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Gaining Insight into Hispanic Students' Postsecondary Plans

by

Neel A. Brown

A DISSERTATION

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Gaining Insight into Hispanic Students' Postsecondary Plans

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University of Nebraska, 2012

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While the growth of the Hispanic population in the United States is outpacing other ethnicities, college enrollment and graduation rates of Hispanic students continue to lag behind other groups. This longitudinal, qualitative case study explored when, how, and why a sample of Hispanic high school seniors at a large high school in North Central Texas made decisions regarding their postsecondary educational and career choices.

The foundation of this research relied on a series of 39 individual interviews with 13 Hispanic high school students over the course of their 2012 senior year. Analysis of the data uncovered themes regarding family influence, institutional influence, vague college knowledge, and the evolution of the students' postsecondary decisions. The students spoke in-depth about the factors that influenced their dreams, goals, and decisions.

The study provides recommendations to K-16 school administrators, policymakers, teachers, parents, students, and other researchers. Included are recommendations for further research.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1—Introduction	1
The Context of the Problem Addressed in the Study	1
Hispanic U.S. Population Growth.....	1
Hispanic Employment Opportunities and Economic Outlook.....	1
Educational Attainment for Hispanics	2
High School	2
College Enrollment	3
The Impact of Educational Attainment on Hispanics	4
Sub-questions.....	5
Factors Affecting Hispanic Decisions Regarding Post Secondary Education	5
Data Gathering Method.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	7
Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations of the Study	7
Significance of the Study	8
Chapter Two—Review of Literature	10
The Family as an Influencing Factor	10
Family Economics	16
Peers as an Influencing Factor	18
The K-12 School as an Influencing Factor	21
High School Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers as Influencing Factor	21
Academics as an Influencing Factor.....	30
Extracurricular Activities as an Influencing Factor	32
Summary	33

Chapter Three—Methodology	35
Data Collection Method.....	35
Research Question	37
Sub-questions.....	37
Research Site.....	37
Participants.....	38
Data Collection	41
Data Analysis	42
Storage of the Data.....	44
Validation.....	44
Triangulation of Data.....	45
Peer Examination	45
Member Checks	45
Long Term Observation.....	45
External Audit.....	45
The Role of the Researcher.....	46
Ethical Considerations	46
Chapter Four—Presentation of Data.....	50
Profiles of the Interview Participants.....	51
Rosa.....	51
Marissa.....	53
Josie.....	54
Flora	54
Antonia.....	56
Janette	57

Carlos	58
Maria.....	59
Rafael	60
Angelina.....	61
Jesus	62
Efren.....	63
Eduardo.....	64
Summary of Interview Data.....	66
Sub-questions.....	66
Family Influence	67
Parent Struggles Have an Impact.....	68
Sibling Influence.....	68
Parent/Family General Influence	69
Institutional Influence	70
Counselors.....	70
Peers.....	72
Vague College Knowledge	73
Application Knowledge	74
Financial Concerns and College Costs	75
Evolution of Decisions.....	76
Staying Focused on their College Goal	76
Changing College Plans.....	79
Positive High School Experience.....	81
Summary	82

Chapter Five—Significance of Findings	83
Family Influence	83
Parental Influence	83
Sibling Influence	87
Institutional Influence	87
From Teachers	87
From Counselors	88
From Peers	88
Vague College Knowledge	89
Enrollment Procedures, College Costs, Financial Aid, and Scholarships	89
Evolution of the Students’ Decision	91
Life Got in the Way	94
What they were supposed to say?	94
Did Not Know the Next Step	95
Recommendations for Practice	95
Recommendations for Future Research	98
Varying Demographics	98
Continue Past High School	98
Include Parents	99
References	100
Appendices	112

List of Tables

Table 1	High School Graduates College Enrollment Rates: 20 Year Comparison	4
Table 2	Participant Demographic Data	52
Table 3	Evolution of Students' Postsecondary Plans.....	77
Table 4	Students' Influences Towards College Attainment	84

List of Appendices

Appendix A	Participant Demographic Worksheet	112
Appendix B	Interview Protocol.....	116
Appendix C	External Audit Attestation	124
Appendix D	Themes and Corresponding Codes	131

Chapter One

Introduction

This qualitative collective case study explored when, how, and why a sample of Hispanic high school seniors at a large high school in north central Texas makes decisions regarding their post secondary educational and career choices and the extent to which those choices evolve throughout their senior year.

The Context of the Problem Addressed in the Study

Hispanic U.S. population growth. The Hispanic population in the United States is growing at a rapid rate. Data from the 2010 Census provide insights into our ethnically diverse nation. In the 2010 Census, 308.7 million people resided in the United States on April 1st, of which 50.5 million (or 16%) were of Hispanic origin (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). The Hispanic population increased by 15.2 million between 2000 and 2010, accounting for over half of the 27.3 million increase in the total population of the United States. Between 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic population grew by 43%, which was more than four times the growth in the total population (10%) (Ennis et al., 2011). As our population grows, the U.S. is challenged with meeting the social and physical requirements of the populace (e.g., housing, medical care, food, education, and jobs).

Hispanic Employment Opportunities and Economic Outlook

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2011) reports that Hispanic workers are about twice as likely as White or Asian workers to be poor (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Further analysis of the BLS report indicates that a Hispanic worker with only a high school diploma was 3.7 times more likely to be in poverty than a

Hispanic worker with a bachelor's degree or higher (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). The data indicate that the more education workers have, the less likely they are to be classified as "working poor." Hispanic workers with only a high school diploma were almost twice as likely to be poor when compared to their counterparts with an associate's degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). This educational attainment gap for Hispanics appears to be costly to those individuals in their ability to earn a significant income. The Hispanic unemployment data from 2009 indicate that the education gap also creates a disparity in the unemployment rate of Hispanic workers who are 25 years and older (beyond the traditional college age). Hispanics with only a high school diploma are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those with a bachelor's degree or higher, 9.7% versus 4.6% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Educational Attainment for Hispanics

High School. As the population of Hispanics in the U.S. has grown, so has the number of Hispanic public school students. With increased enrollments has come increased numbers of Hispanic high school dropouts. Although the dropout rate declined for Hispanics between 1988 and 2008, their rate in 2008 (18.3%) remained significantly higher than the rate for Whites (4.8%) in 2008 (Snyder & Dillow, 2010). This gap reduces the number of Hispanics who are eligible to consider college. These are crisis numbers for the nation.

Nationally, while college-going rates continue to rise overall, gaps between some groups of students are actually expanding in both access and college completion. Hispanic students earn bachelors' degrees at one-third the rate of white students (11% versus 34%). Currently, low-income students of all races earn bachelors' degrees at one-

eighth the rate of their more advantaged counterparts (9% vs. 75% by age 24) (Germeraad, 2007).

College Enrollment. In the fall of 2010, a record 19.1 million students are expected to attend the Nation's 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities, an increase of about 3.8 million since fall 2000 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009d).

Females are expected to comprise the majority of all college students: 10.9 million females will attend in fall 2010, compared with 8.3 million males. Although the majority of students will attend full-time (an estimated 11.9 million for fall 2010), about 7.2 million are expected to attend part-time (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009d).

About 7.5 million students are expected to attend public 4-year institutions (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009e), 6.7 million will attend public 2-year institutions (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009f), about 4.6 million will attend private 4-year institutions (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009g), and 0.3 million will attend private 2-year colleges (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009h).

Increasing numbers and percentages of Hispanic students are attending college. Between 2000 and 2008, the percentage of college students who were Hispanic rose from 9.5% to 11.9% (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009c). The increase reflects both the growing numbers of college-age Hispanics (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009a) and their higher enrollment rates (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009b). Although increasing in both absolute numbers and percentages of the Hispanic population, the gap between Hispanic enrollment rates and White student enrollment rates is increasing. As Table 1 documents, the Hispanic enrollment gap increased from 7.8% to 12.5% between 1988 and 2008.

Table 1

High School Graduates College Enrollment Rates: 20 Year Comparison

Year	Hispanic	White	Difference
1988	30.8%	38.6%	7.8
2008	36.7%	49.2%	12.5%

Source: NCES Digest Table 204 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2009b).

The Impact of Educational Attainment on Hispanics

The educational attainment impact on the U.S. Hispanic population can carry lifelong implications. As previously noted, employment opportunities and income are clearly reduced by limited educational achievement. Winkleby, Jatulis, Frank, and Fortmann (1992) also documented a positive link between education and quality of life. They noted that “education may protect against disease by influencing life-style behaviors, problem-solving abilities, and values. Moreover, education may facilitate the acquisition of positive social, psychological, and economic skills and assets, and may provide insulation from adverse influences.” Some wage increases were found to be possible for Hispanic males if they were to raise their educational level by three grades. Reimers (1984) stated that

the potential gains to raising education levels are quite large, especially for Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and blacks, who lag the furthest behind the white non-Hispanics. Mexican American men's average wage offer would be raised 16%—halfway to equality with Anglos—if their education levels could be raised the requisite three grades on average. (p. 414)

Anecdotal evidence from our daily lives generally supports the assumption that education and income level have an impact on the quality of life. The lack of financial resources for older Hispanics is a link to increasing negative consequences to normal life events

(Angel, Frisco, Angel, & Chiriboga, 2003), and the strain that comes from low income can have a demoralizing effect that has negative effects on health (Angel et al., 2003).

Sub-Questions

Factors Affecting Hispanic Decisions Regarding Post Secondary Education.

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the most critical factors influencing senior Hispanic students' decisions regarding their post secondary plans?
2. Which factors weigh the most in their decisions?
3. Do their deliberations throughout the year cause their decisions to remain fixed, evolve gradually, or change rather quickly?
4. Do high school staff members influence the students' decisions?
5. When does their decision become final?

Many factors can influence senior Hispanic students' decisions to pursue postsecondary education. Students have reported that parent support, misinformation about college, present work requirements, educators not showing interest in their future, and limited financial resources figure into their decisions about postsecondary education (Immerwahr, 2003). Davison, Guerrero, Howarth, and Thomas (1999) found low expectations from school personnel contributed to negative feelings about continuing their education. Other students reported insufficient counselor-student support (Vela-Gude et al., 2009) and Riegle-Crumb and Callahan (2009) found that "co-ethnic friendship networks are positively related to Latino students' achievement" (p. 627). Most of the studies that have uncovered factors influencing Hispanic students' post secondary decisions have been point-in-time studies. The research has been focused on

students in one of three conditions: before the high school senior year, during the first year in college, or after dropping out of high school. While all of these studies have contributed to understanding the overall issue of lagging Hispanic college enrollment, none have uncovered the timing and the decision making process of Hispanic seniors during their senior year. These questions are important. If we can uncover and understand these “tipping points” and when they occur, we can begin to better support our Hispanic high school students in their post secondary college and career decisions.

Data Gathering Method

This inquiry was guided by my interest in uncovering the decision making process of senior high school Hispanic students as they determine their direction after high school. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, I have chosen the qualitative method of a collective case study. A case study “is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases” (Creswell, 2007 p. 74). Using this approach allowed the researcher to gain meaningful insights into the decision making process of Hispanic high school seniors as they formulated their post secondary educational and career plans. The study focused on “what” the students experienced and “how” they processed their decisions (Moustakas, 1994). The foundation of this research project relied on a series of three 45-minute individual interviews with each participant over the course of their senior year of high school. The 13 student participants in the study were chosen randomly from United High School senior class Hispanics who were expected to graduate in the 2011-12 school year and were between the ages of 17-18.

Using open-ended guiding research questions an array of thick, rich, and meaningful data was derived from the descriptions of the students' experiences in their decision making. The 39 interviews occurred between September 2011 and May 2012. Each interview was audio recorded for transcription. All recordings were erased after transcription. The transcriptions were then coded through transcript review for commonalities, categories, and discerning themes. Additionally, standard school related data specific to each respondent were analyzed.

Definition of Terms

It is important that terms and policies for this study are clearly defined.

Hispanic—Determined on the basis of a question asked for self-identification of the person's origin or descent. Includes references to Latina/Latino.

College—Two or four year institution of higher learning, including vocational and career technical schools.

Senior—A student who has the representative amount of credits to graduate from high school in the current school year.

First Generation—A student who is the first in his/her immediate family to graduate.

Dropout—A student who has left the school environment prior to graduation.

Grade Point Average (GPA)—All grade point averages reported reflect the high school's six point scale.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations of the Study

The underlying assumption of this study was that the students would be able to remember and openly express their thoughts about the many factors that they considered

when making their decisions about their postsecondary future. Their honesty and openness played a large part in the accuracy of the interpretations. One aspect of my role as a researcher was to gain the students trust. I facilitated this by being forthcoming and honest with them in all information related to the study. I fully explained the nature of the study and its related goals. As the Assistant Principal of the high school I removed myself from acting as their principal in any way that could have hindered our relationship. Their participation and all the factors relating to their participation were kept strictly confidential. During the year, another principal assumed all duties related to the students, including discipline, attendance, academics, and parent conferences.

My study was conducted at one high school in North Central Texas, with specific Hispanic students, over a specific period of time. These factors limit the generalizations that can be made from the study.

Since participant interviews were the primary source of my data collecting, it should be noted that I relied on the respondents to self report their experiences and feelings and that all subject responses can be biased. My work as a researcher may have also been affected by bias because I wanted all of the students to make good postsecondary decisions. Throughout the data collection process, I used the validation techniques of maintaining a field journal and peer review in order to control for my bias.

Significance of the Study

Discovering that a senior Hispanic student's postsecondary decisions do evolve over the course of their last year in high school, gives credence and added impetus to a number of possible career and educational recruitment intervention techniques. An emerging theme indicating that students are more receptive to certain situational input at

certain times of their senior year, allows for specific interventions to be administered at specific times when they can be most effective and efficient. Conversely, if these students' decisions are confirmed to be static, intervention strategies may be properly targeted at younger students.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

The Pew Hispanic Center conducted a national survey of 2,012 Latinos age 16 to 25 and found that 89% say that a college education is important in life, yet only 48% say that they themselves plan to attain a college degree (Lopez, 2009). Though there are few studies that specifically address the timing of Hispanic high school seniors' decisions regarding their postsecondary educational choices, several factors have been found to influence their decisions.

The Family as an Influencing Factor

A significant number of immigrant and first generation Hispanic students are unfamiliar with how to negotiate our postsecondary education system and depend on their families for guidance. The Hispanic culture values the family, and it remains a key influence when Hispanic students are making decisions about their education (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003).

Hurtado and Gauvain (1997) found that Hispanic high school seniors most often consulted their parents about college planning information. Parents are an important influence in the postsecondary decision process of Hispanic high school students. In their longitudinal study of 81 Hispanic students and their parents, Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, and Garnier, (2001) found that irrespective of the number of years in the U. S., Hispanic "parents see a strong positive value to formal schooling, and they want their children to get as much of it as possible" (p. 566). They revealed that Hispanic parents have extremely high aspirations for their children's eventual educational attainment. Their research showed that even as their children began elementary school, more than

90% of their parents aspired to university attendance or completion (p. 599). In his landmark book *Manufacturing Hope and Despair*, Stanton-Salazar (2001) stated that “Mexican immigrant parents communicated an unequivocal value for the continued education and schooling of their children” (p. 82). However, while these parents expressed support towards their students’ educational goals, they allowed their children to define their own educational plans (p. 83). Parental involvement is positively related to the college enrollment of Hispanic students (Perna & Titus, 2005, p. 511). Immerwahr (2003) wrote that Hispanic parents are much more likely to see college as an absolute necessity when compared to non-Hispanic white parents.

The Hispanic students whose parents frequently discussed school related matters with them were more than twice as likely to enroll in a four year college as compared to students whose parents had little or no discussion. Horn and Chen’s 1998 study uncovered that parental input appears to be an effective factor for influencing their students’ postsecondary enrollment. “Even some discussions” about school related matters increased the odds of a Hispanic student attending “any postsecondary education” (p. 16). In a study conducted by McCallister, Evans, and Illich (2010), results indicated that Hispanic parents were very supportive of higher education. Nearly 100% of the 285 respondents surveyed wanted their children to attend college.

Hispanic parents can have an influence in varying ways. Keller and Tillman (2008) collaborated on a study regarding the educational attainment of immigrant youth and found that “parental behaviors and college expectations during adolescence are significantly associated with later college attendance” (p. 142). In a qualitative study of 12 Latina/o university students, Zalaquett (2005) found that even though most of their

parents had no experience with higher education, they supported their children's aspirations to attend college. Strong family support was found to help Hispanic students to "succeed in high school and pursue a college education" (p. 40). Each of the Hispanic students analyzed in Zalaquet's study portrayed that family support was a major factor in their educational success. An illustration of this fact also appeared in an article by Deborah A. Santiago, the co-founder and vice-president for policy and research at Excelencia in Education. Santiago wrote that she was a college graduate because of her family's influence. Many Hispanic students are the first in their family to attend college, and in this pursuit, "the role of the family is critical. Family bonds are strong for many Latinos, which reinforces both cultural ties and a family's sense of responsibility for success" (Santiago, 2011, p. 1). Stanton-Salazar (2001) emphasized that some students indicated that their parents did occasionally talk to them about school and college. However, the students did not expect their parents to help them with their schoolwork because "they don't understand it" (p. 89). Many of the parents in his study did not have postsecondary education, and therefore their children often felt that their parents "didn't have the knowledge base to truly comprehend the academic difficulties" they were experiencing (p. 88). The parents of many of these students were found to have general discussions about the value of higher education attainment with their children, but could not really assist them with the best methods to actually attain it.

Advertising and marketing experts recognize that the family makes decisions based on how the decision will affect the Hispanic household as a whole. As reported by Gilroy (2010), the Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies (AHAA) has commissioned research on Hispanic culture and found that Hispanic families tend to

“think in terms of doing something for the family rather than the individual” (p. 20). In their qualitative cross-case analysis of 32 post high school Hispanic students, Sánchez, Esparza, Colón, and Davis (2010) found that the needs of the family were an important factor in the participants’ decisions about their postsecondary future. Some students chose to delay college in order to assist the family, and some chose college so they could better help their family for the longer term. In making their postsecondary decisions, the respondents were influenced by family factors such as helping the family financially, helping to raise siblings, wanting to stay home and help a single parent, and even choosing to go to college to be a positive role model for a niece. Desmond and Turley (2009) contended that Hispanic family attachment can have an opposite result for senior high school students. They found that Hispanic students who indicate that it is important to stay home are less likely to enroll in college. In their qualitative study of 106 college bound students, Pérez and McDonough (2008) found that parents are valuable resources to Hispanic students and that the influences of the Hispanic family are varied. Strong family obligations can motivate students to pursue a college education to completion as they may be motivated to succeed so they are better able to support their families in the future (Tseng, 2004). Boden (2011) explored first-generation Latino students’ perceptions about their academic preparedness for college and found that the students had a strong feeling of family responsibility. The students interviewed expressed a strong desire to find careers that would enable them to financially assist their families. The students linked their academic preparedness to the feasibility of this goal.

A study by Hurtado and Gauvain (1997) of Hispanics’ college planning found that the educational background of the students’ mother has an impact on whether their child

will attend college. However, Ojeda, and Flores (2008), emphasized that the educational level of Hispanic parents did not predict their children's educational aspirations. While most of the mothers in the research had less than a high school education, this did not directly influence their children's educational goals. The children may have been motivated to pursue higher education because their mothers exemplified what life might be without higher education. However, it is interesting to note that students whose parents have less than a high school diploma scored 23% lower on the SAT when compared to those students whose parents have a graduate degree (College Board, 2011b). This study seems to indicate that a parent's education may at least have an effect on a student's college preparedness attributes.

Colleges recognize that parents play an important role in their children's college attainment. Santiago (2011) wrote that some Hispanic-serving institutions, nonprofit colleges whose enrollment is at least 25% Hispanic, have recognized that Hispanic parents are an important part of their children's college decisions. One college provides a mother-daughter program where they encourage the girls to finish high school and enroll in college. The program tries to help the girls and their mothers to set academic goals. The program targets girls as early as sixth grade because the organizers feel that at this age, the girls still have an array of choices before them (Tinajero, 1992). Programs such as this appear to be on target "for raising educational and career aspirations of young Hispanic girls and their mothers" (p. 41).

The kinds of support that a family offers can be varied. A mixed-methods study of Hispanic high school students revealed that most students felt that their families were a source of motivation and encouragement, but that the parents were limited on specific

college preparatory advice due to their lack of experience with higher education (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009). As an example, in 2008 only 11% of Hispanic children had mothers with at least a bachelor's degree (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). However, none of the students participating in the Kimura-Walsh study used their parents as a source of college information. In fact, students had to struggle with their parents' lack of understanding regarding the college application process. However, the students said that their parents motivated them by telling them stories of their own hardships. The students not only wanted to fulfill their parents' dreams, they hoped to inspire their family members by attending college.

Goldenberg et al. (2001) concluded that "student achievement and parent expectations were unrelated when children began kindergarten, but an association emerged early in elementary school and continued throughout the subsequent years" (p. 578). Children's interest and school motivation and performance were factors that influenced parents' perceptions of the possibility that their children would attain college. Hispanic parents were shown to recognize and value the importance of education for their children and they are clearly "not an impediment to their children's school success. On the contrary, they are valuable allies who can promote their children's school success" (p. 579). Educators need to facilitate this expectation by providing Hispanic parents with an educational roadmap so they may help their children reach their educational goals and aspirations. While parents' educational expectations did not increase the odds of their children attending a postsecondary institution, students were more likely to enroll in higher education if their parents frequently discussed school matters (Horn & Chen, 1998), and in their study of Hispanic high school freshmen, Castillo, Conoley, Cepeda,

Ivy, and Archuleta (2010) confirmed that a strong male parent often helped to create a pro-college culture within the family.

Hispanic students' older siblings can also be an influence. Researchers Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2007) evaluated experiences in the whole family and how they contribute to the postsecondary educational attainment of Mexican-American youth. They agreed that parents as well as older siblings influenced postsecondary attainment, achievement, and aspirations. Their findings showed that Mexican-American parents "encouraged their children to earn a college degree" (p. 188) and that older siblings who had attended college may serve as role models "and as information brokers for their younger siblings as they near college age" (p. 190).

Family Economics

In the comprehensive research project conducted by Immerwahr (2000) for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 202 Hispanic parents were surveyed regarding their views of higher education. Several important points were evident. Sixty-five percent of the Hispanic parents felt that college was necessary for a person to be successful in the work world and 78% felt that it was absolutely necessary for their child to get a college education. Only 2% of Hispanic parents surveyed felt that a college education was not that important. When it comes to paying for a college education, 83% of Hispanic parents were either somewhat or very worried that they would be able to afford college for their children. However, 84% of the same parents thought they would find a way to work out the costs. Finally, 62% of Hispanic parents surveyed felt that ethnic minority students had the same or more opportunity to get a college education. The Hispanic parents surveyed clearly place value on the importance

of a college education for their children and will try to figure out how to pay for it. It is also likely that the value and importance of postsecondary education is transferred from the parents to their children. An analysis from Perna and Titus (2005) confirmed this transference. They found that Hispanic parents convey “norms and standards” that promote college enrollment to their children (p. 508).

In 2007 there were more Hispanic children living in poverty in the United States than any other group. These Hispanic children comprised 27% of all those living in poverty in the U.S. (NCES, 2010). Family income can have an effect on a student’s postsecondary attainment in various ways. In 2011 a student whose family income was \$20,000 or less scored an average of 397 points lower on the SAT college entrance exam than a student from the highest income group (College Board, 2011b). Turley (2006), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), discovered that for each \$10,000 dollar increase in family income a Hispanic student increased their odds of applying to college by 4%. Hispanic parents worry about paying for their children’s college. In a qualitative case study, Auerbach (2004) found that Hispanic parents of high school students were worried about acquiring the funds for their children to attend college. Mortenson (2010) aptly summed up the families income effect on college attainment for all students when he wrote, “In 2009 a student born into the top quartile of family income is ten times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree by age 24 than is another student born into the bottom quartile of family income” (p. 2). In the 2007-2008 school year, 85% of Hispanic postsecondary students received financial aid with each receiving an average of \$11,400 for the year (NCES, 2010).

Though the impact of the family culture on a Hispanic students' point-in-time decision regarding their postsecondary choice is difficult to quantify, the available research indicates that the family can have a holistic presence in a students' overall attitude and bias towards higher educational attainment. The research literature is limited in regards to when the family influence becomes instilled in the Hispanic student to the point that the student actually decides to attend or not attend college. However, the literature does indicate that a Hispanic student's decision about their postsecondary future can often be influenced by their familial relationships.

Peers as an Influencing Factor

Hispanic high school students' peers have been found to influence students' postsecondary decisions. Research indicates that peers can either impede or facilitate whether or not a friend attends college. In their study of Mexican-American high school students, Castillo, Conoley, et al. (2010) found that peers could influence a pro-college culture, but that positive college-going peer discussions were lacking because sometimes students kept away from these discussions.

When positive peer relationships exist, the peer network can provide a link to institutional resources. However, peer interactions do not always lead to academic success because sometimes they can offer a negative educational influence. Peers and peer relationships influence Hispanic students in their sense of belonging, engagement, and achievement in their educational attainment. Peer interactions affect how students situate and engage themselves in the academic process. Peers can foster a sense of belonging or marginalize Hispanic students in regards to their sense of belonging and participation in the school community (Teaver, 2005). In their study of small rural high

schools, Talbot and Kuehn (2002) discovered that “Hispanic graduates benefited from having culturally similar peers” in the school (p. 120).

In order to make a decision regarding postsecondary education, a high school student must be knowledgeable about the possibility or existence of higher educational attainment. The information about this existence may come to the Hispanic student through institutional agents. Stanton-Salazar (1997) wrote:

Institutional agents can be formally defined as those individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities. For children and adolescents, resources can include information about school programs, academic tutoring and mentoring, as well as assistance with career decision making and college admission. Institutional agents can include middle-class family members, although this term generally draws attention to such people as teachers and counselors, social service workers, clergy, community leaders, college going youth in the community, and others. School peers may also act as institutional agents – for example, when working-class youth obtain informational resources from their middle-class peers. Through relationships with institutional agents, a segment of society gains the resources, privileges, and support necessary to advance and maintain their economic and political position in society. The most important social spheres for children and youth are the extended family, the school, community organizations (e.g., the church), and the peer group. (p. 6)

Hispanic students’ peers are important in providing information regarding college choice.

Peers can help these students to “decode the system” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 33).

Groups of Hispanic friends have been found to be a major influence in the college decision making process. These peer groups encouraged each other and shared information about the college admissions process (González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003).

While Hispanic high school seniors rely on several different sources of information to help them with their postsecondary educational decisions, the second most consulted source was found to be one’s peers (Hurtado & Gauvain, 1997). However, their study also revealed that even though these students desired to go to college and

engaged in “planning-relevant behaviors,” these planning factors were not sufficient enough to help these students reach their goal of college attainment.

When researching at-risk students, Horn and Chen (1998) found that “the variable that most increased the odds of enrolling in a four year college was the number of friends with college plans” (p. 26). When most or all of their friends planned to enroll in a four year college, students were four times more likely to also enroll. When their friends perceived that studying and getting good grades was important, these attributes increased the odds that at-risk students would enroll in some form of postsecondary education.

The fact that a Hispanic student doesn’t have any or many friends has even been found to have an effect on the ability to attain higher education. Benner (2010) contended that if Hispanic high school students struggle to make friends with their peers, increased loneliness can put these students at risk academically and less likely to pass their exit exams. In Texas, a high school senior must pass exit exams in English, Social studies, Math, and Science in order to graduate from high school. No diploma results in non-postsecondary acceptance. Conversely, Hispanic students who have more friendships have been found to achieve more academic gains (Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Riegle-Crumb & Callahan, 2009). The research of Perna and Titus (2005) suggested that it may be important to raise the levels of educational aspirations among Hispanic high school students’ friends, as their analysis indicated that only 9% of Hispanics “report that all of their friends plan to attend a 4-year institution, compared with 14% of whites and 22% of Asian Americans” (p. 511). The odds of Hispanic students enrolling in a four year college increase as does the number of their college bound Hispanic friends. When

a Hispanic high school student has more friends enrolling in college, the odds increase that they, too, will enroll.

The K-12 School as an Influencing Factor

The school is an important part of the network that Hispanic students rely on for postsecondary decision-making information. The longitudinal study conducted by Goldenberg et al. (2001) found that directly helping students be successful and motivated from kindergarten through high school will increase their odds of success in later years and of higher school attainment. In addition, encouraging college access beginning in the early grades that Hispanic students attend school and continuing this practice throughout high school has been found to be important. Oliva (2008) has asserted that college access begins years before students begin college. She called for postsecondary educators to reach down to the Hispanic students in K-12 to work with both them and their parents. It is also important for K-12 educators to understand that they begin to structure their students' college trajectory the moment the students enter the education system.

This is especially the case when students come from low socioeconomic status families, when they are the first in their family to go to college, when they attend majority minority schools, and when their non-White race or ethnicity means that postsecondary institutions are not yet as responsive as they could be to meeting their needs. (p. 127)

It is the high school, however, which has a significant impact on Hispanic students' postsecondary decisions.

High School Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers as Influencing Factors

Providing college information to Hispanic students while they are in high school promotes college-going behavior. In their study of Hispanic acculturation and college planning, Hurtado and Gauvain (1997) found that Hispanic high school students use

information from both primary and secondary sources when making college plans, and teachers were the third most popular informational source consulted by Hispanic high school seniors. The closer they get to their goal of attending college, the more they consult various and diverse sources of college information. Taggart and Crisp (2011) found that 92% of four year college students and 84% of two year college students said their high school provided them with college-related information. Zarate and Burciaga (2010) have listed several considerations for high schools to increase college enrollment among Latinos:

- Make high school counselors easily available in a timely manner.
- Train and utilize teachers to help disseminate college and financial aid information.
- Counselors should be thoroughly familiar with college admission options available to undocumented students.
- Use school-specific data to pinpoint areas of focus for improving college preparation opportunities at school.
- All high schools should make college preparatory curriculum the standard course offerings to remove confusion or misinformation about which courses prepare students for college admission.

Hispanic parents generally have high educational aspirations for their children but do not know how to negotiate the higher education maze. They have little knowledge about the process or the American university system. Thus, many students must rely on their high school for information (Goldenberg et al., 2001). Their research found that most Hispanic families

would benefit from clear information about how to interpret grades and other school communication, and from finding out what their children's college options are, what courses children should take in high school, and what grants, scholarships, or mentoring and advising might be available to help them. (p. 580)

Castillo, Conoley, et al. (2010) noted that Hispanic “students expected the school to have the largest responsibility for the pro-college culture in their life” (p. 68). Their findings indicated that teachers and counselors have an impact when they contribute to a pro-college culture. As researchers Collatos, Morrell, Nuno, and Lara (2004) have explained:

Low income and first generation college-going students especially need mentors and advocates within their schools to assist them with college access. At a minimum, this mentoring process needs to start the first day of high school and continue until a student enrolls in a postsecondary institution. (p. 175)

When secondary schools effectively disseminate college information to their Hispanic students, college enrollment among this group has increased.

Since Hispanic parents generally lack the direct experience of higher education, schools need to offer their students “additional support to facilitate college access” (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009, p. 307). Their survey of 16 California high school Latino students found that 33% used teachers and 27% used counselors as their primary source of college information. Teachers, counselors, and administrators need to ensure that all students are receiving the help they need to negotiate the college enrollment process. Immerwahr (2003) conducted interviews with 50 Hispanic high school seniors about how and why they make the choices they do about their postsecondary educational plans. The research has indicated the importance of these students having the presence of a significant adult in their lives who can help them make better choices about higher education, redirect them if they get off track, and hold them to high expectations. Many

times, the students risked making poor, life-changing choices due to the fact that they had inadequate or incorrect information about the college attainment process.

Whether these youngsters displayed a lot of college potential or very little, the most common situation was that no one was helping them sort out their futures in any individual way. Too many were left on their own, and our fear is that too many will end up paying a price. (p. 19)

Counselors, teachers, and administrators need to ensure that all students are receiving the help they need to negotiate the college enrollment process. Students interviewed by Boden (2011) expressed that they mapped out their college intentions with an adult guide. The guide was often a friend, a family member, or school personnel, and they sought out this guide to lay out their personal education plan. Hispanic high school students need school mentors to help them navigate the college entrance maze as most of their parents or other family members do not have this knowledge. These students often need help with financial aid as well as which specific college to attend (Esprivalo Harrell & Forney, 2003). High school counselors are often called on to provide this information connection.

The high school counselor is the main school source that can connect students to the help and information they need to follow onto the college path. In a comparative study in which Hispanic high school senior students participated in a program by receiving direct assistance in the college enrollment process, students participating in the program showed a 16% increase in college enrollment over the previous year where no assistance was provided (Marsico & Getch, 2009). As a result of their study, several recommendations were made to high school counselors:

1. Hispanic students need someone to believe in them and give them the encouragement and information required to pursue a postsecondary education.

2. School counselors need to take the lead by advocating on behalf of Hispanic students and their families.
3. In order to narrow the achievement gap faced by Hispanic students, high school counselors need to be prepared to advocate for these students.
4. Collecting data on Hispanic student achievement will help school counselors understand the kinds of support and programs that are needed to make these students more successful towards postsecondary attainment.
5. Counselors must familiarize themselves with Hispanic cultural differences and consider these differences when developing student programs.

Schools need to work to be inclusionary rather than exclusionary in the methods they use to educate Hispanic students. Trusting relationships must exist because the lack of these institutional-student relationships is the root cause of Hispanic students' disengagement from the educational system. Hispanic students must have institutional support to be successful towards college attainment (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). School personnel are key to these relationships. Rios (2010) found that some students exposed to consistent negative interactions with school officials felt like school was an unsafe place to be. The students in the study believed that their detachment from school was a result of being marginalized by school personnel. However, when these students were helped to "build positive interactions and relationships with local institutions" such as their school, their self-perceptions were changed for the better, and they believed that they could make it because someone cared for them and "established a connection" (p. 210). Counselors have a major role in this issue and can have an impact on Hispanic students' success. In her qualitative case study, Auerbach (2004) interviewed parents of

Hispanic high school students and determined that some parents were insulted because they perceived that the high school counselors did not have time to talk to them or their children. Some parents stated that since they did not know how to negotiate the university system, they were depending on the high school counselors for help.

Auerbach's research resulted in several recommendations regarding what secondary schools can do to help Hispanic students with their college decisions.

- Start early by getting college information to parents and students beginning in the upper elementary grades.
- Secondary schools must reach out to Hispanic parents in both English and Spanish.
- Give parents the opportunity to meet individually with high school counselors.

School officials need to ensure that these facets of advising and information are not inadvertently withheld from their students. González et al. (2003) found that while educators may favorably help Hispanic students prepare for a postsecondary education, they can also act as negative influences. Schools should ensure that they are not withholding critical college related information or "limiting access to opportunities for college" (p. 153). Educators should receive training on how to best facilitate the cultural differences of Hispanic students in order to effectively convey higher education information.

Kimura-Walsh et al. (2009) found that some Hispanic students reported that they were prevented equal access to important college-related information. Students reported that the counselors were too busy serving the top 10% students. Some Hispanic students also complained that counselors were only providing them with information on less

exclusive colleges. Kimura-Walsh et al. (2009) determined that there was not necessarily a shortage of school resources, but that the resources were unequally distributed.

Policymakers, teachers, counselors, and school administrators need to ensure that college information is distributed equally among all students regardless of their academic ability. “This could be accomplished within existing resources by having counselors specialize in working with students by achievement levels” (p. 312).

Researchers Vela-Gude et al. (2009) interviewed eight Latino college students to determine their perceptions of the role of their high school counselors. They reported that the students indicated the following themes:

- inadequate advisement,
- lack of availability,
- lack of individual counseling,
- differential treatment, and
- low expectations or setting limits.

Hispanic students requiring college guidance from their counselors may become discouraged or misdirected under these conditions. Even the lack of information or guidance regarding college admission testing can be a barrier to college attendance for Hispanic high school seniors. A qualitative study by Walpole et al. (2005) pointed out that “a lack of information, lack of resources to pay for college admission tests, lack of test preparation, and the pressure these students feel to perform well result in admission test requirements becoming a barrier to college attendance” for the Latino students in their study (p. 341).

Hispanic students can be aided by the school's direct intervention regarding the enrollment process and other college information issues. Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, and Saldivar (2010) studied the influence of acculturation, enculturation, parental education level, financial concerns, and gender on 106 Mexican-American high school students' decisions to apply to college. They determined that acculturation was a significant predictor of the decision to attend college, and high school counselors can benefit these students' decisions. They recommend that counselors identify students with low levels of acculturation and introduce them to the college application process. When educators directly help at-risk students with the college enrollment process, these students are more likely to attend college (Horn & Chen, 1998). When teachers or other staff members helped at-risk students to fill out college applications, prepare for entrance exams, or learn about financial aid, these students were more likely to enroll in some form of postsecondary education. "Intervention, whether on the part of the parents or school, played a positive role in helping moderate to high-risk students make the transition from high school to college" (p. 27). The schools can aid the parents' intervention.

While high school counselors can have an impact on the educational trajectory of their students, Jarsky, McDonough, and Marie-Nunez (2009) wrote that a "school's college resource infrastructure cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the counseling staff – instead, the responsibility must reside school wide," such as with the teachers and especially the principal (p. 359). They discovered that a K-12 and university collaboration could lead to an improved effort to effectively guide students of color towards postsecondary attainment. They found that improving the college-going culture of a high school was a slow and evolving process that could be improved with a

collaborative effort between secondary and postsecondary educational systems. Their study further indicated that high school counselors struggle with their roles in collaborative efforts. Although these barriers can exist, they concluded “that collaboration across educational levels is both valuable and manageable” (p. 369). It is very important to maintain a long term view when working collaboratively to improve the college-going culture for high school students of color.

Fann, Jarsky, and McDonough (2009) wrote that one of the greatest challenges in improving college attendance is getting parents involved in their students’ college preparation. They recommended that school cultures must be changed to include families as partners in higher education attainment. Many of the parents in their study were not aware that college planning information was available at the schools, or that they could make appointments with counselors to discuss their children’s college plans. School officials may also find it necessary to counsel Hispanic parents in regards to their children’s college selection and enrollment process. In their longitudinal study of 81 Latino children and their immigrant parents, Goldenberg et al. (2001) found that many Latino parents simply do not understand the U. S. educational system. However, these parents are not necessarily an impediment to their children’s educational success; it just indicates that they may need additional information and support. Educators need to reach out to parents with information and support so that they can better facilitate their children’s higher educational attainment. Latino parents will welcome the school’s outreach. The research of Behnke and Kelly (2011) indicated there is a clear need to “promote parental involvement in schools and promote academic achievement within Latino families” (p. 8).

Academics as an Influencing Factor

Counselors also advise, guide, and direct students towards their individual graduation plan. They facilitate the registration process and are instrumental in a student's academic choices. Gandora (2002) has suggested that "counselors have the power to divert a student into a more academic track or to a remedial one" (as cited by Loza, 2003, p. 54). The rigor of high school classes was shown to have favorable impact on Hispanic students' odds of attending a four year college. Taggart and Crisp (2011) found that when students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses during high school, they were 4.98 times more likely to enroll in college. If they took an extra math class, their odds of attending a four year college increased by a factor of 1.76 (p. 30). Keller and Tillman (2008) reported that immigrant high school students raised in the U.S. increased their college attendance based on the level of their math achievement or their overall cumulative GPA (p. 140). Math achievement also correlates with elevated SAT scores. All College-bound high school seniors in Texas scored highest on their SAT when the students took four years of high school math (College Board, 2011a). The college-bound four-year math students scored higher in critical reading, English, and mathematics. Flores, Ojeda, Gee, Lee and Huang (2006) found that a Hispanic student's positive problem solving ability contributed to their higher educational goals. In addition to more rigorous college-preparatory courses, Watt, Huerta, and Alkan (2011) emphasized that high schools should "not only provide academic preparation but also support students' college aspirations and expectations and help students with the specific steps needed to enter college and apply for financial aid" (p. 131). These attributes are generally relegated to teachers and counselors, but a college-going culture must exist in

order for school staff to be most effective in this role. Some secondary schools have implemented courses that combine rigor with a college attainment-culture. However, simply enrolling Hispanic students in these rigorous courses may not be enough. Gibson, Gandara, and Koyama (2004) found that although teachers generally believe that their classrooms and other school areas promote participation and belonging for all the students willing to make the effort, the students “may find that the support needed to succeed in such classes is insufficient” (p. 9). If the students’ grades suffer in these more rigorous courses, there is an increased chance that their postsecondary decisions will be negatively affected by failing to meet the necessary grade requirements for college entrance. Preventing this negative effect is primarily the responsibility of school officials.

The senior year is instrumental to the high school Hispanic students’ postsecondary decision. Nora (2004) wrote:

Choosing a college appears to move from the head to the heart as students realize that the college they choose will become a major part of their personal and social lives. Counselors and parents, instrumental in guiding students to the brink of their college decision, should nudge them in the direction of choosing a college where they experience reassurance, open-mindedness, and a sense of match. (p. 202)

Nora (2004) confirmed that high school administrators, particularly counselors, should be aware of this shift in the students’ focus during the final process of their college decision.

While Hispanic students’ college aspirations were found to remain stable between the tenth and twelfth grades (Lozano, Watt, & Huerta, 2009), stated that students who were participating in a high schools Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) or the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) “may increase their graduation and college enrollment rates” (p. 107). These programs

often promote a college-going culture for their students by facilitating a college campus visit. The importance of the college visit was emphasized by Nora (2004). Secondary schools should help facilitate college visits for their students, and that even pre-high school students should be invited to the college campus for athletics and other events. These visits “emphasize positive early experiences that encourage participation in higher education” (p. 203).

While outreach programs can help to direct and prepare Hispanic students towards college, Loza (2003) found that programs need to broaden their eligibility requirements to include students that have the most need. Loza’s review of the college outreach programs revealed that the programs excluded many Hispanic students who have the greatest need. When schools do provide these programs to their Hispanic students, they are supporting them with high postsecondary aspirations and this support may influence college attainment success.

Extracurricular Activities as an Influencing Factor

Non-academic areas have been found to have an impact on Hispanic students’ postsecondary decisions. Taggart and Crisp (2011) discovered that participation in high school extracurricular activities can increase the odds that Hispanic students will attend a four year college. On the other hand, students who reported discriminatory in-school experiences were less likely to attend a four year college. Students who felt like they were put down by other students also were less likely to attend a four year college. In his research on Hispanic students’ high school extracurricular participation, Lozano (2008) determined that Hispanic high school leaders were more likely than non-leaders to attend college. Schools should include Hispanics in as many campus clubs and organizations as

possible to help make them a vibrant part of high school campus life. Students who participate in extracurricular activities have been found to be more involved in the school and tend to have friends that are also engaged (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). School administrators who can help Hispanic students become more involved in extracurricular activities, and after school programs can often help those students to meet other groups of students thereby improving educational opportunities.

In addition to extracurricular activities, a Hispanic student's high school experience may also be affected by more indirect school conditions. Benner and Graham (2011) reasoned from their study of 688 Latino high school students that perceptions of "increases in discrimination across time influenced Latino adolescents' academic outcomes (i.e., grades, absences) indirectly via their influences on perceptions of school climate" (p. 508).

Summary

The literature reveals that there are many factors that may influence the Hispanic seniors' decision-making process regarding their postsecondary plans. It is provided here to provide the proper context with which to evaluate and interpret the findings of this qualitative case study research. The literature clearly indicates that a Hispanic high school senior's postsecondary decision relies on the relationships and experiences that they have encountered to that point in their lives. The four most evident influences are the Hispanic students' family relationships, their financial situation, their peers, and their K-12 school experiences. What is less clear is the timing of the Hispanic seniors' decision making process over the course of their senior high school year. The literature is limited in this regard. This qualitative case study provides new insight on the influence

of the four factors on the evolution of the students' decision-making process and the eventual timing of that decision. This more complete examination is needed to uncover the whole decision-making process and to provide data to inform further research.

The next chapter, Chapter Three, outlines the methodology of the research and restates the research problem, purpose, and questions. Chapter Four follows with a summary of the findings and Chapter Five provides a discussion of those findings.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The target audience for this case study is all school administrators, policymakers, teachers, parents, students, and other researchers. It is this researcher's hope that by understanding the decision-making process of Hispanic high school seniors, we can begin the discussion on how to better facilitate their decisions with helpful and informative postsecondary information and direction. This study attempts to contribute to the available knowledge base through a qualitative collective case study by exploring when, how, and why a sample of Hispanic high school seniors at a large high school in North Central Texas makes decisions regarding their postsecondary educational and career choices and the extent to which those choices evolve throughout their senior year. By doing so, I have attempted to contribute to the dialogue on the factors that influence the students' decisions about their postsecondary career and educational plans. However, existing literature has revealed limited information regarding how senior Hispanic students' decisions evolve and when they become final. It is hoped that this research has begun the dialogue on this important topic.

In this chapter I discuss the research methodology including data collection, analysis, validation techniques, role of the researcher, ethical considerations, and the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight.

Data Collection Method

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, I used a qualitative case study method of inquiry. There is no unified, standard reason why a group of Hispanic high school seniors at United High School in North Central Texas decide to continue or not

continue their education. There can be a multitude of personal varying factors that influence each student's decision and each factor may influence by varying degrees each of the other factors. A quantitative approach would reveal little about these varied feelings and the interactions of the factors that influence students' decisions. As Stake (2010) has written, "By quantitative, we mean that its thinking relies heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis" (p. 11). Additionally, a quantitative approach would likely provide little to compare and contrast. Conversely, Creswell (2007) notes that qualitative research is a process of collecting data in the participants' natural setting, being sensitive to them, and inductively determining themes or patterns (p. 37). A qualitative method means "that it relies primarily on human perception and understanding" (Stake, 2010, p. 11). Thus, qualitative research was chosen as the most effective method to uncover the students' process of complex thinking, planning, and self-analyzing of their future educational decisions and the timing of those decisions.

This inquiry was guided by my interest in uncovering the decision making process of senior high school Hispanic students as they determine their direction after high school and the timing of their decisions. In order to explore the factors that influenced the participants' decision-making process, qualitative research allowed for the purposeful sampling of information-rich Hispanic high school seniors into a case study. A case study "is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). More specifically, due to the idea that there may be many different reasons why graduating Hispanic high school seniors might continue their education, it was assumed that the evolution and characteristics of those

decisions would be best explored through the qualitative case study method. Using this approach, allowed me to gain meaningful insights into the decision making process of Hispanic high school seniors as they formulated their postsecondary educational and career plans. The study focused on “what” the students experienced and “how” they processed their decisions (Moustakas, 1994). The foundation of this research project relied on personal interviews with the participants at three different intervals during their senior year of high school.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following central research question: What are the critical influences regarding Hispanic high school seniors postsecondary plans?

Sub-Questions. From the central research question I considered and addressed a variety of sub questions which included:

1. What factors influence senior Hispanic students’ decisions regarding their post secondary plans?
2. Which factors occur the most frequently among the respondents?
3. Which factors weigh the most on their decisions?
4. Do their deliberations throughout the year cause their decision to remain fixed, evolve gradually, or change rather quickly?
5. Does the high school experience influence the students’ decisions?
6. When does their decision become final?

Research Site

The interviews all took place on the campus of a large Title I high school in North Central Texas where the investigator is employed as the Assistant Principal. The school

has a population of approximately 1500 students in grades 10 through 12 and it is the main high school in a district of 7,500 students. The high school's demographic breakdown is approximately one-third white, one-third black, and one-third Hispanic. Approximately 51% of the students are socio-economically disadvantaged. The school is located in a rural-suburban town with a population of 31,000. The district has one pre-K school, five elementary schools, two junior high schools, one ninth grade academy, one early college high school, one credit recovery high school, and one traditional high school.

I received written authorization to conduct the study at United High School from the Deputy Superintendent of the United Independent School District. This district approval was submitted to the University of Nebraska IRB with the other required approval documents.

Participants

Prior to beginning the interview process, I submitted the research plan and all other related documents to the IRB and secured approval for the study. The 13 student participants in this study were chosen through purposeful sampling from a North Central Texas high school senior class of Hispanics who were on schedule to graduate in May of the 2011-12 school year. Qualitative case studies need enough participants to answer the research question(s) posed at the beginning of a research study (Merriam, 1998) and the selection method may vary. The participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling which is grounded on the assumption that the researcher "wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Each participant was interviewed three

times over the course of their senior high school year. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 minutes. The respondents were English speaking regular education students, between the ages of 17-18, were first generation U.S. high school students, and had no one in their family who had ever graduated from a U.S. college or university. This purposeful sampling provided information-rich respondents who were actually in the process of making their final decisions about their postsecondary plans. The types of samples were chosen to be typical case, highlighting what is typical for the group studied. Using this rationale, I selected a prospective group of students that could most likely provide information-rich respondents. The recruitment goal was to secure approximately twelve participants with a relatively equal number of males and females.

The recruiting process was organized around a mailing campaign with the recruitment documents being delivered via U.S. Mail to 44 potential respondents. The documents outlined the purpose of the research, procedures, potential risks and/or discomforts, benefits, confidentiality, compensation, and their right to withdraw at any time. The following documents were included in the recruitment package:

1. parent information letter printed in English and Spanish,
2. parental Informed Consent Form printed in English and Spanish,
3. youth Assent Form printed in English and Spanish, and
4. addressed and stamped return envelope.

In order to limit the recruits' possible perceptions of coercion from the investigator, the ESL teacher at the high school served as the primary recruiter for the project. The parent informational letter was signed by her and the return envelope was

addressed to her office. The informational letter invited the parents to allow their child's participation and listed some general information about the research project.

Following a telephone script, the recruiter made a follow-up recruitment phone call to the parents of all potential participants. The call was made five days after the recruitment package was mailed. Two Parental Informed Consent forms were returned by mail. Thirteen more Parental Informed Consent forms were returned after personal requests were made to the students in person by the recruiter. A total of 15 Informed Consent forms (five males and ten females) were secured for the project. Based on the IRB's requirement that the participants be selected based on their order of return; the first eight female and all five of the male respondents were selected from this pool. This yielded a total of thirteen research study participants.

Prior to beginning the first interview, I met with each respondent and reviewed the central purpose of the research project and the data collection procedures. The process was thoroughly explained and it was made clear to each student that they would be given total anonymity. All understood that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their expected benefits of the study were minimal. It was explained that each participant would be given a \$7.00 gift card to a local bookstore at the conclusion of each interview. Also at this meeting, each student was allowed to review the Student Assent Form, ask pertinent questions, and to sign the assent form if they chose to participate in the research study. The researcher also signed the form and copies of all signed documents were given to each participant. All students who met with the primary investigator elected to participate. Each participant then completed a short demographic worksheet (Appendix A) which provided relevant information such as their family

history, parents' educational level, SAT scores, college goals, etc. This information helped to build rapport with all participants during the first interview sessions. Of the 13 students that began the research project, all completed their interviews.

Data Collection

Stake (1995) has written:

Qualitative study capitalizes on ordinary ways of getting acquainted with things. The acquaintance is largely cerebral, only a few things get recorded. All researchers have great privilege to pay attention to what they consider worthy of attention and the obligation to make conclusions drawn from those choices meaningful to colleagues and clients. (p. 49)

I utilized three methods of data collection for this research project: interviews, archival records, and direct observation. Yin (1994) explains that multiple forms of data collection complement each other and a good case study should utilize as many sources as possible (p. 92).

The first method of data collection was through individual interviews. Each participant was interviewed three times (October, February, and May) over measured intervals of their 2011-2012 senior year in high school. Through these personal interviews I attempted to have the respondents explore and explain their feelings and experiences regarding the factors that were influencing their postsecondary educational decisions, and the timing of those decisions. Using open-ended guiding research questions, an array of thick, rich, and meaningful data were derived from the descriptions of the students' experiences regarding their decision making process about their postsecondary plans. My interviews allowed me to probe and explore how each student thought and felt about postsecondary education, how those perceptions impacted their future plans, and what were the influencing factors regarding those plans. My questions

were guided by interview protocols (Appendix B). The guiding questions were semi-structured to facilitate the fluidity of the topics and the direction of the students' discussions. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 minutes. During the interviews, the researcher made notes for later analysis and each interview was audio recorded on a digital audio recorder for transcription.

Merriam (1998) states that in qualitative studies the researcher is the primary instrument and relies on skills to interpret adequate documents from which to make meaning (p. 120). As the second method of data collection, this study utilized each student's archival school performance records and grade history transcripts which were reviewed for validation. This document review allowed me to better understand the academic level, attendance regularity, and possible discipline issues of each student. Furthermore, these data allowed me to guide and structure academic and general school perception questions in a proper light.

The third method of data collection came from my direct observation of the participants as they moved through some typical school day situations and interactions. These observations were noted by informally observing the respondents and making field notes that allowed me an added insight into the students' ability to interact socially with peers. These notes were later used in analysis.

As an IRB requirement, I maintained confidentiality by using pseudonyms for my respondents and for the school at which they attended.

Data Analysis

Creswell explains that the topics of qualitative research are often those that are involved with concerns of culture and marginalized groups. They are "emotion laden,

close to people, and practical” (2007, p. 42). Qualitative research explores these issues partly through open-ended guiding questions that evolve as we listen to the participants uncover their own perceptions, and feelings about the study topic. During the interviews, I attempted to gain knowledge about each respondent’s specific feelings and impressions about their life and their educational perceptions and history. My guiding questions explored the participant’s decisions about their postsecondary plans as well as the student’s feelings about their upbringing, education, friends, financial concerns, and their familiarity with college choice, scholarships, and financial aid. I used the same interview protocol with all informants, but allowed the questions and discussion to develop and evolve based on what each participant felt was important and pertinent regarding who they were, where they came from, and where they were going in life after high school.

Each interview was transcribed, reviewed and coded for evaluation and analysis using Atlas.ti.version 6.2. Coding techniques have the purpose of allowing the researcher to “simplify and focus on some specific characteristics of the data” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 133). I coded for themes within each case (within-case analysis) and then analyzed the themes across the cases to uncover commonalities and categories to make meaning of the cases as discussed by Creswell (2007). A theme is a commonality that exists through the data (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 135). Stake (1995) writes that in case study research we often look for patterns and consistencies within the conditions of the study. These patterns and consistencies served as a template for the analysis of my research. Sometimes the researcher finds significant meaning in a single instance, “but usually the important meanings will come from reappearance over and over” (p. 78).

Throughout the interviews, codes and themes were compared and contrasted across all student cases. This evaluative process was ongoing throughout the research study. In Chapters Four and Five these patterns, commonalities, and consistencies are analyzed, evaluated, and discussed for their meaning. In addition to these data, analysis also included all participants' school records and my research field notes. All three methods of data collection are analyzed and discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

Storage of the Data

The student interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and the individual files were saved to a computer. Randomly assigned participant code numbers were attached to each audio file to indicate each participant's identification. The participant code list was kept in a locked cabinet within the researcher's office. The computer files were then transmitted as wave files through Adobe Send Now for downloading to the transcriptionist. After transcription, the transcripts were returned to the researcher as email attachments and stored as text files. The individual text files were then printed for analysis by the researcher and shown to a random selection of participants for validation via member checking. During formal analysis, the transcribed interview files were loaded into the Atlas.ti software for coding. At the conclusion of the study, the interview audio files were erased and the participant code list was destroyed.

Validation

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 1998, p. 198). I have used several strategies to validate this research including triangulation, peer examination, member checks, long-term observation, and dissertation audit.

Triangulation of data. Multiple forms of data were evaluated in order to uncover meaning about the topic covered. Interviews, archival document review, and direct observation were used in order to provide several views “from more than one vantage point” (Stake, 2010, p. 123). Looking again and again at something tends to solidify one’s view.

Peer examination. I have utilized colleagues to review and comment on my findings as they have emerged.

Member checks. Member checking is vital to qualitative research. By presenting a copy of a participant’s transcribed interview to them for correction and comment, the researcher is able to determine accuracy, avoid insensitivity, and perhaps find new meaning (Stake, 2010, p. 126). A random selection of student participants reviewed their transcripts and some chose not to.

Long term observation. Long term observation at the research site or gathering data over a long period of time can facilitate in an increased validity of the findings (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). I was able to physically observe the participants over the entirety of one school year and interview them three times over the same period.

External audit. Through a formal audit, an external auditor is able to review and critique a project to determine the validity of the research (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 199). In order to assess the accuracy of this study, I utilized the services of an external auditor. The auditor had “no connection to the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 209) and after examination determined that the interpretations, findings, and conclusions were supported by the data (see Appendix C).

The Role of the Researcher

As the primary investigator for this research I was cognizant of my normal duties as an Assistant Principal at the campus site where the student interviews were collected. Specifically I removed myself from having any supervisory responsibilities with the participants in the study. Over the course of the school year, another principal and counselor were assigned to handle and facilitate all discipline, attendance, academic, and counseling issues with all respondents.

All interviews were conducted in a comfortable and private setting on the campus where the participants attended school. In order to facilitate and develop a trusting relationship with the students, the beginning of each interview was preceded with an informal conversation about their lives and any recent personal or scholastic information that they chose to share.

The underlying assumption for each interview was that the students would be able to accurately articulate their feelings about their lives and the factors impacting their postsecondary decisions. Using open ended guiding questions most students were very capable and willing to talk openly and at length about these issues. Between interview sessions, some students even stopped me in the halls to ask when we were going to get to meet again in order to talk some more.

Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure that there was not a high level of coercion or undue influence involved in the recruitment phase of the research because of the Primary Investigator's role as the Assistant Principal of the proposed sample of students; I was assisted in the recruitment phase by the high school's campus English-as-a-Second Language (ESL)

teacher. She is bilingual (English-Spanish) and was only involved in the recruitment phase of the research. The Recruiter signed a Confidentiality Agreement as outlined by the IRB.

During the recruitment phase, the recruiter was available to answer questions only as they related to specific items as outlined on the Informed Consent document. She did not answer questions about any other topics or procedures involved in the research. Those questions were referred to the principal investigator. A recruitment letter in English and Spanish was included in the Informed Consent packet that was mailed to the prospective participant's parent or guardian. This letter was an invitation to participate in the research project and it was signed by the participant recruiter.

The participant recruiter handled the recruitment phase of the research and was available to answer questions only as they pertained to the information outlined and listed on the Informed Consent Form. When Spanish-speaking parents requested information about consent, the bilingual recruiter was able to read over the form with them. In the event that a more in-depth review of the Parent Informed Consent Form was necessary, I was assisted by the recruiter to read verbatim the explanations contained therein regarding the specifics of each part of the form, such as:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to enroll your child in this study. You can refuse to participate or withdraw your child at any time without harming his/her or your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, your child's school, (or other institutions or organizations), or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

I also made arrangements with other administrative staff to handle all participants' school related issues such as discipline, attendance, student conferences, parent conferences, academic dishonesty, counseling issues, grades, etc. Therefore, I was not involved with

the students on any school related or other issues. The student assent process was completed by the primary investigator only after the parent or guardian had mailed in or provided the signed consent forms to the recruiter. As was required by the IRB, the recruiter selected the respondents based on their order of return. The signed parental consent forms were then referred to the primary investigator for inclusion in the study.

Any information that was obtained during this study that was about or could identify the participants was kept strictly confidential. Interviews were conducted in a private setting and all the information was reviewed only by the investigator in the confidential setting. The data were stored in a locked container in the investigator's office and was only be seen by the investigator during the study. The participants' information and data that was obtained in this study was only reported and published as anonymous and/or aggregated data. The audio recordings of the investigator's interviews were erased immediately after transcription. My transcriptionist was certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), was informed of IRB confidentiality protocols and signed a transcriptionist confidentiality statement. My UNL advisor, Dr. James Griesen was the secondary investigator on the research study and only had access to the data after all names and personal identifiers were removed from the research data.

During the interviews the students' first names were used as a matter of conversation. Their identities were then removed during transcription and pseudonyms were assigned by the primary investigator and used in the research findings. The investigator maintained a coding list linking pseudonyms with the names of the participants until the research was concluded and then the coding list was destroyed. All identifying information was kept in a locked cabinet in the investigators locked office.

All school records that were collected were also kept in a locked cabinet in the primary investigators locked office. All names were removed from the participants' school records and replaced with pseudonyms. Individual demographic worksheets were identified by a number that was linked to the respondents on the coding list. The pseudonyms that were assigned to the participants' data were not disclosed to them in order to protect their identity.

Chapter Four

Presentation of Data

As outlined in Chapters One and Three, the purpose of this collective case study is to attempt to contribute to the available knowledge base about the postsecondary decisions of Hispanic high school seniors. More specifically, this study explores when, how, and why a sample of Hispanic high school seniors makes decisions regarding their postsecondary educational and career choices. The research also seeks to uncover the extent to which those choices evolve throughout the participants' senior year.

The 13 Hispanic participants in this study were chosen through purposeful sampling from a North Central Texas high school senior class who were on schedule to graduate in May of the 2011-2012 school year. Participating in the study were 8 females and 5 male students.

The basis of this study relied on individual personal interviews. Each participant was interviewed three times over the course of his or her senior year. Prior to beginning the interviews, I met with each respondent and reviewed the nature of the study as well as the interview requirements. Even though all the participants' parents had previously given their informed consent for their child's participation, each student was offered the opportunity to participate or decline. After the participants reviewed the student assent form, they were given a chance to ask questions about the study. All students elected to participate in the study, and each signed the student assent form. Each student then completed a Participant Demographic Worksheet before beginning the interview process (see Appendix A).

Profiles of the Interview Participants

Identifiable details of the participants, such as their names and school, have been changed or omitted from their profiles and elsewhere throughout this study. A summary of the participant's demographic data is included in Table 2.

Rosa. Born in Mexico, Rosa is an outgoing 18-year-old senior who loves being a part of the high school band. She is the oldest of 3 children, and when she was little, she wanted to be a doctor. Her parents attended school in Mexico where her father finished high school, but her mother did not. Rosa describes her family's socioeconomic status as lower middle-class, and she says that her parents worry about having enough money "to make the week go by." Because of this, Rosa has a job and wants to contribute part of her earnings to her parents, though sometimes her weekly check is only \$100. She worries about money "all the time." Rosa was rebellious when she was younger, but now she realizes how hard her parents work, and she wants to help them out whenever she can.

Rosa graduated on the Distinguished Achievement Degree Plan (DAP), which is the most difficult graduation track at United High School. Her degree plan included two Advanced Placement (AP) courses and one dual-credit course. The Texas DAP degree requires 26 credits, and Rosa graduated after completing 36.5 credits. She graduated in the first quartile of her class of 396 students and had a GPA of 4.2. She received commended scores on most of the Texas achievement tests, and she made a 1350 on the SAT. Rosa has attended counseling and been diagnosed with depression.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Gender	SES	High School Graduation Quartile	Employed	Parent Educational Attainment—High School	
					Mother	Father
Rosa	F	Lower-middle	1st	Yes	No	Yes
Marissa	F	Middle	1st	No	No	No
Josie	F	Middle	4th	No	Unknown	Unknown
Flora	F	Lower-middle	4th	No	No	No
Antonia	F	Middle	3rd	Yes	Yes	Yes
Janette	F	Lower-middle	2nd	Yes	No	No
Carlos	M	Middle	3rd	No	Some	Some
Maria	F	Middle	2nd	No	No	No
Rafael	M	Lower-middle	3rd	No	Some	Unknown
Angelina	F	Lower-middle	3rd	Yes	Yes	No
Jesus	M	Middle	3rd	Yes	Yes	Yes
Efren	M	Lower-middle	2nd	No	No	Yes
Eduardo	M	Unknown	4th	No	No	No

Note: All participants identified themselves as Hispanic. All students were traditional age for high school seniors (17-18). All participants are first generation status.

Marissa. Marissa graduated from United High School in the first quartile of her class with a 4.2 GPA and received her Texas Cosmetology license through United's Career and Technical Education classes. Marissa has been interested in a career in psychology and counseling for as long as she can remember. Marissa scored a 25 on the ACT has been accepted to a large four-year university that is 45 minutes from her home.

Marissa was born in California and moved to Texas during the ninth grade. Her parents did not attend high school but have always been supportive of education. They are very excited that she wants to attend college, but neither of them wants her to leave home in order to attend. Marissa says that her parents have always been very strict. Her father does not allow texting on her cell phone, and she has a 9:00 P.M. cell phone curfew. He has never been very vocal about Marissa's educational successes, but Marissa's mom tells her that he often brags about her to their relatives.

Marissa is the middle child of three daughters and enjoys spending time with her extended family during holidays and other special occasions. Recently, her family has been upset because Marissa's older sister's marriage has fallen apart, and her sister has returned home to live with the family. Marissa is particularly disappointed with her older sister because she has chosen to abandon her children. However, Marissa feels like she has learned some valuable lessons from her sister, especially the one about not getting pregnant when one is only 15.

Marissa works in a fast-food restaurant and worries about how she will be able to pay for college. She has an excellent high school attendance record, has never had a school discipline referral, and does not like to party or go out drinking with friends. During her interviews, she was pensive, self-reflective, and very well-spoken.

Josie. Josie is a quiet 18-year-old who graduated from United High School on the Minimum Degree Plan. (Due to her difficulties with math, she had to drop from the Recommended Degree Plan just prior to graduation.) In Texas, students who graduate on the Minimum Degree Plan must first attend community college for two years before they can enroll in a four-year university. She graduated in the fourth quartile of her class and passed the exit level math achievement test on her fourth attempt. Josie struggled with both science and math throughout her high school career. She finished high school with 24 credits (22 credits are required for the Minimum Degree Plan) and failed to meet minimum high school math scores nine times. Josie is a friendly student, often seen with the same two friends throughout the school day. When we first met, she said she wanted to attend the local community college but had no idea what she wanted to major in. In high school, Josie was involved in the Anime Club, and art classes were her favorite. Her attendance was good, and she never had a discipline referral.

Josie worries about money and says that her parents have trouble paying their bills. She wants to help out so she has been looking for a job, to no avail.

Josie says that if she could do anything, she would like to travel around the world. When asked where she sees herself in five years, she answered, “Mostly in my own house.” While she seemed initially willing to be interviewed, Josie often missed her appointments with me.

Flora. After being born in the U.S., Flora and her family had to move back to Mexico when she was a baby. She attended school there for two years, and the family moved to Texas when she was six. She remembers being scared and crying on her first day in a Texas school because she did not know anyone and could not speak English.

Despite the traumatic start, she remembers her teacher being nice to her and helping her learn to speak English. Flora still thinks fondly of her and says she loves her to this day.

Flora was a self-described troublemaker in junior high who liked to skip school, drink, hang out with older guys, and get into fights. Her mother became wise one day when she picked Flora up after school. Flora was still drunk from the day's activities, and her parents caught on to her behavior, though she says the behavior continued for several more years.

Flora settled down in high school where she enrolled in United's cosmetology program. She had planned to get her license, but was removed from the program because of attendance issues.

Flora's parents and older sister were born in Mexico City. Her sister still has legal issues because she does not have a green card or a Social Security number. Her sister, who used to be the "good kid" in high school, is now running around with the wrong crowd, using drugs, and getting into trouble with the law. Flora says her sister started to go downhill after graduating from high school. Flora feels like she and her sister have switched roles, and now it is she who is trying to be good.

Flora's parents value education and want Flora to go to college. However, because of her sister's legal expenses, which her parents are paying for, it is unknown how they can pay for Flora's education.

Between our second and third interviews, Flora got pregnant and moved in with her boyfriend's parents. In lieu of dropping out, Flora applied to and was accepted into the district's high school for at-risk students. She was able to stay on track and graduate with her classmates. Flora says that her high school teachers were good to her, and her

high school experience was positive. She said that there would be ten family members at her graduation, and her mom and dad would be the most proud.

Antonia. At the time of our first interview, Antonia was trying to decide between attending a four-year university and going to a community college first. She was concerned that all of her community college credits might not transfer. She was interested in family or children's social work. She considers herself to be a "very patient person" with children. Since she was nine years old, Antonia has helped take care of her grandmother who has Alzheimer's. Her grandmother lives with them, and this experience has caused Antonia to think she might be good as a nurse or in social work. Antonia's grandmother died between our second and third interviews, and it was a very sad time for her. She spoke of an unsettling absence in their home as a result.

Antonia has known since elementary school that she would go to college. Growing up, she remembers her parents always telling her and her sisters that "whenever you grow up, you are going to go to college." She credits her parents with instilling in her the desire to improve herself. Her parents were born in Mexico and went to high school there. They moved to the U.S. after they were married, and shortly after Antonia was born, the family lived in a friend's garage. After years of working hard, they have been able to get their own place. Her father says that he wants her to go to college so she can have a "higher income." Antonia says of her parents, "They just always encourage us to do better."

Antonia values family and has not been able to visit her grandpa or other family members who still live in Mexico. She and her family worry that Mexico is too dangerous for a visit.

Antonia normally is a good student, but she admits she has gotten lazy this year. English is her favorite subject, but this year she is making a 68. She has never failed an English class in her life. Antonia graduated from United High on the Distinguished Degree Plan with a 3.0 GPA. She has a job and has recently opened a savings account; she is saving 75% of her earnings for college. She wants to try to pay for college on her own without taking out any loans. When discussing the future, Antonia says, “I don’t really care about, like, my being rich or anything. I just want to make a good living in helping other people.”

Janette. Janette is a very outgoing 17-year-old. When I first met her, she listed her possible future occupations as an anesthesiologist assistant, fantasy make-up artist, photographer, or a music producer. Neither of her parents attended high school, and she describes her socioeconomic status as lower-middle income. She completed United High School’s cosmetology program, passed the state exams, and is a licensed cosmetologist in the state of Texas. She hopes to use cosmetology as a way to pay for college. Her parents did not have the opportunity to attend college, and they really want Janette to be the first one in their family to attend. Her parents were poor growing up in Mexico, and both of them had to drop out when they were in elementary school to help their families work and to do chores. They strongly want Janette to succeed.

The youngest of three sisters, Janette is the only one born in the U.S. Her two older sisters have had trouble getting jobs because of citizenship issues. One wanted to be a nurse but never thought she could be hired so she never went to college.

Janette’s favorite classes in high school were in cosmetology, English, and anatomy. She graduated on the Recommended Degree Plan with a 3.1 GPA and was in

the second quartile of her graduating class. She received commended scores on three of her English achievement exams, and her exit level social studies exam. Janette loves to read. Two books that made an impression on her were *The Jackie Robinson Story* and a book about the Gettysburg Address.

Janette seemed to make friends easily and was usually seen around the high school with several close friends. She wanted to drop out of high school on occasion, but her mother would not let her. Her mother reminded her several times that if she dropped out, she would be just like her cousins with no degrees and just sitting at home. Janette usually talks about the future with her mother because her mother is the head of the house. Her mom works at a local motel, and her father worked for a long time driving a garbage truck, but he was laid off because, as Janette says, he was being paid too much. Now he does something for the phone company. Janette knows her parents stress out about money, and she tries to contribute some of her earnings to them each week. She has been employed at a local pizza restaurant for about a year. Janette says that her parents are always saying, "I wish I would have gone to school. I wish I would have gotten an education so I wouldn't have to have the job that I have right now. So if you don't want a job like ours, I suggest you get your butt to school!"

Carlos. Carlos's family came from Puerto Rico when he was a baby. His parents left him to be raised by his alcoholic grandmother in the Lexington area of Newark, New Jersey. He remembers that it was a scary place to live, and he recalls seeing drug dealers selling drugs throughout the neighborhood. He became emotional when he told me about the time he was six or seven years old, and he saw someone being shot through the head.

Blood and brains were splattered on the wall, and he just kept walking. As he got older, he worried that he would “lose it” if he remained in New Jersey.

When he was in the fourth grade, Carlos’s aunt and uncle took him and moved to Florida. They raised him there until the beginning of his senior year, when they moved to Texas, and he enrolled at United High School.

Carlos now thinks of his aunt and uncle as his mom and dad. He lives with them and his four cousins in the town where United High School is located. He believes that they saved his life, and he knows now that he can be somebody. He never knew how it would feel to have a mother and a father and to have a real family, and now that he does, he says he is “very thankful.” Neither of his “parents” graduated from high school, but they are his role models, and he says that his father is his inspiration. His dad has convinced him that he can do anything in life as long as he puts his mind to it. Carlos never has drunk alcohol or taken drugs because he didn’t want to “mess up his life.” He will be the first in his family to graduate from high school. He plans to go to college, but he doesn’t know how he will pay for it. His dad tells him not to worry about the money and that it will all work out.

Carlos graduated from United High School with a 2.7 GPA and was in the third quartile of his class. He graduated on the Minimum Degree Plan, and his attendance was fair. He is the only study participant who did not live in a Spanish-speaking household.

Maria. Maria graduated on the Recommended Degree Plan in the second quartile of her class with a 3.2 GPA. She had good attendance and never had any discipline issues. She passed all of her high school exit level achievement tests, with her highest

marks being in social studies. She has a reserved personality, and math is her favorite subject.

Maria is the youngest of three children, and when she was in middle school, she wanted to be a nurse or a doctor, but definitely not a teacher. Her oldest sister (age 24) just completed career training to be a dental assistant, and Maria is also interested in that vocation because of her sister's influence.

Maria was born in California, moved to Texas four years ago, and enrolled in the ninth grade at United High School. Though neither of her parents went to high school, they are supportive of education. Her mother talks to her about school more than her dad because he is too tired when he comes home from work. Maria worries about money but says that her parents paid off their house in four years. She would like to save money for college but does not have a job, though she looked.

Her household language is Spanish, and when she watches television, she usually watches Spanish programs. She likes to read and says that she wants to travel to Europe some day, even though she has a lot of family in Mexico.

During our first interview, Maria said that she had a good high school experience and was scared about being out of high school. Though she had plans to go to a vocational school, she did not know how much it would cost.

Rafael. Rafael's parents are separated. He has not seen his father, who lives in Mexico, in a very long time. He is the older of two boys, and he lives with his mother. She is supportive of his education, and he finished high school to make his mother proud. She is his largest influence.

Rafael was born in Mexico City, and his family moved to Texas when he was in the first grade. Rafael describes his family as being lower middle-income. His mother had some high school, but she did not graduate. She works two restaurant jobs to make ends meet. He still has a lot of family in Mexico but he does not go back to see them. They stay in touch via telephone. Rafael worries about being able to afford college. When we first met, he did not know what he wanted to study in college but thought he might attend the Art Institute of Dallas because he has always loved to draw. Art has been his favorite subject since the sixth grade.

Rafael says that high school math was hard for him, though he never did schoolwork at home, and he only studied for tests just before class. He graduated on the Recommended Degree Plan with a 2.5 GPA, and he had excellent attendance. He feels like he got a good high school education. He spent a lot of the school day in the ESL classroom where the teacher gave him good support. When he was a sophomore, he was interested in Auto Tech classes, but his counselor told him they were full. Rafael does not like to read but does spend about four hours a day on his cell phone either texting or talking. His home language is Spanish, he has a computer with internet access at home, and he does not have a job. When he gets older, he wants to travel around the world and visit Japan because he thinks their culture is interesting.

Angelina. Angelina wants to be a geometry teacher, but her parents think too many teachers can't find jobs, and they want her to go into the medical field. Her mother has had some university education in Mexico, but she could not use her education in the U.S. because she can't speak English. Her father never attended high school, and he has told Angelina all her life that she is going to go to college. She agrees because when she

was 11, she had to go back to Mexico for personal reasons. She was there for four years and saw how poor life was for everyone there. It was this experience that made her realize she wanted an education. Her father was recently laid off from his job of fourteen years. He was without work for three months but has now gotten another job.

Angelina's mother is employed as a housekeeper. They live in a house which they are buying. She describes her family as lower middle-class, and they speak Spanish when they are at home.

Angelina likes to read, and she told me that she enjoyed reading John Steinbeck for one of her classes. Her favorite high school class was Geometry. She has been inspired by her ESL teacher. She frequently goes to the ESL classroom and tutors Mexican students on her own time. She does this in addition to holding a part-time job after school.

Angelina is excited about graduating from high school. When I met her at the beginning of her senior year, she told me that she wanted "to finish high school because education makes me a better person."

Jesus. Jesus is a quiet, soft-spoken young man who is well-liked by other students. He is usually a B or C student who was born in Mexico and lived there through the second grade. His favorite class in high school was Auto Tech, though when he was in sixth grade, he wanted to be an artist. He does not like to read and remembers a lot of his teachers. He was not in any clubs or organizations in high school.

Both of Jesus's parents were recently laid off from a factory where his mom had worked for four years and his dad for six. The factory took his dad back, but his mom had to find another job. She now works for a custodial company and cleans a local

discount department store. Jesus classifies his family as middle-income. When they moved to Texas, they lived in a trailer with his grandmother before buying their own. They eventually moved to a house, which they are buying. His mom attended college for a short time in Mexico, and his father graduated from a Mexican high school. Neither of his parents likes to read.

Jesus was the only student in the study who was working full-time and going to school. He would get off work at 11:30 P.M. every night and still come to school. Because of his work schedule, he was late to school on many mornings. He bought his own clothes, shoes, cell phone, necessities, and his car. He used to box but had to give it up due to his work schedule. Though he owns a cell phone, he does not have much use for them. Jesus enjoys being outdoors.

The first time I met Jesus, he had very specific plans to attend a vocational school and learn about diesel engines. He was not nervous at all about graduation and said that sometime he would like to travel the world and visit Paris in particular. His parents were his greatest influence, and he said his father always told him to “follow my dreams.”

Efren. Efren is a very quiet and soft-spoken 17-year-old who comes from a lower middle-class household. He was born in Texas and is the oldest of three brothers. The family speaks mostly Spanish when they are at home, but his two brothers know English best. They lived in a mobile home for a while, but now they have a house which they are buying. Efren has heard his parents talk about money sometimes, but says they don't worry about it. His mom did not go to high school, but his dad did. His mom takes care of his cousins during the day, and his father is a concrete worker. He has talked about starting his own business, and even suggested to Efren that he should get a business

degree and work with him. His mom wants him to be a doctor or a lawyer, but Efren is not interested in any of those occupations. Overall, his parents are encouraging him to get a college education so doors will open up. Though he does not know which college to attend, Efren has thought about attending a religious institution so he can determine “what God wants me to do.” His pastors and youth pastors have had an impact on his life, and he says that he has thought about being a missionary.

Efren does not remember much about his pre-high school days and states that none of his teachers have stood out along the way. He had a good high school experience, graduated in the second quartile of his class, and was on the Recommended Degree Plan. Art was his favorite class, but he knows he cannot make a career out of art because there is not enough money in it. Efren never considered dropping out of school. He made a 1380 on his SAT, and he made commended scores in science and social studies when he took his exit level achievement tests. Math was his most difficult subject. He likes to read. He took two years of French, and he had excellent attendance throughout his senior year.

Efren is one of the few students at school who does not have a cell phone. He does not think he needs one. He also does not have a driver’s license, and this is one reason he says he has been unable to find a job. He has a lot of family in the U.S., and they get together on most holidays. He has family in Mexico also, but says he will never live there.

Eduardo. Eduardo is very patriotic towards the U.S. The first time I met with him, he told me that he was absolutely sure that he was going to join the Marines after high school. He commented, “I might be Hispanic, but I still love this country as much

as anybody does!” He has known he would be a Marine for about two years. He first got interested by seeing the Marine commercials on television and then researched them on the internet. His parents are not very happy that he may move away from home to join the Marines, but they support his decision.

Eduardo has had a difficult time with school. He thought about dropping out after failing the eighth grade, but something told him to keep going. (His older brother dropped out of high school.) He didn’t “want to end up on the wrong road.” He remembers a good third-grade teacher who helped him a lot. English, writing, and math have always been a challenge. Since the fourth grade, he has failed to meet expectations on 31 out of 35 of his state achievement tests. During high school, he had difficulty passing his exit level achievement tests in math and science. He passed the math exit test on his third attempt and the science test on his fourth try. He graduated in the fourth quartile with a 1.5 GPA on the Minimum Degree Plan. (Eduardo was not aware of this.) He had to follow the minimum plan because of the deficiencies in his math classes. Though his exit level achievement tests made his high school years hard, he enjoyed the pride associated with being a student at United High School. He persevered through high school because he knew it would “help you more in life.” During his senior year, he had good attendance and no discipline issues.

Eduardo does not like to read but watches English-speaking television programs for about five hours a day. His family does not have a computer or the internet at home. He has to use his cell phone for internet access.

Though Eduardo is relieved to graduate from high school, going into “real life” makes him nervous. Eduardo does not have a job, and sometimes he worries about

money. After he was born in California, his family followed an uncle to Texas. They still have family in Mexico, and recently they traveled back by bus to visit a sick uncle. Eduardo has no plans to return to Mexico because he does not want to “be killed.” He says it is too dangerous there.

Eduardo says that God has had a large influence on his life, and he goes to church about once a month. He looks up to his mother, and he says that since he was little, she has always told him to “keep going forward, never backwards.”

Summary of Interview Data

The purpose of the study was to determine the critical influences regarding Hispanic high school seniors’ postsecondary plans.

Sub-questions.

1. What are the critical factors influencing Hispanic students’ decisions regarding their postsecondary plans?
2. Which factors weigh the most on their decisions?
3. Do their deliberations throughout the year cause their decisions to remain fixed, evolve gradually, or change rather quickly?
4. Do high school staff members influence the students’ decisions?
5. When does their decision become final?

These guiding research questions uncovered four main themes. These four themes originated from 22 code families (see Appendix D). The four themes are:

- family influence,
- institutional influence,

- vague college knowledge, and
- evolution of the student's postsecondary decision.

Family influence. All students indicated that their parents were supportive of education in general by recounting statements such as, "They're encouraging," "She wouldn't let me quit," and "If you don't want a job like ours, I suggest you get your butt to school!" One male student explained that he had attended College and Career Night at the high school because his parents took him even though he did not want to go. "I didn't want to; my parents made me," he said. When Flora discussed her father's wishes with respect to staying home and working in the family restaurant or going to college she said, "He wants me to go to school," and Janette said, "They really want me to succeed in going to college . . . and since I have the opportunity, they want me to take advantage of it." Angelina remarked that her parents "really care about my school and me going to school and getting an education. My dad's, like, you need to go to college; it's not for me, it's for you."

Some of the students discussed the specific motivating influence of their parents and provided a rich description of their parental interaction. Rafael reported, "Mom's always telling us to go to get an education because she couldn't. She didn't get the chance, you know, to finish high school so she's telling us to continue. I really don't want to disappoint her."

I've never at a point in my life have I thought that college would not be for me. I think that once you're grown up, parents always pound it in your head: I want you to go to college, I want you to go to college, so I never saw it as I'm not going.
(Marissa)

Parents' struggles have an impact. Some participants witnessed first-hand how difficult it was for their parents when they had little or no education. Angelina spoke of living in Mexico for three years and watching her father struggle:

I knew how the life was there and, I mean, it's real poor down there, and I'm, like, I don't want this for me. I want to have a career. I want to have a good job. I guess I just didn't want to live the life my dad did 'cause he didn't finish high school or nothing. Here in the U.S., he works in a factory, and I don't want my kids to. I just don't know. I just want a better future for me, and I'm doing it because my dad told me his life and all he suffered in Mexico. I know what he's suffering here in the U.S., but it's because he doesn't have a better education.

When I asked Rosa about her reasons for wanting to go to college, she said seeing the stress in her parents' life was an influence:

I guess seeing how my parents don't, I don't know, they always seem stressed out, and my mom's always saying "I wish I had gone to college, I wish I had gone to college," and somehow, I'm just, I don't want to be stuck in that situation. I want to go to college, get a career going, get a family going maybe one day and not have to be stressing out. I wish I had gone to college; I wish I had done this.

Siblings influence. In addition to the influences of their parents, the students voiced sibling connections their decisions about going to college. When I asked Maria who influenced her most regarding her college decisions, she emphatically said, "My sister!" Responding to the same topic, Janette said it was her two sisters who contributed to her decisions about the future.

Antonia spoke of her sisters and a larger family influence that moved her towards high school graduation and then college. "My sisters and my mom [influenced me]. They were always good students so seeing that, like, my whole household family is not bad influences at all. I don't want to be the only bad one!"

Family dynamics can work in different ways. Flora said that she wanted to go to college “to try and get my sister to go!” Rosa related that her younger brother even pressed her to aim higher:

One time I told my brother I was, like, well maybe I could just be some kind of, I don't know, a technician or an assistant. He's like, “No!” I was just, like, why not? And he's like, “Because I know you can do better than that! Why would you want to stay at the minimum if you know your capacities are, like, beyond that?” I'm just, like, I guess that's true. Okay. Makes sense!

Older siblings sometimes provided direction also. Maria related that her older sister had always been there for her and that “she's been through the teenage years so she tells me what's good and what's not good.”

Parent/family general influence. Students reported that their parents and family provided a general positive influence on their lives, not just educationally, but in other ways as well. Jesus indicated that both of his parents were the most influential people in his life. He said, “They always encourage me to things I want to do. They say to follow my dreams and stuff and to do what I want to do. It's pretty much what I'm doing right now.” Speaking not only about his mom, but his whole family, Eduardo responded:

My family for me is in everything I do, and that's pretty amazing. Some parents, like, give up on their kids, but my mom's, like, the number one support. I used to, like, bring myself down a lot of times. If I do something I give up on, I just stop, but with them, I can keep on going!

Many of the students expressed that their grandparents had also been important in their lives. For example, Antonia stated:

It's mainly my family that has made a huge difference. They're the ones that, you know, just encourage me and stuff. Also, I think that part of the reason that I've always been so patient and wanting to work with others is because of my grandma.

Every participant expressed the importance of their family and that they were who they were because of them. When I asked Maria who had given her her confident personality, she quickly answered, “My family!”

Institutional influence. Many participants discussed how their teachers had influenced them to think about or pursue a college direction. Angelina declared:

I admire what Mrs. A. does. She’s a really good teacher in helping people that don’t know the language, and they have to struggle here. I was, like, I want to be like Mrs. A! I want to teach Geometry!

Rosa discussed how even her fourth grade teacher instigated discussions about college. She said that it was the first time she thought about going to college. She told me, “He always seemed really encouraging towards college, even though we were all in the fourth grade, but he was always talking about his Aggies and stuff, and I was just, like, what other colleges are there?”

Some students spoke of teachers who had a more hands-on approach by helping with applications and scholarships. Rafael explained, “Since I’m going to community college after I graduate, she kind of helped me get those papers in order and all that stuff, and even the scholarship. She’s been a big help to me.” When speaking of her ESL teacher, Angelina said, “I’d have questions sometimes. She tells me, ‘Well, you need to do this and that for college. You need to take this many classes. You need to pay this, and there’s these scholarships,’ and stuff like that.”

Counselors. Ten of the participants (77%) said that they had met with their counselor one or more times during high school. Most meetings were to discuss grades or schedule changes. However, only three of those students (23%) reported that they had discussed college-related issues with their counselors.

Some students voiced frustration or dissatisfaction with their counselors. When asked about the high school counseling services, Rosa said, “I don’t know if I’ve had the best; I guess it just takes forever.” She continued, “It just seems like they don’t want to do anything.” Expressing frustration, she finished:

I don’t know, just, like, throughout the years . . . In my freshman year, I came through junior high and stuff . . . I guess maybe it was a smaller school. It was, like, more personal. Now it’s just, like, “Okay, you have five seconds to tell me what’s wrong. Okay, get out.” Its’ just, like, I’m here, I made an appointment. I’m trying to see you and obviously it’s serious, and you don’t have the time for me. It’s, like, they’re rushing you through it. If they call you in at all, like, it could be a month. So I just stopped trying to see them.

Rosa’s frustration was echoed by another student who tried to see her counselor for a routine matter:

I was going to talk to her last time for my schedule because they changed it, but she wasn’t there. So they told me to come after school, but she wasn’t there either. They told me to come back the next day, but I never had the chance to. (Josie)

Conversely, some students reported that seeing their counselor was easy. Rafael said, “I usually just walk in and see her right away, basically.” When specifically seeing her counselor about a college issue, Marissa explained, “She’s really nice. She’s been very nice about the whole college thing. She’s tried to help me out with papers for scholarships.” Another of the three students who discussed college with their counselor observed:

I talked to her, like, I asked her when I was excited about community college, I asked her what she would think would be best for me to do—just to go to a four-year college or go to a community college? I think she recommended, I mean she said I could go to a four-year college, but I think she recommended me going to a community college first. (Antonia)

Some students explained that their counselor was “nice” or “caring” when helping with general issues. For example, Carlos pointed out:

Every time I go to have meetings with her about my schedule, or I'm concerned about my grades, she spends a lot of time trying to help me out. I really do appreciate the fact that she does that. There's not really many counselors that would.

Peers. All of the participants in the study said that they have talked about college with their friends to some extent. Antonia mentioned, "I have friends that are going to college, a lot of my friends, actually. I would talk to them about college, like if they've applied, or we talk about it." Efren commented, "I have a friend at church who has talked about going to TCU, and another one of my friends, I think she is applying for a college next year." Rosa indicated that a lot of her friends were not only talking about college, they have even picked schools such as Baylor, Tarleton, and Texas.

Conversations sometimes led to another student enrolling right away. Antonia said, "I actually told one of my friends that I was starting college, and she told one of my friends about it, and she actually went to the community college and got an application. She starts class next month!"

Some of the students reported that at times, their friends talked about going to college and at others just going to work, as well as other options. Jesus recalled:

Well, one of my friends, he wanted to go to UTI with me, too, but his dad just didn't support him so, I don't know, I think he's going to work. I've got two friends that are going to go to community college and get their basics, and the others, they're just going to work.

Eduardo said, "I have one friend that says he wants to go to the Marines, but others, they haven't, like, decided yet if they're going to go to college or not." Some students even reported that their friends wanted to go to school with them. Angelina remembered:

One of my friends, she doesn't speak much English, she's like, "Wow! I want to go with you!" She also wants to be a teacher, and she's like, "I want to go with you wherever you go!" and I'm like, okay, I'll take you!

Vague college knowledge. All students came into the first interview with quick answers about their postsecondary plans, such as Rosa who said, “I’m going to a junior college in Kansas to get some basics and then from there, perhaps go down to Texas State in San Marcos and finish up my bachelor’s in nursing, and from there get my master’s.”

Other comments included the following:

- “I’m going to UTI.” (Jesus)
- “I want to go to college.” (Efren)
- “I might go to Junction Community College to do mostly my English or math and my basic important classes, and then I will be going to the universities.”
(Josie)
- “I want to be, what do you call it, and anesthesiologist assistant.” (Janette)
- “I plan on going to pre-med and do about eight years to study neurosurgeon.”
(Carlos)
- “I’m going to a training school and try to become a dental assistant.” (Maria)
- “I plan to attend college.” (Rafael)
- “I plan to go to Junction to do my basics.” (Angelina)
- “Get my basics done and then transfer.” (Antonia)
- “I want to join the Marines.” (Eduardo)
- “I kind of want to go to UTA for Psychology.” (Marissa)
- “I’ve thought, like, about a first-grade teacher.” (Flora)

In spite of speaking in definite tones about their plans, most participants were lacking in the specific knowledge about the steps to reach these goals, and by the end of their senior year, only four students had made a campus visit.

Application knowledge. By the end of the school year two students (15%), Antonia and Marissa, had completed college applications. Antonia had already begun spring classes at a local community college, and Marissa had applied and been accepted into a four-year university. Only one other student, Jesus, had completed any type of postsecondary application. He had completed an application to a local career-technical school during the year, but by graduation, he had decided not to attend.

The remainder of the students (77%) had not begun to fill out college applications. Some indicated that they did not know what the application process was or how to fill out the application. Rafael indicated that he had seen a community college application but said, “I’m not exactly sure what to do after I fill it out.” At the end of the school year, Rafael said that he had planned to ask someone at the high school to show him how to fill out a college application, but that he always kept forgetting to ask. Others also seemed confused about the college application process. When I asked Josie where she was going to get the application forms for the local community college, she replied:

Well, mostly get them from the office right there because they’re giving the forms right there in the office. I called them and asked them if they have any kind of forms or all the stuff they have. They’re like, “We still have some in stock right there because there are some kids that are actually signing up right now. Like, they graduated early, and they’re just getting a list and all.” I told them if I could get a list, and they said they would mail it to me.

I asked Josie what list they were going to send to her, and she answered, “Mostly, like, the signing-up and also the categories I want to get into, like the basics and all that.” By the end of the school year, Josie reported that she had still not filled out the application. At the end of the school year, I asked Janette, who had still not completed an application, if she knew when the fall enrollment deadline was, and she said she did not. Although

there were 11 students still indicating they wanted to attend college, by the end of their senior year there were still only 3 students who had completed a college application.

Financial concerns and college costs. Every student expressed varying degrees of concern about their family's general financial situation. Some said they were concerned about the day to day financial stress that their parents faced, and some students had jobs in order to help out with the household bills. Many of the students and their parents discussed the difficulty of being able to pay for college, but few knew actual college costs or where the money would come from. By the end of their senior year, only four students had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and only three had applied for any type of scholarship or grant. Several students reported that they didn't know how to do this even though the high school's website listed over forty available local and national scholarships and grants.

Similar to their lack of knowledge regarding the college application process, most of the students were also uninformed about what their college education was going to cost. Efren guessed that college would cost "around \$40,000 per semester." Eduardo suggested that community college "would probably cost, like, around \$10,000 or so per semester." Josie thought that the local community college would cost \$150 per semester, and Janette estimated it was \$15,000 per semester including books. Carlos was sure the same community college was \$20,000 per year. Rafael, who was planning to attend a technical training school to learn mechanics, told me that the cost was "\$92,000 or so." When I asked him the program's duration, he said, "I think it was two years, or I think it was a four-year school, or so it's probably for all of it. I'm not sure if it was, like, for one

year or two years.” At the time of his third interview, Rafael had said that he had completed the application for this program.

There were only three students who did have good knowledge of college costs. Marissa, who had been accepted by a four-year university, explored the university’s website and knew how much money she needed to attend in the fall. She also had enrolled in a community college’s spring break course, and she knew the cost of this as well. Antonia, who had begun two community college courses during the spring, knew her costs exactly, and Jesus knew that a local technical college costs \$32,000 for a 15-month certificate.

Even though most of the students spoke emphatically about attending college, few had accurate knowledge of the cost.

Evolution of decisions.

Staying focused on their college goal. From the beginning of their senior year through their graduation, there were three students (23%) whose postsecondary plans remained the same throughout. Marissa and Antonia began the year with a firm goal of a specific college and major, and they did not waver. Angelina remained fixed on a plan to attend a local community college and complete her basics. The remaining ten students (77%) changed their plans for various reasons as the school year progressed (see Table 3).

Through the duration of the interviews, many students faced personal issues or family conflicts. Despite these issues, some of them were able to stay focused on their postsecondary goals while others waived on their plans. Marissa had some family

Table 3

Evolution of Students' Postsecondary Plans

	Plans at First Interview (Beginning of Senior Year)	Plans at Second Interview (Middle of Senior Year)	Plans at Third Interview (End of Senior Year)
Rosa	BA in Nursing	Lab Tech, Pharmacy Tech, Radiology Tech	Local CC for basic and transfer to 4-year college for occupational therapy
Marissa	Psychology—Children's Counseling; 4-year College	No Change	No Change
Josie	Art (vague)	Local CC for basics (vague)	Move to California Chiropractic (vague)
Flora	Teacher (vague)	Pregnant, moved out of parents home, plans impacted	Nursing at Tech School (vague)
Antonia	Local CC for basics Social work—family counseling	No change, began CC during Spring semester	No change
Janette	Anesthesiologist Assistant, Music, Cosmetology, Photography, Move to Georgia (vague)	Sister seriously ill Plans impacted	Local CC for basic Stay at home (vague)
Carlos	Pre-med, Neurosurgeon College undecided	Film school, move to Florida	Local CC for basic. Film school at private college in Florida (vague)
Maria	Dental assistant at local Career-Tech	Family move to California	Unknown, worried that Texas CC hours will not transfer to California (vague)
Rafael	Art; Art Institute	Unsure	Local CC for basic than Art Institute (vague)
Angelina	Local CC for basics Future major unknown	No change	No change
Jesus	Automotive—Diesel Mechanic; Career-Tech	No change	Military—National Guard (vague)
Efren	Local CC, work with father (vague)	(Vague)	Religious 2-year school, missionary, pastor, whatever God wants (vague)
Eduardo	Marines	Marines	Move to California with girlfriend; will take service entrance exam when ready (vague)

issues which provide a good example of this. Marissa's older sister left her husband and moved back home with her three children, causing a family disruption. Her sister did not help to take care of the kids. The house was crowded, and the family's routines were disrupted. As Marissa described:

My dad was very upset with her because, you know, it's not a very smart choice, and, I don't know, everything just became kind of weird around the house. I mean, nobody really wanted to talk to each other. It was just really quiet.

Then, a couple of months later, the school counselor notified Marissa's father that her 13-year-old sister might be pregnant. Marissa observed:

My dad's always been a very strict person so for him to hear that, he just, I don't know, I mean, it's really weird to walk around the house right now because my dad doesn't talk to my little sister no more. I mean, everything's been so awkward for me lately because having to go through that with my older sister and then all of a sudden, that happens with my little sister. The thing is that, I guess, no one's ever pictured her as anything but a little girl.

Marissa was concerned that her father's familial pride was going to make it hard for them to accept and adjust to their family problems. She confided, "He sounds like he's better, but then he can't even look at my little sister. He turns the other way not to talk to her."

Despite these personal family issues, Marissa has remained focused on her postsecondary goals even though she feels like her family is not. Marissa said:

My older sister dropped out of high school, and she never graduated so I am the first to graduate. I kind of feel like this is my year. I don't want to sound selfish, but I kind of feel like the attention should be put on me, but then, everything's just been going on out of control, and I just kind of feel like nobody cares much.

Finally, her father wants Marissa to attend a community college instead of going away to the four-year university at which she was accepted. As she explained:

My dad said, "If it's so cheap to attend community college, why don't you just stay here instead of going all the way out there and paying all that money for nothing?" He's like, "You have all this scholarship money. Why don't you just pay for school with that?" I'm, like, I only have one scholarship, and it's \$4000.

The university is about \$15,000 to \$20,000, and that won't cover it. My dad's, like, the kind of person that says, "Why would you even go to the university if you can get the same thing at a small community college?" I'm like, it's just the experience, you know? It's not only where you are at, it's what you're going to get out of it, you know, where you're going to live and trying to be on your own. It's just what I want, and my dad doesn't understand that because they never went to college. My parents don't know the difference between going to a community college and going to a school like the university. It just kind of stresses me out so I don't know what to do.

Despite the familial challenges, Marissa was one of three students who never wavered on their college plans.

Changing college plans. Some students did change their postsecondary plans due to family issues. Janette changed her plans and decided not to move to Georgia and become an anesthesiologist assistant. This was primarily due to a family illness. Janette's older sister was diagnosed with a genetic disorder and had to have emergency brain surgery in the spring. As Janette explained:

My sister being in the hospital right now, it's kind of tough. They flew her to Dallas, and she had to have emergency brain surgery. It's a birth defect linked to the seventh chromosome, and it runs in the Hispanic descent. I've noticed that the last couple of days, she's forgetting more and more, but I'm not sure if it's part of the operation or it's an effect of the medication. I'm not sure.

Janette is very close to her sister and was visibly upset about her condition. She expressed concern that the situation was causing her to change her postsecondary plans. She wanted to stay home and help care for her sister and also didn't feel right about leaving her mom to handle everything by herself. Because of her sister's medical expenses and the family having no insurance, Janette also knew it was likely that her parents would now not be able to help her pay for college. Janette explained:

My parents wanted to help me financially go to college, but I'm not sure that's going to happen. I think so far it's how long she stays in the hospital will kind of determine afterwards what we're going to do. It's going to be one expensive bill. My family is worried if we're going to have enough money to go to college.

Based on these unavoidable life circumstances, Janette has decided to change her plans from moving to Georgia and becoming an anesthesiologist assistant. She currently hopes to stay home and attend a local community college for her basic courses.

Flora is another student whose plans changed during the year. During our first interview, she indicated that she wanted to become a teacher. During the spring semester, she became pregnant, moved out of her parents' home, and moved in with her boyfriend. Her immediate high school graduation plans became at-risk as her new residence was located in another town from the high school. Flora had no car, and that complicated her school attendance. She applied to the United High School's Learning Center for at-risk students because it offered half-day, self-paced instruction. She was accepted into the school in April, and her father provided her transportation to the new school. Flora was able to graduate a few weeks early and was able to walk with her senior class at graduation in June. Due to these personal issues, Flora changed her postsecondary plans. At the beginning of the year, she had wanted to become a teacher, but by graduation, Flora had changed her mind and wanted to go to nursing school at the same career-tech school where her boyfriend was studying law enforcement.

Money for Flora's college education also became tenuous and factored into her changing postsecondary plans. Flora's older sister had been arrested again, and her parents were using money for her legal matters that could have been used to help fund Flora's college education. Flora observed:

I want to start school maybe in the summer, but I got to see how the money is. If I can't in the summer, I'll start to plan on the other school that starts in the fall. It depends on if my mom and dad have money or not because they're having problems with my sister, like with the laws and stuff. They are having problems with my sister so they got to waste money on a lawyer for her and stuff. Like, they have a bond, a bail bond, to pay so they've got to waste money on that, too.

These issues appeared to cause concern for Flora, and her postsecondary plans changed over the course of our interviews.

Positive high school experience. Most (85%) of the students in the study reported having a positive high school experience. Two (15%) stated they had a neutral or average high school experience, and the balance of the students used adjectives such as good, wonderful, excellent, or by saying it was “a ten!” Even the student who said her high school experience was average commented that she would probably stay in high school another year if she could. Marissa said, “There is something here for everybody, and there is no reason that that somebody should not have something. I love band!” Flora said that she did not really like high school in the beginning, but later she changed her opinion:

At first, I wasn't really that high when I first started because I had problems, and my teachers mostly didn't show me what the problem is. They were mostly just not here. Then later on, I started getting more better teachers, and they started explaining to me. I'm not really good with math, but one of my teachers explained to me each step of the way. So I started liking school more.

Maria, who had moved from California, liked United better because of higher standards. She explained, “Everyone is friendly, and I like the way the teachers teach because I know their standards are high, and when I came from California, it's really not. Over here, they do everything harder and faster.”

Angelina described her high school experience as wonderful, and said, “I have never had a bad experience.” Eduardo liked his high school experience because he had “some easy teachers, and just the whole thing about school pride.”

All students indicated that they had been treated fairly and respectfully by other students and staff. That opinion seemed to impact their overall opinion of their high school experience. Angelina commented:

I mean, we're in school, and you have rules, and you need to respect them because if you come to school, you know you have to respect some rules. I just do the work, and if I just don't understand something, I just go to my teacher. If I have problems or something, well, I just tell them, and they understand.

When I asked Jesus about how he had been treated, he answered, "I'd say it's good, you know." "I'm going to miss high school when I get out." Eduardo said, "I don't see racism. They still respect the Mexican kids even though some can't speak English, the teachers will still show them."

The students all communicated that their high school experience was good for them, and they were appreciative of the opportunity. Flora declared:

I really liked this school, and the teachers are nice, and they're good to you. They're, like, nice to get along with. You can joke with them and stuff, and the principal, Mr. Nowlin, he makes a big difference to have an outgoing principal like that because you feel like you can have more fun at your school. You're not all here just to do work. You're also here to have fun and interact with people.

Summary

This research discerned four themes from the lived experiences of the study's participants. The four themes are:

- family influence,
- institutional influence,
- vague college knowledge, and
- evolution of the student's postsecondary decision.

These themes and their significance are discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

Significance of Findings

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore when, how, and why a sample of Hispanic high school seniors at a large high school in north central Texas make decisions regarding their postsecondary educational and career choices and how those choices evolved during their senior year in high school.

Four themes emerged from this study: family influence, postsecondary guidance, vague college knowledge, and the evolution of the students' decision about their postsecondary plans.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature and a discussion of the findings revealed by the study. The second section provides recommendations for practitioners to better serve the population studied and the last section makes recommendations for further research.

Family Influence

Parental influence. This work supports previous work (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Hurtado & Gauvain, 1997; Immerwahr, 2003; McCallister et al., 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Zalaquette, 2005) that Hispanic parents support education for their children and communicate that belief to them. The students in this study indicated that their parents were encouraging through words and deeds. All students ranked their parents and family collectively as one of the top two greatest influencing factors when it came to pursuing higher education (see Table 4).

Table 4

Student Influences Towards College Attainment

	Family	Teachers & Staff	Financial	Courses & Grades	Counselors	Personal Issues
Rosa	1	4	3	2	6	5
Marissa	2	6	5	3	4	1
Josie	1	2	5	4	3	6
Flora	1	2	6	4	3	5
Antonia	1	3	6	2	4	5
Janette	2	3	1	4	5	6
Carlos	1	3	2	5	4	6
Maria	2	5	1	3	4	6
Rafael	1	2	3	4	5	6
Angelina	1	2	4	3	5	6
Jesus	2	3	4	6	5	1
Efren	1	5	2	4	6	3
Eduardo	1	2	3	4	5	6

* 1 = Greatest Influence
6 = Least influence

Those students that said that they were planning on attending college all said that their parents had been supportive in several ways:

1. repeatedly telling their children the importance of an education,
2. taking their children to college related events, such as college and career night and FAFSA night,
3. taking their children for college visits,

4. taking their children to register for college, and
5. offering to help pay for their children's tuition costs.

Though the parents in this study did influence and encourage postsecondary education, most students also said their parents supported their decision to choose their own postsecondary path. This was similar to the findings of Stanton-Salazar (2001) who wrote that Mexican-American parents allowed their children to manage their own educational plans. My study revealed that the parents did encourage education, but that only two parents actually took a more directive approach. One mother took her daughter to a local community college and enrolled her, and another student's parents took their daughter to visit two college campuses.

This current study revealed that some students were influenced towards postsecondary education because they had seen their parents struggle without a good education. The students voiced that they did not "want to live the life my dad did because he didn't finish high school or nothing." One student spoke of her parents visible stress, "they always seem stressed out and my mom's always saying 'I wish I had gone to college, I wish I had gone to college.'" Another student told a story of temporarily moving back to Mexico with her family when she was young and saw how hard life was for their friends and family who had little education. She related how this experience helped her to realize the value of an education. The current study echoes Ojeda and Flores (2008) who found that Hispanic children may have been motivated to pursue higher education based on the life that their mothers lived. Students in their study reported that they were encouraged towards higher education by witnessing their parent's hardships.

All students indicated that they respected and honored their parents and that they wanted “to make them proud” or to “pay them back for everything that their parents had done for them.” Josie said that she wanted to “be something more, and like you know, earn a little bit of money to like repay my parents.” This is similar to the previous findings that indicate that students may be motivated towards college to support their families for the future (Tseng, 2004) and that they had strong feelings of family responsibility (Boden, 2011). However, this feeling of family responsibility may influence students to remain at home and not attend college (Desmond & Turley, 2009). In the current study, Jackie stated she was going to forgo college and remain at home to care for her ill sister and help with the family’s financial issues.

In general terms, all students discussed the fact that their parents had the most influence on their lives and that they had encouraged and built confidence in their children. Jesus said, “They always encourage me to do the things I want to. They say follow my dreams and stuff.” However, only a few students in this study said that their parents initiated specific college attainment efforts such as taking them on college visits or to enroll in school. This is similar to previous studies that Hispanic parents motivated their children with general discussions about college, but couldn’t assist them with the best methods to actually attain it (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Based on the student’s responses in my study, it is likely that the parents were not knowledgeable about specific college-going procedures and therefore could not advise them. This may be one reason that most students stated that they were going to attend college at the beginning of their senior year, but that only a few actually took the necessary steps to make their plans a reality by the end of their senior year.

Sibling influence. Hurtado-Ortiz and Gauvain (2007) found that older siblings who had attended college served as role models and also provided college information to their younger siblings. The current study reveals this to be true, but I also found that sibling influences can also come from different contexts. Flora's older sister had begun community college several years ago, but started running with a bad group of friends, been arrested for drugs and dropped out of school. Flora is hoping that if she goes to college she could influence her older sister's return to the college classroom.

Younger siblings also have an impact in college decisions. Rosa commented that her younger brother had been an influence. When she told him that she wanted to be a dental technician or assistant, he told her that she could do better than that. He encouraged her to aim higher.

All students felt that their family offered great support and by being supportive they had made them who they were. Eduardo stated, "My family for me is in everything I do, and that's pretty amazing." Antonia said that her family made a huge difference in her life and when I asked Maria who had given her confidence, she emphatically said, "My family!"

Most participants in this study explained that their families were important to them and that they had influenced them to aspire to a good education.

Institutional Influence

From teachers. Some of the students in the current study said that they started thinking about college during elementary school. This gives voice to Oliva's research that college access begins years before students begin college (2008). Participants in the current project received guidance in varying degrees. Some said that their teachers had

encouraged them to pursue college and some students indicated that their teachers had even shown them how to apply. Some participants even said that their teachers showed them how to fill out scholarship applications.

Angelina wanted to be a geometry teacher because of her high school math teacher and Rafael said that one of his teachers helped him prepare college paperwork and scholarship applications. The influence of these teachers supports Boden (2011) and Esprivalo Harrell and Forney (2003), who wrote that at risk Hispanic high school students need mentors or adult guides to help them sort out their futures and negotiate the college enrollment process. Those in the current study indicated that they were receptive to and in need of information about post secondary planning.

From counselors. While the majority of this group of Hispanic students met at least once with their counselor, only three of them reported discussing college related issues. Some students were critical of the school's counselors and said, "They didn't want to do anything," and "It just takes forever to get in to see them." However, Rafael said that it was easy to see his counselor, and Marissa, Carlos and Antonia said their counselors were caring and helpful whenever they asked them for help. However, none of the students indicated that there was an organized effort by the counselors to meet individually with the Hispanic students to discuss college advisement. This study supports Immerwahr's (2003) research that indicated that many Hispanic high school seniors do not receive individual help to sort out their futures.

From peers. The importance of peer interaction towards college attainment for Hispanic students has been well-documented (Castillo, Conoley, et al., 2010; González et al., 2003; Horn & Chen, 1998; Hurtado & Gauvain, 1997) and has found that this

connection has a positive influence on the students' college decision making process.

These findings are also supported by the current study. All students in this study reported that they had talked about college with their friends. Their varying discussions included topics such as which colleges they might attend, whether or not they had applied, when they might apply, and affordability. These college conversations among the Hispanic students' peers sometimes influenced them to either consider attending college or to actually enroll.

Vague College Knowledge

Enrollment procedures, college costs, financial aid, and scholarships. During the first interview that took place in the fall, ten students said that they planned on going to college (Rosa, Efren, Josie, Janette, Carlos, Rafael, Antonia, Angelina, Marissa, and Flora), two students (Maria and Jesus) said they were going to attend a career tech school, and one said he was going to join the marines (Eduardo). Most of the students were confident in their answers and gave the impression that these goals would be met upon their high school graduation. However, as the interviews progressed through the school year, the students revealed that despite their intentions towards postsecondary education, they knew very little regarding specific enrollment procedures or the cost of a postsecondary education. By the end of their senior year, only two of the students (15%) had completed a college application. During the interviews some students said they did not know how to enroll or where to get a college application. This is supportive of other research that indicates that students need help with attaining college access (Collatos et al., 2004; Goldenberg et al., 2001; Immerwahr, 2003; Marsico & Getch, 2009; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

All of the students said that they were worried about money and the financial situation of their families, but though most reported that they planned to attend college or technical school, only three students knew the approximate cost of a postsecondary education. The students estimated college costs to range from \$150.00 to 40,000.00 per semester. The two students that did know accurate costs (Marissa and Antonia), had also completed college applications and had been accepted by the time of our last interview. One other student, Jesus, completed a career tech application but later decided not to apply.

The students and their parents had little information regarding the financing of a postsecondary education. The students reported that they had conversations with their parents about the difficulty of being able to pay for college, but their conversations were only general in nature. Even though the FAFSA can be instrumental towards the funding of a college education, by the end of the school year only four students had completed it. Most students (77%) did not apply for scholarships even though the high school's website had links to many local and national scholarships. The current study supports Esprivalo Harrell and Forney (2003), who wrote that Hispanic high school students often need help organizing their college financial aid.

Some of the students that stated that they wanted to attend college may not have completely understood the procedures for actually getting there and may have chosen not to seek out that information. Most students did not know the college enrollment process, had never visited a college campus, had no knowledge of college costs and financing, and did not know how to apply for college scholarships.

The P-12 educational system at United Independent School District has done an adequate job of instilling the value and concept of higher education in the Hispanic students studied here. However, the district has possibly failed to fully explain and give specific direction regarding all of the facets of the college enrollment and college attainment process. When it came time for the students in this study to take the next step towards educational attainment, a majority of them failed to do so. Perhaps they and their parents did not fully understand how to negotiate the process.

Evolution of the Students' Decision

All students began the series of interviews having specific postsecondary plans. Most indicated they were going to attend college. However, by graduation there were only three students who had completed a college application. In evaluating the reasons why the participants did or did not follow through with their educational plans, it is appropriate to consider each one's attitude towards education. All students said that they believed that education was important. At the beginning of their senior year, 12 students indicated that they planned to pursue some form of postsecondary education. The one exception was Eduardo, who planned on joining the marines. In addition, 85% of the participants said they had a positive high school experience. When asked to describe their experience they used descriptors such as good, wonderful, or excellent. The results also showed that the students' parents and family believed that education was an important and worthwhile endeavor. Most participants indicated that:

- they believed that education was a necessary way to improve their life,
- their high school experience was positive, and
- their parents and family supported education.

When interviewed, all students said they wanted a better life and the other benefits that a good education could provide. Most said that their educational experience was good to excellent. Their parents supported education because they perceived that it would add value to their children's lives. With these factors and influences being evident in the student's lives, why did only three students complete their goal to enroll for college?

Castillo, Lopez-Arenas, et al. (2010) described acculturation as "adapting to the host culture's norms" (p. 89). The students in the current study appear to have adapted to many American norms as described below. Previous research has been mixed on the effect of acculturation and educational persistence. Several studies have found that acculturation in Hispanic students has positively influenced their educational persistence (Flores et al., 2006; McWhirter, Hackett, & Bandalos, 1998; Ramos & Sanchez, 1995) and that increased acculturation leads to educational persistence. However, other studies have found that Hispanic student's educational goals are not influenced through acculturation (Navarro, Flores, & Worthington, 2007; Ojeda & Flores, 2008). The students in the current study were comfortable with living in the U.S. and had adapted to the host country's norms. None had any interest in going to Mexico to live even though they had family there. All spoke English well and had positive relationships with their teachers and other students. Though all associated mostly with other Hispanic students at school, none felt like there was any significant bias towards them or their Hispanic friends at school or in the community. Those who had jobs worked at the places where many typical high school students are employed. All appeared to be happy and were often seen during the school day enjoying their friends and the social aspects of high

school. All made average or better grades and passed the state's standardized exit tests for graduation. During United High School's graduation ceremony the students were extremely happy and proud to be graduating. Some were crying. Some were speechless. The stands were crowded with their parents, families, and friends. One could hear the shouts of joy as the families clapped for their children. Most of the students in the current study had been in the United School District's elementary schools and living in an American community for years. Their parents understood how to survive and flourish. Most owned their own home, had gainful employment or owned their own business. They understood the American system of education enough to guide their children through to the completion of high school and graduation. They participate in a significant part of the American way of life on a daily basis. All students and parents had access to college and other postsecondary information and choice. This information was available to them through the high school counselor's office and scheduled high school informational meetings about college and college financing. The high school's website was also readily available and provided scholarship information in Spanish and English. There are two universities located within a 40 minute commute. A community college is located within 8 minutes of the high school and online college choices are abundant. Yet with all of these offerings, and despite the fact that 92% of the students said that they planned to attend college, only 23% of the students had completed college applications by the time of their high school graduation. Why did many of the students fail to follow their original goal of postsecondary attainment? To borrow an analogy from baseball, when the students were finally in the batter's box, with the bat in their hands, they

decided not to swing. What caused them to change their mind? I offer several possible reasons.

Life got in the way. The reasons that the students gave for changing their college plans were varied. Some had family related issues. One student had a major illness in her immediate family, one became pregnant and moved in with her boy friend, and several said they were moving out of state to be with friends or girlfriends. The two students that did enroll and attend in the fall of 2012 also had developing personal issues, but chose not to waiver from their original college attendance goals. Most of the students that did change their college plans did so for no stated reason.

What they were supposed to say? During their first interviews, 12 of 13 students said they were going to go to college. By the end of their senior year only three students were enrolled. Most of the students that did change their college plans did so for no stated reason. In relating their original goals to me, the students may have been only repeating a college mantra that they assumed they were supposed to say when someone asked about their postsecondary plans: "I am going to go to community college first and get my basics." Based on my position as an administrator at United High School, I hear this same statement from other at-risk students' dozens of times each year. Yet, when it is stated, it is most often said apologetically and without any positive emphasis. It appears to be an embarrassment to some students. It is a possibility that some of the students in the current study never really planned to attend college and that they just told me what they thought they should say or what they thought I wanted to hear. They knew they were supposed to go to college, so they feigned attendance plans even though they did not actually want or plan to go.

Did not know the next step. Some of the students in the study indicated that they did not know how to take the next step regarding how to actually enter college. They stated that they did not know how to fill out a college application or where to get one. Most also had not taken any type of college entrance exam. Even though all students indicated that they were concerned about financial issues, most did not complete the FAFSA or know where to get information on the process. The majority of the students also did not complete scholarship applications or know where to get scholarship information. At the conclusion of the study these students seemed unconcerned about these tasks and procedures.

Recommendations for Practice

This study explored when, how, and why a sample of Hispanic high school seniors at a large high school in north central Texas made decisions regarding their postsecondary educational and career choices and how those choices evolved during their senior year in high school. The recommendations herein are structured to add knowledge to the college-going decision making process of future Hispanic high school seniors. In making recommendations to practitioners, there are nine reference points that were uncovered in this study that may be worthy of practical consideration.

1. At the beginning of their senior year in high school all 13 participants stated that they had specific postsecondary plans.
2. Twelve of the 13 students (92%) reported that their postsecondary plans included educationally related goals and one student said he was planning on joining the military.

3. Their goals changed as the school year progressed. At the conclusion of the school year only three students had enrolled in college.
4. All of the students said that they and their parents valued education.
5. Eleven indicated that their high school experience was good to excellent and two students said that their experience was satisfactory or average.
6. Ten students reported that their parents were their largest influencing factor regarding their decision to attend college and three reported that their parents were the second greatest influence.
7. Only three of the students knew the cost of their chosen postsecondary education.
8. By the end of the school year, only four students had completed the FAFSA form.
9. Only three students completed a college scholarship application and only one student received a scholarship.

Based on these results, I believe that institutional information sources failed to provide enough postsecondary information and direction to the students in this study. Many of them did not take the last step towards postsecondary education because they did not know how. They had little or no knowledge of what was required to make the transition from high school to college. Most of the students were lacking knowledge regarding the college enrollment process, entrance exams, financial information, college costs, and scholarship applications. It is possible that the institutional sources failed to deliver this information to the students or their parents to a level of adequate comprehension. Many Hispanic parents and students don't know what to ask or who to ask regarding the college

attainment process. This current study has resulted in the following recommendations to all school administrators, policymakers, teachers, parents, students, and other researchers:

1. Provide more information to Hispanic parents when their children are in the elementary grades. This should include information about the importance of higher education, overall chronological educational system overview, and the high school to college transition process (to include college entrance requirements, costs, financing, and areas of study). This should be presented in group presentations and in college attainment how-to publications printed in both English and Spanish.
2. Train P-12 personnel how to best serve their Hispanic students in regards to their cultural differences.
3. Schools should provide college counseling services tailored specifically towards Hispanic students.
4. Provide elective classes designed to provide hands on direction for completing college and career-tech enrollment forms, scholarship forms, entrance exams, college costs, financing, areas of study, and provide or facilitate college campus visits.
5. Provide extracurricular clubs to generate interest and provide college going information among peers.
6. Publicize and increase the availability of dual-credit courses. Provide dual-credit scholarships to increase college access.
7. Publish and distribute a step by step, how-to booklet and DVD directed towards Hispanic high school students and their parents detailing the high

school-to-college transition process. The presentation should be informative, simple, and specific. It should be published in Spanish and English and distributed during the Hispanic students' junior year in high school.

8. Streamline the Hispanic students' transition from secondary to postsecondary education via a collaborative P-16 effort. This should include satellite college offices located on the high school campus, reduced enrollment paperwork, informational phone calls, and informational home visits provided to the students' and parents.

Recommendations for Further Research

Varying demographics. This study was conducted on the campus of a large Title I high school in North Central Texas. The school has a population of approximately 1350 students in grades 10 through 12 and it is the main high school in a district of 7,500 students. The high school's demographic breakdown is approximately one-third White, one-third Black, and one-third Hispanic. Approximately 51% of the students are socio-economically disadvantaged. The school is located in a rural-suburban town with a population of 31,000. The district has one pre-K school, five elementary schools, two junior high schools, one ninth grade academy, one early college high school, one credit recovery high school, and one regular high school. It may be useful to replicate this study in schools and towns of varying size and location to determine if the results can be generalized across different regions and demographics.

Continue past high school. A student's college plan may begin prior to their high school senior year and continue to evolve well after this time. It therefore, would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study over a longer period of time than the current

study. Interviewing students into their first full year after high school may add to the body of knowledge regarding the college intentions of Hispanic students.

Include parents. This research relied primarily on student interviews to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Often times the student participants relayed the comments and thoughts of their parents as they, the students, perceived them to be. This project found that the students' college decisions were greatly influenced by their parents' feelings and beliefs about education. Further research should consider the inclusion of the students' parents into a separate interview process in order to possibly uncover and explore a more accurate representation of the parents' feelings and beliefs about education. This would particularly be helpful in determining the Hispanic parents' informational knowledge level regarding college attainment for their children. Having this advantage could better help practitioners transmit more appropriate information to Hispanic parents regarding their children's education.

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Appendix A

Participant Demographic Worksheet

Participant Demographic Worksheet
(Adapted from Dr. Caroline Petre, 2010)

Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions, you can choose to leave the question blank.

Pseudonym: _____
(Name to be utilized in the documentation of the research)

1.) Gender: F M Other (explain): _____

2.) Race/Ethnicity (Circle all that apply and identify as needed):

White

African American/Black

Hispanic/Latino

Asian

Multiracial (Identify): _____

Other (Identify): _____

3.) Anticipated Major in college:

No idea _____

Some possible ideas (please list) _____

I am certain I will major in _____

Other explanation if necessary:

4.) On or off campus employment (please list employer, if applicable)

5.) Self-identified Socioeconomic Status of your family (Circle all that apply):

Lower

Lower-middle

Middle

Upper-middle

Upper

6.) Mother's highest education (Circle):

Father's highest Education Experience:

Unknown

Unknown

No High School

No High School

Some high school

Some high school

High school graduate

High school graduate

Some technical education

Some technical education

Licensed/certified: _____

Licensed/certified: _____

Some college

Some college

College graduate: _____

College graduate: _____

Graduate /professional school: _____

Graduate/professional school: _____

If you go to college would you consider yourself to be a first-generation college student (first in your family to attend college)? Explain.

7.) Current High School GPA: _____

ACT/SAT score: _____

8.) Where were you born: _____

9.) Current relationship status (circle all that apply):

Single

Married

Partnered

Dating/In Relationship

Other/explain: _____

Highest educational attainment of close friend/partner/spouse (if applicable):

10.) Favorite classes in high school: _____

11.) Does your family own or rent their home? _____

12.) High school campus activities (please list and rank level of involvement):

Which campus organization/activity is most important to you? Explain.

Which campus activity/organization requires the most of your time? Explain.

13.) Have you decided yet whether or not to go to college, work, or a career-tech school?

14.) Is it important to you that you finish high school? ___Yes ___No

Explain. _____

15.) Other information that you would like to share?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Note about interview protocol: The content of the interview questions are designed to uncover and explore the factors that impact the student's decisions about their postsecondary college and career plans.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following central research question:

What are the critical influences regarding Hispanic high school seniors postsecondary plans?

Sub-Questions

From the central research question I considered and addressed a variety of sub-questions which included:

1. What factors influence senior Hispanic students' decisions regarding their post secondary plans?
2. Which factors occur the most frequently among the respondents?
3. Which factors weigh the most on their decisions?
4. Do their deliberations throughout the year cause their decision to remain fixed, evolve gradually, or change rather quickly?
5. Does the high school experience influence the students' decisions?
6. When does their decision become final?

Guiding Questions for Interview 1

- Have you decided what you are going to do after you graduate from high school?
- When did you make your decision?
- Why do you think that you came to that conclusion?
- What do your parents think about your plans?

- What do you think about your decision? Does it make you happy to know that's what you're going to do?
- When did you first start thinking about your plans?
- When you were in elementary school did you think this is what you were going to do?
- Do you have any friends or family members that have done what you are going to do?
- Who do you think is most happy with your decision? Mom? Dad? Other?
- Is this what you've always wanted to do?
- Have you ever changed your mind about your decision?
- Do you think you could change your mind?
- What were your other two choices?
- Are you nervous about being out of high school?
- Is anyone that you know making the same decision?
- Who helped you the most with your decision?
- Is there something about it that you are still unsure of?
- Do you ever worry about money?
- Where do you think you will be in five years?
- If you could do anything with your life, what would it be?

Guiding Questions for Interview 2

- What has been going on in your life?
- Tell me about the people at the high school that have talked to you about college or a career.
- Are you treated respectfully here by adults and students? Please explain.
- Tell me a little about how you are doing in your classes and if your grades are going to be good enough to graduate.
- Tell me about how you did on your TAKS tests last year. Tell me your feelings about those tests.
- Discuss your counselor.
- What do you think about Dual Credit and AP classes?
- What did you think about college and career night?
- What are your plans after high school? (Have they changed since we last talked?)
- Has anyone ever showed you how to fill out a college application?
- Ever been on a college campus? Talk about that experience.
- Do you know if any of your high school friends have ever visited a college campus?
- Talk a little bit about any of your friends or family that has been to college.
- Do you know what FASFA is?
- If you are going to go to college or tech school, talk a little about what it must be like to leave your friends and family behind.

- After graduation would you like to be close to home or far away? Tell me why you feel that way.
- How many family members do you know that have graduated from high school or college?
- Tell me about any of your friends that may have dropped out of high school. Was that a good idea?
- Do you know what kind of requirements or grades someone has to have to get into college?
- Please explain to me why you are or are not in any campus clubs, organizations, or sports.
- Please tell me about your life story.
- What obstacles have you had to overcome during high school?
- What has motivated you to finish high school?
- What has motivated you to pursue a university degree?
- What advice would you suggest to other Hispanic students that are entering high school?
- Talk about who has helped/influenced you the most to finish high school and to pursue college.
- Talk about how the high school staff has treated Hispanic students.

Guiding Questions for Interview 3

- Graduation is only about a month away. Tell me about the thoughts you are having now about your friends, family, teachers, grades, preparedness for life after high school, preparedness for college, job, etc.
- Explain to me how it feels right now to be a high school senior about to graduate from high school.
- Tell me how you think you will feel on graduation night when you are walking across the stage to get your high school diploma.
- Share with me what you are going to do after graduation in regards to a career, college, vocational or technical training, etc.
- Tell me how you came to that decision.
- Tell me about the people in your life that have made a difference and those that have helped you make your decision about your future plans for after high school.
- Have you been contacted by Navarro or any other colleges or VoTech Schools? When? Who?
- Tell me anything you can remember about what they told you about going to college.
- In 2007 in the U. S., the overall high school graduation rate is about 91%. Hispanic students lag behind with about 70% graduating. Tell me why you think that happens.
- When did you first think about going to college?
- Tell me about the steps you have taken in the past three years to prepare yourself for college.

- Do you believe that you are academically prepared for college? Why do you feel this way?
- In your own words tell me what you think colleges and universities will expect of you.
- How would you describe a student who is academically prepared for college?
- Did anyone at the high school tell you what classes that you had to have to be able to go to college?
- What personal characteristics does it take to be successful in college?
- Why do you think a higher percentage of white kids go to college than Hispanic kids?
- If your future plans change, what else might you do?
- If you are not going to college, please discuss the things that are preventing you from going.
- Do you have any friends that have graduated from college and what are they doing now?
- Rank these 5 influences on your decision on whether or not to continue your education:
 - (A) Parents/Family
 - (B) Counselors
 - (C) Teachers or other staff
 - (D) Financial
 - (E) Grades/Courses Taken
 - (F) Other Personal Issues

- Would you have joined a WHS club that was designed to help you learn about the options regarding college entrance? Or issues to do with your future?
- What do you recommend that we do at WHS to help Hispanic students with their college plans?
- Do you know the enrollment deadline for college Summer semester/Fall semester?
- Do you know how much college costs per year?
- Where have you gotten most of your college information?
- What comes to your mind when I say graduate? Or
- How do you feel when I say that you are about to graduate?
- How many of your family members will be at graduation?
- What will you be thinking when you walk across the stage on graduation night?

Appendix C

External Audit Attestation

External Audit Attestation

Ronald J. Shope, PhD

Acknowledgements

Note: The auditor is indebted to Dr. Dana Miller who provided an example of a dissertation audit attestation. The procedure used in the audit of Daniela's thesis was developed by Dr. Dana Miller in 1996 and is based on the work of Lincoln and Guba. . The format for this attestation was taken from an attestation used by Dr. Miller to audit a dissertation in November of 1996.

Audit Attestation

Neel Brown requested that I complete a methodological audit of his qualitative thesis entitled, *Gaining Insight into Hispanic Students Postsecondary Plans*. The audit was conducted September 16, 2012 and October 21, 2012. The purpose of the audit was to determine the extent to which the results of the study are trustworthy.

Lincoln and Guba (1995) in their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry* note that the audit "may be the single most important trustworthiness technique available to the naturalist" (p. 283). They note that the audit is "based metaphorically on the fiscal audit" (p. 317). The role of the auditor is to carefully examine both the process and the product of the inquiry. It is essential, therefore, that the researcher maintains careful detailed records regarding the research process throughout the process. This provides the "paper trail" for the auditor to validate qualitative method and procedures.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) note two essential tasks associated with the audit process. These are as follows: 1) An examination of the Process of inquiry to ensure that the participants are represented fairly in recorded accounts; and 2) An Examination of the final Product to ensure that it is accurate and the findings are supported by the data.

Prior to the audit, Neel was emailed a checklist of materials that would be required for the audit. The researcher delivered the materials electronically through email attachments. These materials contained documents that provided the basis to evaluate the process of inquiry as well as the accuracy of the September 2012 draft of the dissertation.

Audit Procedures

The audit consisted of the following steps:

1. Reviewing all dissertation materials received from Neel Brown. Notes regarding the contents of the materials are included below.
2. Coding ten transcripts using qualitative analysis software and noted possible emerging themes from the transcripts. This represents about 33% of the total transcripts used in the project. The coding of the transcripts took place before the reading of the analysis section of the thesis to ensure that the coding that I did was not influenced by the themes and summary of the results that were in the thesis.
3. Reading Chapters 1-3 of the electronic copy of the dissertation draft labeled September 2012 (Pages 1-39) to examine Central Question, Sub-Questions, and Methodology
4. Coding 10 of the 39 transcripts for codes and themes which is consistent with Case Study data analysis.
5. Reading Chapters 4 and 5 of the dissertation draft labeled September 2012 (pages 50 – 119). During the reading, the themes and summary of the results were compared to the codes and themes I had generated during my coding of the sample interview transcripts prior to reading Chapters four and five determine if I had obtained similar results.
6. Final review of all of the materials, recording notes, and formulated conclusions regarding the trustworthiness of the audit trail and findings.
7. Write and submit audit report that includes the signed attestation to the researcher.

Review of Audit Materials:

Pre-Study Materials

- Dissertation Proposal *Gaining Insight into Hispanic Students Post Secondary Plans* 7-11
- Chapter 1 Presentation 7-15-11: The presentation of the proposal to the Dissertation Committee that outlines the project including the proposed project timeline.

Raw Data

- Interview transcripts (39) (741 pages). Each transcript contains essential header information, and is single spaced. Lines are not numbered. Interview questions labeled "I:" and the participant's responses are labeled "Respondent:" and responses are single spaced paragraphs below the question.

- 3 sample Interview audio files: “Audio Transcript of Respondent First Interview (Marissa) 10-28-11”; Respondent #4, 2nd Interview 2-24-12 (Flora) and Respondent #5, 3rd Interview, 5-2—12. Links to files were sent through Adobe Send Now.

Data Reduction and Analysis Products

- Atlas.ti file *Transcripts.hpr6* allowed the auditor to examine the codes that were used and quotes from the transcripts of the transcripts.
- However, a table labeled “Codes Primary Documents Table” which is an Excel spreadsheet table of codes and the frequency that they occurred was available to examine the coding process.
- There were also documents available that illustrated the reduction of codes to themes and sub-themes. These included *Themes and Corresponding Codes* and *Codes and Themes from Transcripts*. Each of these tables illustrated the reduction of codes into the four major themes of Family influence, Postsecondary guidance, Vague college knowledge, and the Evolution of the students’ decision about their postsecondary plans.
- Participant Demographic Worksheet
- Sample of 3 participant school document records

Data Reconstruction and Synthesis Products

- Dissertation: *Gaining Insight into Hispanic Students Postsecondary Plans* Dated September 2011 (119 including Appendices A - D)
- Table of Themes and Corresponding Codes by Participant (Appendix D – Handwritten)

Process Notes

- Interview schedule 8-25-2011
- Emails regarding the types of materials needed for the audit, how they were to be organized and the timeframe and cost of the audit. The auditor also emailed as an attachment a checklist developed by Dr. Dana Miller that contained an outline of how to categorize and what materials were to be placed in each category.
- Drafts and Feedback on emerging product
 - Chapter 1 presentation July 15, 2011
 - Literature Review Rough 4-2-12
 - Information regarding the School as an Influencing Factor 4-6-12
 - Information regarding the School as an Influencing Factor 4-8-12
 - Chapter 2 first section revised 4-8-12
 - Chapter 2 Lit Review 4-21-12
 - Chapter 2 revised 4-15-12
 - Chapter 3 revised 4-22-12
 - Methodology Chapter 3 revised 5-20-12
 - Dissertation Edit 6-4-12
 - Chapters 1,2,3 6-5-12
 - Methodology Chapter Three revised 6-15-12
 - Chapters 1 and 2 Dissertation edit 7-29-12
 - Chapter 4(2) complete 8-5-12

These drafts contained feedback using “Comments” that were created using MS Word.

- Emails from dissertation advisor and others at UNL regarding dissertation issues including methodology and sampling between 8-11 and 3-12.

Materials Related to Researcher Intentions/Dispositions

- IRB Approval Documents
 - Electronic copy of IRB Protocol
 - Copy of IRB letter of project approval dated October 6, 2011 and IRB# 20111011943-EP assigned to the project
 - Student Assent Form (English and Spanish) Approved 10-6-2011
 - Parental Consent Letter (English and Spanish) Approved 10-6-2011
 - Confidentiality Agreement for Participant Recruiter Approved 10-6-2011
- Documentation of access to participants
 - Waxahachie School District approval letter 7-12-11
- Scripts for scheduling interviews 8-27-2011
- Parental Informational Letter (English and Spanish)
- Phone Script for Parental Informed Consent Follow-up Revised 9-13-11
- Meeting Script for Obtaining Youth Assent Revised 8-27-11
- Interview Reminder Letter for Mail or Email
- Email from author indicating that he had obtained signed Parental Consent letters (13) and signed Youth Assent Letters (13)
- Script for verbal reminders about interviews to be use by Neel Brown
- Transcriptionist Confidentiality Statement
- Email from the researcher regarding member checking. All participants were given transcripts and asked to verify that these were accurate representations of what they had said. The response from the participants was verbal not written.

Information Relative to Instrument Development

- Copies of Interview Protocols for each of the 3 sets of interviews

Conclusions

Having catalogued and reviewed the materials outlined in this audit, I submit the following conclusions:

3. It is the auditor's opinion that the data analysis supports the Central question for the study which is, *What are the critical influences regarding Hispanic high school seniors postsecondary plans and when does their decision occur?* In addition, the data appears to support the four sub-questions which are: 1. *What factors influence senior Hispanic students' decisions regarding their post secondary plans?* 2. *Which factors occur the most frequently among the respondents?* 3. *Which factors weigh the most on their decisions?* 4. *Do their deliberations throughout the year cause their decision to remain fixed, evolve gradually, or change rather quickly?* 5. *Does the high school*

experience influence the students' decisions? 6. When does their decision become final?

2. I also cross-checked the following methodological procedures between the proposal and September 2012 draft of the dissertation for consistency. The Sub-Questions were consistent between the proposal (p. 5) and the dissertation (p. 5 and p.37). While the proposal did not have a Central Research Question stated, the dissertation draft included a Central Research Question on p. 37. One major difference between the proposal and the dissertation draft was the change in research method. In the proposal, the author proposed using Phenomenology (p.1). However in the dissertation, Case Study was used. Email correspondence in August of 2011 indicates that methodology was an ongoing discussion and eventually led to the selection of Case Study as the approach that should be used since it would better allow the findings to emerge and also would provide a means to apply them to practice. The Case Study approach, in the opinion of the auditor is more suitable for the research questions that were proposed.

3. It is this auditor's assessment that the trustworthiness of the study can be established through both the process and product of this study. After independently coding a sample of 10 of the 39 transcripts I conclude that the Summary of the Findings in Chapter 5 is supported by the data. This is also evident not only through this audit of the materials but, while limited, through member checking. The researcher's analytic process is detailed in the thesis and the materials submitted in the review. Extensive documentation of the research process was included that indicated a rigorous research process and the development of the product over time. The researcher provided the reader with the background of each of the participants in Chapter 4 of the dissertation. The sampling methods and data analysis procedures are consistent with qualitative research. There is evidence that the themes and sub themes, including a table of themes and sub-themes, which are presented in Chapter 4, are supported by the interview data. The table, *Themes and Corresponding Codes* illustrated how the codes were related to each of the themes.

4. Although the issue of "reliability" (in its traditional definition) is problematic for qualitative researchers, and generalizability from specific cases may be limited, the process of the audit demonstrated that the researcher maintained a minimally acceptable audit trail. While the additional materials regarding the research process, such as a researcher journal, and additional materials in the area of data reconstruction such as additional drafts of the analysis and summary sections and drafts of code tables would have been desirable, the materials submitted for the audit met the minimum requirements for an audit trail and provided sufficient evidence that qualitative procedures were followed.

Attested to by Ronald J. Shope this 22nd day of October, 2012.

Ronald J. Shope, Ph.D.

Research Associate Professor, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Professor of Communication and Research, Grace University, Omaha, NE

Appendix D

Themes and Corresponding Codes

Themes and Corresponding Codes by Participant

	Rosa	Marissa	Josie	Flora	Antonia	Janette	Carlos	Maria	Rafael	Angelina	Jesus	Efren	Eduardo
Family Influence Theme Codes													
Parents support education	2	15	6	8	15	10	6	7	11	8	5	11	5
Siblings positive education influence	3	3	2	4	3	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	5
Institutional Influence Theme Codes													
Teachers positive education influence	2	0	3	0	1	4	1	0	3	8	2	0	2
Peers discuss college	3	1	3	3	2	3	1	2	2	2	1	2	2
Counselor not supportive	1	0	2	3	1	1	0	2	1	0	2	3	1
Counselor was supportive	0	1	0	2	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1
High school experience good	4	4	6	4	7	3	3	5	4	6	6	3	5
Vague College Knowledge Theme Codes													
College plans vague	0	1	9	2	2	5	3	1	2	6	1	2	2
College financial concerns	1	10	1	4	2	4	1	1	4	4	2	0	0
Unsure of college costs	0	0	3	5	1	2	2	3	3	4	0	4	2
FAFSA—Some knowledge	1	4	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	0

	Rosa	Marissa	Josie	Flora	Antonia	Janette	Carlos	Maria	Rafael	Angelina	Jesus	Efren	Eduardo
FAFSA—Completed	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Has applied for scholarship	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0
SAT—not taken	0	0	4	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	1	0	0
College campus visit	2	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Had dual-credit or AP class	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Evaluation of Postsecondary Decision Theme Codes													
Always knew they would attend college	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Initially firm in their plans	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	2
Made decision in elementary	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Made decision in secondary	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	1	0	2
Decision changed													
Between first and second interview	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Between second and third interview	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1