particular jobs, they must receive a college degree.
- Students valued the bettering of themselves and transferring this betterment by giving back to others around them.
- Participants assumed that college is an experience, one that is unlike many of the experiences they have had up to this point in their lives.

## **Discussion**

At this time, most research studies previously completed are specific to students who are either first-generation students or students from a diverse background. The results of this study added to the body of research and literature on these topics as it continues to grow. The findings promote awareness to our own higher education professionals and all educators to better serve this population of students.

**Research question 1: How does the importance of higher education in a student's life affect their perception of higher education?** Upon the completion of the research study, it was clear that students felt higher education was important. In this way, students felt that they must attend college in order to find success. Their perceptions of higher education were always correct, however participants demonstrated that their perception of higher education was directly affected by those participants who wanted to attend college.

Additionally, many students stated that in order to pursue their career goals, such as becoming a lawyer, veterinarian, criminal justice practitioner, etc., they would need a degree. This made their perception of higher education valuable because they understood they must attend college to satisfy these personal goals.

Participants touched on the challenging aspect college may bring to its students. They readily stated that they would need to stay motivated and focus on their goals, unlike in high school. This directly affects the perception of higher education in that college is more important than high school. Students also recognized that in order to be successful in college, academics need to be a priority in high school.

Parents and guardians played an important role affecting the perceptions of higher education. It was clear that there was some family talk about college and how important it was – as many of the parents did not have a college education. Students knew the importance of higher education and this directly affected their perceptions of college just based on conversations with parents, guardians, or other relatives.

**Research Question 2: How does affordability affect the perception of higher education for a student?** Despite the heavy response in the financial barriers of college, students still stated that they wanted to attend higher education. Most students still had positive thoughts on how they would make college affordable, despite its price tag. The very small group of individuals who stated they would not be attending college listed reasons other than affordability, such as attitude and simply not wanting to continue to attend school.

The majority of the participants listed ‘money’ as their negative barrier for college, but added solutions they saw fit or even listed consequences for not attending college. Affordability did not prohibit student choices at this time of their lives based on whether or not they would attend college. Affordability was something brought up in nearly all of the research interviews, outlining that this is a challenge for this particular population. One hopeful participant states, “The cost of college is standing in my way right now but if I have some time to help my parents save money.”

**Research Question 3: How does accessibility affect the higher education perception for a student?** Students quickly recognized that college was not something easily accessible, but this did not prevent them stating they would attend college. The results of this study show that even though the students understand the challenges of getting to college, they still would like to pursue a higher education.

Students stated many barriers and challenges relating to the accessibility of higher education. One student said, “My mom has told me she, wants me to go to college. Do not have money.” Another participant stated that their barrier would be “the Cost. The transportation.” One student goes as far to say they do not have any potential barriers stating:

I do not have no potential barriers keeping me from college. But the main positive influences I do have is that I want to go be the person who solves a huge ase and also I want to stand out from my family.”

Students understood that by accessing a college degree, they would become something bigger than themselves. This same participant says:



It is super important to me. I want to be that person that you call a hero and someone you can depend on. I want to do something nobody in my family has ever done, I want to stand out and show that there is someone to believe in. Students significantly noted that college would be no easy task for them to access.

Harder course loads, money, transportation, and low academic performance levels were all concepts participants listed as challenges to accessibility. Some of the students understood that these challenges might prevent them from attending college, while others felt these challenges were challenges all college students must go through. The reality is that college access is a problem many students are taking on. As 8<sup>th</sup> graders, these students understand that these realities exist, but such harshness might not truly be real to them until they are in high school and preparing for their next steps.

### **Limitations**

This open-ended, survey research study focused on the perception of higher education at an at-risk, urban middle school. 105 8<sup>th</sup> grade students both male and female participated in this study. Demographics and academic standing were not taken into account in the analysis.

The researcher cannot make assumptions about the students in regards to their family income, their living situations, their family situations, or their academic performance levels. Based on the findings of the study, family support emerges in one of the dominant themes. Additionally, it is evident that many of the written words pulled from the interviews have misspellings and poor grammar usage.

### **Implications**

This study does not account for whether or not students were in fact first-generation students. Based on the results, many participants wrote that they would be the

first to attend college. This study additionally does not ask where the student might choose to go to college. Participants were students and did not take into account what a parent might say to them in regard to wanting to pursue higher education. These students are young and have four to five years of school left before making the decision to attend college.

This study found the importance of higher education based on affordability and accessibility. Reflecting on circumstances in life, the participants were able to give a clear reason for their perception of higher education. At such a young age, this might be challenging to do. Professionals in higher education should consider the lack of knowledge at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level when building college access programs and also when recruiting. Professionals should also consider the lack of preparedness when accepting applicants based on their previous schooling.

Many of these students want college to be an option for them, but also see how challenging this might be for them because of poor academic preparation academically. A participant wrote, "I am not focused or smart enough. To attend college but I want to be a pediatrician so that alone right their pushes me."

Finally, this study focused on a small middle school in an urban setting. This does not look at schools in the surrounding area, nor schools in other city populations. Students living in rural populations might also be experiencing similar college access challenges.

## **Future Research**

The results of this study add to a growing body of qualitative and quantitative research on college access for low-income, at-risk populations in the United States. This study focused solely on the perception of higher education and whether or not a student would be attending college. This study was unique in that there were a multitude of participants. The open-ended, survey questions allowed for opportunity to go into depth on the challenges and perceptions of higher education.

Future research could focus on this class again to see whether or not the students *did or did not* attend college. With so many participants stating ‘Yes’ when asking if they would attend, it would be profound to see whether or not this actually happened in a longitudinal study. All participants appeared to be Black students. To conduct a future research study including the demographics of the population would add to research based on race and the implications these students face when striving to attend college.

Even further into the future, focusing on how college actually went for the students if they did make it to a campus would be worthwhile. With the struggles that the students feared, academically and financially, it would be important to understand if accommodations and resources were available for students with these particular challenges. Additionally, research studying the academic preparedness of middle school and schools similar would be meaningful – as many of the students recognized they might not be academically prepared to pursue a college education.

The concept of family came out in the results of this research study. Future research might also consider the family situations and how families dealt with students

either attending or not attending college in the future. Many of the students discussed their birth order and how this determines whether or not they will attend college. Studying the other siblings and their experiences would be a contribution to future research as well.

Originally, this study was looking to focus on faculty views on student perceptions of college as well. Based on the amount of data, faculty data was not included in the final research plan. This would be an additional piece to future research with this group of students.

### **Conclusion**

Increasing knowledge on the perception of higher education at at-risk school settings will allow for college access implications to decrease. College access continues to challenge our campuses today and even more so millions of families and determined students. This study focused on the perception of higher education and the challenges this student population see as barriers to their personal college aspirations.

The results of this study focus on the values students have during their 8<sup>th</sup> grade year of schooling. The open-ended, survey research method used tells the story of participants' current situations and realities in their lived environments. Honesty and hopefulness comes through the results of this study finding that college access is a challenge. This challenge is a national and international phenomenon that must be considered by higher educational professionals everywhere. There are determined students in this country hungry who are but ill prepared to learn.

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**Appendix A**

**IRB Approval Letter**





October 4, 2013

Kristen Upp  
Department of Educational Administration

Debra Mullen  
Department of Educational Administration  
239 MABL, UNL, 68588-0234

IRB Number: 20131013846 EX  
Project ID: 13846  
Project Title: Higher Education Perceptions of At-Risk, Urban Middle School Students

Dear Kristen:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 1 & 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 10/04/2013.

1. The stamped and approved informed consent documents have been uploaded to your form files (documents with Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use these documents to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the documents, please submit the revised documents to the IRB for review and approval prior to using them.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
for the IRB



**Appendix B**

**Letter of Request**

September 6, 2013

Carol City Middle School  
Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
3737 NW 188<sup>th</sup> Street  
Miami, FL 33169

Dear Sonia Romero:

This letter is to request the permission to offer a research opportunity in Ms. Anneli Dudley's 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom regarding a higher education perception study. A voluntary written interview would be conducted during class time on Friday, October 18<sup>th</sup> and the Monday, October 21<sup>st</sup>. Students will write an opinion-based answer for each of the four questions asked.

Students must have parent or guardian permission to participate in this study. Participants will additionally be included in a prize drawing for college memorabilia and snacks during the class period. All interviews would be confidential. Names will not be included on any document. The interview will take an estimated 15-30 minutes.

Additionally, 10-20 faculty members will be interviewed if willing to participate. They will answer similar questions based on the students' perceptions of higher education in relation to college access, affordability, and importance.

If you are interested, I would be happy to discuss college options with the students after the completion of the study. My knowledge and experience in the Office of Admissions at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln would provide for a foundational learning opportunity for all students regarding higher education possibilities.

All forms required by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln are attached. This ensures the protection of confidentiality for participating individuals. Study results will be available to the administration upon completion.

If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact me at (308) 631-2773. You may also contact Ms. Dudley with any lesson requirement concerns or questions, as we will continue to communicate about this October date. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Kristen Upp  
Graduate Assistant – Leadership & Entrepreneurship  
University of Nebraska – Lincoln

**Appendix C**

**School Permission Letter**



## Miami-Dade County Public Schools

*giving our students the world*

**Superintendent of Schools**  
Alberto M. Carvalho

**Miami-Dade County School Board**  
Perla Tabares Hantman, Chair  
Dr. Martin Karp, Vice Chair  
Dr. Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall  
Susie V. Castillo  
Carlos L. Curbelo  
Dr. Lawrence S. Feldman  
Dr. Wilbert "Tee" Holloway  
Dr. Marta Pérez  
Raquel A. Regalado

9/29/13

To whom it may concern,

I hereby grant permission to Ms. Kristen Upp to conduct research at Carol City Middle School.

Thank you,

Sonia Romero  
Principal

**Appendix D**

**Parent Informed Consent Form**



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**Parent/Guardian Informed Consent Form****IRB#** 20131013846 EX**Title:** Higher Education Perceptions of At-Risk, Urban Middle School Students**Purpose:**

This research project will aim to understand the perception of higher education from the view of at-risk, urban adolescents. You are invited to participate in this study because you are the parent or guardian of a child who attends a progressive middle school: Carol City Middle School.

**Procedures:**

All students will complete this opinion based interview assignment for class. Permission is being sought to also use student responses for research. Students will be asked to answer a short amount of questions about the perception of higher education. Procedures will last for 20 to 30 minutes will be conducted on Friday, October 18<sup>th</sup> or Monday, October 21<sup>st</sup> during English class time. Answers will be documented in the written format. Grades will NOT be affected by decision to participate or not to participate.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify the student will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigator during the study and for 2 years after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. Names will not be associated with any of the interview answers.

**Compensation:**

This is a voluntary study. Students will receive no compensation for participation. Students who choose to participate in this study will be entered into a drawing for Nebraska Cornhusker memorabilia prizes to promote higher education. Each class will have two winners based on those who are participating. If there are 30 students in a classroom, 20 students participating, and 2 prizes for each class, there will be a 1 in 10 chance of receiving one of the two prizes for those students participating. Additionally, snacks will be provided after the interview for all students.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about research participant rights.



**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

Decisions are voluntary whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to allow a student to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Name of Child Participating:**

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**Signature of Parent or Guardian:****Date:**

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**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

Kristen Upp, Principal Investigator  
Debra Mullen, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator

Phone: (308) 631-2773  
Phone: (402) 472-2913

**Appendix E**

**Youth Consent Form**




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**Youth Consent Form**

**IRB#** 20131013846 EX

**PERCEPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: THE IMPACT ON URBAN AT-RISK MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS**

You are invited to participate in a research study because you are an adolescent attending an at-risk middle school. The purpose of this research study is to view the perceptions of middle school students in regard to your perception of college.

This assignment is a requirement for class. Only those who have parent or guardian permission will participate in the research study. Grades will not be affected by your decision to participate. This research will take you about 15-30 minutes to do. You will fill out four written interview questions in relation to your perception of college. You will be asked to write your opinion for each of the questions to the best of your ability.

Each class will have two winners based on those who are participating. If there are 30 students in a classroom, 20 students participating, and 2 prizes for each class, there will be a 1 in 10 chance of receiving one of the two prizes for those students participating. Additionally, snacks will be provided after the interview for all students.

Your responses will be strictly confidential. You will not have your name associated with your answers in any way. Your answers may be published or summarized for the results of the research study. Your identity and your responses will be entirely confidential.

You will be asked to obtain parent or guardian permission for you to take part in this research study. Please talk this over with your parent or guardian before you decide whether or not to participate. Participants will be put in a prize drawing to receive college memorabilia.

If you have any questions at this time, please contact the researcher, Kristen Upp, graduate student at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**INVESTIGATOR**

Kristen Upp

Phone: (308) 631-2773

Email: [alec-kupp@unl.edu](mailto:alec-kupp@unl.edu)

Dr. Deb Mullen

Phone: (402) 472-2913

**Appendix F**

**Interview Protocol**

