

**MAKING CHOICES: THE INFLUENCE OF THE PITTSBURGH PROMISE ON THE  
COLLEGE-GOING DECISIONS OF PITTSBURGH PUBLIC AND CHARTER  
SCHOOL STUDENTS**

by

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Molly A. Mistretta, PhD.

University of Pittsburgh, 2013

This study describes the college choice experiences of high school students eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise, a place-based merit-aid scholarship. The Pittsburgh Promise provides scholarships of up to \$10,000 to eligible students graduating from Pittsburgh public and charter schools who enroll at postsecondary institutions within the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This phenomenological study explored how the Pittsburgh Promise award influenced the college choice processes of 17 eligible award recipients. Participants in this study represented a variety of demographic backgrounds, as well as made enrollment decisions across the postsecondary educational spectrum. Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice and Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice to examine students' college choice experiences, this study found both theories provided a useful framework for understanding the college choice experiences of the study's respondents. However, Perna's (2006) focus on the influence of contextual experiences better illuminate obstacles students from low-income and minority backgrounds face when navigating the college choice process. This study also explored the ways in which the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship promoted human agency in the college choice process. Using Bandura's (2006) theory of human agency, respondent experiences were analyzed for examples where the Pittsburgh Promise promoted choices and actions related to

college matriculation. This study found that the Pittsburgh Promise positively influences human agency in the college choice process in several ways. The Promise scholarship directly affects college choice through programmatic efforts and financial awards. The Pittsburgh Promise has also likely positively influenced a college-going culture within the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the larger Pittsburgh community. Those least likely to be directly influenced by the Pittsburgh Promise were students opting to attend elite postsecondary institutions ineligible for Promise funding.

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## 1.0 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the study of college choice it is important to distinguish between the terms college access and college choice. College *access* refers to the barriers students - particularly those from underrepresented and low socioeconomic backgrounds - face as they attempt to pursue college aspirations. There are three primary barriers to college matriculation. The first is poor academic preparation, which prevents admittance to some postsecondary institutions while affecting academic performance in all settings. Second, students experience difficulty in acquiring the information needed to successfully navigate the college enrollment process. Third, affordability impacts student access to postsecondary education. Federal and state financial aid has failed to keep up with rising college costs, making postsecondary attendance unaffordable for many low and middle-income students.

College *choice* describes the process of determining whether to go to college, and if so, where to go to college. Over the years, there has been a significant amount of research focused on how students make these important life decisions. The research has evolved from a universal approach to college choice to looking at the specific choice sets of students from underrepresented and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The creation of merit scholarship programs has become a popular means of assisting students with the financial burden of postsecondary education. Since 1993, over 22 states have implemented broad-based merit aid scholarship programs, while an additional 22 merit-aid

place-based programs have come into existence. Many of these programs have come into existence to address the financial access issues associated with college choice. Because the emergence of broad-based merit scholarship programs is a relatively new phenomenon, college choice models don't specifically address the choice sets of merit scholarship recipients.

This dissertation attempts to explore this gap in the college choice literature by studying the college choice experience of students receiving a local merit-aid scholarship, the Pittsburgh Promise. The Pittsburgh Promise was established in December of 2006. The creation of this scholarship for postsecondary education was conceived as an answer to population decline in the city of Pittsburgh, with stated goals of promoting high school completion and a diverse educated workforce (G. C. Gonzales, Bozick, Tharp-Taylor, & Phillips, 2011). This scholarship is awarded to students who have attended a Pittsburgh public school or charter school, graduate with a minimum of a 2.5 GPA, and are enrolled in any two or four-year accredited postsecondary institution in the state of Pennsylvania.

The Pittsburgh Promise initially provided students with a \$5,000 scholarship per year for up to four years. The scholarship amount increased from \$5,000 per year to \$10,000 per year for students enrolling on college in 2012-2013 (Pittsburgh Promise, 2011). In December 2010, the Pittsburgh Public Schools had a total of 1,686 graduates, and of those students, 53.6% were eligible for a Pittsburgh Promise scholarship (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). Student eligibility varied by socio-demographic characteristics. Seventy-one percent of White students were Promise-eligible, while only 32.6% of African-American students achieved eligibility (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). In addition, there are significant differences by family income. The majority of students receiving free or reduced lunch were ineligible for the Pittsburgh Promise



scholarship. Only 35% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch were awarded a Promise scholarship, as opposed to 66.7% of their wealthier classmates (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011).

Promise-eligible graduates enroll in postsecondary education at higher rates as compared to all graduates of the Pittsburgh Public Schools (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). In addition, enrollment rates for students eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise rose at both two-year and four-year schools. Collaboration between The Pittsburgh Promise and the Pittsburgh Public Schools has also resulted in several initiatives to promote college readiness among Pittsburgh Public School students. It is also interesting to note that the number of Promise-eligible students enrolling in out-of-state schools has dropped by 4.6% (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). Where Pittsburgh Promise recipients choose to enroll is of interest as well. Almost 5000 Promise students have been funded. Those students enrolled in 98 Promise-eligible post-secondary institutions of higher education (The Pittsburgh Promise, 2014) . The institution enrolling the largest number of Promise scholars is the Community College of Allegheny County with 1,176 students (The Pittsburgh Promise, 2014). This represents approximately 30% of Pittsburgh Promise scholars.

## **1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

For this study, I interviewed Pittsburgh Promise recipients to give voice to their experiences in choosing a postsecondary institution. Taking into consideration the generous Promise scholarship, I was interested in how parental educational attainment, race, household income, school context and academic achievement contribute to recipients' postsecondary decision process. Much of the research in college choice is quantitative in nature. Therefore the lived

college choice experiences of recipients of merit aid scholarship programs would be a valuable contribution to college choice literature. While merit-aid scholarship programs seem to promote access to college, they seem to have less impact on issues of stratification in higher education. The majority of recipients of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program appear to enroll in the less selective institutions of higher education that accept Promise dollars.

There are three literature bases that inform the investigation of this problem. Scholarly literature associated with college choice theory, higher education stratification, and merit-aid scholarship programs in higher education establish what is already known about the problem. Research in college choice theory is moving from comprehensive models that attempt to generalize the college search process for all students to models that examine the choice sets of particular groups. Investigating college choice through the economic, psychological, and sociological lenses permit a more holistic perspective on issues surrounding college choice. Much of the recent college choice research is forward thinking and purpose-driven, as researchers articulate their purpose in improving educational practices and policies to increase postsecondary opportunities for underrepresented groups.

Most of the research regarding college choice is quantitative in nature. Researchers have typically used large data sets to determine which students choose to go where, while controlling for a variety of factors such as academic achievement, family income, race, gender, and parental academic attainment. However, as Bergerson (2009) states, “there is a clear need for additional qualitative work to further illuminate how and why those variables affect students’ postsecondary decisions” (p. 174). This call for qualitative research in college choice literature is especially needed to fully understand the contexts in which underrepresented groups make their postsecondary decisions.

There is much more to learn regarding the college choices of various groups. Research has helped to illuminate what choices students make, but more work is needed to understand *why* students make the college choices they do. This is especially important as the higher education community continues to seek ways to improve the college attendance and graduation gap for low-income students and students of color. As education leaders and policy-makers create programs and policies to improve access to higher education, it is important to explore how these affect the college-choice contexts of students.

While college-choice literature helps to identify the barriers to college entry, research in stratification illuminates where various students are enrolled across the spectrum of higher education. Overall, this body of literature demonstrates that students of color and those from low-income households are much more likely to be enrolled in less selective institutions, especially community colleges. The irony is that the groups of students most likely to benefit from an academically engaging environment are the least likely to attend institutions providing such a climate. Hence, they are less likely to persist and graduate.

Research related to merit-aid scholarship programs indicates that these programs increase participation in higher education. In addition, it was shown in Georgia that it also shifted students from two-year to four-year institutions (Dynarski, 2004). However, students of color and those from low-income households still tend to be clustered in less-selective institutions. It is speculated that in the states with large merit-aid scholarship programs, increased competition for admittance to the flagship institutions has compounded issues of stratification. However, little is known about the outcomes of location-specific merit-aid scholarship programs in regards to their success in enrolling recipients from underrepresented groups in more selective institutions.

## 1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions guiding this research were defined after reviewing the existing literature related to college choice, merit scholarship programs, and higher education stratification. There is a significant amount of scholarly literature that addresses general college choice contexts. However, little is known about how college choices are made within the context of broad-based merit-scholarship awards. The guiding question for this research is: How does the Pittsburgh Promise merit-scholarship program influence the college choice processes of its recipients? The following subsidiary questions assist in addressing this guiding question:

1. How do Pittsburgh Promise scholars make their college choice decisions?
2. How does the Pittsburgh Promise influence the college-going decisions of its recipients as viewed through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice? Is this the most appropriate lens to understand the choice sets of Pittsburgh Promise recipients?
3. In what ways does the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship promote human agency in the college choice process?

My findings indicate that Pittsburgh Promise Scholars make their college choice decisions in a variety of ways, and under a variety of circumstances.

Epistemology and theoretical perspective influence the type of research questions asked. Once formulated, the research questions served to narrow the research objective and research purpose. Moreover, research questions also drove the methodology that was used, as well as informed the sample size and sampling procedures, the data collection tools used, and the data analysis techniques employed.

### 1.3 EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The exploration of theoretical frameworks through which to approach the study of college choice begins with an evaluation of how researchers' assumptions situate their view of reality and being. This is referred to as ontology, which is described as the study of "claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other" (Grix, 2004, p. 59). Epistemology, on the other hand, is defined as the "theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Thus, while ontology is the study of what is, epistemology is the study of how one knows it. Together, ontological and epistemological assumptions make up a paradigm. Paradigms refer to an overall theoretical research framework.

There are three major paradigms in the research on college choice. The first paradigm, or approach to college choice, is based on rational choice theory. With its roots in the field of economics, rational choice theory is post-positivist in nature in that it assumes that true knowledge can only be obtained through empirical investigation. Research in the rational choice approach was conducted through statistical analysis of large data sets to establish "truths" about college-going behaviors. Central to this philosophy is the assumption of "homo economicus," the idea that individuals make rational decisions based on their self-interests. Problematic in this approach are the assumptions that the conditions surrounding college choice are similar for all students and that the information needed to make college choice decisions is readily available and accessible by all.

The psychological perspective of college choice takes a constructivist approach to college choice. The constructivist paradigm in the research on college choice recognizes that reality is

socially constructed, and researchers should attempt to understand this world of lived experience by the individuals who live it (Schwandt, 2000). A constructive approach to understanding college choice recognizes that student's college-going decisions are made based on their perception of the higher education environment and the environment of specific institutions. How a student perceives institutional characteristics such as college cost, location, size, and program offerings influences his or her sense of "fit" with a potential postsecondary environment.

For instance, for lower-income students, factors related to cost and financial aid outweigh curricular offerings in their choice of institution (Mansky & Wise, 1983; St. John, 1990; M. I. Tierney, 1982). That sense of "fit" ultimately determines a student's enrollment behaviors. A constructivist approach is useful in recognizing that there are multiple realities in the college choice process for many students. The lived experiences of students shape the way they interpret and perceive the higher education environment. However, it falls short by failing to examine how the college choice process replicates inequalities in higher education attendance.

The third college choice perspective is based on a sociological approach. This approach describes how different characteristics influence students' decisions about going to college. Inherent in this direction of study is the assumption that there are systemic barriers to higher education attainment. A critical approach attempts to explore the experiences of various student groups in light of those barriers, revealing the interactions of individual characteristics and social phenomena working to prevent college enrollment and persistence. This approach is particularly useful to illuminate the experiences of underrepresented groups in higher education, including low income and minority students, while attempting to promote interventions that ameliorate the problem.

The potential for overlap between the last two approaches is where I found my own approach to college choice research. I personally identify with the constructivist paradigm. The concept of multiple realities fits with my own worldview regarding “the nature of the world, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to the world and its parts” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). In my view, there is no one explanation, or truth that makes up reality. It is clear that there are many realities under investigation regarding the college choice experience of students. However, some constructions call for more sophisticated understandings than others. Lincoln (1991) suggests that simplistic or inadequate constructions can be “replaced or reconstructed by more socially aware and/or consensual constructions” (p. 27).

One construction that is compelling and deserves further investigation is the relationship between college choice and stratification in higher education. What is it about the college choice process that results in particular individuals (students of color, those from low-income households, educationally disadvantaged students) opting out of higher education, or enrolling in less-selective institutions? This particular construct suggests the existence of oppressive structures within the college choice arena. Therefore, I think that there is potential for a critical approach to examining the college choice decisions of merit aid scholarship recipients.

Lincoln (1991) suggests researchers should ask two questions to determine whether a critical perspective might be appropriate. First, researchers should ask, “what is the purpose of this research?” (p. 27). My purpose is to investigate the factors affecting Pittsburgh Promise recipients’ college choice decisions. Understanding how those decisions are made will better inform the policies and practices of both the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Pittsburgh Promise as they help students aspire to and secure higher education opportunities. Second, Lincoln asks, “which paradigm or approach best fits the phenomenon under question?” (p. 27).

A critical approach best fits the investigation of the issues of oppression in the college choice process, to reveal how it is possible to transform institutions of higher education and their associated systems “as to enable them to act in more empowering and emancipatory ways” (p. 28).

Historically, research in higher education was conducted within the logical positivist paradigm (W. G. Tierney, 1991). Keller (1985) suggested that this research approach led to questions left unanswered. In 1991, Yvonna Lincoln proposed a critical agenda to identify the “oppressive and repressive structures operating within higher education” (p. 24). Her first step was a call to identify the structures in higher education that act to reproduce larger social structures. She also asked what the university’s role is in knowledge production that reinforces certain worldviews while overlooking others. She explored the potential role of conflict and contradiction in helping professionals and students to “understand social structures that impinge on and act to oppress their own lives” (p. 26). Lastly, in moving towards action, Lincoln discusses how different constituent groups in higher education might serve as transformative agents.

A critical theory approach in higher education has led to research permitting a greater understanding of the environment of the university, the people associated with it, and its potential to influence societal change. There is growing recognition that the questions of who goes to college and where have a fundamental influence on society at large. Economic mobility is tied to educational attainment. Thus, issues pertaining to college access, affordability and college choice are excellent topics to examine from the critical perspective.

A critical qualitative approach combines critical social theory with methodological approaches shaped by the fields of anthropology and sociology. Critical ethnographers employ



the research methods of interviewing and participant observation to explore the experiences of the oppressed and reveal the social conditions contributing to their oppression. Gunzenhauser (2004) defines critical ethnography as a “political project in which a social science researcher appropriates the tools of ethnography and promises to communicate the voice of the oppressed, uncover differential power equations, discover agency, and connect particular experience to social critique” (p. 78). There is potential for a critical qualitative approach to studying the enrollment choices of those with a Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. This approach would help to illuminate the processes and experiences associated with college choice among students of various socioeconomic backgrounds. However, this research may not be able to address all four of Gunzenhauser’s promises.

In the realm of college choice, there has been increased interest in the use of critical qualitative research to give voice to the experiences of underrepresented students in the college choice process. For example, Reay, David and Ball (2005) used mixed methods to further explore the lived experienced in the college choice process. This research uncovered how social class interacts with the schooling experience to create patterns of social closure for lower income students. Their work meets Gunzenhauser’s (2004) definition of critical qualitative research and was influential I in how I approached my own research questions.

First, Reay et al. (2005) address the inherent political nature of their research. They situate the reason for their study in the shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education in Great Britain. Reay, et al. note that this move appears to heighten stratification, despite “the political rhetoric of widening access” (p. 9). Through the use of ethnographic tools such as questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews, the researchers attempted to create a “thick

description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) of the college choice process by soliciting the experiences of students, parents, and education personnel.

While many voices are presented in their study, Reay et al. focus on the voices of students as they negotiated the college choice process - particularly those whom they considered non-traditional (working class, minority, mature women). In doing so, the researchers attempt to give voice to a population that has largely been excluded and/or invisible in British higher education. Several chapters in their book also focus on the differential power equations associated with college choice in the British higher education system. To provide a better degree of coherence, Reay et al. grouped their explanations into three categories; (a) stratification within the higher education system; (b) policies regarding non-traditional students; and (c) access to information about the enrollment process.

The promise of discovering agency is less clearly defined. Although the focus of chapter seven is the college choice behaviors of applicants, the authors describe it as a “messy process in which intuition, affective response, and serendipity can play a great role” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 140). I feel this overlooks the development of agency in use of “grapevine knowledge” whereby participants spoke of valuing the viewpoint of “someone like me” as opposed to official information disseminated by the higher education institutions and associated personnel (Reay et al., 2005, p. 152). This source of information helped marginalized students in the choice process develop their own perception of “fit”. At any particular institution, “fit” could also manifest itself in the sense that a potential student’s identity group was visible on campus. Lastly, Reay et al. provide social critique in their last chapter through a discussion of the future direction of policy to address issues of social justice and equality in British higher education.

As I considered a critical qualitative approach to my research on merit-aid scholarship recipients' experiences in the choice process, I realized my research questions required an appropriate approach and methodology. The challenge was to construct research questions with the aim of working towards all four promises. However, Gunzenhauser (2004) states that "each promise is difficult to keep, and together, they make success of critical ethnography more problematic" (p. 79).

#### **1.4 FINDINGS**

Included in my findings are suggestions for new ways of thinking about comprehensive college choice models. Respondents in this study did not appear to match traditionally accepted timelines for the college choice process as described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). For almost all students in this study, the predisposition stage of college choice occurred at a very young age. However, for one student affected by few resources to pay for college, her predisposition and search stages tended to overlap as she re-evaluated her decision of whether she should attend college.

In examining the college choice experiences of all participants in this study, it became clear that both Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice and Perna's conceptual model of college choice have much to offer in exploring students' college choice experiences. Respondents described a college choice process where the three stages of college choice were affected by students' lived contexts. Those lived contexts affected students' outcomes in each of the three stages of college choice. A basic rendering of these combined perspectives is as follows:

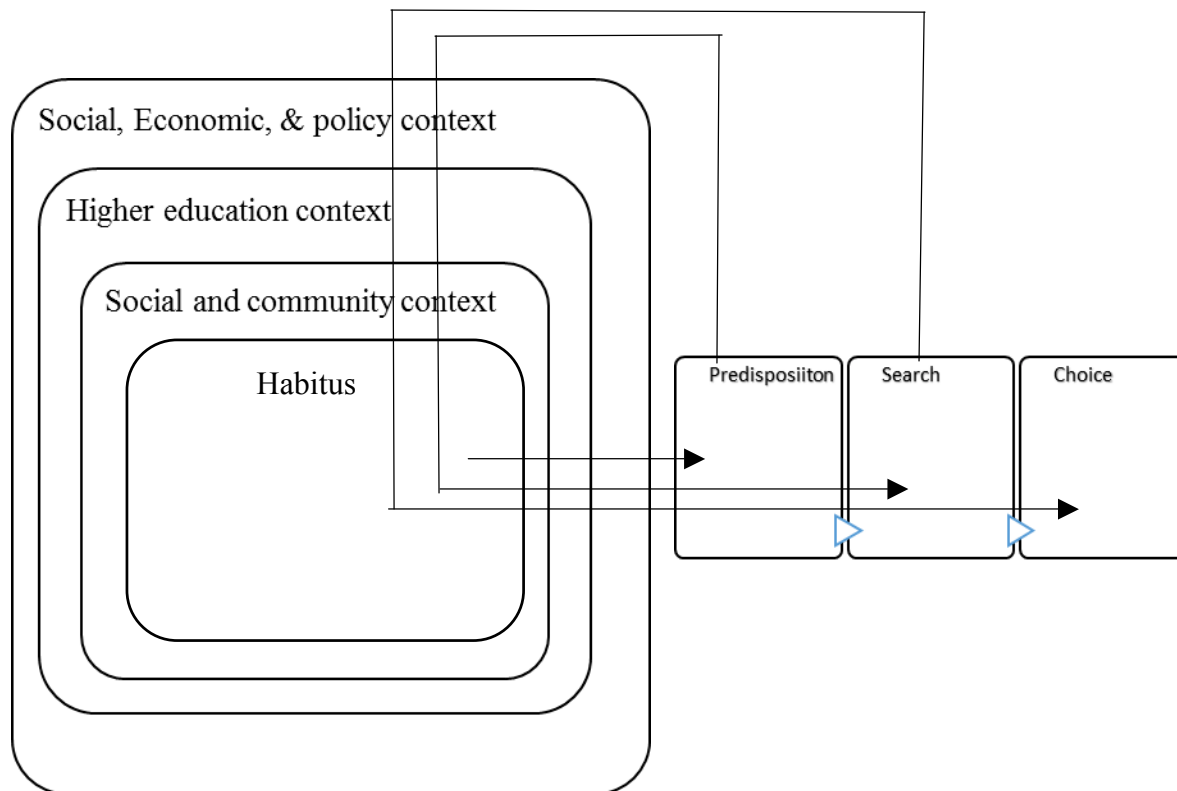


Figure 1. Combined approach to student college choice

## 1.5 SIGNIFICANCE

Little is known about the college choice processes of merit-aid and place-based scholarship recipients. While researchers have identified what are likely the most salient issues facing students as they make their college enrollment decisions, there is little understanding how students frame these issues, sifting through them to determine where to enroll in college. A better understanding of how students wrestle with these decisions as set against their own personal lived contexts will enable educators and scholarship programs to better assist students through this process.

There is also potential for this research to expand on the scholarly understanding of college choice theory. While qualitative research is not considered to be generalizable to a

larger, more diverse population, this research could serve to create new ways of thinking about the more specific choice considerations of broad-based merit scholarship recipients. Schofield (2002) notes that “specific ideas or conclusions from a piece of qualitative work can stimulate further research” (p. 174) that could provide such information. In addition, Guba and Lincoln (1982) speak of a “fittingness”, which describes ways of analyzing to what degree a situation under study might appropriately match other situations.

Lastly, this research examines the potential for merit-aid and place-based scholarships to mitigate stratification in higher education by increasing human agency in the college choice process. Literature demonstrates that the criteria used in determining eligibility in broad-based merit-aid scholarship programs serves to increase or constrain human agency in the college choice process (Dynarski, 2004; D.E. Heller & Marin, 2002, 2004; Ness & Tucker, 2008; St. John & Parsons, 2005). The exploration of the exercise of human agency within the college choice experience of Pittsburgh Promise recipients provides an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the scholarship in helping students realize their college aspirations. A better understanding of how students from different lived contexts make choices regarding the use of the Promise scholarship can help educators and scholarship staff to effectively structure scholarship rewards and program criteria to maximize human agency in the college choice process.

### **1.5.1 Personal significance**

I have always been fascinated by students’ enrollment decisions. As an administrator in higher education, I always found this topic helpful as an introductory question whenever a student landed in my office. The explanation of how a student came to be at that institution helped me to

get to know the student better, as well as develop insight into their motivations and expectations of the college experience. The idea of choice in the college decision-making process can certainly be considered a privilege. Unfortunately, far too many academically able students view the college choice process as one that offers little or few choices due to financial need and other constraints.

My own experience with college choice started well before I was born. My grandfather, not having the opportunity to attend college himself, was determined that his children would go. My grandparents also established modest education funds for each of their nine grandchildren. That fund made all the difference to me when it was time to decide where to go for college. The local state comprehensive institution would have provided a solid college education, but the education fund established by my grandparents made attending a small residential liberal arts college possible.

I believe the opportunity to attend Westminster College changed my life profoundly. A shy, academically oriented high school student, I found myself at home in an environment that promoted interdisciplinary connections and critical thinking. I was encouraged to become involved in the campus community in ways I had never considered, which eventually led to my desire to pursue a master's degree in higher education student affairs. Let me be clear - I do not advocate a small, liberal arts college education for everyone. For me, the best choice was a small private college, for another it might be a large public university, and for another it might be a local community college. What I do believe is that choice in college enrollment decisions is important, and every student should have opportunities to attend the type of institution that maximizes his or her potential.

This was the basic premise in the creation of need-based federal student aid programs. Unfortunately, rising tuition rates, along with the declining purchasing power of Pell Grants and the growing reliance on student loans has eliminated the notion of any meaningful college choice for many low-income students. The proliferation of merit-aid scholarship programs is an attempt to provide needed and often necessary funding for college-bound students. While broad-based merit-aid scholarship programs may serve to expand college choice, these programs can also be fraught with other issues and concerns. My goal is to understand how merit-aid scholarship programs impact college choice, and to identify how these programs might improve the college choice situations of the students they affect.

## **1.5 DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS**

This dissertation consists of an introduction that describes the background of my study, the research questions and design of my study, the import of the study, and its significance. The introduction also situates the problem within the context of college affordability issues. Chapter Two consists of a literature review that includes an overview of college choice theory, as well as how the research of merit-aid scholarship programs informs our understanding of the college choice processes of recipients. Chapter Three explores how my theoretical perspective influences the questions being asked and informs the research design. In addition, the Chapter three outlines my research methodology.

Chapter Four documents the results associated with the issues affecting college choice among the Pittsburgh Promise recipients I interviewed. These results are examined in light of

the varying life contexts of the participants in the study. Chapter Five explores how the results might be examined through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice theory. Chapter Six analyzes theoretical lenses through which one might explore the potential for the Pittsburgh Promise to promote human agency in the college choice process. The final chapter summarizes my findings, and explores implications for practice and further research.



## **2.0 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 DEVELOPMENT OF COLLEGE CHOICE THEORY**

Prior to 1990, research on college choice tended to take a linear approach, assuming the process was similar for all students. Hossler et al. (1999) notes “research on student college choice has employed diverse methods, assumptions, and theoretical perspectives” (p. 141). Early studies examined the choice process through three different perspectives.

One perspective uses economic models of student choice. Economic models assume that the college decision-making process is conducted according to economic rational choice theory. As such, it is assumed that students have all the necessary information to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of potential postsecondary enrollment. Generally, economic models posited that students are more likely to choose to attend college when the benefits of attending college outweigh the costs (Kodde & Ritzen, 1988). Kotler and Fox (1985) proposed a model based on risk reduction involving four stages. In their model, the student makes the initial decision to explore colleges, gathers information, systematically selects and eliminates options, and finally chooses from among the remaining options. Rational choice theory was the foundation for research in students’ educational aspirations (Cohn & Geske, 1990; Cohn & Huches Jr., 1994; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006; Monks, 2000), where to enroll (Chapman, 1981; DesJardins et al., 2006; DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987;

Jackson, 1978; Leslie & Brinkman, 1987; Mansky & Wise, 1983), and choices regarding persistence (Bean, 1983; Tinto, 1975).

The psychological perspective is the second approach to examining college choice. This perspective focuses on the climate of the higher education environment, and how students' college decisions are based on their perceptions of that climate. Institutional characteristics such as college cost, location, availability of financial aid, and program of study serve to create a sense of institutional climate, influencing the psychological aspect of postsecondary decisions (Mansky & Wise, 1983; St. John, 1990; M. I. Tierney, 1982). The psychological dimension of a student's college choice is driven by the sense of "fit" between the student and a potential postsecondary environment.

The third perspective in studying college choice is through the sociological perspective. Postsecondary choice is viewed as part of the status attainment process, which describes how different characteristics interact as students make decisions about going to college, and which particular institution to attend. While economic models describe a student who weighs the costs and benefits of many possible options, status attainment models attempt to describe a process that narrows the possibilities for postsecondary education. This perspective focuses on which variables, or individual characteristics, influence college choice. Researchers have identified characteristics such as race and ethnicity (Mansky & Wise, 1983), socioeconomic status (St. John, 1990), parent educational attainment (Mansky & Wise, 1983), parental expectations (Attinasi Jr., 1989), and student academic achievement (St. John, 1990) as having a significant impact on students' postsecondary choices. These variables influence both postsecondary student aspirations as well as institutional choice.

Researchers have taken the status attainment model and overlaid it on the economic choice model. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) note that combining both processes provides a deeper understanding of the college choice process than either perspective does alone. The advantage of the mixed models is that the researcher can examine the influence of the sociological aspect of college choice within the context of the decision-making process. Hansen and Litten's (1982) combined model described the college search as a continuing five-stage process. This process involves the development of college aspirations, the search process, gathering information, sending applications, and enrolling in a postsecondary institution (Hansen & Litten, 1982). Variables associated with student characteristics (race, income, gender), personal attributes (class rank, self-image, lifestyle), high school characteristics (social composition, quality, programs), environment (occupational structure, economic conditions, social conditions), and public policy (financial aid) affect decisions made in the first stages of the college choice process. Other variables such as college actions (recruitment, admissions policies), college characteristics (size, price, programs), and influences (parents, counselors, peers, media) all affect the information gathering and application stages. College action variables (admit, deny, aid granted) ultimately affect a student's final choice regarding enrollment.

Hansen and Litten's (1982) model describes college choice as a comprehensive process, in that it captures variables relating to students, institutions, and other external factors. One of the most widely recognized comprehensive choice models is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice. This model describes the stages through which students progress as they begin to develop college aspirations, identify and explore college options, and ultimately enroll in college. In one sense this model is considered developmental in nature, with

each stage identifying the competencies and cognitive abilities students achieve as they move through the college choice process (Hendrickson, 2002).

The first stage is called predisposition, where students begin to formulate their attitudes and expectations regarding participation in post-secondary education. While there are many factors that affect a student's plans beyond high school, parental influences tend to affect this stage the most (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Parental influence falls into two distinct categories. One is the amount of parental encouragement provided to students regarding college attendance. This encouragement is provided in the form of "discussions between parents and students about parents' expectations, hopes and dreams for their children" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 24). Parental support also includes enacted values such as saving for college and visiting colleges with their student (Hossler et al., 1999).

A second predictor of college attendance in the predisposition stage is a student's achievement in school. The better grades a student earns in high school, the more likely he or she is to attend college. Parental educational attainment also factors into a student's attitudes and expectations regarding college enrollment. Parental participation in college provides several benefits. Parents who have attended college may better recognize the value of the post-secondary educational experience, and transmit this value to their child. In addition, a parent with college experience is "better equipped to explain to their children how the college system is structured, how it works, and how the student can prepare for it" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 26).

The predisposition stage is most often associated with the junior high school years (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). However, high levels of parental influence in the form of encouragement and support can work to create a family environment where expectations regarding participation in higher education are evident well before the seventh grade. Hossler,

Schmit, and Vesper (1999) acknowledge that for some students, participation in college has always been an assumed choice.

Search, the second stage in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, is consistent with the formation of concrete choices, with the student determining "which institutional characteristics are most important" (Bergerson, 2009, p. 24). This stage is characterized by inconsistency, with choice sets expanding and contracting as students learn about and explore new options. Students gather information during this stage in three ways: attentive search, active search, and interactive search. Attentive search is when students begin to pay attention to information around them about higher education. Active search involves "seeking out discussions about educational options" (Hossler et al., 1999, p. 60). Interactive search involves a student-directed search process, with the student initiating discussions about the college search process with parents, teachers, and admissions counselors. In addition, an interactive search includes contacting prospective colleges and universities for information and visiting campuses (Hossler et al., 1999).

Choice is the third stage in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, whereby students use specific information to select an institution and begin the enrollment process. Three variables in the choice stage are important to note. First, there is a marked shift in where students gather information regarding the college choice process. Up to this point, close family members such as parents and siblings heavily influence a student's postsecondary aspirations for schooling. However in the choice stage, external influences such as teachers, peers, school counselors and college marketing material become more influential sources of information (Hossler et al., 1999). In addition, issues relating to college costs and available financial aid are significant factors in a student's enrollment decision. As students narrow down the list of prospective institutions,

paying for college becomes a less abstract notion, and there is greater attention to specific costs and means of financing a college education. Last, students weigh institutional characteristics such as location, program and course offerings, reputation, and social opportunities to determine the right institutional fit. However, these factors may vary in importance for students of different socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds (Bergerson, 2009).

## **2.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF CHOICE**

A growing recognition that comprehensive choice models may not apply to all students has led to a focus on access and equity in college choice. The introduction of student-choice constructs in research “examines the experiences of diverse groups of students on their own terms” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 191). This body of research involves three basic assumptions. First, the educational choice process follows a logical sequence. This sequence includes college aspirations, the decision to attend, selection of a college, and persistence to graduation. This sequence is influenced by other factors such as financial considerations, social class, race, and educational experience. Second, there are diverse patterns to college choice, which should be reflected in the research approach. Diverse groups merit study, and research that pursues comparisons between groups provides a deeper understanding of the college choice process. The third assumption in student-choice constructs is that students make educational choices within “situated contexts” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 192). Contemporary research reveals that many students are constrained in their choices.

### 2.2.1 Social choice.

Social class significantly shapes college choice processes (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2004; Teranishi, 2004). Researchers examining the constraints of social class on college choice have drawn heavily from the sociological perspective through the application of social theory. College choice occurs within “two registers of meaning and action” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 19). The first is cognitive/performance, and relates to the demonstration of aptitude and abilities as students match with the selectivity of institutions and courses. The second is the social/cultural and its relation to social classifications of individuals and institutions. As Reay et al. (2005) note, “higher education choice is exercised in different ways for different groups of students across both registers” (p. 19). By examining college choice through this sociological perspective, Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework has great explanatory power.

Born in 1930, Pierre Bourdieu was a French anthropologist and sociologist who developed social theories on the acquisition and transmission of culture. Bourdieu suggested that ‘taste’ is a classifying object of distinction, establishing the difference in social hierarchies. In his work, *Distinction* (1984), he provides a lens through which to understand the choices made by different class groupings. Those choices are constrained by his concept of *habitus*. Bourdieu (1984) described habitus as:

the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments...it is the relationship between the two capacities which define habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and producers, the represented world is constituted  
(p. 170)

According to Bourdieu, habitus is embodied. It is applicable not only to one’s mental state, as expressed in attitudes and perceptions (Shilling, 2004). Habitus is also expressed

through a range of activities, including eating, speaking and gesturing (P. Bourdieu, 1984). Additionally, while habitus allows for some individual agency, it “predisposes individuals toward certain ways of behaving” (Reay et al., 2005). This is most notable when habitus serves to reinforce social group behavior. Bourdieu (1984) states that individuals will avoid certain practices if those practices are unfamiliar to their own social class.

Another concept of Bourdieu’s that lends itself to the use of status attainment models in college choice is *cultural capital*. While many have ascribed academic success to natural aptitudes, such as innate intelligence and ability, Bourdieu suggests school success is attributed to cultural capital inherited from the family group. He states cultural capital “makes it possible to explain the uneven scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success...to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes” (P. Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). Bourdieu’s framework recognizes that cultural capital is a structuring mechanism for educational outcomes. The most valuable form of cultural capital is that of the dominant classes. Educators value this type of cultural capital, rewarding the students who possess it, and failing to transmit it to those of other classes. The educational system reinforces this dominant cultural capital accumulation through a schooling structure that disproportionately awards educational credentials to members of upper-class groups.

According to Bourdieu (1984), there are three types of cultural capital. The first is in the embodied state. The process of acquiring cultural capital begins at birth, with the education of a child by family members and professionals to introduce and reinforce tastes and behaviors. Bourdieu (1984) notes that embodied cultural capital “functions as sort of an advance...[in] acquiring the basic elements of legitimate culture...in the most unconscious and impalpable way” (p. 70). A second variation of cultural capital exists in institutionalized forms, such as



educational qualifications. Educational qualifications provide access to cultural capital, increasingly so, as “one rises in the educational hierarchy and as more value comes to be set on ways of using knowledge” (P. Bourdieu, 1984, p. 80). The third variation of cultural capital also exists in objectified forms. In this variation, items such as books, art, and furniture are considered to be cultural goods.

When examining college choice, cultural capital should be viewed in its broadest sense. Lareau and Weininger (2003) explain cultural capital is best applied when it reflects “processes whereby individuals’ strategic use of knowledge, skills and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation” (p. 2). Research shows that in social status attainment models, cultural capital plays a large role in the outcomes of the college decision-making processes of students. During the college choice process, an “individual’s ability to deploy knowledge, skills and competences successfully is powerfully classed” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 21). The choice of attending college, and even a particular college, is a choice of lifestyle and, thus, taste. Social class is a significant factor that plays into the choice process. The college choice process is a process by which a student is setting a social trajectory, and thus, a form of social closure (Ball, 2003).

### **2.2.2 Financial considerations**

Another significant aspect associated with a student’s social context is income. In prior research, it was assumed that students rationally weighed the financial costs and benefits of pursuing postsecondary education. More recently, researchers have questioned the assumption that students act in a classically rational manner (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Jackson, 1978). With the growing recognition that students have unequal access to

information regarding college costs, DesJardins and Toutkoushian (2005) argue that what has been previously considered irrational behavior by students may actually be quite rational. First, DesJardins and Toutkoushian (2005) recognize that not everything is known about college costs, nor is the information perfect. In fact, they suggest that many college enrollment decisions are made under a different form of rationality, called *bounded rationality*. Bounded rationality allows the individual to seek the best course of action to achieve their goals that is not optimal, but given their constraints, the individual deems the option as satisfactory. More importantly they highlight that not all costs associated with college enrollment are financial. For students who anticipate a career path that doesn't require a college degree, the amount of time and effort in acquiring a college degree might not be worth the investment.

Paulsen and St. John's (2002) financial nexus model allows researchers to examine the financial considerations of enrollment behavior among students from different socioeconomic strata. The financial nexus model advances understanding of "diverse patterns of educational choice, how such patterns may be related to differences in social class, and the ways public policy (e.g. financial policy) can promote and support diversity in higher education" (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 193). This approach also provides opportunities to study new linkages between two aspects of enrollment behavior, college choice and persistence. The researchers point out that the factors affecting earlier decisions in the college choice sequence also later influence choices related to persistence (Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

### **2.2.3 Race and ethnicity**

While more African-American and Hispanic students are attending college and receiving degrees, students from these groups are still underrepresented in higher education. Exploring the

issue of college choice as it relates to race and ethnicity can be difficult, as issues of race and social class can be intertwined. Constraints associated with college choice among students of color are further complicated by their overrepresentation in lower income groups and social class constructs. It used to be assumed that the lower participation rates of students of color in postsecondary education were due in part to lower educational aspirations. However, research shows that blacks and other students of color have high educational aspirations. Solorzano (1992) found that blacks had higher educational aspirations than whites in all but the highest socioeconomic group.

Mickelson (1990) noted that there are two different attitudes among black students in regard to postsecondary aspirations. Abstract attitudes regarding the benefits of postsecondary education influenced students' predisposition. Concrete attitudes, formed through personal experiences, had a greater bearing on postsecondary behavior. The negative concrete experiences that black students have regarding paying for and completing a degree program suggest that the investment does not outweigh the costs (Mickelson, 1990). Perna (2005) also found similar results in her study of Hispanic students.

Parental influences also serve to shape college choice among students of color. Parental expectations regarding postsecondary education have a significant effect on enrollment (Hamrick & Stage, 1995; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). Parent educational levels affect their ability to positively influence postsecondary participation. Lack of information about their students' career goals and the admissions and financial aid processes translated into few tangible parental support behaviors (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Lastly, parental engagement with their child's education promotes postsecondary enrollment. Activities such as participation in school activities, detailed conversations about education, and community involvement had a positive

outcome in terms of Hispanic enrollment in higher education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; K. P. Gonzales, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003).

College costs and availability of financial aid impact on the college-going decisions of students of color in many ways (D. E Heller, 1999; Ikenberry & Hartle, 1998; Kim, 2004). Sensitivity to costs increases the likelihood that a Hispanic student will enroll at a community college as opposed to a four-year institution (Kurlaender, 2006). African Americans' concerns about forgone wages will also impact their college-going decisions (Freeman, 1997). Lastly, geographic location as it relates to college costs also affects the choice process. Black, Hispanic, Asian and Native American students are more likely to select postsecondary institutions that are close to home (Grotsky & Jones, 2007; Kurlaender, 2006; H. Smith, 2007; Stewart & Post, 1990). Students of color were more likely to pick local institutions due to lower costs and familiarity, which helped ease the transition to college.

#### **2.2.4 Student experience and high school resources**

A student's experience in high school has a significant influence on postsecondary decisions. Because the opportunity to attend a quality high school is highly dependent on one's income level, many lower-income students often miss opportunities that further encourage postsecondary choice. One factor that can affect a student's predisposition towards college is his or her experience in a tracked curriculum. Tracking occurs when students are grouped for instruction according to perceived academic ability and potential. Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be placed in lower academic tracks, with little opportunity for upward mobility. Lucas and Good (2001) termed this phenomenon "tournament track mobility" (p. 139). Students of color in high schools with majority minority populations have less access to Advanced

Placement and other college prep courses than those attending white majority high schools (Solorzano, 1992; Teranishi, Allen, & Solorzano, 2004). Students who perceive they are not academically prepared are less likely to enroll in college (Perna, 2000; Pitre, 2006).

Resources in the schools also affect college choice. School personnel that supported students' educational aspirations was found to be just as important as academic achievement (K. P. Gonzales et al., 2003). Schools with fewer resources provided limited college guidance counseling (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). College guidance is important, as access to information might compensate for family background differences among students as they pertain to the college choice process (Perna, 2000). School personnel can provide valuable information and concrete assistance to students with college selection, application, and financial aid forms. Unfortunately, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have greater access to this type of information through parents, school personnel, and social networks (McDonough, 1997).

Perna (2006) notes that neither the rational human capital investment models nor the sociological models alone provide a means for exploring college choice decisions across groups. Moving away from linear models of college choice, Perna's (2006) model describes a process where a student's college-going and enrollment decisions are nested within four layers of influence. An individual's "assessment of the benefits and costs of an investment in college" (p. 101) is shaped by his or her habitus, the school and community context, the higher education context, and the broader social, economic and policy context. These contexts recognize "differences across students in the resources that shape college choice" (p. 116).

Nested within the four sociological contexts of Perna's model (2006) is the human capital investment model. This portion of the model compares the expected benefits of attending college with the anticipated costs. Calculations of benefits and costs of college attendance are

influenced by several factors. One is the demand for higher education. A student's academic preparation and achievement influences his or her ability to estimate the likelihood of being accepted, persisting, and ultimately graduating from any particular institution of higher education. Additionally, the availability of resources in the form of family income and financial aid influences a student's college choice decision.

The first of the four sociological contexts, or layers, shaping an individual's college choice decisions is the student's habitus. This layer reflects a student's background characteristics that include demographic information, such as race and gender. Included in this layer is also cultural capital, which provides knowledge of, and appreciation for the resources that encourage college-going behaviors and outcomes. Social capital describes relationships that provide access to information about college and the college admissions processes.

The second layer describes attributes associated with the school and community context. This context accounts for the availability of resources within secondary schools' organizational habitus. School resources such as quality teachers, college-prep curriculum, and the availability of guidance counselors positively influences students' college-going decisions.

The higher education context is the third layer in Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model of college choice. This layer takes into account the role institutions of higher education have in shaping college choice. Students gather information about postsecondary institutions in a variety of ways. The information students collect shapes their perceptions about postsecondary enrollment options. Institutional characteristics such as cost, location, academic reputation, selectivity and curriculum also have a significant impact on students' college choices.

The fourth and final layer in Perna's model is the social, economic and policy context. College choices may be affected directly or indirectly by these components. The social context

may represent demographic characteristics and changes. Economic forces including unemployment rates, labor supply, and salaries in various employment sectors also affect college choice. Government action (or inaction) creates policy contexts that are connected to students' college-choice decisions. State appropriations to higher education institutions, federal Pell grant amounts, and Stafford loan interest rates represent public policies that affect students' perceptions about the affordability and accessibility of higher education options.

The strength of Perna's proposed conceptual model resides in its multilayered approach. In appropriating constructs from the economic and sociological approaches, this model provides a more sophisticated examination of student college choice. In addition, it takes into account the perspectives of four major stakeholders in the college-choice process: students and their parents, K-12 school systems, the higher education sector, and public policy-makers. This model can be quite helpful in "understanding differences across groups in college-choice outcomes, because of its explicit recognition of the multiple layers of context that influence an individual's college-related decisions" (p. 120).

### **2.3 MERIT AID AND COLLEGE CHOICE THEORY**

While college choice models don't specifically address the choice sets of merit scholarship recipients, researchers have discovered a good deal about the impact merit scholarships have on college choice. The availability of a broad-based merit scholarship program affects a student's postsecondary choices on a variety of levels. Issues of eligibility, financial awards, and program constraints impact a student's final decision on whether to attend college, and if so, where to go.

The research analyzed here explores the effects of broad-based merit scholarship programs on the postsecondary decisions of students, particularly as it pertains to class, race, and ethnicity.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model provides a useful framework to explore how college choice theory might incorporate the decisions of students within a merit aid scholarship context. The broad categories of predisposition, search, and choice help to organize the literature surrounding the enrollment decisions of merit aid scholarship recipients. However, there are some limitations. It is important to note that not all merit aid literature fits neatly into these three categories. Factors in the search and choice stages tend to overlap; to reduce confusion, the two stages are combined. In addition, as noted earlier, the experiences of underrepresented students don't always align with the enrollment decisions portrayed in traditional college choice models.

### **2.3.1 Predisposition**

The predisposition phase of college choice emphasizes the educational aspirations and expectations of students and their families (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). There are several studies examining the effect of merit-aid scholarship programs on student educational aspirations. Merit scholarship programs have the ability to positively affect student and parental attitudes and expectations regarding higher education, shape students' ideas about academic achievement, and improving school climate for postsecondary attainment.

One of the primary motivations for the creation of merit-aid scholarship programs is to promote college access and attainment. Surveys indicate that parents of students eligible to participate in one merit-scholarship program were positively influenced by the program. A study by the RAND Corporation (2011) indicated that the availability of the Pittsburgh merit scholarship helped motivate parents to enroll their children into Promise-eligible schools. In



fact, the availability of the scholarship was the heaviest weighted factor that influenced their enrollment decision (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). This was particularly true for parents of African-American children and parents with lower levels of education. Students also reported that their parents pushed them to attend school and work hard to meet the GPA requirement for the scholarship program.

Merit-aid scholarship programs are also designed to encourage and reward students who work hard academically. Heller and Marin (2002) note that the West Virginia PROMISE scholarship web site acknowledges that “the quickest and most effective way to motivate students to study harder and to achieve in school is to offer good students the opportunity to attend college for free” (p. 19). A motto for the Pittsburgh Promise is “Dream Big and Work Hard” (Pittsburgh Promise, 2009, p. 2). Pittsburgh Promise students reported that the opportunity to gain college funds motivated them to strive for better grades, attend school, and seek postsecondary education (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). Studies of Georgia’s HOPE scholarship program also indicate that this broad-based merit scholarship affected overall student academic achievement (Cornwell & Mustard, 2006). Georgia senior students increased their average SAT scores by 36 points, while high school seniors throughout the U.S. increased their scores by 25 points.

Broad-based merit scholarship programs also have the potential to change attitudes and expectations regarding higher education and educational achievement on the part of school personnel, which plays a significant role in a student’s predisposition towards postsecondary enrollment. In the case of Kalamazoo Central High School, the launch of the Kalamazoo Promise was a “catalyst for systemic reform, bringing together educators, students, their parents, and the broader community to focus on a common goal: success for students – not just in high

school, but through the college years” (Miron, Jones, & Kelaher-Young, 2010, p. 51). Teachers set higher academic standards, communicated higher expectations to students, and felt more motivated and supported as a result of the Kalamazoo Promise. To develop a pro-academic culture that values and embraces postsecondary opportunities for all students, the Kalamazoo school district created college readiness programs for middle school students, incentivized students to enroll in AP courses, and connected students’ future career goals with present academic opportunities (Miron, Jones, & Kelaher-Young, 2009).

### **2.3.2 Search and choice**

During the search and choice stages of the college choice process, students use information and consult their social networks to define their choice set, identify reasonable options, and decide where to apply and ultimately enroll. Merit aid scholarship programs have program criteria that can influence students’ choice sets significantly. Program eligibility requirements may limit what students believe is possible regarding postsecondary attendance. Merit-aid scholarship programs often establish limits regarding the type and location of postsecondary institutions where students can use the funding. While merit aid scholarship programs increase access to higher education, there are ways in which the same programs can also limit student choice.

The emergence of broad-based merit aid scholarship programs has provided the average student the opportunity to attend college. It is estimated that broad-based merit-aid scholarship programs boost college attendance by five to seven percentage points (Dynarski, 2004). In fact, Dynarski (2004) found that merit-aid programs are more effective than need-based aid in getting students into college. These particular students may have faced uncertainty in the past regarding postsecondary choices. However, Dynarski (2004) states that “when offered a well-publicized,

generous scholarship, some of these students may decide to give college a try” (p. 64). The “simplicity and transparency” of these programs may be the reason that racial and ethnic gaps in postsecondary schooling appear to close in Arkansas, Florida and Mississippi (Dynarski, 2004, p. 95). Unlike the FAFSA process, merit aid programs tend to have minimal application procedures. Students already know whether they are eligible, and can accurately gauge the amount of their reward.

It is important to consider that student perceptions of scholarship eligibility have an impact on postsecondary enrollment. A study of the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship program demonstrated that African-American and low income students view their scholarship eligibility as a significant factor in deciding whether to attend a postsecondary institution or not (Ness & Tucker, 2008). Merit aid scholarship programs that impose lower academic standards for eligibility are more likely to positively affect the postsecondary choices of lower income and students of color (Andrews, DesJardins, & Ranchhod, 2010). On the other hand, Gonzales et al. (2011) recognized that confusion regarding program eligibility and funding amounts for students in the Pittsburgh Promise zone could negatively affect students’ motivation to become scholarship eligible.

Information regarding program criteria also influences the college choice sets of students. Georgia’s HOPE scholarship can be used at either public or private postsecondary institutions within the state. Students benefitting from the Kalamazoo Promise are limited to using their scholarship at any public college or university in the state of Michigan. Thus, merit scholarship programs can affect where students choose to attend college. Studies of state-sponsored merit scholarship programs found that states with similar programs experienced larger percentages of

students electing to remain in-state for postsecondary education (Cornwell, Mustard, & Sridhar, 2006; Dynarski, 2004; Orsuwan & Heck, 2009; Zhang & Ness, 2010).

A study of seven state-sponsored merit-aid scholarship programs in the south indicated that they have an additional impact on the choice of type of college. Merit scholarship recipients in these states tended to select four-year public schools, by an increase of about 4.4 percentage points (Dynarski, 2004). If the program permits using award amounts at private postsecondary institutions, then attendance at 4-year private institutions increases as well. In Georgia, the HOPE scholarship program is estimated to increase private four-year college attendance by 2.2 percentage points (Dynarski, 2004). For black students, there was a significant enrollment shift under the Georgia HOPE scholarship program. Black student enrollment in public universities jumped 27%, while enrollment in private universities increased by 14%. It is interesting to note that four historically black colleges and universities are located in Georgia, which research demonstrates helped to shift the black student enrollment to in-state four year colleges (Cornwell et al., 2006).

Dynarski (2004) also indicates that there is a shift upwards in postsecondary schooling choices. Students increasingly chose four-year institutions over two-year institutions. The greater preference among HOPE scholarship recipients for in-state four-year institutions has led to increased competition for admittance to state flagship institutions (Cornwell & Mustard, 2006). As a result, students denied entrance to the University of Georgia or Georgia Tech might not consider other four-year institutions in the state as appropriate substitutes. These students might choose comparable out-of-state flagship institutions such as Auburn, Alabama, the University of Florida, Clemson, or the University of Tennessee.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

Over time, the research on college student choice has evolved from general college choice models to ones that attempt to account for the college choice experiences of under-represented groups. There is little research on the college choice sets of merit scholarship recipients. However, research on the effects of various broad-based merit aid programs can provide some insight regarding the college choice outcomes of scholarship recipients. Financial considerations are implicit in many of the choices merit-aid scholarship recipients make regarding postsecondary education. The possibility of attending college for free or with significantly reduced costs helps induce students who may be on the fence to attend college. Merit scholarship programs allow students who are financially constrained to consider postsecondary institutions that are higher priced and more selective. In addition, many merit-aid recipients are willing to narrow their particular college choice sets according to program criteria. By viewing the college choice sets of merit-aid scholarship recipients through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's college choice model, it is interesting to note that while merit-aid scholarship programs open up opportunities for postsecondary education, program criteria can also serve to limit college choice options as well.

### **3.0 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 THEORETICAL TOOLS AND FRAMEWORK**

Human agency is the capacity for people to make choices and live those choices out in the world. One of the most important decisions a person can make relates to their choice to engage in further education. Education is considered an important vehicle for the advancement of people within a given society. Paulo Friere's (1970) concern for the poor and oppressed, and their capacity to become agents of their own destiny through education was the central theme of his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Choice in college enrollment decisions is important, and students should have opportunities to attend the type of institution that maximizes his or her potential. However, college choice is often mediated by issues of access and affordability.

Researchers focusing on college choice often draw upon the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) to understand the enrollment choices of students. Bourdieu (1984) views individuals as "status-strivers" who make strategic decisions to attain desired social and economic goods. However, those decisions are regulated by the habitus. One's habitus can act to constrain individual agency through perceptions regarding one's possibilities and the appropriate responses. Thus, the habitus may lead a student to have lower aspirations or to resist adopting "new habitus elements" (Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2007, p. 23).

Students from less-privileged backgrounds operate within a habitus that is not as optimistic about their academic outcomes. These students often view higher education as a potentially risky investment decision, especially in light of the fact they are less likely to complete a degree. If they do, they will have more debt than their wealthier counterparts and are less likely to earn as much money once employed (Callender & Jackson, 2005). Thus, the prospect of significant loan burden is a disincentive for enrollment of lower-income students.

Assessing fit and place is another obstacle within the college choice-process. Bourdieu (1984) recognizes the role self-identification can play in the college choice process. In doing so, a student will “develop a sense of one’s place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded” (Reay, 2005, p. 91). Many academically qualified poor students reject elite institutions or college entirely, because they do not have a sense of ‘fit’. The question becomes, “what is a person like me doing at a place like that?” (Reay, 2005, p. 91). In exercising college choice, there is a process of class matching, which occurs between the student and the university, which Bourdieu would view as a search for ‘fit’ between family and institutional habitus.

One limitation of Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptual framework is that it focuses on the behavior of groups, but not individuals. Therefore, it is useful to examine group tendencies in regards to college choice. However, it is more difficult to examine the decisions of individuals within Bourdieu’s framework. Many researchers attempt to apply Bourdieu’s (1984) framework to the actions and decisions of individuals. This is more confusing in that Bourdieu’s theory is more a theory of practice, rather than a theory of action (Nash, 2005). Bourdieu provides little insight regarding individual agency. According to Nash (2005), Bourdieu suggests “people are only rational when they step out of the automatic responses prompted by their habitus” (p. 434).

A more appropriate framework for evaluating individual human agency in the college choice process was Albert Bandura's (2006) core properties of human agency. Bandura (2001), originator of Social Cognitive Theory and the theory of self-efficacy, states that "the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life is the essence of humanness" (p. 1). Therefore, to be "an agent is to make things intentionally happen by one's actions"(p. 2). The beginning stage of agency is the thought process that exerts determinative influence on one's actions. Examining human agency in the college choice process required an understanding of the properties permitting a person to be "contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them" (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). The properties of human agency are broken down into four core features.

The first core feature of human agency focuses on the intentionality of one's actions. An intention is "a representation of a future course of action to be performed"(p. 6). Intentions center on plans of action. When a student exhibits intentionality in the college choice process, he or she is describing future plans for postsecondary education that are grounded in self-motivators affecting the likelihood of college attendance in the future. It is also entirely possible that intentions can be changed, revised, or reconsidered with the acquisition of new information.

Forethought is the second core feature of human agency. Bandura states that "through the exercise of forethought, people motivate themselves and guide their actions in anticipation of events" (p. 7). Forethought provides direction, coherence and meaning to one's life. It enables individuals to "transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and to shape and regulate the present to fit a desired future" (p. 7). Forethought entails the anticipation of possible future outcomes to guide and motivate current behavior. Students set goals related to college enrollment and anticipate likely outcomes that guide and motivate their efforts to acquire the



necessary academic credentials, gather financial resources to pay for college, and participate in college admissions processes.

Agency requires that individuals not only plan ahead and anticipate possibilities, but also demonstrate self-motivation and self-regulation. The third core feature of agency is self-reactiveness. It is the “ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution” (p. 8). Individuals direct their pursuits and create self-incentives to “sustain their efforts for goal attainment” (p. 8). Students use a reactive strategy when they try to reduce the discrepancies between their achievements and their personal college goals. This form of agency is action-oriented in that students do things that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth, and refrain from actions that limit their opportunities to achieve their goals. While with forethought, students might anticipate the courses of action they might take to realize their goals, self-reactiveness enables students to put those imagined courses of action into motion.

The fourth core feature of human agency is self-reflectiveness. It is the “ability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one’s thoughts and actions” (p. 10). In doing so, individuals evaluate their motivations, values and the meaning of their life pursuits. Self-reflectiveness comes about through self-awareness. Central to the property of self-reflectiveness is the concept of self-efficacy, which is the belief that one has what it takes to achieve a goal. Bandura states that “unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 10).

## **3.2 METHODS**

The methodology I used in this study is the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). In this approach, participant interviews served the purpose of gathering narratives of individual experiences as resources for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon. In addition, the interview was a vehicle for developing a “conversational relation” with the interviewee about the “meaning of an experience” (p. 66). Thus, it was the most appropriate method for seeking information regarding the research questions guiding this study. The phenomenological nature of this study allowed me to explore the “meaning” of the participants’ college choice experience from an organizational or social vantage point, as well as from the individual experiences of these students’ personal contexts (Van Manen, 1990).

### **3.2.1 Population**

For the purposes of this study, I was concerned with the college choice sets of students eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program. Limiting my study to students eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise ensured that all participants lived in Allegheny County, all attended the same school district, and all met the academic and school attendance scholarship criteria. In addition, all participants in my study experienced similar options on their college choice sets, as represented by the list of Promise-eligible institutions of higher education. This approach potentially reached students enrolled in a wide range of institutions, including those not awarding bachelor’s degrees, such as proprietary and trade schools.

In the fall of 2011, I attended the PromiseNet conference in Pittsburgh, PA. PromiseNet is a loose consortium of stakeholders who “come together and share best practices around designing, implementing, and sustaining” place-based scholarship programs (PromiseNet, 2014). There, I connected with Eugene Walker, the program manager for the Pittsburgh Promise. I spoke with him about my interest in exploring the college choice processes of Pittsburgh Promise recipients. He felt that it was an interesting study, and offered to introduce me to Shawn Butler, the Director of Programs for the Pittsburgh Promise. Shawn and I corresponded over the fall as I further developed my research questions and explored potential methods for answering them. In January of 2012, I met with Shawn and Saleem Ghubril, the Executive Director of the Pittsburgh Promise to propose working with the Pittsburgh Promise to recruit scholarship recipients to participate in this study.

Shawn, Saleem, and I all shared similar goals, how to protect the privacy of Pittsburgh Promise Scholarship recipients while casting as large a net as possible to achieve maximum variation in study respondents. We discussed a variety of ways in which scholarship recipients could be contacted about the study, but without my knowing who was being contacted and their personal contact information. I was, and still am, extremely grateful for the assistance the Pittsburgh Promise provided in this stage of the study. Their willingness to assist me in this process was the only viable way to gain access to this specific population.

I anticipated that working with the Pittsburgh Promise would allow for a more meaningful study, as I intended to purposefully select participants to ensure maximum variation among study participants. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the most useful sampling strategy for qualitative research is maximum variation sampling. This strategy of purposeful sampling aims at capturing and describing the central themes that are shared within a varied

population. Common patterns or themes that emerge “are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 235).

To achieve maximum variation in my sample population, I wanted to recruit a wide variety of Pittsburgh Promise scholarship recipients. This would allow me to purposefully select participants representing varying dimensions such as race, income, gender, family educational attainment, high school GPA, and postsecondary institutional type. Selecting a small sample with great diversity helps to ensure two things. First, detailed descriptions of the college choice process within a variety of lived contexts would produce unique experiences. Second, common shared experiences despite the heterogeneity assists in a more meaningful analysis. The study would also be meaningful in that any resulting social critique has meaning locally, and can be efficiently and effectively used by the Promise, the Pittsburgh School district and the local community.

During the spring of 2012, I worked with Pittsburgh Promise staff to solidify a time line for the recruitment of potential study participants. This was difficult, as the Promise staff were entering a very busy time in the life of the program. In June of 2012, the Pittsburgh Promise celebrated its first class of Promise recipients to graduate from college. This milestone was marked by several events throughout the city for students, foundations, corporations, and individuals connected to the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship fund. The decision was made to wait until after the celebrations to begin recruiting study participants. The staff would have more time to devote to reaching out to recipients, and the request to participate in the study would not be lost among all of the other communications recipients were receiving about the celebration events.

In the fall of 2012, I met with Steve Kroser, the Data and Technology Coordinator for the Pittsburgh Promise. We went through the Pittsburgh Promise database fields to determine which recipients would receive an invitation to participate in this study. Since this study was focused on the college choice process, it was decided that any recipient who had used Promise funds would be contacted. This group would include all students who had used Promise funds but may have dropped out of college or graduated from a two-year institution in the meantime.

Steve also helped to identify the best time to contact students. He usually spends most of the early fall updating the database with email contacts of newly enrolled Pittsburgh Promise scholarship recipients. Therefore, he suggested that the request for study participants go out in mid-November when the contact information in his database is generally the most accurate. On November 26, 2012, Steve sent out the first email to recruit participants in this study (Appendix A). Another email went out to the same group of Pittsburgh Promise recipients a week later.

Scholarship recipients who were interested in participating in the study were directed to a Survey Monkey link. This survey tool was a private and secure location where participants could leave contact information, indicate their availability for interviews, and provide demographic information. I also used this space to provide additional information about the nature of my research. In doing so, I made available my cell phone number and invited respondents to contact me if they any questions about the research project.

Of the roughly 4,000 Promise recipients in the Promise database, 31 students responded either by leaving their contact information via Survey Monkey, or by contacting me at the phone number I provided. There are several reasons why the response rate is so low. First, the Pittsburgh Promise database is only as reliable as the information that is provided. Institutions of higher education do not provide the Pittsburgh Promise with student email addresses. The

Promise first collects contact information from parents and students while still in high school. When the student enrolls in a post-secondary institution, the Promise asks recipients to update their contact information. The staff at the Pittsburgh Promise readily admit that often doesn't happen, and reliable communication with recipients is a challenge.

Secondly, Steven Kroser and I discovered that institutional spam/junk mail filters may also make email communication with recipients haphazard at best. While working with Steve on this project, I had no problems communicating with him via my University of Pittsburgh email account. However, we discovered that test recruitment emails wound up in Pitt's Spam/Virus Message program. We were able to discern that the Promise's use of a third party vendor for group email services, as well as emails that have a large number of recipients tend to trigger institutional spam/junk mail filters.

Given I wanted to achieve maximum variation in my respondent pool, I examined closely respondent demographic information. Demographic information for eleven respondents was either incomplete or unavailable. Of the demographic information on hand, ten respondents were male and 21 were female. Six identified as African-American and one as Asian-American. Eight students indicated that they were eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school, which is a reliable indicator of being from a low-income family. While the respondents were enrolled in many types of post-secondary institutions, only one made the choice to attend a community college. No respondents were enrolled in a trade school or proprietary institution.

The lack of respondents who ultimately chose to enroll in community colleges and trade schools concerned me, as I wanted to be sure the experiences of students who made those post-secondary choices were present in this research. I contacted Dr. Roslynne Wilson, the Director of Specialized Services at the Community College of Allegheny County. Roslynne supervises

the Pittsburgh Promise Scholar's Initiative, a program that provides special support and student services to assist Promise Scholars in their transition to college. Knowing that she is in contact with Pittsburgh Promise recipients daily, I asked if she would be willing to help me recruit participants for this study.

Roslynne was happy to help. She sent out an email to the Promise students, asking them to consider participating in this study. She also invited me to attend a Promise Club meeting at CCAC, which was scheduled for the following week. There were approximately 20 students in attendance at the meeting. At the meeting I was given the opportunity to explain the purpose of this study and to ask if they would consider participating. I passed around a sign-up sheet. Three students signed up. Several stopped by after the meeting to wish me well in my "school project", but they informed me they were really busy and couldn't do it. One mentioned that she didn't have much to say in an interview; she explained that she went to CCAC because it was the only school she could afford. None of the students I met that evening followed through with participation in this study, nor did any other Promise students at CCAC respond to Dr. Wilson's email.

On the other hand, I was surprised when a student who had declined to use her Pittsburgh Promise eligibility volunteered to participate in this study. When I reached her on the phone, I asked how she found out about this study. She said that she had received the email the Pittsburgh Promise had sent because she had used Promise scholarship money to take a class at the University of Pittsburgh the previous summer. Thus, her contact information was in the Promise database. I felt this study would be enriched by the experiences of students who gave up their scholarship to attend institutions that were not Promise-eligible. I asked if she knew of other students who had chosen to forego their Promise scholarships as well. She said she did and

offered to post a request to participate in this study on her Facebook page. Her posting generated five of the participants in this study.

In the end, a total of 17 Pittsburgh Promise-eligible students agreed to participate in this study. The participants represent a variety of demographic dimensions. They range from first-year to graduating seniors in college, and were products of five different Pittsburgh public high schools. Eleven study participants self-identified as being White/Caucasian, two as African-American, and two as Asian-American. Two students described a mixed Hispanic/White identity. Five students came from low-income households, as evidenced by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch in high school. Participant college enrollment decisions include opting for the local county community college, public state system institutions, small private colleges, large competitive publics, and elite universities. I wrote about each of the participants throughout the following chapters as I connected their experiences with theories and concepts associated with the college choice process. Each participant's background information is contained in the "Profiles" section of this chapter.



**Table 1.** Respondent demographics

<b>Person</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Free or Reduced Lunch</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Type of Institution</b>	<b>Uses Promise</b>
Anna	White/ Caucasian	Yes	William McKinley	Community College of Allegheny County	Community College	Yes
Benjamin	Asian	No	William McKinley	University of California Berkeley	Elite	No
Beth	Asian	No	Rutherford B. Hayes	University of Chicago	Elite	No
Bruce	White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	Philadelphia University	Private/ Selective	Yes
Christine	Hispanic White/ Caucasian	No	Rutherford B. Hayes	Drexel University	Private/ Selective	Yes
Christopher	White/ Caucasian	No	Rutherford B. Hayes	Robert Morris University	Private/ Selective	Yes
Frank	White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	University of Pittsburgh	Private/ Selective	Yes
Jennifer	White/ Caucasian	Yes	George Washington	Chatham University	Private/ Selective	Yes
Judy	Black/African American	Yes	Abraham Lincoln Charter	Slippery Rock University	State System	Yes
Karen	White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	Slippery Rock University	State System	Yes
Kelly	White/ Caucasian	Yes	Rutherford B. Hayes	Carnegie Mellon University	Elite	Yes
Kimberly	White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	Brown University	Elite	No
Melissa	White/ Caucasian	No	Rutherford B. Hayes	Duquesne University	Private/ Selective	Yes
Michael	White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	Johns Hopkins University	Elite	No
Sarah	Hispanic White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	Stanford University	Elite	No
Todd	Black/African American	Yes	Herbert Hoover Charter	California University	State System	Yes
Wendy	White/ Caucasian	No	William McKinley	Northeastern University	Private/ Selective	No

### 3.2.2 Profiles

The following profiles of each respondent provide some context regarding experiences and personal characteristics that served to shape college choice processes. These profiles provide a succinct summary of the respondents' predisposition, search and choice decisions.

- *Anna.* Anna, a White/Caucasian student, grew up in a household that didn't value college attendance, therefore she had little encouragement to pursue her education beyond high school. Anna enjoyed school. Because her favorite subjects were science and math, she participated in a program for girls interested in the sciences at Carnegie Mellon University throughout middle and high school. Because of her family's low income, she had to work many hours to meet her basic expenses while in high school. Her experiences in dual enrollment at CCAC her senior year strengthened her resolve to pursue higher education. While college attendance was seriously in doubt, Anna ultimately chose to enroll at CCAC.
- *Benjamin.* Benjamin grew up in an Asian-American family that had a history of high academic achievement at elite colleges and universities. Benjamin's father attended Harvard for his undergraduate degree, and Stanford for his PhD. Benjamin's mother earned her PhD at Carnegie Mellon University. Not only did Benjamin grow up with expectations that he would go to college, but it was expected that he would attend an elite university. Benjamin relied on information about academic reputation and curricular programs to narrow down his list of potential colleges. From there, he opted to attend the University of California at Berkeley based on its academic reputation and the campus

culture. Benjamin considered himself fortunate that cost wasn't a factor in his enrollment decision.

- *Beth.* Beth is an Asian American whose parents both hold PhD's. She grew up in a home where college attendance was expected. From a young age, Beth anticipated that she would attend graduate school as well. Because her father is a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Beth was eligible to attend there with a full tuition waiver. However, she explored several other post-secondary options that were in her opinion, more preferable options. Most were elite institutions in the Midwest and Northeast. Since cost was not a significant consideration in her college choice decision, she enrolled at the University of Chicago due to its academic reputation and location in a large city.
- *Bruce.* Bruce grew up in a White/Caucasian middle-class family where several relatives had attended college. His father did not, but worked as a manager at a local supermarket. His parents encouraged him to prepare for college from an early age. His interest in architecture focused his college search on institutions that provided nationally accredited programs. Bruce chose Philadelphia University due to its national reputation as an excellent architecture program. While the Promise Scholarship offsets some of the costs, he recognizes that he will have significant student loan debt when he graduates. Bruce considers the expense a necessary investment in order to obtain a good career in a field he enjoys.
- *Christine.* Christine, who identifies as both Hispanic and White/Caucasian, dreamed of having an international higher education experience at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. Both of her parents attended Carnegie Mellon University, but only her father graduated. Her parents were very involved in Christine's education, enrolling her in a

variety of schools while she was growing up, and even homeschooling her at one point. When it became apparent that enrolling at the University of Glasgow was not feasible due to financial constraints, Christine began to explore options in the United States. She applied to a mixture of elite, selective private and public institutions. Her final enrollment decision was to attend Drexel University due to the quality of its film study program, the campus culture, and her ability to use her Promise scholarship to help offset the cost of attendance.

- *Christopher.* An academically talented student who is White/Caucasian, Christopher grew up in a family with limited college experience. Both of his parents had attended college briefly, but neither persisted to graduation. They had high expectations for Christopher to attend a four-year college. Between his parents and high school teachers, he had plenty of support in the college search process. Christopher's parents took him to visit several potential colleges, and encouraged him to apply to many others. He narrowed down his choices to small, residential colleges where he could use the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. Ultimately, he chose to attend Robert Morris University, which was the most affordable option. He anticipates that he will have approximately \$20,000 in student loans when he graduates.
- *Frank.* Frank, who is White/Caucasian, grew up in a middle-class home with his father, who works in real estate, and his mother who is an accountant. An academically driven student in high school, he wanted to pursue his education in bioengineering at a nationally recognized program that would provide him with great learning experiences and opportunities to do research with faculty. Frank applied to several colleges, many of which were elite institutions. He was also accepted at Johns Hopkins University, where

the bioengineering program is ranked first in the nation. Frank decided to enroll at the University of Pittsburgh because of the learning opportunities Pitt can provide, as well as the ability to use his Promise scholarship. Between the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship and University of Pittsburgh scholarships, Frank doesn't pay anything to attend college.

- *Jennifer.* Jennifer, a White/Caucasian, grew up in a low-income household where education was valued. Her mother, who has an associate's degree, encouraged Jennifer to do well in school to prepare for college. As an honor's student in high school, Jennifer benefitted from taking Advanced Placement courses and participating in enrichment activities provided for college-bound students. Anticipating that she would live at home while in college, Jennifer limited her search to schools within a commutable distance from her home. Deciding on Chatham, Jennifer applied for, and was awarded, several scholarships that make it an affordable option.
- *Judy.* Judy, an African-American student from a low-income household, grew up watching her mother work her way through college. The message she received is that "you need to go to school to get a job". She attended a public charter school that focused on college preparation, taking several Advanced Placement classes. Her teachers and guidance counselors were instrumental in providing advice in the college search process and helping her navigate the admissions and financial aid process. Judy initially considered attending an institution in New Jersey, but determined that Slippery Rock University was a more affordable option.
- *Karen.* Karen, who is White/Caucasian, grew up in a middle-class home. Neither parent attended college, and nor did her two older brothers. Her mother is a retired police officer, and her father used to be a surveyor. After losing his job, he secured employment

working in the county supply warehouse. Karen was motivated to attend college to help ensure future financial stability. She originally wanted to attend large, state institutions, but it was not feasible due to her lack of academic qualifications and financial resources. She began her college search process again focusing on Pennsylvania state-system institutions, which were a better academic and financial fit. She decided to enroll at Slippery Rock University after visiting and talking to a friend who already goes there.

- *Kelly*. Kelly is a Caucasian/White student who moved to Pittsburgh in the eighth grade. Her parents are artists. Her mother is a painter. Her father is in a band and works part-time at a Pittsburgh museum. Both had attended college for only a year, and had limited financial resources. They strongly encouraged Kelly and her younger brother to attend college. Kelly has strong interests in the arts, and wanted to attend an institution where she could continue her oboe studies, as well as take advantage of a strong liberal arts curriculum. She conducted a national college search, considering schools were not eligible for Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. After negotiating with Carnegie Mellon University for a better financial aid package, she enrolled there.
- *Kimberly*. Kimberly is a white/Caucasian student who opted not to use her Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. She opted to attend Brown University, which was also both her father and her sister's alma mater. Kimberly recalls visiting Brown a lot while her sister was enrolled, and fell in love with the school. However, she considered several schools in the New England area, and visited many before deciding on Brown. Describing her family as overachievers, she was pushed to do well in school and participate in extra-curriculars. Her parents encouraged her to select the best possible school and to not be too concerned about the cost.

- Michael.* Michael, a White/Caucasian student, always assumed he would attend college. His parents are highly educated, his father is a lawyer and his mother holds two master's degrees. His parents both enjoyed their college experiences, and encouraged Michael to explore many college options. Michael wanted to attend college outside of Pittsburgh, in an East Coast city. Academic reputation was important to him, as well as institutional size. He wanted a medium sized school where there was a good personal fit. He decided to attend Johns Hopkins. Although attending Johns Hopkins is quite expensive, cost was not an important consideration in his enrollment decision.
- Melissa.* A White/Caucasian student, Melissa made two separate college searches. Her first college search resulted in her selection of Columbia College in Chicago. As a vocal performance major, she wanted to attend an arts school for professional training. Unhappy in that program, she started exploring other options. On the advice of her high school voice teacher, she contacted Duquesne University to arrange a voice audition. The option of enrolling at Duquesne appealed to Melissa because she could major in music therapy as well as vocal performance. The ability to use her Pittsburgh Promise scholarship made college a much more affordable experience as well.
- Sarah.* Sarah's father, who is originally from Mexico, is a professor at a higher education institution in Pittsburgh, and her mother is an elementary school teacher. As educators, her parents had high expectations regarding Sarah's college aspirations. Her college search began when her older brother began looking at colleges, and she went along on his campus visits. Her brother was considering schools with strong academic reputations, and eventually enrolled at MIT. Sarah said that experience strongly influenced what she expected her own college search would be like. She excelled in high school, taking as

many AP classes as she could and participating in the pre-engineering program. Sarah applied to several Ivy League schools and ultimately chose to attend Stanford University. Sarah reported that Stanford did provide some financial assistance, which was helpful.

- *Todd*. An African-American student from a low-income household, Todd struggled to focus on academics while in high school. An intervention with his mother and guidance counselor finally convinced him that attending college was possible. Todd's mother and sister both attended college, and provided him a great deal of support in the college search. Since Todd's sister had attended California University of Pennsylvania, it was Todd's first choice. To minimize his potential loan burden, Todd opted to live at home and commute back and forth to California University of Pennsylvania.
- *Wendy*. Wendy is a White/Caucasian student with college-educated parents. College attendance was expected. Wendy participated in her older sister's college search, and was strongly influenced by her sister's college experience at Carnegie Mellon University. While her sister was very social and participated in a sorority, Wendy recalls that her sister also worked very hard on her academics. To prepare for the college choice process, Wendy understood early on that good grades were important, as well as participation in extra-curricular activities. Deciding on a career in physical therapy, Wendy focused her college search on institutions with well-respected programs in that field of study. Ultimately, she chose to attend Northeastern University. The ability to complete her Doctor of Physical Therapy while at Northeastern was a significant consideration. Although tuition is very expensive, Wendy sees her education as a good investment in her future.



### **3.2.3 Data collection**

Initially, my goal was to have between 20 and 40 participants in this study. However, despite trying several avenues to recruit more study participants, I believe that with the exception of students choosing to attend community colleges, I had sufficient response for a meaningful study. Seidman (2006) suggests two criteria for determining how many participants are enough. First, the participant sample should have sufficient numbers to reflect the range of possible student college choice experiences within the population of Pittsburgh Promise-eligible students. The second criterion pertains to saturation of information. Saturation denotes a point in the research where no new information is being reported (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For participants enrolling in four-year institutions, I felt this point was reached.

I contacted each participant using the information her or she provided to arrange a time and place for an interview. The purpose of the interview was to obtain information that deepened my understanding of how these students made their college choice decisions. Interviews provided a less structured format than surveys, and they allowed me to examine the complex decision-making process involved in making an enrollment decision. The interviews were semi-structured. This approach was more appropriate for this study, as it was an “attempt to understand the complex behavior without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 56). The semi-structured interview also facilitated my ability to establish a relationship with the respondents, which allowed me as the researcher to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of each respondent’s decision-making process, rather than simply explain it (Spradley, 1979).

Van Manen (1990) states that “the interview process must be disciplined by the fundamental question that prompted the need for the interview in the first place” (p. 66). The questions and prompts used in my semi-structured interview were derived from my study of the literature in light of the research questions being asked. Therefore, the interview questions first asked the participants to reconstruct their college choice process, with follow-up questions and prompts that served to further explore their experiences and identify the issues involved in their enrollment decision. In addition, I also created questions and prompts based on two theoretical constructs that serve to frame two of my research questions.

To explore participants’ college choice process through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three stage process, I designed questions that would encourage participants to reflect on their experiences during the predisposition, search and choice stages. I also asked students to describe the various contexts and environments they inhabited, and reflect on how those contexts and environments affected their college choice decisions. In addition, I included questions derived from Bandera’s (2006) core properties of human agency to further explore how the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship affects recipients’ self-efficacy. These questions elicited information regarding participants’ intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. My interview guide is attached (Appendix B).

#### **3.2.4 Informed consent and confidentiality**

This particular study qualified for Exempt status within the guidelines of the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board because it fell under the category of “tests, surveys, interviews, or observation of public behavior”. As such, an informed consent document was not

necessary for this study. However, an informational script was used as part of the interview process (Appendix C).

Confidentiality was an important part of this study, so I took steps to ensure participant privacy was protected. Interviews were recorded, but the recordings did not have subject identifiers or codes that can be used to re-identify subjects. I also practiced the use of pseudonyms. Through the use of an on-line random name generator, I was able to create a list of common first names for men and women. I assigned each participant a pseudonym from the randomly generated list.

To further protect participant identities, I created pseudonyms for each of the Pittsburgh Public High Schools that respondents attended. I was concerned that while I created pseudonyms for participants, their personal experiences tied to a particular high school may inadvertently reveal their identity. I came up with the pseudonyms by naming the each high school after a deceased U. S. president.

### **3.2.5 Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed from an audio file to a text document. I personally transcribed half of the recorded interviews. The remaining recorded interviews were transcribed by a reputable transcription service. I reviewed every audio file against the transcribed text document to ensure accuracy. In addition, I emailed each transcript to the appropriate respondent, asking them to check the transcript for accuracy. I also invited the respondent to provide additional comments, and amend or retract statements if they felt they needed to.

Each interview was then coded for predetermined and emerging themes. *Interpretation* is the act of “giving meaning to data” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 5). Interpretation “attaches meaning and significance to the patterns, themes, and connections” that a researcher identifies through data analysis. It also helps to explain “why they have come to exist,” as well as identifying future implications. (p. 5).

For this study, an iterative research design was necessary. *Iterative research design* is a “succession of question and answer cycles that entails examining a given set of cases and then refining or modifying those cases on the basis of subsequent ones (Huberman & Miles, 1998, p. 186). This relates to the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser, 1965). The recursive search design permits qualitative researchers to “revise original formations, raise different questions, and come to different conclusions than anticipated” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 9).

My coding scheme included codes generated both deductively and inductively. These codes assisted in identifying patterns of behavior, individual perspectives, and outcomes. A properly devised coding scheme allowed me to retrieve particular types of data, and thus I was able to determine whether the data was idiosyncratic, or part of larger patterns. Coding also allowed me to see what types of attributes co-occurred with varying sets of outcomes for cross-case analysis. For instance I was able to examine the specific choice sets of students attending particular types of institutions, or those from low-income backgrounds to explore potential thematic connections.

I used a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo9) to classify and organize data. This program also assisted in the exploration of relationships between the data. A *hierarchical node tree* was used in NVivo9 for organization and more manageable analysis of

the data. It is a method of branching key elements of data from other key elements. The formation is then that of a tree with branches that all relate to each other in some way. A hierarchical node tree consists of containers for a “theme or topic within your data” that are organized, “moving from a general category at the top (parent node) to more specific categories (child nodes)” (QSR International, 2008, p.111). Large amounts of qualitative data can be very difficult to organize and analyze in a methodical way. Node trees are primarily used in qualitative software packages as a means of organizing data for easy access and manipulation.

Another benefit of using a qualitative data analysis software program was that it facilitated my ability to structure the large amounts of qualitative data generated in research “in meaningful and systematic ways, code that data with an extensive concept and variable scheme, and retrieve the data in ways that allow the user to evaluate patterns in the data” (Abramson, 2009, p. 71). The point of using a program such as NVivo9 is not to turn qualitative data into quantifiable data to be used for statistical analysis. Instead, NVivo9 allowed me to “reference and cross-reference occurrences in ways that make the analysis of patterns more systematic and less anecdotal” (p. 71).

### **3.2.6 Representation of data**

The results of my study are represented in a cross-case analysis format. For the purposes of this dissertation, “cases” are individuals within several settings. Huberman and Miles (1998) note that in cross-case analysis, “key processes, constructs, and explanations in play can be tested in several different configurations” (p. 193). The tension in this approach is reconciling the particular and the universal, exploring the “uniqueness of an individual’s experience while

attempting to understand generic processes at work across cases” (Silverstein, 1988, p. 426). It was my intention to represent the various themes that cut across cases as they relate to individual college choice experiences. While each chapter sought to answer a specific research question, I intended to explore those answers through the themes associated with the experiences of participants’ lived contexts.

### **3.2.7 Limitations**

There are several limitations to this particular study. First, this study embodies a small number of participants. Despite attempts to secure a diverse sample of Pittsburgh Promise scholars, the experiences of the respondents in this study may not be reflective of other Pittsburgh Promise scholars.

It was hard to anticipate how many Pittsburgh Promise recipients would be willing to participate in this study. Promise staff had shared with me that they often experienced low response rates when surveying families and scholarship recipients about various matters. I was concerned that low response rates for short paper/pencil surveys might translate into even lower response rates for 45-minute interviews. College students are often asked to participate in a variety of research and assessment projects, and response rates tend to be low (Lipka, 2011). The accountability movement has increased the amount of assessment tools used to evaluate the effectiveness of many higher education programs and offerings. Studies about college student response rates show that women are more likely to participate in these types of research, while minority are less likely (Lipka, 2011).

It is also important to consider that participating in a scholarly research is a classed experience. Respondents self-selected themselves to participate in this study. This may reflect outcomes associated with middle and upper-class parenting practices, *concerted cultivation* (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In doing so, children develop an individualized sense of self, and the ability to comfortably converse with educators and other professionals.

For some respondents, participation in research was a familiar experience. Their parents were faculty members and researchers who likely spoke about their own research projects in the home. Some of the respondents had even participated in research projects for parents' colleagues or through their own educational experiences. These respondents may have felt that their experiences in college choice were valid and worthy of the researcher's interest. Additionally, these participants anticipated their involvement in this study would help contribute to the social good.

Potential respondents may have been intimidated by the prospect of meeting a stranger to talk about this part of their lives. Students from lower social classes likely had fewer opportunities to hear about and participate in educational and social science research. Therefore, it was unfamiliar. Despite the care I put into ensuring the request to participate was clear and welcoming, terminology such as "confidentiality" and "foreseeable risks" may have been off-putting. In lower social classes, parenting strategies focus more on the accomplishment of natural growth. This approach is characterized by social lives that are spent within family environments, less participation in school and organized activities, and deference to those in authority (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Thus, potential respondents may have felt that their own experiences in college choice were unremarkable, and that they were ill-equipped to participate in an experience so far outside their own comfort zone.

Finally, respondent willingness to devote the time and energy to participate may be reflective of personal contexts and viewpoints that also may not be reflective of other Pittsburgh Promise scholars. I recognize that the potential low response rate limits my ability to achieve maximum variation. However, I believe that there was enough variation within the sample for rich analysis.

This study is also not generalizable to all merit-aid scholarship program recipients. It is important to note that there is significant variation among broad-based merit-aid scholarship programs. Some like Georgia and Tennessee's are sponsored and administered by their respective states. These programs provide scholarships to a large number of students, creating conditions that affect recipients at various points of the college choice process. The Pittsburgh Promise is not a large program. The scholarship is modest compared to other merit-aid programs that pay full tuition. Since it is a small, place-based program, it is reflected in participant demographics. To be eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise, a recipient must be a resident of Allegheny County, and have attended either a Pittsburgh public school or charter school. The demographics of these eligible scholarship recipients are much different than scholarship recipients in state-administered programs. Pittsburgh Promise recipients are reflective of a large urban population; they tend to be from lower-income households, and are more likely from a minority population.

I also recognize that this study may have limitations in regard to the influences on the students that I interviewed. They may have felt anxiety to perform or answer questions in a way that I might expect, or put the Pittsburgh Promise in a positive light. They also may have felt uncomfortable talking about their financial constraints to a middle class white researcher who has had the privilege of financial stability and significant access to higher education. Although I



reassured participants about protecting their confidentiality, and that their responses were in no way tied to their scholarship awards, there still might have had underlying insecurities that influenced their answers.

### **3.2.8 Researcher subjectivity**

I recognize that I have presuppositions and biases that might have influenced the interviewing and interpreting of the data. I have personal experience in struggling to afford higher education, and have had to avail myself of student loans at every step of my educational journey. Student loans and the responsibilities attached to them have weighed heavily on my own experiences and at times I might make incorrect assumptions about their effects on other students. I recognized that my experiences, while common, might be very different from these students. I therefore, recognized that I needed to approach the analysis of respondents' college choice experiences with an open mind.

My review of the literature and the small amount of information gleaned from a pilot study had the potential to influence my interpretation of participant interviews. As I compared what I learned from the respondents, I noticed that college choice experiences of first generation college students are not as similar as scholarly research suggests. While I respect the research that has been done on college choice, I was also willing to explore findings that diverged from assumptions in existing literature. I also recognized that I have been influenced by the deficit approach that many researchers use in studying college choice. By such a large focus on the constraints to college choice especially among students with low economic, social and cultural capital, it was easy to assume that these students are unable to exercise human agency.

However, I recognized that I needed to be open to exploring how these students exercise human agency within their own contexts.

### **3.2.9 Integrity of analysis**

A primary goal of any qualitative researcher is to produce a body of work that is recognized for its quality and credibility. Applying concepts such as “reliability” and “validity” is problematic, due to their development in the scientific and quantitative traditions. Reissman (1993) notes that there are “unresolved dilemmas”, as methodologists search for more appropriate constructs that identify integrity in qualitative research. For this study, the use of the concept of *trustworthiness*, as recommended by Denzin and Lincoln is more appropriate to describe how I ensured quality in the collection, analysis, and presentation of my data. Bazeley (2013) suggests strategies for asserting the integrity of one’s findings. The following is a discussion of my use of strategies that generated predictions, triangulated results and confirmed the accuracy of my data.

One strategy I used to ensure research quality and establish the trustworthiness of this study involved the use of a pilot study. In February 2012, I conducted a pilot study involving five recipients of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship enrolled at Slippery Rock University. I collected demographic data about each, and interviewed them using a draft interview protocol. Despite all being Slippery Rock University students and self-identifying as low-income students, there were some differences among the students. Two came from families with no prior college experience, while others had some college experience. One participant had an older brother who had graduated from college, and another was a third generation college student. Two students were African-American, and the others self-identified as White/Caucasian.

The pilot study helped me to develop and refine my earlier predictions based on the study results. Among the respondents in the pilot study, I found that cost of attendance was a significant factor, if not the most important one in deciding where to enroll in college. While there were varying degrees of parental involvement in the college enrollment decision, all participants reported their enrollment choice as being driven by the prospect of student loans. Participants reported selecting Slippery Rock University either because they would have no student loans, or that their loans would be manageable upon graduation.

I thought this was an interesting result. I had anticipated that the data derived from the interviews would support a sociological approach to college choice theory. I had also anticipated that there would be more factors influencing the outcome of recipients' college enrollment decisions, such as institutional reputation, peer influence, and sense of personal "fit". For the lower-income students in my pilot study, financial considerations were paramount. This decision-making process appears to fit the financial nexus model for college choice. However, their choice processes might also be best explained by bounded rationality, whereby Promise recipients make choices that aren't ideal, but the most satisfactory given their individual constraints. The pilot study demonstrated that I needed to take a broader approach in exploring the influence of the Pittsburgh Promise in students' college choices. I revised my research questions as I recognized the need to view the college choice process through more than one theoretical lens.

The pilot study also helped me to refine my understanding of how I could better approach issues of human agency in the interview protocol. Many of the questions I asked in the pilot study were not effective in generating reflection and meaningful responses about respondents' use of human agency during the college choice process. I responded to this problem by

revisiting human agency theory, which inspired me to develop interview protocol questions that reflected Bandura's core properties of human agency.

The pilot study also influenced my growing understanding how respondents demonstrated human agency in the college choice process. I had predicted that the \$5,000 per year scholarship might allow students to explore institutions that would have previously been out of their reach, financially. However, I was surprised to discover that students felt constrained in their choices due to their aversion to student loans. Instead of using their scholarship to "trade up" in terms of institutional type, prestige, or selectivity, these students used their Pittsburgh Promise scholarship to limit or even eliminate the need for student loans. Thus, for almost all of the students I interviewed in the pilot study, while they could have attended a more selective institution, they chose to attend Slippery Rock University in their desire to avoid student loans as much as possible. This result influenced my thinking in this matter, suggesting that exploration of all dimensions of student habitus in the college selection process might be more appropriate.

## 4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: MAKING COLLEGE CHOICES

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The students in this study came from a wide variety of backgrounds and have made a wide variety of college choices. However, for each student, the decision to attend college was underpinned by the acknowledgement that a college education is necessary for participation in at least the middle class. So, for almost all of these students, it was less a decision of *whether* to go to college, but *where* to go to college. The students in this study have chosen a range of post-secondary institutions: community colleges, Pennsylvania state system universities, selective public and private universities, and nationally respected elite universities. For some that choice was pretty straightforward, while for others it was overwhelming and at times quite frustrating. Most would find the college choice process more complex than they anticipated.

This chapter describes how the participants in my study approached the decision to enroll in a particular college or university. All of the students participating in this study were Pittsburgh Promise-eligible, and for many, the scholarship was a significant consideration in their college enrollment choice. Students' enrollment choices often boiled down to various institutional factors such as academic reputation, location, cost and curriculum. I use Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice to organize themes associated with the college choice processes of the students who participated in this study. Within this

framework, I used the stages of *predisposition*, *search* and *choice* to examine students' college choice experiences by institutional type.

## **4.2 THE THREE STAGE MODEL OF COLLEGE CHOICE**

Hossler and Gallagher's model describes three phases through which students move as they develop post-secondary aspirations, consider specific institutions, and ultimately enroll. It is considered a process model, in that it captures "elements of potential students, institutional characteristics, and the college application process" (Hendrickson, 2002, p. 403). It is also considered developmental in that each stage is associated with certain cognitive and emotional outcomes (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). The first stage is *predisposition*, which involves the development of a student's college aspirations and expectations. The second stage is *search*, in which students evaluate the possibility of enrolling in various post-secondary institutions, using institutional characteristics to narrow their choices. The last stage, *choice*, is marked by the selection of an institution and completion of the enrollment process.

### **4.2.1 Community college**

Anna was the only participant in this study who chose to attend a community college. A white, low income, first generation college student, her college choice process was marked by uncertainty and a lack of support at home. Her story demonstrates how influential the Pittsburgh

Promise was in her choice and ongoing persistence at the Community College of Allegheny College (CCAC).

#### **4.2.1.1 Predisposition.**

Anna attended the Pittsburgh's William McKinley High School, graduating with a 2.8 grade point average. She stated that in her younger years, she enjoyed learning and liked school. Early on she became interested in engineering. In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, she began participating in a "Women in Engineering" summer program at Carnegie Mellon University. She continued to attend the program throughout high school.

Anna's high school years were inconsistent, academically. As she said, "I wasn't a school person all of the time." She did well her freshman year, but in her tenth grade year she "played off." Her high school curriculum was tracked, and she was in the Pittsburgh Scholars program, which was a step up academically above the mainstream program. Right before her senior year, Anna's father passed away. "I didn't want to do the work," Anna shared, so she was moved down into the mainstream curricular track.

As she began to think seriously about her career aspirations, she debated between nursing and engineering. Talking to guidance counselors, she discovered that each major required a specific curriculum, so she felt the need to commit to a major early. She decided on nursing because, "I had been taking care of people my entire life. Everybody told me I was such a good nurse. If someone was sick, I was sent off to sit with them."

Her decision to attend college did not meet a great deal of support at home. She described her family as "workers"; her father was a carpenter and her mother has worked a series

of low-skill jobs. Anna recalls that the general message she got regarding her future plans was “go get a job.”

#### **4.2.1.2. Search**

Anna began seriously considering attending a post-secondary institution her junior year of high school. Initially she considered four-year institutions. As part of her college search she visited two schools. Her first visit, to Barry University, occurred when she went to Florida with a friend who was visiting her grandmother. While there, she and her friend met with an admissions counselor and toured the campus. She also toured Robert Morris University, an option closer to home.

It was during this time that certain criteria became very important in Anna’s college search process. The first was institutional cost. Anna said, “I started crunching numbers... I knew my Mom wasn’t going to help me. Not because she didn’t want to, she just couldn’t.” Anna felt that she was unprepared for how expensive college was, and had no idea what to expect in terms of financial aid. The Pittsburgh Promise sent Anna a letter her senior year detailing the amount of her award and the eligible schools where she would use her award. She also reported that the financial aid counselors at her school were “so helpful,” especially as she had to fill out her FAFSA by herself.

In the end, Anna never applied to any institution of higher education, due to the cost of application fees. In fact, she had decided to delay entering college. She applied for a job as a dialysis technician at a local clinic. The clinic supervisor, who is the mother of Anna’s best friend, sat Anna down and told her that she was afraid that if Anna didn’t continue on with her education now, she’d never go. She told Anna she would only hire her if she enrolled in college.



#### **4.2.1.3 Choice**

Anna enrolled at the CCAC-South campus. The cost of attendance was mitigated by Anna's Pittsburgh Promise award. In addition, she was eligible for a program that provided extra support for students entering the field of nursing. Anna received \$250 a month to take study skills and other remedial courses to better prepare her for the academic rigor of the nursing curriculum.

Anna readily admits that the Pittsburgh Promise had a huge impact on her college aspirations. She says without it, "I might not have gone, or finished. It would have been too much money." She also feels that she wouldn't have graduated with her associate's degree, nor would she have plans to enroll at California University of Pennsylvania, using the remainder of her Promise scholarship to work towards her bachelors of science in nursing.

#### **4.2.2 Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education**

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) is comprised of 14 state-funded universities, enrolling over 120,000 undergraduate students. These institutions offer the lowest cost four year baccalaureate degree programs in Pennsylvania ("Why PASSHE?," 2013). Three participants in this study chose to attend a PASSHE institution. Judy, Karen and Todd all come from homes where few or no family members had enrolled in higher education. In addition, all three were very concerned about the issue of paying for college. Each of their college search processes appeared arbitrary, lacking an overall systematic approach.

#### **4.2.2.1 Predisposition**

The three study participants who chose PASSHE schools reported different motivations for attending college. Judy and Todd, both African-American, shared that their motivation for attending college was to get a good education. They enjoyed learning in high school, and looked forward to continuing that experience in college.

For Todd, the personal motivation for college came late. He described himself as, “a goofy kid at that point. Just kind of out there... I was always a smart kid, but I never applied myself, never.” It wasn’t until an intervention with a teacher and high school counselor who met with Todd and his mother to discuss his abilities, did Todd believe he could achieve better academically with more effort on his part. Another motivational factor for Todd was his interest in playing football beyond the high school level.

Karen’s motivation to attend college stemmed from a desire for economic prosperity. While both of her parents had good jobs, she related how her father had been laid off after 20 years as an employee for the county. She said that with a degree, “I don’t even want to have to worry... like I just want to make money. I want to have a nice lavish living.”

All three students came from homes where there was little or no family experience with post-secondary education. Only one student, Todd, had a parent with a college education. His mother attended California University of Pennsylvania (Cal U) for a nursing degree. Todd’s sister also attended Cal U. Judy’s mother had attended college off and on throughout her childhood. Neither of Karen’s parents had attended college, nor had her two older siblings.

However, despite the lack of higher education experience in their families, each student was encouraged to attend college. Karen stated that her parents brought up the topic of college “numerous times.” Judy described her parent’s encouragement as, “kinda always beaten into my

head. I never really had a choice to think about it.” Todd said that his parents encouraged college, stating his mother “always believed in me, but a part of her was like I don’t know if he is ever really going to try.” When Todd’s grades began improving, “she was really surprised I actually started to turn it around.”

Judy and Karen both took college prep courses in high school. Judy, who attended the Abraham Lincoln charter school, benefitted from small class sizes. For instance, her calculus class had six students in it, which allowed them to “move pretty quickly through stuff.” She also took Advanced Placement (AP) English and AP History.

Karen’s experience in high school was a bit different. She had transferred to William McKinley from a private high school her sophomore year. She enjoyed William McKinley much more, because it wasn’t as socially restrictive as her private school. While at William McKinley, Karen was in the Pittsburgh Scholars program, which provided access to honors level courses and some Advanced Placement (AP) options as well. Happier in her environment, her grades significantly improved, jumping from a 3.0 to a 3.6 by the end of her junior year.

#### **4.2.2.2 Search.**

The college search process for these three study participants lacked focus and direction. Judy described it as “confusing.” She began to seriously search for colleges her senior year. She was living with her grandmother at the time, saying that “it was kind of up in the air what school everyone wanted me to go to.” However, her parents did set one rule – Judy wasn’t allowed to attend college in the city her first year. They felt it was important for her to experience life beyond the city of Pittsburgh. So, “Robert Morris, Carlow, Pitt... that went out the window.”

So, she “winged it.” Judy wanted to go out of state, but still remain close to family. The option of Farleigh Dickenson University in New Jersey bubbled up as a possibility, as it was right around the corner from her aunt. The institution also appealed to Judy because its size and the way the campus looked. She visited Penn State but decided it was too big. She also applied to Drexel, York College, and Slippery Rock University. When asked, Judy was unable to articulate what it was about some of these schools that appealed to her, or why she had applied to them.

Todd’ search process also lacked direction and focus. He considered the University of Florida, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), Cal U, and Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). However, he had a difficult time figuring out the likelihood of acceptance and his ability to succeed at some of these schools. In reference to CMU, he wondered “what if I get into this school and it is too much for me? It kind of scared me basically.” In researching Pitt, again he decided not to apply. Anticipating that Pitt would have high admissions standards regarding the rigor and breadth of his high school courses, Todd explained, “I didn’t think I had the foreign language and that stuff.”

Karen initially looked at large, well-known schools, including West Virginia University (WVU), Pitt, Penn State, and Temple. She was looking for a typical collegiate environment, with big crowds at football games and lots of school spirit. She applied to Pitt and Penn State, but was only accepted at their branch campuses. Karen was very disappointed by those options. The branch campuses were, in her opinion, very pale comparisons to the experiences she anticipated having on the main campuses. During her senior year, Karen’s mother became ill. Feeling that she needed to limit her choices to be closer to home, Temple ceased to be a viable option.

So, in April of her senior year, Karen found herself applying to a new round of colleges. This time, she shifted her sights to local, state system campuses. She applied to Slippery Rock University (SRU) because she had a close friend enrolled there, and Edinboro University. Ultimately, while she liked the campus, she felt Edinboro was “in the middle of nowhere.”

Judy, Todd and Karen’s college search strategies lacked sophistication. They weren’t able to put together a list of potential schools that included some safe options as well as “dream” schools. Their choice sets were also limited because they struggled to determine which potential schools would be good matches for them, financially and academically. Therefore, none of their search processes included all the available college options.

However, all three students felt they received considerable support from high school teachers and guidance counselors. The support they received from high school staff helped them in identifying some potential college options, prepared them for the participation in the college admission process, and assisted them with filing for federal financial aid. This support kept their college aspirations alive.

Todd described his high school, Herbert Hoover High School, as being “so involved” with the college search process. A guidance counselor would meet with him monthly to discuss where he was in the college search process. His high school provided assistance to students registering for the SATs and ACTs, as well as those filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Todd reported that guidance counselors in his high school “got us in touch with people there in the colleges to get us talking and enter the [admissions] process and all that.” The high school also sponsored tours to visit various Pennsylvania colleges and universities. Looking back, Todd said that because his high school provided so much assistance in the college search process, his parents “really didn’t have to do that much.”

The public charter school, Abraham Lincoln, also provided significant support for college-bound students like Judy. She said that she would “go to them before I [would] go to my parents.” Judy’s guidance counselor would meet with her to look over potential colleges and go over the application process for each one with her. The guidance counselor would also contact schools on Judy’s behalf, to gather more information and clarify what materials were needed for her application packet. Another guidance counselor at Abraham Lincoln provided seminars on the college admission process, covering topics such as filling out college applications, what to do on the campus visit, and putting together a resume. Judy described her high school as “so hands on.” She said that she could “still call my high school... and they will help me.”

Of the three, Karen recalled the least amount of support from her high school. William McKinley is a large high school with 1,351 enrolled students, which she thought might have contributed to the lack of individual attention. Karen felt that the “guidance counselors don’t help you with much.” She initiated contact with the guidance staff, saying that “I was chasing my guidance counselor down all the time to get my transcripts.” She did admit that William McKinley “did a real good job... having schools come in and talk to everybody.” Like the others, Karen reported that the school provided workshops for college-bound students and their parents. Karen remembers her parents attending a workshop on filling out the FAFSA and applying for Stafford Loans. Looking back, she said it was “definitely helpful.”

#### **4.2.2.3 Choice**

For Karen, Todd and Judy, the final decision came down to cost. Judy said that cost became the most significant factor “when the financial aid packets started coming in.” Tuition, room and board at Slippery Rock was mostly covered by Judy’s Promise scholarship and grants. Her other

college options meant that she would graduate with considerable loan debt. For instance, attending Drexel would require \$40,000 in student loans. Judy noted that “when you look at it that way, it starts to look pretty clear.” Judy anticipates that she will graduate from Slippery Rock with about \$13,000 in student loans. While she says that her parents are concerned about the amount, she isn’t too worried about paying it back. Judy reasons, “You make more than that in your first job, no matter what your job is.”

Todd recalled that his final decision to attend Cal U came down to the fact that “it felt more reasonable.” Todd realized early on in his college search that institutions like the University of Florida were out of state and therefore tuition was “astronomical.” Even though it is a state-related institution, Todd was surprised how expensive Pitt was compared to Cal U. Enrolling at Cal U became the clear choice. Because the Pittsburgh Promise covered his tuition, and he didn’t live on campus, Todd only ended up taking out a small loan to have money on hand in case anything happened to his car. He described it as “an insurance kind of loan”, of approximately \$5,000.

Karen also cited cost as her primary reason for enrolling at Slippery Rock University. Karen had to take into consideration that she was not awarded the full Promise scholarship due to the fact she had attended private school until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Once the financial aid package came back, it became clear that Karen would have to use student loans to help pay for college. Karen recalls her father saying to her “If you go to Slippery Rock, you’re going to come out with a car payment. If you go to WVU, you’re going to come out with a house payment.” She said that “after I saw how much WVU was going to cost me, I was just like out of state is not going to happen.” However, in terms of loans, she is unsure exactly how much she might owe. “My dad took care of it all when it comes to my loans. I don’t look at anything.”

### **4.2.3 Private/selective colleges and universities**

This group of higher education institutions include selective private colleges and the state-related universities. These institutions generally have higher admissions standards than state system schools, and they also tend to be considerably more expensive. Seven study participants enrolled in this category of post-secondary institutions. Their college searches tended to be more sophisticated, while matters of academic reputation and specific curricular programs, as well as potential costs, drove their decision-making.

#### **4.2.3.1 Predisposition**

The seven students in this group attended either Pittsburgh William McKinley High School, or the Pittsburgh Rutherford B. Hayes Creative and Performing Arts High School. All self-identified as white/Caucasian, and six were eligible for free or reduced lunch while in high school. Jennifer, who attended George Washington High School, was eligible for free or reduced lunch. All of the participants had a least one parent who attended college. Parental occupations included accountant, realtor, event planner, and author.

Study participants enrolled in private or selective college and universities expressed two different motivations for attending college. Like the other participants in this study, some spoke about needing a college degree to compete for higher salaried jobs. As Bruce noted, “You go to college, you’re going to make money and you’re going to make more money than with just working.” His father did not finish his college degree, but Bruce recognized that times are



different. “He got to a point in his job where he was able to get [into] management without that degree, but now even for that they want a college degree.”

All the participants enrolled in private or selective institutions were also motivated by the opportunity to further their education. They grew up in households where going to college was the norm (at least for them). Bruce commented that “I guess I always enjoyed school... it just seemed abnormal to be anything else other than in school.” Frank, who is enrolled at Pitt, shared, “I wanted to learn. I wanted to be part of an academic setting where I have the freedom to expand my own horizons.” Christine reported a similar sentiment, saying, “Well, I just love school. I do. I think after high school if I had just stopped with school it wouldn’t have been enough.” For all the students in this group, they hadn’t really considered doing anything else. As Frank said, “I sort of had the idea from since elementary school that I would end up in college. I never really had any other thoughts about where I would go.”

Others tied their desire to learn to their career aspirations. Bruce, who is pursuing architecture, and Wendy, who is enrolled in a physical therapy program, realized that their vocational aspirations required at least a bachelor’s degree. Jennifer voiced that understanding as well, stating that “I decided I wanted to be a counselor, and everybody said you’ve got to go to college. I’m like fine, because I loved to learn anyways.”

Parents had a significant influence on these students in the predisposition phase of the search process. These study participants shared that they had many conversations with their parents about their college aspirations. Melissa said that “It was always an expectation that I would go to college, it was not where it was like I was under pressure or something, it just felt like something that was the natural life progression.” Frank also couldn’t remember the first time his parents talked with him about going to college. He said, “I don’t know a specific time,

but generally I sort of had the idea from since elementary school that I would end up in college. I never had any other thoughts about where I would go.” Jennifer shared that her mother reinforced a college-going mentality through small gestures as well. “She’d write to me a lot when I was a child, she encouraged me to get good grades and she was very proud when I got good grades.”

Study participants described their parents as very involved with their educations from a very young age. For example, Christine’s parents took quite an active role in her educational journey.

From a very young age, they would sit down and help me with my homework and there was a big emphasis on reading...I switched schools a lot. And then I think also about him [her father] homeschooling me, so I really had a one-on-one education experience with one of my parents... by the time I was getting into high school I had been to four different schools. I had started right over here at the first charter school of Pittsburgh. My dad was really involved. My parents have been always really involved in any school that I went to.

Alex shared that his parents not only encouraged him to get good grades, but to also get involved in other activities while in high school. They felt it would make him more well-rounded. “They told me I needed to be on one of the sports teams...it was starting the trend of being involved and doing things and being active.”

#### **4.2.3.2 Search**

Study participants in this group seriously considered more institutions than those enrolled in community college or state-system universities. The average number of institutions the study participants attending state-system universities applied to was four. Most study participants attending private or selective institutions applied to six or more institutions. In addition, they conducted more sophisticated and targeted college searches.

Like others in this group, Christine framed her search in terms of a “dream” school and “back-up” schools. While she was in high school, she had the opportunity to study abroad in Spain. She loved the experience and seriously began to consider higher education opportunities in other countries. She identified the University of Glasgow in Scotland as a possibility. “It had a great biology and genetics program, and that is what I was interested in.” Christine had never visited the campus, but “for some reason, I very much fell in love with it.”

With the University of Glasgow as her “dream” school, Christine began to select other possibilities as “back-up” schools. She used the College Board website to sort through schools to “see which ones I liked and if they were good.” She also paid close attention to specific programs and majors, seeing how they stacked up in college rankings and reviews. Ultimately, she narrowed her list to Princeton, Temple, Drexel, Notre Dame, and the University of Southern California. West Chester University was designated as her “safety school”, a school where she was very likely to gain admittance, and one that her parents felt they could comfortably afford. However, Christine and her parents never considered it a serious possibility, as they were reasonably sure that she would be accepted by, and they could afford many of her other college options.

Christopher also selected a “dream” school, Washington and Jefferson University. This was an institution where he had less certainty of being accepted, or being able to afford to attend. While he applied to a large number of schools, they all shared similar criteria. They were mostly small to mid-size private colleges and universities with strong broadcasting and journalism programs. To evaluate different post-secondary possibilities, Christopher spent a great deal of time online. He described his online searches as an opportunity to collect information such as curricular offerings, the average GPA of incoming first year students, retention rates, graduation

rates, and college costs. He also paid attention to student reviews, saying, “I wanted to check what people thought, so that was one of my big things.”

It was important to Christopher that the schools he was considering had a sense of community. “I really wanted a place that felt like you are a person and not a number.” This desire was reflected in the list of schools he applied to, which included Washington and Jefferson University, Robert Morris University, Duquesne University, College of William and Mary, Hofstra University, and St. John’s University. Each of these institutions is relatively small, with residential campuses and an emphasis on holistic student development. Of these, he said, “Robert Morris was always, like, I hate saying, the back-up option, but that is what I truly viewed it as.”

Some respondents in this category of schools conducted a very targeted search process. These students had vary particular goals regarding their higher education experience, and only considered schools that fell into a narrow range of options. One example is Bruce. An architecture major at Philadelphia University, he applied to only three post-secondary institutions. In terms of focusing his college search, he said, “I knew what I wanted to do was architecture...obviously the program was huge.” He remembers spending a lot of time online looking at specific architectural programs. Bruce said he paid particular attention to the “integrity of the schools.” By this, he meant whether the architecture program was accredited or not. A National Architecture Accrediting Board (NAAB) program prepares students to become a licensed architect. “Pitt has one [architecture program], but it’s not accredited, it’s only a four-year degree and it’s more I guess like an arts degree...so it’s not as well-rounded I guess.” Bruce knew enough about the architecture field to understand that an NAAB accredited program would provide the best pathway to his professional goals.

Students who enrolled in private or selective college and universities spoke of having both parental and school staff support during the college search process. Wendy, who ultimately enrolled at Northeastern University in Boston, stated that she benefitted from both parent and teacher support. She said William McKinley “was a huge school, shout out to them, because they did a great job... my counselor knew who I was, what schools I wanted to go to.” Looking back, she realized that having support from school and from home during the college search process helped her to successfully identify potential schools and put together strong college applications. She added, “What I think makes the big difference is knowing that you have someone at school, and you know, people at home that support you.”

#### **4.2.3.3 Choice**

Balancing the desire for strong curricular programs with affordable institutional cost characterized the final enrollment decisions for every student in this group. Christine, whose heart was set on attending the University of Glasgow, described her decision this way, “Things didn’t work out with Glasgow because they couldn’t give my parents an exact financial answer for how much it would be...that was awful.” However, Christine felt that one of her back-up schools, Drexel University, was a good second option. She visited the campus a second time, and while there learned more about their film program. Feeling comfortable about the quality of the program and reassured about the experiences she would have while there, she decided to enroll. It wasn’t the cheapest school she could have attended, “I could have gone to Temple for four years for the amount it would have taken me to go to Drexel in one.” However, narrowing down her schools by eliminating ones she could not afford, she was able to “look less at cost and look more at the program at that point.”

Melissa initially enrolled at Columbia College in Chicago as a vocal performance major, but after a semester there, started the college search process again. “I was unhappy there because I wasn’t making friends quickly and I was bored in my music classes.” Deciding to come home and attend college in Pittsburgh, she quickly starting thinking about Duquesne. She had a piano and voice teacher in Pittsburgh who “both graduated from Duquesne, and they’re people that I really respect, and they’re talented and they know a lot about music.” Feeling confident about the quality of the music program, she applied for admittance to Duquesne and began practicing for her vocal audition.

A significant incentive to come back to Pittsburgh was the availability of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. Melissa noted that “if I had no scholarship money, it would be about the same” cost as attending Columbia. However, with music and academic scholarships from Duquesne, along with her Promise money, “we’re paying like maybe \$17,000 a year, which is a lot better than \$30,000.”

Frank admitted that the Pittsburgh Promise “definitely” influenced his college enrollment decision. To maximize his ability to fund a college education, he applied to many Pennsylvania schools with the hopes of using his Pittsburgh Promise award. His enrollment decision came down to Pitt, Washington University in St. Louis, and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. All three had well-regarded bioengineering departments and offered opportunities for meaningful undergraduate research.

His final decision was a tough one. He was really impressed with his visit to Johns Hopkins. They have “the number one bioengineering program in the country. When I got into that I was super-surprised.” However, cost and the Pittsburgh Promise award was “a big factor.” For Frank, Johns Hopkins was “the hardest one to let go of. I liked it a lot.”

Ultimately, the decision to enroll at Pitt boiled down to the fact that with an academic scholarship and the Pittsburgh Promise, Frank ended up paying nothing for tuition, room, and board. While the bioengineering program doesn't have the reputation that Johns Hopkins has, the University of Pittsburgh provides some unique experiences that appealed to Frank. One was the opportunity for bioengineering students to participate in ongoing research. Generally, "it's really hard for freshman bioengineering students to get research positions in a bioengineering laboratory" due to their lack of classroom and lab experience. Another was a specific program for engineering students to study abroad. "It sounded like a really interesting program, and my parents put it out, like, if I went to Pitt... we would have the extra money and be able to pay for something like that."

#### **4.2.4 Elite universities**

Elite universities are characterized by very selective admissions criteria. All of the institutions represented by the respondents in this group accepted less than 28% of applicants, with half boasting an admissions rate of less than 13% ("Compare Colleges," 2013). Students in this group enrolled at Stanford University, Boston University, the University of California at Berkeley, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Chicago, and Carnegie Mellon University. Elite institutions also come with high tuition rates. Yearly tuition, room and board costs for this group of students ranged from \$50,752 to \$61,418 ("Compare Colleges," 2013).

The college search process for the respondents in this category looked different from the searches conducted by students in the other three groups. Students attending elite institutions were very specific about the types of universities they were looking at. However, respondents in

this category seriously considered a greater number of institutions. Most applied to eight or more universities. For almost all students attending elite institutions in this study, cost was not a significant factor in their college choice decision.

#### **4.2.4.1 Predisposition**

Like the students who enrolled in private and/or selective institutions, respondents in this group also grew up with the expectation that higher education was in their future. Many referred to their future college plans as an “assumption.” Sarah described her higher education aspirations by saying college “was definitely talked about and assumed, I guess. I mean both my parents went to college. My mom is a teacher. My dad was a professor for a while so college was always kind of in the cards, yeah.” Benjamin also expected that he would attend college. “I had considered college all of my life, just pretty much assumed.”

In talking about where college fit in her life goals, Sarah also pointed out that “both my parent have graduate degrees so like for me the question of attending college was never whether I would go or not. I mean I actually always assumed I would go to graduate or professional school, too.” Michael echoed this outlook on his educational future. For him it was “always an assumption that I would go” to college. Along the way, he realized that “going to grad school” was also very likely.

Expectations for graduate education among respondents in this group are closely tied to their career ambitions. Benjamin, who attends the University of California at Berkeley, is a double major in computer science and astrophysics. On a very practical level, he realizes that

Going into something like computer science and astrophysics is kind of like, hinting towards graduate school. It’s all research. What do you do with a bachelor’s in astrophysics? Nothing. Literally nothing. You work at a coffee shop. I mean that graduate school is probably on the horizon.



Beth also anticipates that she will be furthering her education past a bachelor's. While she is interested in the sciences and had considered a future as a researcher, an illness her junior year of high school made her realize the role of physician fit her much better. As she saw it, "I think being a doctor is inherently a social rather than a technical role and I think that I'm relatively good at interacting with people." Beth sees her bachelor's experience as one step in a long educational path towards being a doctor.

#### **4.2.4.2 Search**

Parental involvement in the search process for this group of respondents takes shape in several different ways. Because these parents had significant amounts of higher education experience themselves, they were a natural source of information and advice during the college search process. Sarah recalls that "my primary resource was really my parents...they really pushed me to kind of apply to these tougher schools and everything." Kimberly said that her parents were "never overbearing", but definitely involved. They were "on top of" making sure she had a challenging high school course schedule, and had signed up to take her SATs. They also engaged her in conversations about different colleges, asking her "what are you thinking, how do you feel?" about certain institutions.

When it came to applications, parents encouraged respondents to aim high. Michael talked about his parents encouraging him to consider good schools outside of the Pittsburgh area. He had applied and gotten into Pitt. However, "that was sort of never something I really wanted to do. I wanted to be away from home." His parents agreed. Michael said, "They thought it was important that I get away and see a new city and learn to be on my own."

Benjamin said that his parents were able to provide him specific advice and information about programs and schools that he was considering. “My dad is well-versed in the academic community. He does a lot of research. He know all about where people are doing research, what kind of research... serious research, not serious research. He lent a good perspective on that.” When it came to networking as a part of the application and admissions process, “they knew what I needed to do and who I need to contact.”

A search process focusing on elite colleges and universities can be an expensive endeavor. While elite university respondents rarely spoke about this aspect of the search process, it is important to recognize that parents funded the cost of applications, as well as travel to visit prospective institutions. With application fees as high as \$90, the cost of just applying to elite universities can be substantial. Many of these students applied to eight or more institutions. Two students, Sarah and Benjamin, did bi-coastal college searches. For Benjamin, his search process included two separate trips to the west coast. The first was to visit Stanford, and on the second, he visited Berkeley and Harvey Mudd College. Others, while limiting their college searches to a particular region, still made multiple college visits.

College visits among this group were family endeavors. Kelly, who was seeking out schools with strong music programs and a good liberal arts curriculum, needed to audition at every institution she applied. Because auditions were held at specific times of the year, she made at least two trips to some campuses. Kelly sees her parent’s involvement as “important because they were there to make sure that I had a schedule, that I knew my deadlines.” Michael described his campus visits with his parents as a series of road trips, going “from college campus to college campus.”

Sarah described the assistance she received from school staff as being secondary to the support she received from her parents. “I didn’t really get that much assistance of that nature in school...just in the rigorous classes, in writing recommendations, and the extracurricular activities that teachers promote.” Kimberly also shared that perspective. “I usually just turned to my parents.” She felt that the available guidance counselors at William McKinley didn’t have the time to provide one-on-one assistance. “I really couldn’t go to them and have long conversations about what you should do.” Benjamin felt that the staff at William McKinley was “helpful”, but “a lot of it was standard things”, such as SAT reminders, AP test registration, and writing recommendation letters. Thus, Benjamin also viewed his high school staff as “a helpful resource”, rather than having an influential role in his college search.

#### **4.2.4.3 Choice**

Only one student attending an elite institution in this study considered cost as an important consideration in selecting where to enroll. Kelly, who was eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school, found herself negotiating with CMU to get a better financial aid package. Kelly said that she “told them this is how much Duquesne provided” with the hope that CMU would match Duquesne’s financial aid package.

For Kelly, the availability of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship influenced her decision as well. Financial aid, a music scholarship, the Pittsburgh Promise and loans are what it takes to cover tuition, room and board at CMU. When asked if she would have made the same college choice without the Pittsburgh Promise, she replied “my parents would say no.” She feels that it “would have been impossible” to attend CMU without “more loans.” With a “little over

\$20,000” in student loans currently, Kelly thinks would have been double that without the \$5,000 Pittsburgh Promise award each year.

For the remaining respondents in this group, cost was not among the top three criteria they used in deciding where to enroll. According to Benjamin, cost “didn’t really” factor into his decision. “My parents said ‘don’t really think about cost, we’ve got that covered’.” When asked about whether he considered the availability of the Pittsburgh Promise, Benjamin said, “I don’t think it had a huge influence financially.” He recalls his parents told him to consider it, but not to limit himself to Promise-eligible institutions.

Kimberly had similar conversations with her parents. She reported that her parents encouraged her to “choose the best school that you can choose rather than be concerned about the costs.” While she did apply to Pitt as a back-up school, she never seriously considered attending Pitt and using her Promise award. A \$12,000 scholarship at Brown helps Kimberly defray the cost of tuition, room and board at Brown. At \$56,000 per year, Kimberly feels that the expense is worth it. “What I am getting out of Brown is much stronger than what I am getting out of Pitt. Both in terms of growth as a person and education. And what it will allow me to achieve further in life.”

Criteria that were important to respondents in this group included academic reputation and campus culture. However, academic reputation was not initially named by some respondents as a significant consideration in their college search process. It often became evident as I reviewed with students the schools to which they had applied. For instance, after reviewing the list of schools that Michael had applied to, which included Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, and Yale, I asked him if academic reputation was important. He said, “Definitely. When you are like applying to, I mean I applied to Princeton and Yale. When you

are applying to those sorts of schools, you are obviously paying attention.” When asked why academic reputation mattered, Sarah said, “those were the types that I kind of saw as supplying the best opportunities to people.”

### 4.3 CONCLUSION

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three stage model of college choice provides a clear picture of the process Pittsburgh Promise-eligible students went about collecting and assessing various types of information about post-secondary institutions. Each participant in this study described a process that began with a *predisposition* stage, where their own educational experiences coupled with different sources of encouragement helped them to form post-secondary aspirations. The *search* stage involved identifying potential institutions of higher education and collecting the information necessary to make enrollment decisions. *Choice* was the process by which the students determined which college or university to attend.

Breaking this process down by institutional type revealed similarities among student choice processes within each group. Anna described a college choice process that was narrowed down to the local community college by lack of other affordable options. The college choice process for students attending PASSHE institutions also lacked focus, partially because they had trouble acquiring information that might have served to expand their choices. These students had higher aspirations, but came up short in their ideal college choices due to academic and financial limitations. Students attending selective and elite institutions conducted very similar college search processes. Their decisions were made based on lots of information gathered from a variety of sources, and their enrollment decisions were not constrained by cost.

Given that lower-income students in this study were more likely to be enrolled in less selective institutions, it is not surprising that students attending community college and PASSHE schools cited cost as their most important criteria in their college search. Study participants enrolled at more selective institutions were more likely to make their enrollment decisions based on intuitional characteristics such as academic reputation and campus culture. The strength of the Hossler and Gallagher model is that it is based on action. We are able to see what actions students take, and what actions are taken on their behalf that serve to culminate in a college choice decision. However, this model makes it difficult to see the college choice process for low-income and minority students when they are represented in a wide range of institutional types.

## **5.0 CHAPTER FIVE: UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE APPROACHES TO COLLEGE CHOICE**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

Comprehensive process models of college choice view the journey to college as a linear progression from the development of aspirations through a series of steps ultimately leading to college enrollment. These models “capture elements of potential students, institutional characteristics, and the college application process” (Hendrickson, 2002, p. 403). Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provide examples of robust comprehensive models describing a process that occurs over time, while providing numerous variables to consider.

In this study, each student’s journey to that point was also shaped by certain aspects of students’ environments such as family background, personal college aspirations, eligibility criteria for the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship, and high school experiences. The disadvantaged students in this study have lived environments and experiences that serve to limit their options in the college choice process. To understand the experiences of low-income and minority students, and explore why these students are more likely to enroll in less selective institutions, college choice models need to address variables influencing access and equity in college choice.

In this chapter, I explore the utility of models that better address the complexities of the college choice processes experienced by participants in this study. I use Laura Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice to explore and discuss that process for different groups of students represented in this study. The themes in this chapter are largely themes associated with several college choice models. New themes that emerged during the coding and analysis process included "Investment Decisions Regarding Loans", "Influence of Siblings", and "The Promise and Elite College Choices."

## **5.2 LIMITATIONS OF PROCESS MODELS IN UNDERSTANDING RESPONDENTS' COLLEGE CHOICES**

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice provides a useful framework for examining the process whereby college-bound students collect and weigh various pieces of information about postsecondary institutions. In this study, the Hossler and Gallagher model is useful in exploring what the *predisposition*, *search* and *choice* phases look like for students enrolling in different types of institutions. For instance, there were several similarities among the participants in this study who enrolled in Pennsylvania state higher education institutions. These students had parents with little or no experience in higher education. However, all were encouraged to pursue post-secondary education. Their college search processes were not particularly sophisticated or focused, but each student received support from their high school staff that provided critical pieces of needed information. Ultimately, these students chose schools that were the best academic option given what they could afford.



The students in this study who attended an elite university also conducted college searches that shared many characteristics. While the similar themes of their college search processes were interesting, it was also important to note how their college search experiences differed from study participants who enrolled in less selective higher education categories. Such a comparison makes it clear that not all students who participated in this study entered the college choice process with the same privileges and opportunities.

Research in college choice has moved away from broad applications of college choice models, such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) comprehensive framework, to concentrate on the many variables that influence if and where a student enrolls in college. This represents a shift in focus "to one of access and equity for the increasingly diverse student population in the United States today, drawing attention to the stratification in higher education" (Bergerson, 2009, p. 34).

A limitation of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model is that it does not take into account how a student's social context shapes college choice processes. Grouping student responses in this study by institutional type revealed some issues pertaining to social class. Most notable is that low-income and minority students were concentrated in the less selective types of institutions. The experiences of those students were sometimes lost as I sought to portray a representation of students' collective experience by institution in the college choice process. Viewed through the framework of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three stage model of college choice, it was difficult to understand how some low income and minority students found their way to more selective institutions, while others did not. What is needed is a model that accounts for how a student's habitus influences the college search process at all stages, from predisposition to choice.

The Hossler and Gallagher model also limits the exploration of some aspects of the student experience influencing college choice, such as broader social phenomena and the political environment. McDonough, Ventresca, and Outcalt (2000) note that sources of information associated with the college search process have shifted over time, benefitting students with available access and an extensive social network. Ideally, college choice models should be able to account for how some students in this study had access to and used available sources of information, while others did not. The policies regarding Pittsburgh Promise eligibility criteria influenced students in the predisposition, search and choice stages. However, Hossler and Gallagher don't address merit aid programs specifically, so one is left to infer its place as a "financial consideration" in the search and perhaps choice stages.

### **5.3 ADVANTAGES OF PERNA'S MODEL IN UNDERSTANDING RESPONDENTS' COLLEGE CHOICES**

Emerging college choice models attempt to more accurately portray the college choice experience of diverse groups of students. Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model of college access and choice provides a more complete framework to examine the experiences of the respondents in this study. For these students, their college choice decisions were characterized by two separate processes that sometimes overlapped. In one process, respondents weighed the expected benefits and costs of college attendance in general, while the other choice process considered the costs and benefits associated with enrolling in a particular institution. However, these choice processes were heavily influenced by the context of their lived experience.

Perna identifies four contexts of lived experience. One is the student's habitus. This includes demographic characteristics, as well as measures of available social and cultural capital. The second examines the school and community context. The third layer in Perna's college choice model includes marketing and recruitment activities of higher education institutions, as well as individual institutional characteristics. The fourth and last layer takes into account a student's social, economic and policy environments.

By combining sociological approaches to college choice with rational human capital investment models, Perna suggests this provides a framework for understanding differences across groups in student college choice. It helps to answer the important question of "*How do experiences within the four layers of social contexts influence students' perceptions of benefits and costs as they pertain college attendance and institutional choice?*" Perna's (2006) approach assumes that "the pattern of educational attainment is not universal, but may vary across racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups" (p. 115). While respondents in this study shared similarities in the college choice process by institutional type, the data also revealed similarities in the college-choice experiences within demographic groups, regardless of the institutional type in which they ultimately enrolled.

The following section explores the themes associated with college choice in my study using Perna's proposed conceptual model as a framework. Of particular interest is examining the college choice experiences of the respondents in this study with regards to gender, race and socioeconomic status. This section first looks at the human capital investment segment of Perna's model to analyze the themes among demographic groups as respondents weighed the costs and benefits of higher education. The following section addresses themes associated with the four sociological contextual layers in the model. Together, the two perspectives in Perna's

conceptual model should provide another means of examining how different variables have influenced the college-choice decisions of Promise-eligible students in this study.

#### **5.4 ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN CAPITAL INVESTMENT MODEL**

As Perna (2006) conceives it, the human capital investment model is nested within four layers of context. Within the habitus portion of the model, students anticipate the benefits of higher education, such as access to better paying jobs and increased personal development. Students also weigh the anticipated costs of attending college, including tuition expenses and foregone earnings. These calculations are influenced by a student's level of college readiness and the family resources available to support the student's enrollment in college (Perna, 2006).

##### **5.4.1 Demand for higher education**

Demand for higher education in Perna's conceptual model is shaped by academic preparation and academic achievement. Quality and intensity of the high school curriculum influences a student's college aspirations (Perna, 2005). Participants in this study related different experiences regarding the quality of their education based on the curricular track to which they were assigned. Karen was eventually placed in the mainstream curricular program after experiencing some problems at school. Looking back, she said, "I don't think they prepare you that well. I never studied, I never did homework, but in the end I got 3.6." Karen explained that students who were typically in the lower curricular tracks were treated differently than those taking college-prep and Advanced Placement courses. She said, "I feel like schools, like the

Pittsburgh schools, don't have faith that the kids are even going to go anywhere at that point, so they just – they don't care.” She backed up this statement by noting that teachers in her classes encouraged students to attend informational sessions with visiting colleges like CCAC, ITT Tech, and the other “simple schools”. Karen perceived the teachers and staff believed that “you don't have a chance to go to the big schools...it's not equal, it's weird”. Karen suggested there may be reasons for the attitude of school staff. She had seen students disrespect teachers in her classes at William McKinley, so “so a lot of teachers just want to go there, get through their day and leave”.

For students assigned to a more challenging curricular track, they reported higher levels of academic rigor and teacher quality. Christine shared that “my teachers were amazing. They pushed a lot of us to take the AP even if they didn't think we would get a five or a four.” Judy pointed out that, “Abraham Lincoln is a college prep school...when I got to college, I was doing half the things I already did in high school. I felt I was well-prepared for college.” Judy stated that she also benefitted from well-qualified teachers.

My teachers were also professors. So, my AP history teacher was a professor at Duquesne teaching the same thing. Or my environmental science teacher was an environmental scientist before she started working at the school. My biology teacher was a biologist in France. So it's like they knew what they were talking about.

For students in this study who were not high academic achievers in high school, opportunities to be challenged academically were critical in their aspirations for college. Anna participated in a dual enrollment program at CCAC her senior year. She took an “Intro to Biology” course, which she said, “went horribly wrong.” When she got her schedule, she thought TR meant Thursdays, not Tuesday-Thursday. So, “I was only going Thursdays and I couldn't figure out why I was missing all of this stuff.” She laughed about it while sharing the

story, and in hindsight, said the dual enrollment course was the most important experience she had in high school to help prepare her for college.

Todd, who also struggled academically in high school, benefitted through an internship program Herbert Hoover High School offered as part of the curriculum. Todd completed an internship through the Young Preservationists, a non-profit organization in Pittsburgh. He thoroughly enjoyed the experience, and it had a serious influence on his choice of major, history. Through this internship, Todd also became acquainted with the chairman of the organization, who is a CMU graduate. He took a personal interest in Todd, encouraging him to consider Carnegie Mellon as part of his college search. Eventually, he took Todd on a visit to the CMU campus. Reflecting on the campus visit, Todd said that it opened his eyes to other college possibilities, even if he didn't seriously pursue CMU as an option.

#### **5.4.2 Academic achievement**

Academic achievement is often measured by high school grades or standardized test scores from college entrance exams. Participants in this study had high school grade point averages (GPA) that ranged from 2.8 to 4.0. The GPA's of the low income respondents averaged 3.28, while the average GPA of their wealthier counterparts averaged 3.78.

Research shows that students with greater high school achievement are more likely to enroll in a four year institution (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Perna, 2000). This was reflected in this study, as the study participant with the lowest high school GPA, Anna, enrolled at a community college. Anna said that she didn't have a strong academic focus in high school. Her experience attending the "Women in Engineering" summer program at Carnegie Mellon University influenced her college aspirations and may have mitigated the effects of low academic

achievement. Anna really enjoyed it, and credits it toward helping her develop a strong interest in science-related careers.

### **5.4.3 Expected benefits**

When it comes to the expected benefits of a higher education degree, there was a difference among groups participating in this study. Low income students were more likely than other student respondents to identify future economic stability as a benefit. For these students, economic stability was a benefit they recognized through personal experience. Kelly stated that she aspired to at least a bachelor's degree because "I knew that my parents both had only one year of college experience, and weren't able to really make as much money as someone with a degree would have been able to." Jennifer also shared that perspective, saying, "my mom is a single parent, so seeing how hard she had to work to give me everything, you know, I want to be able to do that more easily...I don't want to struggle like I've seen other people."

However, low income participant also framed the benefits of higher education in terms of their vocational aspirations. Anna wanted to have a career as a nurse, and she realized that a college degree would allow her to "move up in my career." A bachelor's degree would give her "more opportunities." Jennifer hasn't solidified her career aspirations yet, but she recognizes that the roles that she is interested in require at least an undergraduate degree: "I want to work with child trauma survivors" or "work as a legal advocate... I'm also interested in drug addiction counseling."

While low income students participating in this study also spoke about the benefits of college in terms of furthering their educations and broadening their horizons, their wealthier counterparts more frequently spoke about this as a motivation to attend college. Perhaps having

access to greater economic resources permitted wealthier students to focus on other benefits of higher education. These students pursued higher education not because they had to, but because they wanted to. Kimberly cited her primary reason for attending college by saying, “I loved learning.” Kimberly looked forward to college, which meant being in an environment for a four year period where “I would be with people who were as intellectually curious as I was. Which I didn’t get all the time at high school. I wanted to be with students smarter than me.” Sarah felt the same way, saying, “I was excited by the prospect of going somewhere and being really challenged, surrounded by all kids that were also very motivated.”

The male students also spoke about broadening their perspectives and experiences. Frank told me that “I wanted to be part of an academic setting where I have the freedom to expand my own horizons. To also be around people who are like me, who have similar interests and goals.” Benjamin expected several benefits. “I wanted to learn and learn about something specific. But I also want to expand my horizons, I want to be exposed to all sorts of things and put myself in all kinds of situations and explore things.”

Perhaps the difference among the two income groups regarding expected benefits has its roots in student experiences. Students coming from homes and environments where economic stability is a concern realize the limitations of those without a post-secondary education. Low-income students often referred to parents and siblings whom they observed struggling for economic stability. Anna said about her brother, “he is in the sheet metal union. He keeps getting laid off.” Karen’s father had a good job despite the absence of a college degree, but struggled financially after being laid off by the county. Todd readily acknowledged that his father couldn’t get a job as a manager at his supermarket chain today without a college degree.



For wealthier students, there are enough resources and safety nets around them to make the fear of falling out of the middle class seem far removed. With success seemingly assured in obtaining a higher education degree, they were freer to focus on the less practical reasons for pursuing higher education. Because of their own experiences in higher education, parents of wealthier students were able to promote the intangible qualities and experiences that come with higher levels of education, such as personal development and social networking. Kimberly recalled that her parents encouraged college because the experience would help her “grow a lot as an individual” and “make life-long friends”.

#### **5.4.4 Expected cost/supply of resources**

Not surprisingly, the issue of cost was a greater concern for students from low-income backgrounds. Of the five students in this study who were eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school, all of them cited cost as an important criteria in their college search. Anna, the only respondent who enrolled in a community college, stated that expected cost was the central issue in determining if she went to college. “The first thing I looked at was tuition”, she recalled.

It quickly became clear that college costs left her few post-secondary options. So she started “crunching numbers”, trying to figure out how far the Pittsburgh Promise award might go towards paying college tuition. Anna’s mother advised that “if you are going to go, you might as well just go here” to CCAC. Midway through her college experience, Anna got a job that provided scholarships. “Where I work they will pay so much money per year to certain schools. But only half of that for other schools.” These available funds were a significant concern for Anna, and influenced her decision to continue on for a bachelor’s in nursing at California University of Pennsylvania.

Beyond expected tuition costs, Anna also struggled to deal with the very real reality of foregone earnings. For many of the respondents in this study, attending college limited their opportunities to earn money by working significant numbers of hours. For those students, the result was less money available for the “extras” in life. Anna needed to work to contribute to family expenses and make other necessary purchases. Looking back, she spoke about the burden that work added to her college experience, and the decision she felt she had to make if she was to succeed while in school.

My second semester of nursing school, it was horrible... I failed that one nursing class... It was because of the final. We did two weeks of maternity and two weeks of pediatrics. Our final was on everything... And then I was working a lot... The next semester, I told my job I was done. “I am working this day and this day, and I am not working past this many hours.” Cause I’d come in from work all tired.

Other students in this study also had to weigh expected costs as they made decisions about which college to attend. At this point, loan burden became another aspect of anticipated costs. In Chapter Four, Karen explains how she evaluated her enrollment decision based on whether she wanted a “car payment” versus a “house payment” in loan debt when she graduated. Ultimately, when she enrolled, she chose the less expensive school.

Four students from households with modest means mitigated potential costs by deciding to commute rather than live on campus. Christopher approached the decision this way: “I’m at home, that’s part of another cost saving measure I did. I know that it is an extra \$10,000 in most schools” to live on campus. Jennifer’s decision to commute was further limited to college choices that were accessible via public transportation. She considered a local Penn State branch campus, but realized that “going on a bus, it would have been two hours without traffic.” So she focused more on colleges and universities within the city of Pittsburgh. “I wanted to try and make sure I stayed close...if I didn’t know where they were located I’d put them in Google Maps

and then find out if they are close to my house.” For Todd, commuting was a cost saving measure, but also one of the most challenging aspects about his experience at Cal U. He soon became weary of the hour-long commute to campus. Bad weather could make him late or miss class entirely. Also, he found it hard after a long day of being in class and on the road to “force yourself to get down and do class work, read your books.”

For wealthier students in this study, institutional cost was not a significant consideration in their search process. For some, cost was a consideration, but not enough to limit college choices. Kimberly, who is enrolled at Brown University, said that she “feared the costs”, which she said runs about \$56,000 per year for tuition, room and board. Rather than selecting a less expensive institution, she tried to mitigate costs through obtaining scholarships. Sarah also said that cost was “really important” in determining if she would enroll at Stanford University. Seeing the kind of money the university could offer helped her make her enrollment decisions. She added that “it wasn’t that my parents were telling me you need to go anywhere.” In talking it over with her parents, “they realized that I really wanted to go to Stanford, they offered us enough money, financial assistance and...just gradually it made sense.”

For others, costs mattered very little. Benjamin’s parents told him, “Don’t really think about cost, we’ve got that covered.” Others explained why cost wasn’t a consideration. Michael, who is enrolled at Johns Hopkins University, reported, “My parents had saved, so it was understood that they had money. They had been saving money specifically for me to go to college. I am the only kid. I didn’t have to share that with anybody.” For Christine, college costs in her family were traditionally borne by the parents. “In my family the parents will pay for the kids. My grandparents paid for my parents, my parents are paying for me, and I will pay for my child. That kind of helped me to look less at cost.”

### 5.4.5 College as an investment

College as an investment is an emergent theme associated with the human capital investment model of Perna's (2006) conceptual framework. Many of the respondents discussed it in abstract and general terms. Respondents spoke of college as an "investment in my future," or viewed their modest loan burden in light of anticipated starting salaries. However, for two students, Bruce and Wendy, potentially large student loan debts highlighted the issues associated with significant investment decisions. These students framed the high costs associated with their professional ambitions and wrestled considerably with the perceived costs and benefits of their enrollment decision. While neither Bruce nor Wendy was from a low-income household, neither had families that could assume the full cost of their college educations. Bruce, who described his family background as "working class", said that attending a good school was a "huge deal" because he was the first in his family to go. Architecture, however, is a competitive and expensive major. Bruce said the cost "scared" him, especially as he was looking at smaller, private schools.

Those were big numbers for me... I'm thinking forty grand times five, that's \$200,000. I've never even seen \$1,000. How am I going to deal with that? It was upsetting and kind of worrying me, I got a lot of financial aid, but I am still coming out of school with \$90,000 in debt.

Bruce shared that he weighed the costs and benefits of the potential loan burden as he was deciding to attend Philadelphia University. At the time he thought "I'll pay those debts off and I know myself. I know that I will – I will get a good job." It seemed like a good investment decision. Bruce also felt that "there is going to be a sense of pride" in financing his education himself.

Even while in school, Bruce continued to weigh the costs of benefits of his architecture

major at Philadelphia University. In his sophomore year, “because of the rigor and because I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing for me”, Bruce began to consider moving back to Pittsburgh and transferring to another school to pursue engineering. Mounting student loans played a part in that debate with himself. “You see the amount and all the interest accruing...it’s a weighing influence.”

Wendy, who is enrolled in physical therapy (PT) school, looks at the costs associated with her enrollment at Northeastern University in Boston as an investment decision as well. She felt that could not compare to what she’d get from her education at Northeastern. Wendy admitted that “Pitt would have been a lot cheaper but it just came down to the fact that Northeastern’s program is just out of this world.” The program there is a six year doctor of physical therapy program with a co-op. Wendy would have two paying internships, as well as complete all her clinicals through the program. In addition, the program has a reputation for “getting students jobs right out of school” which is something Wendy “definitely took into consideration.”

The program at Northeastern offered Wendy the ability to complete her physical therapy degree in the same program at the same institution. Typically, she would pursue a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution. Then she would have to apply to and gain acceptance at a three-year doctor of physical therapy program. Availability and quality of co-ops and clinicals was uncertain, as well as job placement prospects. Wendy felt the PT program at Northeastern offered her a direct and focused path leading to her career goals. Although it meant considerable student loans, Wendy viewed Northeastern as “a good deal.”

Wendy anticipates that she will graduate with a little more than \$90,000 in student loans. Money had always been “tight.” Wendy’s mother had been “in and out of work”, and her father

is a freelance writer. However, Wendy sees the cost of her education at Northeastern as investment in being able to pursue a career that she will love. While she could have pursued a PT degree elsewhere, Wendy feels that this particular program at Northwestern is “a good program” and it will “pay off in the end.”

## **5.5 SOCIOLOGICAL/CULTURAL CONTEXTS**

The sociological approach in this portion of Perna’s (2006) model is useful for “understanding the ways in which context, influenced in part by structural constraints and opportunities, shapes an individual’s perspectives about and orientations toward college choice” (p. 116). Perna identifies four sociological concepts. They represent one’s habitus, his or her access to social and cultural capital, and organizational constructs of the environment. She describes them as making up a student’s “situated context” (p. 116), which is reflected in a student’s college choice decisions.

### **5.5.1 Habitus**

P. Bourdieu (1984) described habitus as a set of dispositions based on an individual’s social context that subconsciously guide the decisions an individual makes. While Bourdieu intended for habitus to include a wide range of preferences and behaviors, the focus is much narrower when looking at it through the lens of college choice. Perna (2006) envisions this layer as reflecting a student’s demographic characteristics as well as available cultural and social capital. Differences in habitus provide students with varying cultural knowledge, social connections, and

access to information that they deploy as they move forward in the college choice process.

McDonough (1997) suggests that in the college choice process, cultural capital supplies students with access to resources that promote college-going behaviors. In her model, Perna defines cultural capital in terms of cultural knowledge and the value placed on college attainment. In this study, all participants recognized the value of college attainment. However, the level of parental college attainment may set limits on what students perceived was possible or likely in terms of college attendance. Todd began his description of the college search process as saying, “when I started thinking about the whole college process, Cal U was the first one that came to mind, because my mom and my sister went there.”

For the wealthier students in this study, the possibilities for college enrollment seemed limitless. Having had family members who attended elite institutions, this provided respondents with a sense that “this is what we do and where we go.” All but one student attending elite universities had parents who either attended elite universities or achieved high levels of educational attainment. For instance, Benjamin’s parents both had PhDs. His father attended Harvard for his undergraduate degree and Stanford for his PhD in statistics. His mother attended Pitt for her PhD, and is head of the technology division of a nationally-known company. Hearing about his parents’ educational experiences, it was natural for him to assume that he would also pursue his education at an academically challenging, well-known institution.

An emergent theme in this study indicated that the experience of having siblings enroll in college also added to a student’s cultural knowledge. Several commented on how the experience of their sibling in college influenced how they approached their college choice decisions. Todd’s sister had a good experience at Cal U, and Todd recalls her telling him about the benefits of college, which included “getting around and meeting new people, and the freedom of being on

your own.”

Kimberly remembered that her approach to her college search began when her older sister started to look at schools. The whole family, including Kimberly’s younger brother, took summer trips to visit Columbia, Vanderbilt and Browne. Kimberly recalls that those trips “got me excited about college.” Sarah also described her experiences while on a family trip visiting colleges for her older brother as pretty influential.

He was looking at a lot of pretty high achieving, private kind of smaller universities. I guess that did have an influence because I know those were the types that I kind of saw as supplying the best opportunities to people because he was considering them...I think that was kind of big time seeing places and seeing if I could see myself there and figuring I was on the same track as well

Having parents and siblings with high levels of educational attainment provided students with significant social capital in regards to information about college, especially the college search process. Those students in this study were more likely to rely on their parents for information needed in their college choice process, and were less likely to turn to school officials for assistance. Sarah said that “my primary resource was really my parents. I mean, they had gone through the process with my brother.” Sarah added that they “really pushed” her to “apply to these tougher schools and everything.” Sarah said she applied to Ivy League schools, but her parents also encouraged her to apply to Penn State. Their reasoning was if she didn’t get into the elite schools, she could use her Promise scholarship at Penn State.

Many of the students with the privilege of having parents with knowledge about the college admissions process relied on a similarly sophisticated search strategy. The often framed their college search in terms of “dream” or “reach” schools, “back-up” schools and even a “safety” school. “Dream” or “reach” schools were college options where admission wasn’t a sure thing. “Back-up schools” were college options where the likelihood of gaining admission



was high. “Safety” schools could also be termed as schools of last resort, where if all else fails, the student would have an acceptance for that institution. Inherent in this strategy is the access to information that allows students to evaluate which institutions would appropriate to designate as “dream”, “back-up” and “safety” schools.

Christine’s parents identified her “safety” school for slightly different reasons. Christine was required to apply to the Coast Guard Academy, which charges no tuition. While Christine and her parents never considered it a serious option, they did consider it a “safety” school in the event other options didn’t work out financially. Her parents planned to use her acceptance there as a bargaining chip in case they needed to negotiate for a better financial aid package from more desirable college choices.

For students with families having little or no experience in higher education, the college choice process was more ambiguous. Karen had a hard time determining the likelihood of being accepted at her first choice of schools. When she was rejected from those choices, she mounted another college search late her senior year to secure a spot in an entering class. Assuming he might not be accepted, or succeed once he was there, Todd chose not to apply to Carnegie Mellon and Pitt. In doing so, he may have needlessly narrowed his college choices to less selective institutions.

Judy realized that her parents weren’t familiar with the enrollment process and often turned to guidance counselors at her school for assistance. The staff at her high school helped to compensate for the lack of information she could obtain from home. Several teachers assisted Judy in narrowing down a list of reasonable college options, and putting together her college applications. A guidance counselor often made phone calls to potential institutions on her behalf.

For all of the students who had low social and cultural capital as it pertained to the college choice process, support outside the family was crucial. All of these students recalled receiving necessary information about the college choice process in school, and many had other people in their lives who were able to compensate for this deficit. It is possible that students without access to this information have a very difficult time negotiating the college search process to the point of enrollment.

### **5.5.2 School and community context**

There are various ways in which high schools define student college choice through organizational structures. One way is through the school's mission. What a school values and emphasizes is often evident in the student experience. Research shows that low socio-economic status students disproportionately participate in high school academic curriculums that do not adequately prepare them for college (McDonough, 1997).

The Pittsburgh Rutherford B. Hayes School for Performing and Creative Arts states that its mission is to promote a learning environment that will enable all students to “study the arts for their intrinsic, aesthetic, historical and cultural values” (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013b). Students electing to attend Hayes for high school did so because of a strong interest in the arts. Hayes provides intensive instruction in six areas; dance, instrumental music, literary arts, theatre, visual arts, and vocal music. All participants in this study who attended Hayes went on to selective or elite institutions. Each student appreciated the focus on the arts, but Beth felt that it may have been a mis-match given her future aspirations. Although she liked her experience in the instrumental music department, Beth recalled that her experience at Hayes “was a little frustrating.” With its emphasis on the arts, she didn't feel that she was getting the science

background that she felt she needed for a future as a physician.

Participants attending elite institutions in this study spoke about their choice to attend William McKinley High School because of its strong academic reputation. Evidence of an academic focus at William McKinley can be found on the homepage of its website. There William McKinley highlights its gifted and scholars programs, its educational partnerships with Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013a) . Frank, whose previous school was the private Community Day School, opted to attend William McKinley after hearing about the academic and co-curricular options. Looking back, he stated, “I was happy that William McKinley is what I chose.”

William McKinley had an unwritten mission regarding students going on to elite institutions. As Michael shared, “there is a legacy for students to go to good schools... there are teachers writing you recommendations to get you into Ivy League schools. They are very concerned about that.” Students attending elite institutions is part of the culture of William McKinley, setting norms for the rest of the students. Students and teachers talk about which students went where, and how those options might be a good fit for current students. Such an environment makes the idea of elite universities possible. In addition, there is the practical benefit of having teachers and staff who are informed about the application processes of competitive colleges, and are successful in writing recommendations that supported students’ admission.

William McKinley also offers a wide array of Advanced Placement courses through their Centers for Advanced Studies (CAS) program. Participants in this study attending selective and elite institutions reported talking up to eleven AP courses before they graduated. Unlike other

schools, William McKinley does not have a requirement that students who take an AP class also take the AP exam. This policy encourages students to explore subjects in greater depth than they might have in a regular class. Students from William McKinley enrolled in more selective and elite institutions reported they had taken and passed enough AP classes that they were at least a semester ahead when they enrolled in college.

Access to AP courses and an elite college-going culture is limited to students in the highest curricular track. Karen, who moved to the mainstream track while at William McKinley sensed that change in culture. She said that little was expected of students in the mainstream curricular track, and that the teachers “didn’t care.” She sensed the school assumed students at that level weren’t “going to go anywhere at that point”, resulting in less rigor in the curriculum. She felt that attitude was reflected in the information they were provided about potential colleges, as well. “They pushed the more easier schools” like CCAC and ITT Tech. “I feel like they do that because they don’t have faith and they don’t have the feeling that people could make it.”

### **5.5.3 Higher education context**

The third layer of Perna’s (2006) conceptual model focuses on various characteristics of the higher education context that serve to influence college choice. While Perna suggests the influence of marketing and recruitment in the form of mail, email, and phone calls might be worthy of consideration, research suggests otherwise. Chapman (1981) noted over thirty years ago that students “do not know how to process or evaluate” (p. 501) the large amount of college recruitment materials they receive. Every participant in this study recalls being contacted by

potential schools and getting many recruitment brochures in the mail. Benjamin summed up most participants' approach to the avalanche of mail they received,

It was advertising, it was not helpful... the thing about mail, it didn't interest me. There wasn't anything in mail that I couldn't find online. If I got something in the mail from somewhere that I was interested in, I would at least look at. Maybe read the beginning.

The high-achieving students in this study seemed to have a basic understanding as to why they were receiving so much attention from potential colleges and universities. Many acknowledged it as a natural part of their college search. As one student said, "I got it [mail] from every nook and cranny in the universe." However, the students from limited college backgrounds were much more suspicious about the flood of mail. Todd described it as "creepy." He said, "It would just always creep me out, because how do you guys know about me? So like that's why I paid more attention to the schools that I chose because it didn't creep me out as much." Unfortunately, instead of expanding the pool of possible higher education opportunities for this academically capable minority student, the unsolicited mail reinforced a narrower approach to his college search.

Participants' approach to gathering information about various college and universities was overwhelmingly done on-line. Respondents of all abilities and backgrounds in this study were familiar with the College Board and used its college search engine to explore post-secondary possibilities. However, the ways in which they used it differed. For students with limited knowledge and family experience in higher education, they used it to access basic information about various colleges. Anna used it to determine if her academic background and qualifications would be acceptable at any institution of higher education.

I knew I wouldn't get into certain schools with my GPA. So I would look for how many students they accepted. You know that [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)? They

gave you the lowest GPA they accepted. I started there and played around and would click on different things

Study participants more knowledgeable about the college search process used available resources in more sophisticated ways. Wendy used College Board's interactive search tool to narrow her options down to schools with specific characteristics. Christine did also, taking the time to evaluate each institution by carefully established criteria. "I remember going through alphabetical, over 200 colleges and clicking on everyone and seeing which ones I would like and if they were good...I would go through and earmark them." Although she did admit to veering off-course if a certain institution caught her eye.

I can only remember the ones I earmarked for ridiculous reasons, like 'whoa, there is a beautiful one in Hawaii! Wouldn't that be great?' I figured they probably had great marine biology programs. 'I love marine biology!'

During my interviews, I asked respondents to list their top three reasons for choosing a particular institution of higher education. Of the students from low-income backgrounds, college characteristics associated with cost were more likely to be the driving factor for selecting a college than academic reputation. For students from higher SES backgrounds, academic reputation and quality of particular curricular programs was more likely to drive their choices. Students pursuing selective and elite institutions paid close attention to marketing and recruitment materials that provided information on academic reputation and rankings. As Benjamin recalled,

I did use those lists. When it comes to computer science, there are some names that are just standard. Like Stanford, CMU, Berkeley, MIT, and Cornell maybe. Those five would be the leaders of computer science, and the people doing pertinent research and have really good undergraduate departments.

All participants in this study used their social networks to gather information and learn more about certain colleges and universities. Michael benefitted from his experience in the CAS

program at William McKinley, where many alumni attended schools that he was considering. Michael remembers “talking to people that I knew were at those colleges. There is such a breadth of schools that kids go to from William McKinley that you can find somebody who has gone somewhere and talk to them about it.” Benjamin also talked “to a few alumni that went to certain schools.”

High SES students were more likely to use their social network to obtain specific information as it related to their choice criteria. In addition, they were comfortable reaching further into their social network, making connections with friends of friends, as well as using the professional networks of friends and family. These avenues facilitated connections with people they didn’t know, but were individuals who had information that was useful in their college choice decisions.

Frank, for instance, had a friend who had obtained a full tuition scholarship at Pitt. He contacted that friend to see how to go about getting the same scholarship. Wendy’s sister was friends with a man whose younger sister went to Northeastern. Wendy connected with her on Facebook to find out more about “the professors and information that websites wouldn’t tell about.” Kelly, enrolled at CMU as an oboe major, relied on the opinion of her oboe teacher, who “was really telling me who would be good teachers for that [oboe] and that is how I was supposed to make my decision.”

A final aspect of the higher education context worth exploring is the difficulty in teasing apart issues associated with location as an institutional characteristic. Study participants were asked to identify the college characteristics that were important to them in their college search. It became necessary to have students specify why it was an important consideration. For some, location was a geographic term, used to identify distance away from home or its locale as urban

or rural. Wendy specifically wanted to be away from home. For her, location was “outside of Pittsburgh.” For Jennifer, location – a college’s geographic placement - was a significant factor due to her dependency on the public transportation system to commute to and from school.

Other students identified location as a characteristic related to a school’s eligibility to participate in the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program. The Pittsburgh Promise limits eligibility to “any accredited public or private post-secondary school located in Pennsylvania” (The Pittsburgh Promise, 2013a). For students like Judy, Kelly and Frank, location became a consideration since it was linked to Promise eligibility. Location became another aspect of cost.

For some students, location was important as defined both ways. Todd selected Cal U because the Pittsburgh Promise covered most, if not all, of his whole tuition bill each semester. In addition, selecting an institution within a commutable distance enabled him to avoid costs associated with living on campus. Similarly for Christine, Drexel’s location in Philadelphia enabled her to have a college experience in a large city away from home. But location was still a consideration financially. Since it is within the state of Pennsylvania, Drexel is a Promise-eligible institution.

#### **5.5.4 Social, economic and policy context**

The fourth and last layer of Perna’s (2006) model highlights the effects of social forces, economic conditions, and public policies on students’ college choices. College choices may be directly or indirectly influenced by these contextual characteristics. The social context may include demographic characteristics of the population, including if peers chose to attend college, and where. The economic context represents conditions of the labor market, both locally and



nationally. Policy characteristics may include public policies affecting financial aid and tuition, as well as award criteria for merit scholarship programs.

Research demonstrates that peers do influence if a student chooses to attend college (Sokatch, 2006) and also where they enroll (Fletcher, 2012). All respondents in this study indicated that they had friends attending college. Anna, who enrolled at CCAC, reported that most of her friends from high school attended college. Of the friends who attended college, all enrolled in less selective institutions, such as CCAC, state system schools and University of Pittsburgh branch campuses. Anna described one close friend who visited college campuses with her. “She doesn’t even go to college right now. And her mom is all about school, and I don’t know how she got all backwards.”

Each participant described a social circle with members who made similar post-secondary choices. Like Anna, friends who went to college tended to select similar types of institutions in which to enroll. Students attending selective institutions had the greatest variation in this regard. Christopher, who enrolled at Robert Morris University, described friends who enrolled at CCAC, Point Park University, Duquesne and Penn State. Students enrolled in the top academic track at William McKinley tended to have friends also attending highly selective college and universities. Benjamin said he had friends attending U Penn, Kenyon, Dickenson, Harvard, Stanford and Pomona College. Sarah explained that a lot of her friends “went to pretty good universities.” She had a lot of friends who attended “Yale, Johns Hopkins, Chicago. Top schools, and then I had a lot of friends that did Penn State, University of Michigan, University of Vermont, good state schools.”

The public policy context had a significant influence on certain participants in this study. For the low-income students, the Pittsburgh Promise and its program criteria had a strong and

direct influence on their college choices. Anna said that without the Pittsburgh Promise, “I might not have gone, or have finished.” The Pittsburgh Promise was a huge incentive for her to enroll at CCAC. “I tell everybody to go to CCAC first. My friends are tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of debt. They [Pittsburgh Promise] paid for me to go to school.” The availability of a remaining year of Pittsburgh Promise money has also provided an incentive for Anna to continue on toward her BSN at Cal U.

Judy and Todd realized that with the Pittsburgh Promise, they could limit their loan burden significantly by attending a Promise-eligible institution. Both considered out of state post-secondary options, but the reality of the costs caused them to shift their focus to institutions within Pennsylvania. For Judy, to attend Farleigh Dickenson and ignore the benefits of attending Slippery Rock University “would have wasted about \$40,000.” In the end, “there wasn’t any question about maybe. The Pittsburgh Promise paid for my tuition...I need that money.”

Frank is an example of a student who was looking primarily at elite institutions, but felt the opportunities associated with the Promise scholarship at the University of Pittsburgh were too good to pass up. He was accepted to both Johns Hopkins and Washington University as a bioengineering major. It

became a money decision because Pitt is a public institution and Johns Hopkins and Wash U were both private and very expensive. One of the great things about Pitt is that since it is in Pennsylvania, and it has such a great program, I could use the Pittsburgh Promise to help pay for it. It is definitely one of the best ways of doing it. And now I don’t have any debt. If I had gone to one of those schools, we wouldn’t have been able to pay for it.

Frank also opted for Pitt because without the worry about cost, he was able to participate in programs that might have been out of his reach at Johns Hopkins or Wash U. For instance, Frank is participating in a study abroad program for engineering majors. He realized that at other institutions, there wouldn’t have been the available resources to pay for it. In addition,

Frank was able to secure a summer internship through the Pittsburgh Promise Executive Scholars program. This program pairs students having strong academic qualifications with internship opportunities in a variety of companies in Pittsburgh. Frank realizes that since his tuition is covered, he can afford to forego work this summer to participate in the internship, as well as purchase a car for his transportation needs.

For some students, like Benjamin, the Promise award wasn't "much of an influential factor." These students were from families who were not financially dependent on the scholarship to pay for their college education. For some students, the \$5,000 or \$10,000 scholarship represented a small fraction of the cost of tuition. Therefore, it wasn't a large consideration in their enrollment choices.

For some, cost wasn't a factor at all as they weighed college characteristics. Therefore, the Pittsburgh Promise had no bearing on their college choice decisions. For these students, the college culture was an important concern. In families like Benjamin's, the emphasis was finding an atmosphere that encouraged "exploring, getting out of your comfort zone... trying different things." Beth also wanted to try different things. She said, "Part of the reason I wanted to go to the University of Chicago was because it had a really challenging core curriculum...I knew it would push me to explore different fields." Beth paid close attention to the sense of community on campus, too. When visiting the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), she recalled

the main thing I remember from MIT is this gigantic hallway of these buildings linked together, and like you could barely even see the other end of the hallway. It was so long and I guess I kind of felt like I would get eaten alive

A final emergent theme was related to the challenges students applying to elite colleges experienced in evaluating the potential to use their Promise scholarship. Competition for admission to elite universities is fierce. Most of the institutions elite university-bound

participants in this study applied to had an acceptance rate of less than 20 percent. Many potential schools in the collective application pool boasted acceptance rates between seven and fifteen percent. High achieving students share many characteristics, such as having high grade point averages, high SAT test scores, and having taken more than five AP courses. With so little variation in applicant pools at the elite college level, it is hard for students to ascertain their likelihood of being accepted at any particular school. After all, only 25% of high school valedictorians who apply are accepted at Harvard every year (Springer & Franck, 2005).

Students in this category recognized that acceptance decisions sometimes appeared to make little sense. Michael seemed pretty matter-of-fact about a situation where he found himself admitted to the nation's #1 bioengineering program at Johns Hopkins University, and waitlisted at a less selective school such as Lehigh. To increase their chances of being admitted, respondents applied to institutions through a variety of admissions programs, including Early Decision (ED). Perceptions regarding the benefits of ED vary, but research demonstrates that students are 20-30% more likely to be accepted than those applying the standard route (Avery & Levin, 2010).

Frank felt secure about his chances of being accepted to the bioengineering program at Pitt, and anticipated having the benefit of using his Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. Frank liked Johns Hopkins "a lot" and considered it his first choice. However, after receiving the financial aid package, it became clear that it wasn't an affordable option. He is satisfied with his decision to attend Pitt, even though he ended up compromising on academic reputation for the opportunity to use his Promise scholarship.

Michael was a little less willing to consider Pitt as a back-up option. In discussing his satisfaction with Johns Hopkins, he did indicate that if he was able to do it all over again, he

would have rethought his strategy in the applications process. By attending the University of Pennsylvania, he would have been able to save \$30,000 by using his Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. While he wasn't initially accepted at U Penn, he believed that participating in the ED process would have upped the likelihood of his acceptance.

I probably would have applied to Penn early if I could do it over again. When I look back on it, in terms of the stress and the raw outcome, if you apply early somewhere you up your chances of getting in. If I were to get the \$30,000, that would have been nice to eliminate the [financial] stress. When you tally up all those things, it's not that Penn would have been a better fit than Hopkins, but you add in the money and lack of stress it becomes, 'Oh, I should have done that'

The Early Decision process is not for everyone. Once a student is admitted through the ED process, the acceptance is binding. If a student is admitted via ED, he or she is obligated to withdraw applications to all other schools. It is important to note that Early Decision offers are generally made without a student having full knowledge of the potential financial aid package. This is a process that disadvantages students who are dependent on scholarships and financial aid. For Frank, there was "no point in applying" to Lehigh through their Early Decision process, since he might not have been able to afford tuition despite the availability of the Promise scholarship.

## **5.6 CONCLUSION**

As this chapter demonstrates, "students' educational decisions are determined, in least in part, by their habitus, or their system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual's views and interpretations" (Perna, 2006, p. 110). Habitus also serves to influence behavior as it relates to the college search process. As defined by their habitus, students make decisions and take action

based on the options they perceive to be available them.

Perna's conceptual model of college choice provides a more sophisticated approach to understanding how a student's lived context influences decisions regarding college attendance and matriculation. Low income and minority study participants had high aspirations regarding college attendance. However, they were challenged by a lack of resources and knowledge about higher education and the college search process. A comparison with privileged students in this study demonstrates how a student's sociological context interacts with a variety of variables to influence college-going decisions.

## 6.0 CHAPTER SIX: HUMAN AGENCY AND THE PITTSBURGH PROMISE

The participants in this study demonstrated varying levels of human agency as they decided whether to attend college, and where to enroll. Agency in the college choice process can be examined from multiple perspectives. Bandura's theory of human agency provides a theoretical framework for examining the ways in which Pittsburgh Promise recipients were able to make choices and act upon them in the college choice process. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage process provides one lens to explore the choices and actions of students in the college search process. Perna's conceptual model of college choice provides a glimpse of human agency from a different perspective. While Hossler and Gallagher provide insight into *what* choices and actions students take, Perna's model allows us to see *why* students make certain choices.

This chapter examines the ways in which the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship promotes human agency in the college choice process. I first discuss how human agency can be applied to the topic college choice. To do so, I identify Bandura's four components of human agency and describe how they relate to students' experiences in the college choice process. Second, I explore the benefits of Perna's conceptual model of college choice to examine issues of human agency among various groups of students. Third, this chapter addresses how the Pittsburgh Promise might promote human agency in the college choice process. I conclude with an assessment of which participants were most influenced by the Promise to develop and demonstrate agency in the college search.

## 6.1 HUMAN AGENCY AND COLLEGE CHOICE

Bandura's (1997, 2001, 2006) theories on human agency are developed from his work on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, especially in the form of academic self-efficacy, promotes interest and effort towards post-secondary options. Bandura conceptualizes human agency as the process by which individuals exert control over their lives by acting in a goal-oriented, purposeful manner. Individuals interact with, and alter their environment to create conditions that enable success. While not completely autonomous, Bandura (2006) notes, humans are able to transform structures, influencing their environment as well as behaviors and outcomes. Over time, students develop the ability to assess their own capabilities for academic success beyond high school. Students develop attitudes and behaviors toward schooling that reinforce outcomes that either promote or discourage post-secondary opportunities.

Bandura (2006) also identifies four core properties of human agency. The first is intentionality, whereby individuals form intentions that involve plans of action. The second core feature is forethought. Individuals set goals for themselves, based on the likelihood of a desired outcome. Self-reactiveness is the third core property of human agency, whereby individuals give shape to their plans and regulate their execution. Last is self-reflectiveness, the process in which individuals reflect on the adequacy of their own functioning. The core features of agency "enable people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times" (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). The following examples from the data illustrate each of Bandura's core concepts. The examples show how students have played a part in their own development by demonstrating human agency in the college choice process.



### 6.1.1 Efficacy

It is important to consider the role of personal efficacy as it relates to human agency. Unless people believe they have the ability achieve the desired results of their actions, they have little incentive to act or persevere in the face of difficulty. Efficacy affects how positively or negatively individuals perceive challenges. Additionally, self-efficacy affects an individual's aspirations, their self-motivation, and their ability to follow through with their goals. The relationship between self-efficacy and performance appears to be largely mediated by effort, persistence, and motivation. Those with a strong sense of self-efficacy are most likely to persist in the face of difficulties or failure. They are more likely to attribute failure to lack of effort, while those with lower levels of self-efficacy view failure as stemming from a lack of ability, and thus are less likely to persist.

Academic self-efficacy pertains to a student's ability to achieve in academic-related tasks. Academic self-efficacy affects the college choice process by influencing academic achievement and educational aspirations. For example, Anna displayed a significant amount of academic self-efficacy in her pursuit of higher education. While she was unsure if she could afford to attend college immediately after high school, she never lost the desire to enroll. Despite having a disheartening class experience in high school when she signed up for dual enrollment at CCAC, she took what she learned from the experience and didn't let it dissuade her from exploring college options.

When she was working too much during her time at CCAC, she failed a nursing course that she had to retake later. Rather than let it discourage her, Anna reflected on the reasons that she was not successful in the class and concluded that by limiting her work hours, she would

have more time to study and wouldn't be as tired when she came to class. The next semester, she informed her job supervisor that she needed to cut back her hours.

Self-efficacy can also pertain to situations where students struggle with a sense of fit or purpose in pursuit of their academic goals. Christine described an internship experience where she seriously questioned her future in film. As difficult as the internship was, she credited it for helping to validate her desire to pursue a career in film. The internship itself was “stressful and hectic.” Reflecting on the experience, Christine said that “I cried more than I should have.” However, completing the project gave Christine a strong sense of accomplishment. She now knows that “One, I picked the right major. Two, I can do this job, and three, I am good at it.” Christine struggled with her sense of fit in the film industry, but after achieving success in her internship experience, Christine has a better sense for how her skills and talents might be best put to use. Christine plans to apply for two prestigious internships in film, one with the Director's Guild of America, and the other through the British Broadcasting Company.

### **6.1.2 Intentionality of one's actions**

An intention is “a representation of a future course of action to be performed” (Bandura, 2001, p. 6). Intention to pursue post-secondary education is generally referred to as college aspirations. College aspirations are an important first step in the college search process. Each of the students in this study described their aspirations to attend college. However, aspirations for college developed under different circumstances for each student. For example, Anna aspired to a postsecondary education despite the messages she received from home about college being a “waste of money.” Anna, however, wanted a life for herself that was different from that of her

parents. Her parents had jobs. Anna wanted a career; she wanted to work “every day from nine to five” and “move up”. She saw college as giving her the ability to have a career.

Her initial plans for college were hazy. Bandura states that “future-directed plans are rarely specified in further detail at the outset” (p. 6). While Anna attended a “Women in Science” program at Carnegie Mellon University during her summers, she didn’t start to seriously think about attending college until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. At that point, the initial, vague intentions she had about higher education were adjusted as she began to explore specific options. She initially planned to attend a four-year institution, but revised her plans as she realized that was not an option financially. At one point, she even reconsidered her aspirations for higher education until a friend, her “second mom,” encouraged her to attend college.

Bandura (2001) notes that shared intentions help to strengthen commitment toward achieving a goal. Anna’s best friend in high school went on a college visit to Barry University and took Anna with her. Anna also considered enrolling in that institution. While on campus with her friend, Anna met with an admissions counselor to explore her chances of being admitted and qualifying for financial aid. Ultimately, Anna and her friend chose not to attend Barry. However, the experience with her friend on Barry’s campus strengthened her resolve to attend college, and also provided her with a better understanding of the college admissions process.

### **6.1.3 Forethought**

Forethought is forward-directed planning. Through forethought, “people motivate themselves and guide their action in anticipation of future events” (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). Foreseeable future events influence current motivation and shape behavior. Forward directed planning is first recognized in the college search process through the amount of knowledge and understanding

that students have about higher education and the admissions process. Forethought is different from intentions in that forethought requires the development of specific knowledge about future plans, and the ability set specific goals that increase the likelihood of producing desired outcomes.

Many participants in this study discussed how they went about acquiring the knowledge needed to set goals and increase the likelihood of attending college. Judy shared how the staff in her high school, Abraham Lincoln, provided seminars to students wanting to attend college. These seminars informed students about steps in the admissions process, what a campus visit is like, and had them develop resumes. Students were given classroom assignments that were reflective of the experiences they would have in academic settings at college. Judy said her school emphasized information and experiences - “things that get us ready for college.”

Without any forethought regarding college attendance, Todd struggled academically in high school. To him, there really weren't any compelling reasons to focus on his studies. However, his teachers encouraged him to persist at his classwork. After meeting individually with some of his teachers, he was convinced that if he applied himself to his schoolwork, he would be able to get into a four-year college. He said, “My teachers really started... they pounded into me to start thinking about college, start a plan now.”

For other students, parents provided guidance in the development of the forethought necessary to promote college attendance. Frank said that “my mother would work with me and make sure that I always did my homework.” By emphasizing the importance of good grades, Frank developed the understanding that academic achievement was an important piece of getting accepted at a post-secondary institution.

Christine's parents were very involved in the selection of her high school. They encouraged Christine to attend a high school that had a strong college-prep curriculum. Ultimately, Christine selected the Pittsburgh Rutherford B. Hayes Creative and Performing Arts High School. Her father "laid down the law" telling her she could only go if she focused on writing. He felt that good writing was a "valuable" skill that would enable Christine to be accepted at a good college.

For several students participating in this study, forethought focused not only on what it took to be accepted at a college, but it provided direction in their goal to attend a highly selective college or university. These students had to plan differently than other students. Elite institutions value challenging high school curriculums, Advanced Placement courses, and a record of strong extra-curriculars.

Michael, who attended Johns Hopkins University, liked the "academic challenge" of high school. He took "quite a few" Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Michael was also very active in the community. He volunteered at a non-profit organization that promotes responsible energy use. He also worked on a congressional campaign one summer and participated in William McKinley's Leadership Workshop. When asked why he did these things, he said that he had purposefully considered these activities as a way to prepare for college.

Bandura states that forethought enables individuals to "transcend the dictates of their immediate environment and to shape and regulate the present to fit a desired future" (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). For Anna, the dictates of her immediate environment did not support college-going behaviors. Recognizing that she could not afford to go to college, she planned to find a job where the employer would provide college tuition reimbursement. This is a somewhat common

practice in the health-care fields, as a means of attracting and keeping staff in high turn-over positions.

#### **6.1.4 Self-reactiveness**

The first two core properties of agency involve intentions and an action plan. The third core property describes behavior that puts intentions and plans into action. Self-reactiveness is the “ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution” (Bandura, 2001, p. 8). During the college choice process, self-reactiveness is reflected in filling out applications, visiting colleges, and making decisions.

Christine struggled to shape appropriate courses of action in her college search. A high-achieving student, Christine planned on attending a highly selective institution where she could explore her interests in biology. She was strongly considering Princeton, Notre Dame, Drexel, University of Southern California, and Oxford in Cambridge. However, her focus in this goal was easily distracted by appealing characteristics at other schools that didn’t fit that criteria. In the end, the schools she applied to didn’t reflect her original intentions. As she said, “It was the strangest collection of schools. Senioritis hit, and I had my essay and my essay was great. So if someone was like, ‘write another one’, well it was like ‘oh no’.” By that point, Christine lacked the motivation and self-regulation to follow through on additional application requirements. For instance,

I really wanted to go to Princeton. I thought that would be amazing. And I wanted to go to Princeton for pre-med. I went to visit their campus. Their campus is so beautiful, their cafeteria amazing. Everything was top-notch, obviously. It’s Princeton. But then, I got to the point where they were saying, ‘you need to write more essays’. I couldn’t do it.

Ultimately, Christine visited Drexel University. It wasn't a school she was very interested in initially, but she enjoyed the campus visit. While visiting the campus, she opted to switch her intended major to film studies due to the small program and the quality of interactions she observed between faculty and students.

Beth took a different course of action in bringing her goals to fruition. She was very focused on her college search. Beth aspired to be a doctor and dreamed of attending an Ivy League institution away from the city of Pittsburgh. Because her father is a biology professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Beth didn't want to attend Pitt, despite the tuition remission. She wanted to live in a big city and didn't want to have her father or his faculty friends as instructors. Considering Pitt her back-up school, she applied to Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania, and Cornell.

She got into the University of Chicago, her first choice, but was waitlisted at U Penn and Cornell. She recalled, "I didn't want to get in Penn, because I knew if I got into Penn, my mom would probably be like, 'hey, we can use the Pittsburgh Promise there, you should go there instead of Chicago.'" To tip the scales in favor of attending the University of Chicago, and to appease her mother, Beth told her that she had written the Admissions Office at the University of Pennsylvania "about how I was still really interested, blah, blah, blah and I hoped they would take me off the waitlist. But I didn't write that."

### **6.1.5 Self-reflectiveness**

The fourth agentic property describes the ability to "reflect on oneself and the adequacy of one's thoughts and actions" (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). In this process, people "evaluate their motivation, values and the meaning of their life pursuits" (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Participants in this study

demonstrated a high degree of self-reflectiveness. Some felt happy with the outcome of their college choice decision. Some felt they might have chosen another course of action, given different circumstances. Other students felt the choice was the right decision, but wished for different circumstances while on campus.

For example, Bruce is one of the students satisfied with the outcome of his college decision. However, while enrolled at Philadelphia University, he struggled with his enrollment decision his sophomore year. He was dealing with the rigors of the architecture program and felt overwhelmed about the mounting student loan debt. He decided to stay, and he is very happy with his decision. “I would still choose this”, he says, “I met some awesome people and the experiences, I might not have had them at another school.” Bruce is also happy with the quality of the education that he received. The new architecture curriculum that was instated when he matriculated is getting national attention. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology certified the architecture program, and Bruce anticipates that association will “get out and follow me.”

Judy is a respondent who would have chosen another institution under different circumstances. She opted to attend Slippery Rock University because of the high costs associated with attending her first choice, Farleigh Dickenson University. Reflecting on her experiences, she realizes that she wasn’t prepared for the experience being on a predominantly white campus in a rural area. She said, “Although we are 45 minutes from Pittsburgh, it is like another world.” Many of her classmates have had limited experiences in multicultural settings, which left her feeling as if she was responsible for educating her fellow majority classmates about racial differences. “It was way too much to handle at once. It was culture shock.” Judy went on to describe experiences where a professor often reminded the class that she “wasn’t speaking for her own race”, or a fellow student who asked to hug her because “I’ve never hugged



a black person before.” This produces an atmosphere that she describes as “well, I am in 1968.” In this regard, she has had to “push myself to a point that I have never had to push myself before.”

Judy does recognize that she had positive experiences at Slippery Rock University as well. She notes her most satisfying experience has been “seeing herself grow up.” She goes on to say that “schools doesn’t only teach you about other people, but also teaches you about yourself.” She enjoyed developing strong friendships with international students at SRU. She looks forward to visiting some of them in their home countries. Already, she is planning trips to Ireland, Nigeria, and Australia.

Thinking back on her experiences, Christine is very happy with her choice to attend Drexel. However, she acknowledges that she might have handled her anxieties concerning her major differently while on campus. Part of her initial struggle was determining if she had chosen the right major.

For the first couple of years, I was trying to find my footing in film... I didn’t like being behind the camera. Cameras freaked me out. I hate having that much money in my hands in such a breakable piece of equipment. So, I hated my program for the first two years. I tried to avoid as many film classes as I possibly could. As a film major! I thought about switching majors to something that I was more comfortable with.

The most satisfying experience for her at Drexel was discovering that while she wanted a career in film, she didn’t want to be behind the camera. During an internship working on a feature film, she had the opportunity to work as an assistant director. She found that the position is “not so creative, as it is fostering that creativity and making it come to fruition.” The tasks involved in this role include scheduling, organizing, and working with people, which Christine considers her strengths.

Christine shared, “knowing what I know now, I think I would go to the same school, but I would do it differently while I was there.” Christine was clear on what she would have done differently. She would not have avoided taking classes in her major for so long. Instead of avoiding her discomfort with one aspect of film, she would have been more proactive in finding out what she did like about film. She would have taken a wider variety of classes, especially general education courses, such as business classes, that would have provided a foundation for the many roles of an assistant director.

## **6.2 HUMAN AGENCY AND COLLEGE CHOICE MODELS**

There are some benefits to examining human agency through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher’s (2000) three stage model of college choice. As a comprehensive model, it attempts to describe the college search process as it applies generally to all students, leading from the decision whether to attend college through institutional enrollment. Through identification of predisposition, search and choice as three of the main processes in a students’ college search, Hossler and Gallagher provide a useful framework for examining the characteristics associated with each stage.

It is also a useful model to examine the role in human agency in the college search process. Bandura’s core properties of human agency align quite well with Hossler and Gallagher’s process approach to college choice. Intentionality and forethought are most likely demonstrated within the predisposition stage. Forethought carries over into the search stage, as self-reactiveness links thoughts with action. This action-oriented property of human agency takes a student up to the enrollment decision in the choice phase. At this point, Bandura’s final

property of human agency, self-reflectiveness, judges the adequacy of one's own thoughts and actions in the choice process.

In my interviews with respondents in this study, and during my analysis of the data, I found that there were several themes that emerged by looking at college choice through this lens. I found that analyzing college search processes by the type of institution a respondent enrolled in revealed many group similarities. This might provide a deeper understanding of what the college search process might look like for students who ultimately choose a particular type of institution. In addition, this perspective provides a basic illustration of the interactions among students, institutional characteristics, and external conditions that influence their post-secondary plans.

By examining human agency in the search process in much the same way, we can see how students' aspirations interacted with institutional characteristics and external factors, influencing their ability to form intentions and execute action plans that resulted in particular enrollment decisions. For instance, students who ultimately enrolled in Pennsylvania state-system universities tended to have strong intentions regarding college enrollment. College was a goal long before the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program was announced. Their college intentions were reinforced by families and school environments that promoted college as a viable option and provided experiences that supported those goals.

However, students in this group struggled in developing forethought, or plans of action that would help them realize their college goals. Judy understood how to attain scholastic goals, but was unsure how to plan and execute a college search. Todd and Karen struggled to develop and maintain an academic focus that would prepare them to enroll in more selective institutions. Like Judy, they also lacked the ability to develop sophisticated college search plans that would identify appropriate options while maximizing their college choices.

In the search process, respondents in this category of college choice demonstrated self-reactiveness as they conducted college searches. Self-reactiveness involves executing aspects of the college search process. Judy and Todd both initiated and executed their college searches with little parental participation. As this point in the search process, Judy said, “it was just me.” However, the high school staff were able to provide support in their search processes. Todd and Judy availed themselves of school staff who provided advice regarding how to conduct a college search and how to identify appropriate colleges. When she needed assistance, Judy also approached her high school guidance counselors, who helped her with collecting information about various colleges and gathering support materials for applications. Karen’s family also attended information sessions sponsored by her high school to navigate the financial aid application process.

Last, students in this group had to adjust their college choice sets after evaluating their feasibility. This relates to Bandura’s fourth core property of human agency, self-reflectiveness. For the students in this group, family resources limited their choices to more local, Promise-eligible institutions. While all initially pursued college options out-of-state, the reality of the financial burden of such a choice had students reexamining their actions in light of their college aspirations. Judy shifted her college enrollment goal from Farleigh Dickenson in New Jersey, which is outside of New York City, to Slippery Rock University. This eliminated over \$40,000 in potential students loans. For Karen, her inability to be admitted to her first choice of schools required a readjustment of her college enrollment goals. Instead of a large state university, she realized a more appropriate course of action was to apply to smaller, state-system schools that were less selective academically.

Looking at human agency through the lens of a comprehensive process model, general patterns regarding students' college choice process do emerge. However, the Hossler and Gallagher model makes it difficult to tease apart college choices as they pertain to institutional type from college choices as they pertain to a student's lived context. For instance, there are five participants in this study who qualified for free or reduced lunch in high school. While most of these students are clustered in less selective types of institutions, others are enrolled in more selective institutions. The same is true for first generation college students in this study. How is it that while many low income and first generation students are clustered in less-selective institutions, others pursued educational opportunities at institutions with more competitive admissions criteria? The following section explores how Perna's conceptual model might provide answers to this question.

### **6.3 HUMAN AGENCY AND PERNA'S CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

Perna's (2006) model has advantages over Hossler and Gallagher's in examining the college choice processes of disadvantaged groups. It answers the question of why many low income and first generation students tend to be clustered in less-selective institutions. More importantly, Perna's model allows researchers to understand why other low income and first generation students aspire to and enroll in more selective institutions. Perna's approach clarifies how student characteristics interact with their environment to influence why students demonstrate certain college-going decisions and behaviors. Her framework examines how a student weighs the costs and benefits of a college education as shaped by his or her habitus.

Perna argues, and this research demonstrates that contexts are more or less likely to encourage human agency, through providing the necessary preconditions for its expression. Perna provides a means of examining the role of contexts in college choice, which is important in understanding why students make the choices they do. According to Sen (1985), choice is only possible when one has access to both a reasonable quantity and quality of options. Perna's model takes into consideration the influences of the school and community context, the higher education context, and the social, economic, and policy context. Her framework is based on the assumption that context, not process, shapes particular enrollment decisions.

Exploring the role of context in college choice helps us to understand the limitations of human agency in the process. By emphasizing a student's environment, and identifying the different layers of context, her proposed conceptual model recognizes "differences across students in the resources that shape college choice" (p. 116) . In his work, Bourdieu combines structural factors and individual agency to explain the reproduction of social stratification. Perna's use of Bourdieu's framework is useful in explaining stratification of college choices among participants in this study. Perna's conceptual model can also provide insight into the types of assistance most helpful in closing the college-choice gap among disadvantaged students.

I use the term *disadvantaged* in reference to groups of students who are under-represented in higher education, particularly in more selective institutions. Disadvantaged students tend to share similar characteristics. They may come from families with low incomes, without the economic resources to pay for and support a student in college. Disadvantaged students may not have access to information about institutions of higher education and the college choice process, due to a lack of family participation in post-secondary education. Finally, disadvantaged students may have not had experiences in school systems that adequately

prepared them for success in higher education. The following sections discuss how disadvantaged students' characteristics and contexts influenced the college choice process in a variety of ways.

### **6.3.1 Limited resources constraining choices**

The lack of resources at home constrained students' college choices in a variety of ways. Perna (2006) uses Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital to describe the resources available for students to draw upon in the college search process. The lack or availability of these resources help to explain the ways in which human agency, or choice, is mediated by a student's environment.

#### **6.3.1.1 Economic capital**

One form of capital is economic capital, which describes the family resources available to support pay for and support a student in college. The five students in this study who were economically disadvantaged are Anna, Judy, Todd, Jennifer, and Kelly. However, lack of financial resources and support affected these students differently in the college search. This study suggests that students may be able to overcome the constraints of a low-income background if they are able to deploy social and cultural capital in ways that create greater options in the college choice process.

For Anna, who enrolled in community college, financial constraints affected nearly all her decisions in the college search process. Her mother actively discouraged Anna from pursuing college. Anna had a few distant relatives who had attended college, assuming large student loans in the process. Her uncle, who graduated from college and is now working as a

custodian, is her mother's example of why college is not worth the effort and expense. This may have affected Anna's reluctance to pursue student loans as an option for paying for college. Because she was not willing to consider loans, Anna limited her choices to schools that had very low tuition rates.

Additionally, Anna didn't apply to any colleges because of the expense associated with application fees. In fact, she almost didn't go to college at all. She was concerned that between tuition costs and having to work less, she wouldn't be able to meet her basic living expenses. At that time, Anna felt there were no real options regarding higher education. The advice of a family friend made her rethink CCAC as an option for a post-secondary education. Anna realized that unless she enrolled at CCAC, she might never go to college.

For other low-income students in this study, the lack of economic capital constrained their choices regarding the type of institutions in which they enrolled. Judy and Todd both considered other, more selective institutions, but cost and sense of fit conspired to narrow their choices to local, state-system campuses. Judy wanted a more diverse campus experience, but the potentially large student loan burden made her realize the more affordable options were closer to home. Todd initially considered Pitt and CMU, but was skeptical about being able to afford those options. As to his choices related to cost, Todd initially planned to live on campus. But, he realized that the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship would cover almost all of his college expenses and negate the need for student loans if he attended Cal U and lived at home.

### **6.3.1.2 Academic preparedness**

Some disadvantaged students also struggled to ascertain their academic fit with potential institutions. This illuminates another student characteristic that might serve to limit human agency. Academic preparation for college, or academic capital, is a resource that can serve to



limit or expand choice in the college search process. Todd lacked confidence in his academic capabilities. He assumed that his belated focus on academics in high school might affect his ability to succeed at more selective institutions. This influenced his decision to narrow the number and type of schools he applied to.

Karen, who lacked the appropriate academic preparation for the institutions she was interested in, fell short of her college enrollment aspirations. She was turned down for admission to the main campuses of Penn State and the University of Pittsburgh, which were her preferred options. Beginning the college search all over again, her choices were narrowed down to branch campuses of these institutions, or state system campuses.

### **6.3.1.3 Social and cultural capital**

In addition to lacking economic capital, Anna also lacked social and cultural capital as it related to the college choice process. Anna had no knowledge about paying for college and navigating the financial aid process. In fact, Anna was unaware that financial aid existed, which served to significantly limit her options. In looking at potential colleges, she said, “I just went by the price they had. I had no idea about financial aid”. Without any meaningful connections with staff at her school to help in her college search process, Anna also did not know that many colleges will waive application fees for low-income students. By simply applying to a few local colleges or universities, Anna might have had contact with financial aid administrators who could have helped her assess the affordability of those institutions. Anna might have discovered that she had more college options than she assumed.

Todd and Karen came from households where there was little experience with higher education systems and processes. Therefore, for each of them, the college search process was conducted without much family assistance or participation. Karen and Todd mainly relied only

school personnel to assist them with their college application processes. This help tended to be in response to very specific needs: writing recommendation letters, confirming application requirements, and providing financial aid application assistance. Neither student indicated they received any advice on the number and types of institutions to which they should apply.

Karen relied on her guidance counselor to assist her with gathering information about potential schools. Her guidance counselor even made phone calls to prospective institutions for her to clarify admissions requirements and gather information regarding her application for financial aid. Todd had limited interaction with staff at his high school regarding the college admissions process. While he started the college search considering several different institutions, but as he began to develop perceptions about the likelihood of admission at some schools and being able to afford others, he quickly narrowed his choice to California University of Pennsylvania. This was a college option he was already familiar with because his sister had graduated from there. He knew it was a good fit academically and that it was affordable. However, he might have been able to seriously pursue some of his earlier options if he had reached out to teachers, counselors, or other students to gather information that would better help him make that assessment.

### **6.3.2 Mitigating the effects of limited resources**

Jennifer and Kelly were also disadvantaged students due to their low-income backgrounds. However, this study demonstrates that students can overcome a lack of this important resource to gain admission to more selective institutions. Jennifer and Kelly were able to draw upon their social, cultural, and academic capital to mitigate the effects of limited economic resources to enroll in more selective, more expensive institutions.

### **6.3.2.1 Social and cultural capital**

While in high school, Jennifer developed good relationships with her teachers and guidance counselors. Those social connections helped Jennifer in her search process with “a beautiful letter of recommendation” for Chatham, as well as advice on “how to get scholarships”. This provided Jennifer with a better understanding of how she might pay for college. She learned that “I have a single parent, and there is benefits to it, because it helps me get more [financial] aid.” Jennifer participated in a scholarship program at Chatham, and submitted an essay for another scholarship. “I had a couple of loans and grants and scholarships. All together it adds up.” Knowing how the financial aid system works, as well as obtaining access to scholarship funds, helped Jennifer to finance the cost of a private, selective institution.

Despite having few economic resources to draw upon, Jennifer had several individuals in her life that helped her focus her college aspirations towards a selective four-year institution. To help her through the rough patches, Jennifer said her mother and teachers were a great source of support. Jennifer recalls that she was not part of the popular crowd, and when she felt like she didn’t fit in, her mother would remind her that “she was going to have a really good career” to help her “get perspective”. Jennifer said that she “had a really good relationship with my teachers... my teachers would say how smart I was, and how they really hope for the best for me”. Jennifer said that all of her teachers reinforced that, “I’m going to college one day”, which helped reinforce her own aspirations about college.

Kelly grew up in a low-income household with parents who had limited college experience. Her parents are both artists; her mother is a painter and her father is in a rock band. Her parents are very connected in the Pittsburgh arts scene, and encouraged Kelly and her brother to creatively express themselves. Kelly’s intentions were to pursue oboe performance in

college. Since she also wanted to explore a second major, she considered good music programs at institutions with strong liberal arts curriculums. Her college search process was heavily influenced by her oboe instructor, who was familiar with institutions that met Kelly's criteria.

Kelly's oboe teacher connected her with oboe faculty at several schools and helped Kelly prepare for her auditions, which is typically part of the college application process for music performance majors. Kelly was familiar enough with the financial aid system that she was able to use Duquesne's financial aid package as a tool to request more aid from CMU. "I told them this is how much Duquesne provided", and Kelly asked if CMU could match it. Between the CMU's aid package and the Pittsburgh Promise, Kelly felt that her student loans would be manageable. She was thrilled, as CMU "is a top school."

### **6.3.2.2 Academic capital**

Both Jennifer and Kelly had academic experiences in high school that prepared them well for more selective institutions. Jennifer participated in a dual enrollment program between her high school and CCAC. She began taking college level courses as a junior and loved the experience. She enjoyed the longer class sessions and found them "easier" than she anticipated. In addition to dual enrollment, Jennifer also took English and Biology AP courses at George Washington. While she found the courses difficult, she realized that she would be able to enroll in college with a full semester of credits under her belt.

Kelly also felt well-equipped to participate in a competitive college admissions process due to her high school's academically rigorous curriculum. She attended Hayes, where she majored in oboe performance, and took several AP classes as part of the Pittsburgh Scholars Program. Her parents encouraged her to pursue activities that would look good on her college

applications, such as participating in the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony Orchestra. During her summers, Kelly also attended the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Arts, a competitive five-week program for gifted young artists. Similar to a college experience, students took various classes associated with a "major" in one of five art areas. In addition, Kelly took a class that helped her prepare for the SAT.

### **6.3.3 Turning advantage into choice**

While from a low-income family, Kelly's habitus had more in common with advantaged students who participated in this study. These advantages enabled them to have a wider variety of choices, and exert greater human agency in their college search processes. Like Kelly, advantaged students brought with them a great deal of academic capital to the college search process. All the students who attended selective and elite institutions had participated in college preparatory curriculums in their high schools. In addition, they carried high grade point averages and took up to 11 Advanced Placement courses. Most had enough AP credits to enter college with a semester's worth of college work completed. All were confident about their abilities to handle college-level work, although some voiced fears about "getting lost in the system", or being a little fish in a big intellectual pond.

Advantaged students could also access greater social and cultural capital. They grew up in environments where college attendance was the norm, and academic excellence was expected. Most of their parents graduated from college, and many had advanced degrees. Some even had parents who worked in higher education. Thus, advantaged students tended to have parents who were knowledgeable about higher education and the college search process. Several students also had older siblings who had attended college, and they grew up heavily influenced by their

siblings' experience in higher education. For some students, their first college visits happened when brothers or sisters were looking at colleges. Those early campus visits served to shape their own future college choice sets.

In addition to having knowledge about the college search process, and the academic credentials to gain admission to a wide range of higher education institutions, advantaged students' choice sets were further enlarged by family economic resources. Several participants in this study reported that tuition costs were "not an issue". Two students in this study had parents who were employed at Pitt. Therefore, the tuition, room and board were covered by tuition remission and the Pittsburgh Promise. However, the families had enough economic resources that the consideration of "fit" was more important than cost. These two students, as well as several others that were economically advantaged, had the freedom to select a college based on other criteria such as academic reputation, curricular offerings or campus climate.

For Benjamin, the college search process was all about finding a college where he could pursue his interests and explore different fields of study. The Pittsburgh Promise scholarship wasn't enough of an incentive for him to compromise on those goals and keep him within the state of Pennsylvania. While attending a school with a good academic reputation was important, Benjamin also focused on finding a college where he would feel comfortable. He was looking for a school with "interesting people... a diverse student body", a large institution with an eclectic music scene. In the end, he chose the University of California at Berkeley where he could pursue his interests in computer science and astrophysics with world-renowned faculty while enjoying Berkeley's "vibrant" social atmosphere.

### **6.3.4 Environmental characteristics affecting human agency**

Perna's (2006) three other contexts in her college choice model also affect human agency. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Lin (2002) posit that one's individual actions cannot be fully understood unless they are examined within the social context in which the actions occurred. The experiences students have in the school, higher education, and social contexts influence their perception of available college-going choices and their ability to act upon them in the college choice process.

#### **6.3.4.1 School context**

The quality of experience that a student has in the school context is influenced by the choice of school and curriculum offerings. Navigating the Pittsburgh Public School system can be overwhelming given its many enrollment options. One choice is to attend the local neighborhood school, known as a "feeder" school. Enrollment is assigned based on residential location in the city of Pittsburgh, and there is no special application process for attending the local feeder school.

The other enrollment choice for students is through the Pittsburgh Public Schools' Magnet Schools application. Students may opt to attend a Pittsburgh Public High School or Charter School that is different from their neighborhood feeder school. Magnet schools offer specialized programs of study or curricular options. Attending a magnet school involves an application process, and in the instance of Hayes, auditions for performance majors.

There is a great deal of variation in the mission and structure of the curriculum across Pittsburgh Public schools. William McKinley and Hayes are ranked as some of the best high schools in the state, with strong student performance outcomes and challenging curricular

programs (U.S. News and World Report, 2013). Therefore, some enrollment choices may be better than others in terms of promoting human agency in the college choice process.

Both Anna and Karen attended William McKinley High School, but felt the mainstream curriculum program lacked a college readiness focus and suffered from inconsistency in staffing. McDonough (1997) showed that the school guidance process positively influences college choice. Information about the college search process enables students to make informed decisions about their college options. According to Anna, her experience in the mainstream curricular program “was such a mess... they kept changing the way they did things”. Anna didn’t have many guidance counseling staff she felt comfortable with. “I had a different counselor every year... there was no help, really.”

Karen agreed. “At William McKinley the guidance counselors don’t help you as much”. Karen also sensed that the orientation towards college at the mainstream level was limited to “easier” colleges, such as CCAC, Bradford, and ITT Tech. The message she got was “simple schools” were her best option, and you “didn’t have a chance to go to big schools.” As first-generation college students, Anna and Karen depended upon the school environment to compensate for low levels of social and cultural capital at home as they conducted a college search. Their perception was that the mission and college-going orientation of their high school curricular track, as well as a lack of consistent guidance counseling, served to discourage and limit their college options.

The Pittsburgh Scholars Program, the accelerated college-prep program at William McKinley High School has a strong reputation in the city of Pittsburgh for preparing students well for enrollment and success at elite universities. For many of the advantaged students in this study, the choice to attend William McKinley was deliberate. Frank transferred from a private



middle school to attend the Pittsburgh Scholars Program at William McKinley, where he felt the options for a variety of AP courses, as well as being with a large group of students “who wanted to learn and...helped each other go farther” would prepare him well to apply to elite colleges. Frank was also able to tap into his social network to learn about the benefits of attending William McKinley. In doing so, he discovered that William McKinley has a “legacy” of students going to “good schools”. To him, it was clear that the curricular mission in the Pittsburgh Scholars Program at William McKinley was to promote college attendance at elite institutions. Tangible evidence of this mission was the effort guidance counselors and teachers put into mentoring students, providing enrichment opportunities, and writing recommendation letters. These actions provided students with attitudes and a set of credentials that expanded their college choice options.

This section demonstrates that it is possible to have two completely different college-going cultures within the same school district, and indeed within the same high school. William McKinley makes significant investments in the college futures of the students enrolled in the Pittsburgh Scholars Program by deploying staff to provide individual attention in their college search processes. On the other hand, the students enrolled in the lower curricular tracks at William McKinley have a much different experience in regards to the school’s development of their college aspirations and college readiness. The irony is that the students who need the most support in these areas are not receiving it.

#### **6.3.4.2 Higher education context**

Where a prospective college student lives matters in developing aspirations for college. Research demonstrates that proximity to post-secondary institutions of higher education

increases the odds of disadvantaged students applying to and enrolling in college (Lopez Turley, 2009). In the Pittsburgh area, there are approximately 40 accredited institutions of higher education, which positively affected human agency in the college search process for participants in this study. All participants in this study had set foot on a college campus prior to the college search process. Several had been involved in dual enrollment programs, or had participated in an extra-curricular activity hosted by a local college or university. Others had simply attended a concert or program on a local campus. These experiences serve to acquaint students with higher education environments, making it a familiar and normal part of their life experiences.

In addition, the variety of higher education options in the immediate area also increases the likelihood that students can obtain information about different college and university options. Students were aware of the difference between CCAC and Pennsylvania state-system schools, as well as the many private and public university options in the area. It appeared that students benefitted from living in a region with a wide variety of higher education options. Students were able to take what knowledge they had already gleaned from their prior experiences with local college and universities to create even the most basic framework for the college choice process.

### **6.3.4.3 Social, economic and policy context**

The social, economic, and policy context also influences human agency. The social context takes demographic characteristics of the population into account. For high school students evaluating their college choice options, the influence of peers is considerable. For the participants in this study, the choices friends made about attending college appeared to influence study participants. All study participants indicated that others in their immediate circle of friends also chose to attend college.

More broadly, students stated that the social context of the Pittsburgh Scholars Programs at Rutherford B. Hayes and at William McKinley served to positively influence college-going decisions. Both programs have a history of sending students to selective and elite colleges and universities. Not only did the school influence college-going decisions, but it was also embedded in the social culture of students. Benjamin noted that among the students who had attended William McKinley's Pittsburgh Scholars Program, there are so many who attended elite institutions that one doesn't have to look far to obtain an insider's perspective on a particular school. In fact, it is a norm within the social culture of that academic community to network with alumni in regards to the college search process. Feedback from these former students was particularly valued, as they shared a common high school experience. This social practice promoted human agency in the college choice process by providing additional sources of information to be used in the students' college-going decisions.

Lastly, the public policy characteristics in a student's environment can have a significant influence on human agency. Tuition at public college and universities are often established through public policy measures. The amount of government financial appropriations to public higher education also affects tuition levels. Public policy that affects college affordability will

have an influence on student college choice. This was evident in this study. Students from low-income backgrounds described college choice processes that were significantly influenced by the availability of Pittsburgh Promise funding.

#### **6.4 PITTSBURGH PROMISE AND HUMAN AGENCY**

According to Bandura (2001), the establishment of the Pittsburgh Promise could be considered a fortuitous event. Sometimes, the most important determinants of one's life trajectory can arise through unforeseen or planned circumstances. In 1990, couples with young babies opted to live in the city of Pittsburgh, without the expectation that a private fund would be established to provide their children with a college scholarship worth twenty thousand dollars. As Bandura notes, regarding individuals and fortuitous events, "there is a lot of randomness in the determining conditions of its intersection" (Bandura, 2001, p. 12). Bandura goes on to say that "of the myriad fortuitous elements encountered in everyday life, many of them still touch people only lightly, others leave more lasting effects, and still others thrust people into new life trajectories" (p. 12). For participants in this study, the Pittsburgh Promise influenced their college search outcomes, and even their life trajectories in different ways.

This section of the chapter explores how the Pittsburgh Promise may have promoted agency in the college search processes of study participants. The Pittsburgh Promise had the potential to positively influence human agency on two levels. The first level would be in its ability to affect Promise-eligible students as they made choices about college attendance and acted upon them. For at least one student, the Pittsburgh Promise influenced whether she would

attend college. For other participants in this study, its influence was limited to the selection of a specific institution of higher education.

#### **6.4.1 Direct influences**

For some students in this study, the Pittsburgh Promise directly influenced their college choice decisions in many ways. Anna explains how the financial assistance the scholarship provided helped to offset her concerns about cost. For other students like Christopher, the availability of the scholarship put colleges within reach that might not have been possible to attend without the financial assistance. For some students in this study, they had enough financial resources that the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship had little or no influence in their post-secondary enrollment decisions.

Anna recalls that that she learned about the Pittsburgh Promise her senior year when a letter explaining the program and the scholarship award was sent to her house. It appealed to her because “it helped people go to college.” While she had aspired to attend college, Anna felt her post-secondary options were limited as she explored potential costs. She was put off by the high costs of attendance, and wasn’t aware of the availability of financial aid.

Anna didn’t apply to any colleges because she couldn’t afford application fees. She eventually opted to go to CCAC, as it accepted her Promise scholarship and was her only affordable option. Without the Promise scholarship, she says that she “probably wouldn’t have gone to school. Or finished.”

For Anna, the support provided by Promise staff ensured that she enrolled properly at CCAC her first semester. Confused by the registration process, she found a Promise staff

member who walked her downstairs and helped her “figure everything out.” Anna says that she still keeps in touch with her via email, and her help “was amazing.”

For Christopher and several other participants in this study, the Promise had less of an influence regarding if he went to college, but it did have significant influence on where he enrolled. Christopher remembers clearly the first time he heard about the Pittsburgh Promise. He was a freshman in high school. School staff had arranged a large school assembly, and Christopher remembers teachers telling them “there is going to be cameras, don’t do anything stupid.” At the time, Christopher recalls he had some pretty vague ideas about where he wanted to go to college. His plans were to go “out of state”, so the announcement “didn’t really matter” at the time.

Christopher says that the scholarship also didn’t influence his academic efforts. His grades weren’t “really a problem” and “I wasn’t worried about making the cut [grade point average criteria]. I knew I wasn’t going to Harvard, but I knew I wasn’t going to go to CCAC... I knew I had the grades to go to a four-year college.” One of his teachers at Hayes, “started to set the course away” from the big out of state schools Christopher was considering at the time. Christopher began to think “Ok, maybe I need to look in state. She was a big advocate of the Pittsburgh Promise.” The teacher helped Christopher understand how much tuition would be, as well as getting him to think about other college-related expenses. In the end, he realized that “I can get better money with the Pittsburgh Promise.” Without the Pittsburgh Promise, Christopher “would have given CCAC more consideration.”

For a few participants in this study, the Pittsburgh Promise was not an influence in any part of their college search process. These students were from more affluent households, where college aspirations were focused on admittance to a highly selective or elite institution.

Benjamin, who attends the University of California at Berkeley, recalled learning about the Pittsburgh Promise as part of a “ninth grade nation thing”, a Pittsburgh Public Schools’ college-readiness initiative aimed at his particular class. He also heard about the Promise at his older brother’s graduation ceremony. The commencement address was delivered by former a Pittsburgh Steeler great and Pittsburgh Promise board member, Franco Harris. As for the potential of using the scholarship, “it was noted.” His parents seemed to view the scholarship as potentially constraining his college options. “Don’t limit yourself” was the message he got from his parents.

#### **6.4.2 Indirect influences**

While some students may have been directly influenced by the Pittsburgh Promise, others implied that they were not. A few students didn’t think the award influenced them because they already were motivated to attend college. These students had other motivations for meeting school attendance requirements and achieving good grades. However, the Pittsburgh Promise may exert some influence on the schools that in turn serve to promote human agency in the college search process. Enrollment in the Pittsburgh Public School system has stabilized after several years of decline, indicating that students are choosing to persist to graduation and attend college. Additionally, the creation of the Promise has given teachers a point from which to discuss college-going goals and plans.

While the Promise has been in effect for a relatively shorter period of time, enrollment in the Pittsburgh Public School district has stabilized (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). This might be that parents are reacting to the availability of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship by choosing to stay in the school district with the intention that their child will go to college and use the award.

This could be an indication of parental awareness of the availability of the Promise scholarship, and signals an intent to encourage their child to attend college. Research indicates that parental expectations and encouragement of college-going behaviors shape students' enrollment choices (W. G. Tierney, 2002).

This assumption may be borne out by the fact that an increasing number of Pittsburgh Public School students are enrolling in higher education (G. C. Gonzales et al., 2011). With a greater number of students choosing to attend college, the school district may be working towards establishing a college-going culture within the Pittsburgh Public schools. As college attendance becomes the "norm", college-going peers begin to exert greater influence on students as they make their college decisions (Fletcher, 2012). Students may start to develop plans for college that they might not have absent the peer influence.

Lastly, the Pittsburgh Promise may have exerted an influence on the Pittsburgh Public Schools that influences the formation of students' college-going aspirations. The creation of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship has influenced the public schools to align their curricular offerings to better prepare students for college-level work. The current goal set by the Pittsburgh Public Schools is that 80% of PPS students will attend and graduate from a post-secondary institution. To achieve this, the Pittsburgh Public School district has identified key transitions in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, implemented academic interventions for populations of at-risk students, and introducing new curricular programs aimed at preparing students for college-level work (The Pittsburgh Promise, 2013b). High levels of academic achievement influence college-going thoughts and behaviors. As more PPS students opt to attend higher education, there may be an increased effort to ensure they are able to perform academic work at that level.



The Pittsburgh Promise has influenced how teachers and staff encourage college-going aspirations among students. Participants in the study remarked about specific teachers that provided information and assistance to students to help them act on their intentions to attend college. Some teachers talked up the Pittsburgh Promise, while others provided advice and mentoring regarding the selection of a potential college with the Pittsburgh Promise in mind.

### **6.4.3. Human agency potential in place-based scholarship literature**

A review of placed-based scholarship literature helps to deepen our understanding of how the Pittsburgh Promise might influence human agency in the college choice process. Do the experiences of students with other place-based scholarship programs indicate that these programs positively affect human agency in the college search process? Currently, there are 23 Promise-type programs around the country. Eligibility criteria and scholarship amounts differ across programs; however, they are commonly characterized as providing students situated in a defined geographical location with near-universal access to funding for postsecondary education. While place-based scholarships are beginning to attract greater attention, a limited amount of research exists on efficacy and outcomes of these programs.

The first place-based scholarship program created was the Kalamazoo Promise, started in 2005. As such, it has attracted the most interest among scholars. This body of research does point to some positive effects that these place-based scholarships are having on secondary school climates, student behaviors, and students' college choice sets. Beneficial experiences in these areas provide students with the predispositions and skills that will allow them to exert greater agency in the college choice process.

One area under study is whether inception of a place-based scholarship program positively affects a student's secondary school experience. Researchers noted that when the Kalamazoo Promise was announced in 2005, its first impact was "to lift student aspirations and teacher expectations" (Miron et al., 2010, p. 51). Initially, Kalamazoo parents "responded more strongly than students. Parents said they were more focused on their children's school work and were enforcing more social and academic discipline at home" (Miron et al., 2010, p. 52). W. G. Tierney (2002) found that parental support and involvement is second only to academic preparation in activities that influenced college going behaviors.

Student aspirations regarding college enrollment also increased. An evaluation of the Kalamazoo Promise by the U. S. Department of Education found a significant majority of both students and KPS employees believed that student attitudes about school work had improved (Miron et al., 2009). In addition, 85% of students reported their motivation to succeed in school improved after the Kalamazoo Promise was announced. Students also informed researchers of their improved work ethic and "increased plans to enroll in college preparatory classes" (Miron et al., 2009, p. ii). Students also voiced their increased motivation to teachers, who noted that students voiced intentions and displayed actions that indicated a willingness to "try" postsecondary education.

The Kalamazoo Promise announcement also helped motivate the Kalamazoo Public Schools in taking the necessary steps to "assess and modify the school system so that it could serve the broader goal of preparing more students for success in postsecondary education" (Miron et al., 2010). Research indicates that high school experiences are the most important influences in the formation of students' educational aspirations (Pitre, 2006). Teachers were initially the driving force behind changes students experienced in the classroom. A study of

short-term effects of the Kalamazoo Promise indicated that there were significant positive changes in teacher beliefs, expectations, and behaviors that served to promote agency in students' college choice processes. This change is especially important for students at risk for low achievement (A. E. Smith, Jussim, & Eccles, 1999).

As respondents in a study of teacher response to the Kalamazoo Promise, teachers commented that they felt a “renewed sense of urgency” in response to the announcement of the scholarship program (Jones, Miron, & Kelaher-Young, 2012). Teachers further commented on how the Promise scholarship helped to define priorities within the district. One teacher noted that due to the Promise, teachers are “fired up” about the “charge of preparing all students for success in higher education” (Jones et al., 2012, p. 40). Students sense a change among the teachers as well. Students participating in the study perceived heightened teacher expectations regarding effort and the quality of work that students submit.

Teachers report communicating their higher expectations to students in a variety of ways. Teachers provided students with verbal cues, providing students with direct feedback, and a more academically focused classroom climate (Jones et al., 2012). Teachers shifted their focus, looking beyond simply providing preparation for college, and aiming for preparation that “will enable success through the college years (Jones et al., 2012, p. 41). Teachers also engaged students more frequently in conversations about college options and career plans. The Kalamazoo Promise was not just an incentive, but a vehicle to promote college preparation and matriculation.

Students reported in this study that teachers were more helpful in assisting students to succeed in school and prepare for college (Jones et al., 2012). Students shared that teachers were assigning more homework and offering more tutoring for students who were struggling.

Homework assistance was now available before and after school. Students also noticed that teachers enforced rules more often since the Kalamazoo Promise began. This helped to create a more rigorous academic environment, and also sent a message about what “was acceptable as student work and behavior in high school and what would be expected of students in college” (Jones et al., 2012, p. 43).

Lastly, research on the Kalamazoo Promise indicates this place-based scholarship program positively affects students’ ability to exercise human agency in the college choice process. A study exploring the effects of the Kalamazoo Promise on college access determined that students were responsive to price incentives (Andrews et al., 2010). After implementation of the program, students were more likely to include scholarship-eligible post-secondary institutions in their college choice sets. Additionally, students were more likely to include Michigan’s most selective public universities in their college choice sets. Thus, the Kalamazoo Promise scholarship allows students “who are financially constrained to consider institutions that are more higher priced and more selective” (Andrews et al., 2010, p. 25).

In conclusion, the available research demonstrates that place-based scholarships have the potential to positively influence the college choice process. The benefits students experience from increased encouragement from parents and teachers to attend college, along with a more intensive academic experience in school, feeds student aspirations for college attendance. Students set higher goals regarding their academic experiences, and are able to achieve them through greater skill acquisition and knowledge attainment. Increased aspirations and academic achievement provide students with access to a larger choice set. Additionally, access to increased financial resources for college further enables students to exert greater human agency in the college choice process.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

An examination of the ways in which the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship promotes human agency highlights several basic themes related to college choice process. The experiences of the participants in this study are better understood if looked at through a lens that takes into account their individual lived experiences, which are influenced by the school, higher education, and social contexts they inhabit. These themes help to shape our understanding of the college choice process, and to identify key areas that promote human agency.

- *Choices in the college search process increases students' likelihood of having meaningful and successful post-secondary experiences.* Students who do not have access to higher education, either through academic readiness or financial resources will likely have vastly different life outcomes than those to do attend post-secondary institutions (College Board, 2010). Additionally, where one goes to college matters as well. Research shows that enrolling in a four-year institution increases the chances of persisting to attain a bachelor's degree. However, examining the habitus of study participants indicates that those with the least amount of self-efficacy, academic, social, and cultural capital enroll at institutions that are least likely to graduate them. The Pittsburgh Promise has the potential to affect the preparation and college choice processes of Pittsburgh Public School students to help them aspire to institutions that will help them meet their personal and professional goals.

- Context is a better lens for examining human agency in the college choice process.*

Process models, such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice, identify stages in the college choice process, and where in that process human agency might be applied. However, to understand why students make the college choices they do, Perna's (2006) contextual approach is a better lens for examining human agency. Exploration of student contexts allow researchers to explore the factors that promote human agency in the college choice process. This approach is particularly helpful in examining the factors affecting college choice sets of disadvantaged students, who often perceive themselves as having few or no options in the college search process.
- Not all contexts are the same.* This research demonstrated that not all disadvantaged students share similar contexts. Low income students may all experience limited financial resources and means of paying for college expenses. However, due to differences in habitus, some were able to draw upon other sources of capital to compensate for lack of income. Several study participants took advantage of family knowledge of the college admissions process to expand their options, while others drew upon social networks in much the same way.
- Money isn't the only way to promote college choice.* The Pittsburgh Promise influenced the formation of college aspirations and the implementation of college-going plans to varying degrees among study participants. The Pittsburgh Promise promoted human agency most among students lacking the economic, cultural, and social capital needed to enact a successful college choice process. For these students, the financial award coupled with support from the Pittsburgh Public schools and Promise staff allowed students to

form intentions to enroll in college, as well as the ability to evaluate and enact their college-going plans.

For students having high levels of economic, cultural and social capital, the Pittsburgh Promise did not promote human agency in the college choice process. For these students, their college choice sets were determined early in life. Family expectations and values regarding higher education heavily influenced the trajectory of their college search process. While the advantaged students exerted a great deal of human agency in the college search process, very little was influenced by the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. Their environmental contexts produced students with unlimited options in the college search process. While the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program can influence the development of contexts that promote human agency in the college choice process, for many advantaged students, it simply wasn't needed.

## **7.0 CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

When I first began researching the proliferation of state-based merit-aid scholarship programs, I was amazed by the existence of public scholarships that provide significant funding to students who meet basic college-entry criteria. States enacted these programs to promote academic excellence, incentivize public school systems to graduate college-ready students, and encourage high school graduates to remain in-state while pursuing higher education. The premise sounds great. If a student works hard at being college-ready, then the funds will be there to assist a student in paying for college. The motto of the Pittsburgh Promise is to “Work Hard, Dream Big”. However, despite the availability of scholarship funds, it often takes more than hard work and big dreams to successfully navigate the college choice process.

Growing research demonstrates that the decision to attend college, as well as where, begins long before the student wrestles with how he or she might go about paying for it. Process models, such as Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three stage model of college choice, closely examine the choice process from when the student decides to attend college, through enrollment. This model is helpful for examining what the choice process looks like, particularly as students consider a variety of factors in determining where to enroll. However, this model is less helpful in shedding light on issues of stratification in higher education. Lower-income and



minority students are less likely to enroll in higher education, and are less likely to enroll in more selective, four-year institutions. Further research is needed to understand what influences students' college choice decisions, particularly within the context of broad-based merit-scholarship awards. The guiding question for my research was: How does the Pittsburgh Promise merit scholarship program influence the college-choice processes of its recipients?

This research sought to explicitly answer the following questions:

1. How do Pittsburgh Promise scholars make their college choice decisions?
2. How does the Pittsburgh Promise influence the college-going decisions of its recipients as viewed through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice? Is this the most appropriate lens to understand the choice sets of all Pittsburgh Promise recipients?
3. In what ways does the Pittsburgh Promise promote human agency in the college choice process?

This chapter reviews the findings of this study in examining the college choice experiences of a group of Pittsburgh Promise recipients. I used two college choice lenses for exploring college choice decisions, as well as evaluated whether recipients exercised human agency in the college choice process. I then discuss the implications of the findings and offer some suggestions for future research.

## **7.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### **1. How do Pittsburgh Promise scholars make their college choice decisions?**

The wide variety of backgrounds and experiences of respondents in this study contributed to varied approaches to college choice decisions. Each recognized that a college education was necessary for them to achieve professional and personal goals. Therefore, almost all of the respondents knew that college was the next step after high school. The bigger decision was to determine where to enroll. Many of the respondents in this study found the college choice process to be much more complex than they anticipated.

Analysis of the data indicated that most students used similar criteria for determining their college choices. Academic reputation, programs of study, and cost were the primary criteria used by all the student in this study. Secondary considerations were size, campus culture, and geographic location. However, the degree to which these criteria mattered differed among respondents.

For the five students from low-income families, cost tended to be their first concern. For Anna, attendance at any institution of higher education hinged on cost. For others, cost determined the types of schools they would attend, and whether they would live on campus or opt to commute from home. For these and other respondents, cost considerations shaped their choice sets significantly. Only the more financially well-off students seriously considered attending an institution that was ineligible to participate in the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program.

Six study participants shared that their interest in a particular program of study was the strongest influence in their college enrollment choice. For these students, their professional goals dictated their possible higher education choices. Two of these students indicated that the institution they chose for its program came with a significantly high tuition cost. While a

financial burden, these students viewed their institutional choice as being an investment that would pay off later in future earnings.

Six study participants were heavily influenced by the academic reputation of potential schools. All of these students ultimately enrolled at highly selective and elite institutions. All had specific career goals in mind, and most came from families where family members had made similar college enrollment choices. This speaks to the fact that these students tended to come from families that could comfortably afford the high tuition rates associated with these types of institutions. Only one student in this group considered cost as a secondary influence in her enrollment decision. For the rest, campus culture, or a personal sense of fit, was the second important criteria in their college search.

**2. How does the Pittsburgh Promise influence the college-going decisions of its recipients as viewed through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice? Is this the most appropriate lens to understand the choice sets of Pittsburgh Promise recipients?**

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice describes three phases through which students move as they make their college choices. In the predisposition stage, students develop aspirations for higher education. The search stage is characterized by the narrowing down of preferences for particular institutions. The choice stage is marked by the selection of an institution and the completion of the enrollment process. In this study, I grouped student college choice experiences by the type of institution in which they ultimately enrolled. This organizational approach to the data illuminated common characteristics of search processes, while allowing me to compare and contrast the college choice experiences between groups of students.

Since Anna was the only respondent to select a community college, which didn't allow me to compare her search with others who also chose community college as an option for post-secondary education. However, the themes associated with her college choice process align with those identified in current literature. As a low-income, first-generation college student, her aspirations for higher education were affected by a lack of support at home to pursue college, and the lack of financial resources to pay for it. Her search process was haphazard, lacking information and guidance that would allow her to make well-informed decisions. Ultimately, her decision to enroll at CCAC was due to a potential job supervisor making it a condition of employment.

For those enrolled at state-system institutions, college aspirations were supported and encouraged at home. However, the college search process for these three students lacked focus and direction. Students were unable to anticipate how financial aid might affect the final costs of attendance at certain institutions. Additionally, they also struggled to determine which potential institutions were a good academic fit. Final decisions came down to cost, as state-system schools seemed the most affordable option among the four-year institutions.

Respondents who were enrolled at private/selective colleges and universities all had at least one parent who had attended college. Thus, they were predisposed to attend college from an early age. In the search stage, this group of students actively considered a larger number of institutions than those attending community college and state-system universities. They described well-organized college searches with options that better matched their academic and financial abilities. These students also evaluated potential schools on wider range of criteria, with a greater focus on academic reputation and curriculum, and less on cost.

The last group of students I examined were those that chose to attend elite institutions. Only one of these students chose to attend an institution where they were eligible for the Promise scholarship. Respondents in this group typically had parents who held graduate degrees and had attended elite universities themselves. Therefore, these students grew up with the assumption that not only would they attend college, but it would likely be at an elite institution. Their choice sets included nationally-recognized schools with strong academic reputations. These students and their parents invested a great deal of time and money in the college search process in order to find the right school. Ultimately, their final choices came down to finding the right balance between personal fit and academic reputation.

In trying to understand how recipients of the Pittsburgh Promise made their college choice decisions, it is more helpful to understand the variables that influence if and where a student enrolls in college. A student's habitus, or lived experience, influences college choice throughout the predisposition, search, and choice stages. Understanding how habitus affects the college choice sets of low-income, first-generation, and minority students allows researchers to identify the potential barriers to college access and choice.

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice provided a more suitable framework to examine the experiences of respondents in this study. Her model focuses on the influence of student contexts in making college choices. It looks at college choice through the layers of habitus, the school and community context, the higher education context, and a student's social, economic and policy environments. This approach to college choice helped me to better understand differences in the college search process, particularly as they relate to the experiences of underrepresented groups in higher education.

For instance, most of the low-income and first generation college students in this study were likely to be enrolled in less selective institutions. Examining their habitus provided a clearer view of the factors that shaped their college choice sets. These students came from homes where college was an alien experience, or certainly not the norm. Therefore, they received little guidance or support on how to effectively mount a college search. Financial constraints also conspired to limit number and types of institutions a student considered. Lastly, students were often dependent on school personnel to assist and guide their college search process.

The school and community context also influences the possibilities regarding higher education. Students from more privileged backgrounds found themselves in high schools that prepared them well for the college search process. These students talked about curriculums that were challenging, helping them to develop academic skills necessary for success in college. Additionally, they were also able to take advantage of a wide variety of AP courses, which enhance a college application packet by demonstrating a student has already mastered college-level material. These students took advantage of a curricular track that fostered a culture of academic success and high aspirations in regards to collegiate enrollment. This type of school environment was instrumental for low-income and first generation students in this study. It helped to make up for deficits in family social and cultural capital, expanding college options that might not have otherwise been possible.

All respondents in this study were influenced by factors in the higher education context that served to shape their college choice sets. One factor was the availability of information about specific institutions of higher education. Almost all of the respondents reported using on-line resources to gather information about potential colleges. Students with families that had

limited experience in higher education tended to access basic information such as admissions criteria and cost. Additionally, they were less likely to be open to higher educational options that were outside of their own personal experience. Unsolicited mailings were considered “creepy”, and were mostly disregarded. These practices served to limit their knowledge about their available college options, and may have served to further limit their pool of potential institutions.

Perna’s final environmental layer is the economic and policy context. Most notable is the effect that the Pittsburgh Promise had on respondents’ college choices. For low-income students, the Pittsburgh Promise strongly influenced their college choices. For Anna, it made the difference between going to college or not. For others, it expanded their college options, or served to lower their potential student loan burden. A few recognized that lower undergraduate loans allowed them to aspire to attain an advanced degree.

While many of the respondents in this study stated that Pittsburgh Promise criteria didn’t influence their academic efforts in high school, it certainly influenced which higher education institutions they considered. Several noted that once they compared the cost differences between a school that was Promise-eligible and one that was not, the choice to attend a school where they could use their scholarship was a pretty easy one. This comparison served to limit college choices to those that were accredited post-secondary institutions within the state of Pennsylvania.

The only group of students who weren’t influenced in their college enrollment decisions by the Pittsburgh Promise were ones that didn’t have to consider cost as a factor. These students were not dependent upon the Pittsburgh Promise or other forms of government grants and loans. They were free to focus on criteria such as academic reputation and sense of personal fit. Early on in their search process, these students were aware that there were very few limits in their

college enrollment possibilities. These privileged students grew up with the expectation that in regards to college, anything was possible.

**3. In what ways does the Pittsburgh Promise promote human agency in the college choice process?**

Human agency is the capacity for students to make choices regarding their enrollment in college and act upon them. The participants in this study demonstrated varying levels of human agency in the college choice process. The Pittsburgh Promise promoted human agency in the college choice process in several ways. Students demonstrated self-efficacy, intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness in deciding whether to go to college, and determining where they should enroll.

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice focuses less on what enrollment decisions students make, than why students make the choices they do. Perna provides a better lens for understanding the college choice process of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups in higher education. Her approach clarifies how student characteristics interact with their environment to influence why students demonstrate certain college-going decisions and behaviors. Perna argues that contexts are more or less likely to encourage human agency through providing the conditions that favor certain decisions and actions. In doing so, Perna's conceptual model can also provide insight into the interventions that have the potential to positively influence college-choice outcomes, particularly among disadvantaged students.

The Pittsburgh Promise has the potential to promote human agency in the college choice process in a variety of ways. For many, the Promise directly influenced their college-going decisions by helping them determine if going college was even an option. For others, the financial support the scholarship offered shaped the choice sets of potential institutions in which



they could afford to enroll. For Anna, who had the least amount of cultural and social capital to draw upon in the college search process, the availability of Promise staff as she enrolled at CCAC helped her navigate a confusing registration process.

It appeared the Promise had little influence on high school academic effort. While Promise criteria required that students a certain grade point average and meet certain attendance goals, respondents stated that they were influenced very little by these program standards. All of the students stated that they already had the same or higher expectations of themselves in regards to their high school performance.

However, the Pittsburgh Promise may also have less obvious influence in student's college choice experiences. Some respondents reported that their parents were aware of, and spoke often about the availability of the Promise scholarship. This may promote more conversations at home about the possibility of college attendance, raising student aspirations about higher education. In addition, the Promise may also serve as an incentive for the Pittsburgh Public school system to promote a college-going culture in the schools while providing a curriculum that will help to ensure all students are college-ready. This environment serves to expand student options regarding what is possible in terms of higher educational attainment.

Last, the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program has limited potential to influence all Pittsburgh Public school students. For students lacking academic, social, and cultural capital, the opportunity of the scholarship coupled with Promise influences and interventions can serve to create and expand higher education opportunities for disadvantaged students. However, the Promise scholarship has little influence on the most advantaged students in the Pittsburgh Public school system. The scholarship money isn't needed to help fund an elite college experience, and

these students have all the necessary support at home to provide extensive options in the college choice process. These students demonstrate a significant amount of human agency in the college search process. However, the Pittsburgh Promise has little to no influence in promoting it.

### **7.3 IMPLICATIONS**

This study sought to provide a deeper understanding of the college search process among recipients of local place-based merit-scholarships. The implications of this study illuminate new ways of thinking in regards to college choice, human agency, and social class. This has implications for researchers of college choice theory, practitioners as they design and execute college-readiness programs, and research methodologists.

#### **7.3.1 Implications for college choice theory**

Currently, the study of college choice processes involves three distinct choice sets. First, is the choice surrounding whether a student decides to attend college or not. The second choice set involves narrowing down which post-secondary institutions to consider attending. The third and final choice involves the selection of one particular institution in which to enroll.

Many of the comprehensive process models describe the college choice process as a linear process, whereby students move through their decision-making process in sequential steps before ultimately selecting an institution and completing the enrollment process. Researchers propose that each college choice phase seems to be associated with a specific age range (Hossler et al., 1989; Nora & Cabrera, 1992). It is suggested that students develop predispositions to

attend college in high school, undertake the college search in grades 10 -12, and make their enrollment choice in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

However, the respondents in this study did not appear to match that timeline in the college choice process. For two students in this study, their choices regarding whether to attend college or not occurred in much closer proximity to the search phase. Todd was the only student in this study who made the decision to attend college in high school. Because of his poor academic focus and subsequent performance in high school, his ability to be admitted to a college and succeeding there was very much in doubt. Once he applied himself to his studies, he began to seriously consider college as an option. In his case, the predisposition, search and choice phases aligned very well with Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice.

In Anna's case, the reality of her financial need created a situation in which the predisposition and search phases overlapped. Despite wanting to attend college since middle school, Anna realized that her decision to attend college was very much associated with whether she could afford it. Throughout the search phase, she was re-evaluating her decision to attend college. The process by which she searched for potential institutions and the decision of whether she should enroll in any, were highly affected by her uncertainty.

However, for other participants in this study, the college choice process appeared to represent very separate choice processes. The first choice process involved the development of college aspirations that result in a decision of whether to attend college. The choice to attend college was made for many participants in this study well before they were even aware they had a choice. Most described college attendance as "assumed" or "expected". These students can't ever recall having made a choice to attend college, nor had they ever considered *not* attending college.

Particularly for the students from well-educated backgrounds and family environments, college attendance is part of the cultural fabric of their environment. Looking at this through the lens of Bourdieu, students from upper classes develop a “taste” or appreciation for the experiences associated with higher levels of education, which is reflected and reinforced by their habitus. In other words, the choice to attend college is made for them, often even before they are born, and they grow up in an environment that continues to reinforce that choice.

In addition, the search process for college might also begin much earlier for these students. The students from highly educated backgrounds had institutional preferences that were heavily influenced by family members or friends attended who attended certain types of institutions. From a young age, these respondents aspired to attend similar institutions. Also, they received messages about appropriate college choices based on the college search processes of older siblings or cousins. A few respondents recalled that their college search process actually began when they visited college campuses with their family while an older sibling was conducting a college search. Those former campus visits influenced and shaped their own college search and enrollment decisions years later.

There are significant differences among the respondents in this study regarding their experiences in deciding whether they were going to attend college and where they might enroll. Perna’s model provides a framework of understanding how a student’s environment influences decisions made in the college choice process. However, Hossler and Gallagher’s focus on process is also an important perspective to consider while examining a student’s college choices. As this study demonstrated, Perna’s four contextual layers affected student experiences within each of Hossler and Gallagher’s three stages. Each respondents’ aspirations, search process, and enrollment choices were influenced by experiences within their habitus, the school and

community context, the higher education context, and the social, economic and policy context. A college choice model that incorporates both approaches may better explain the college choice process from predisposition to college enrollment. More importantly, this approach might provide a better window for examining the varied college choice experiences of students in each step of the college choice process. A basic rendering of this process could be as follows:

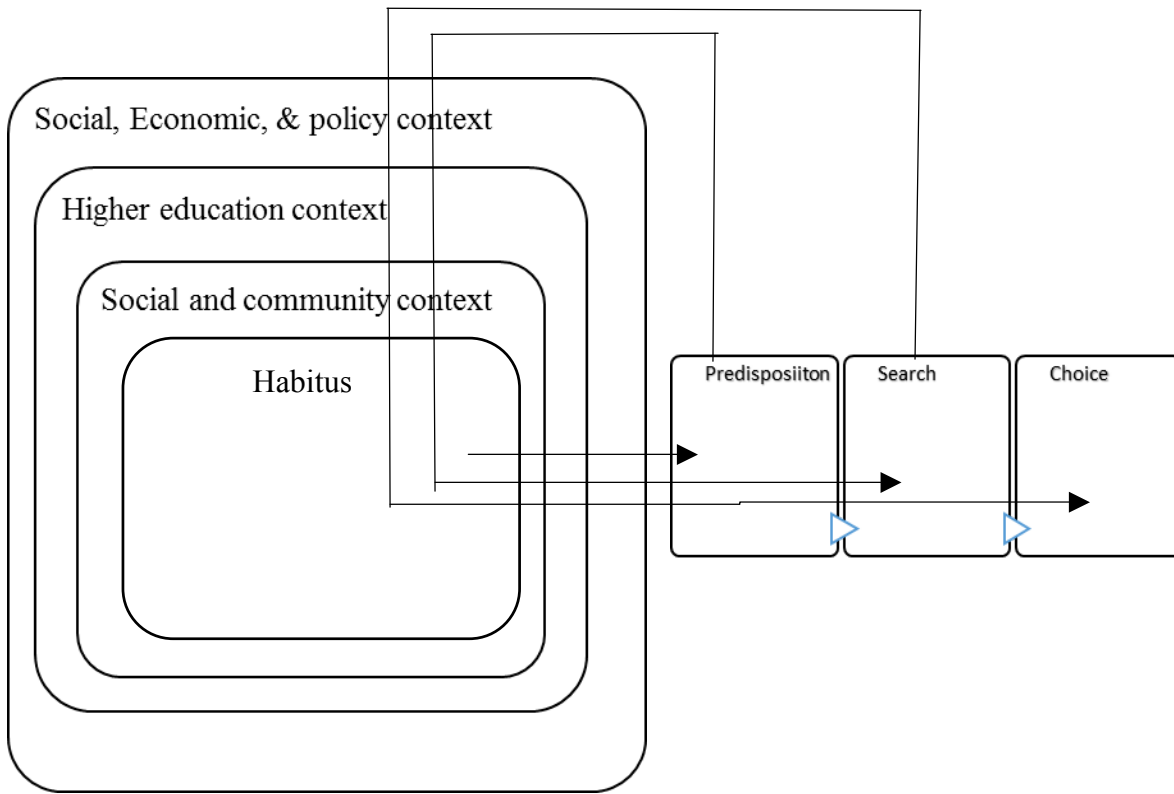


Figure 2. Combined approach to student college choice

This model illustrates the interaction between Perna’s conceptual model of college choice and Hossler and Gallagher’s understanding of the college choice process. In this revised model, a student’s initial aspirations about post-secondary education are shaped by the four nesting contextual layers. These layers recognize the differences in resources and experiences across

students that serve to shape a student's perspective about the benefits of a college education. As predispositions are formed, a student is again influenced by their experiences within the four contextual layers, which in turn shapes his or her college search process. As a student makes the final decision in terms of where to enroll, he or she is again influenced by experiences within the four contextual layers. The entire college choice experience, from developing aspirations to matriculation at a particular institution, is influenced by repeated interactions between a student's lived context and the stages of the college decision-making process.

### **7.3.2 Implications for professional practice**

This research study has the potential to provide a framework through which professionals working with students in the college choice process might assess how to better meet the needs of all students. The revised college choice model demonstrates that there are four contextual layers of student experience that influence how a student makes decisions about attending college that influence progress along the three phases of college choice. Professionals working on behalf of the Pittsburgh Promise, or those within the Pittsburgh Public Schools, could refer to this model to develop interventions that promote college readiness and attendance within all four contextual layers, as well as supporting students during all three phases of the college search process. The more professionals can do to provide resources and experiences for students in ways that promote college aspirations, assist in the search process, and encourage post-secondary enrollment, the more likely the Pittsburgh Promise and the PPS will reach their goal of "80% will get to and go through post-secondary education".

The Pittsburgh Promise and PPS staff might also make use of the revised college choice model to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions currently in use. Questions staff may ask

are, “how well does this intervention influence college choice within any of the four contextual layers?” and “how well does this intervention support students during the college choice process?” The following are examples of interventions already in place and administered by Pittsburgh Promise staff.

*School-Based Outreach* is an effort by the Pittsburgh Promise to ensure that all students and parents are aware of the availability of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship, and that they understand the criteria under which scholarships are awarded. The Promise maintains a presence in all Pittsburgh city and charter schools to develop relationships with students and families. It is their hope that beginning the conversations early about the Promise with students and parents will promote on-going conversations at home about the possibilities regarding college attendance. Additionally, by introducing the scholarship criteria early, students and parents might begin to put into place habits that promote academic success and college-readiness. This intervention affects the contextual layers of social and public policy, schools, and habitus. This also influences predispositions in the process portion of the model.

*School-Based Mentoring* is a program where at-risk students are identified and given extra support as they work towards Promise eligibility. At-risk students are those who are currently not on track to achieve eligibility for a Pittsburgh Promise scholarship. These students are assigned mentors who work with them to provide extra academic support and guidance regarding attendance issues. This program targets two populations in particular: students in their junior year who are falling short on Promise eligibility, and African-American males. This intervention affects the schools and public policy contexts, as well as influences the development of college goals and developing post-secondary aspirations in the predisposition stage.

The *School Attendance Campaign* aims to eliminate chronic absenteeism in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. School attendance is a key indicator of academic success, as well as an important criteria for Promise eligibility. The Promise and Pittsburgh Public Schools are working together to identify problems leading to chronic absenteeism, as well as creating a positive culture in the schools that promotes school attendance. This program would affect students in the school, habitus and public policy contexts. Promoting attendance as a way to be “Promise Ready” could also have a positive influence on students in the predisposition stage.

The Pittsburgh Promise also offers college tours as a way of assisting students in their college search. The purpose of the *College Tours* is to familiarize students with a variety of college options, as well as provide them more information about each college’s application process. Students are also able to visit college campuses to determine their sense of “fit”. The Promise recognizes that a good sense of “fit” will enhance college success and reduce the likelihood of a student dropping out or transferring. The college tours are an intervention that assists students in the search phase of the college choice process. Participation in the college tours also positively influences students in the habitus and higher education contexts of their lived environments.

### **7.3.3 Implications for future research**

A limitation of this study was the lack of participation among students who had chosen to attend a community college. Despite several additional attempts to involve those students in this study, only one community college student chose to participate. I had tried to meet some Promise students at CCAC, and make a personal invitation to students for participation in this study. I had hoped by explaining the purpose of this study, and to let them know that their participation



was helpful and important, I don't think students really felt comfortable about the research process.

I recognize there may be several barriers that community college students might experience when it comes to participation in a phenomenological study. Community college students are more likely to hold jobs, and work more hours than other college students. I certainly got the sense that the community college students I met were juggling multiple responsibilities. Participation in a graduate students' research study might not have been able to compete with other, more immediate priorities in their lives. Busy lives mean that time is precious. Since many community college students also depend on public transportation, they must also factor in time spend traveling to and from the interview. While I offered to meet participants when and where it was convenient for them, they may have felt that they did not have many convenient options, and therefore chose not to participate.

Also, I speculate that they might have also been intimidated by the idea of participating in a research study. They may have been unfamiliar with the research process, and may have felt that their experiences were not "research worthy". In addition, some may have felt that their reasons for attending CCAC were pretty straightforward, and did not necessitate a 45 minute interview.

Perhaps potential research participants did not recognize nor appreciate that their stories are very important. The more advantaged students, having grown up in a culture of "concerted cultivation" had a greater sense of entitlement; their college choice story was worthy of research. Couple that with a level of comfort in interacting with professionals, and you have conditions that make research participation much more likely. Research that attempts to understand the life

experiences of underrepresented and disadvantaged students is important. Therefore it is necessary to remove the barriers that preclude participation.

While it is not an agreed upon practice in qualitative research, the idea of compensating respondents might help to encourage more participation among disadvantaged populations. College students are asked for their participation in many types of research and assessment activities (Lipka, 2011). Often, college administrators have offered participation incentives as a way of increasing the number of student respondents, and as well as increase diversity among the respondents. This has served to create a culture on college campuses where students expect some sort of freebie for their contribution towards institutional research. While I had many advantaged respondents in this study who were happy to participate for free (and willing to pay for their own coffee!), I sensed that the disadvantaged students needed a bit more incentive to participate. A modest amount to compensate participants for their time and transportation costs would go a long way towards eliminating some of the barriers disadvantaged students face in research participation. This is a small investment against what researchers can gain in data that sheds more light on the experiences of disadvantaged students as they relate to enrollment in higher education.

#### **7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study was conducted to understand how the Pittsburgh Promise influences students' college choices. This research did not attempt to answer how effective the Pittsburgh Promise is in influencing if and where students choose to attend college. However, this study did conclude that there are theoretical models with the potential to frame an evaluation study of the Pittsburgh

Promise. The Pittsburgh Promise has several public policy goals. For the purposes of this proposed study, an important evaluation question might be, “how effective are Pittsburgh Promise interventions in supporting students in developing college aspirations, conducting college searches, and enrolling in higher education institutions?”

Another potential avenue of study is to explore the negative cases. This study explored the influence of the Pittsburgh Promise in the college-going decisions of students. What about the students who didn’t use the Pittsburgh Promise? Part of that question was answered in this study, but only among students who aspired to attend colleges outside of Pennsylvania. An appropriate research focus would be on students who chose not to attend college at all. What influence did the Pittsburgh Promise have in their decision not to attend college?

Finally, the Pittsburgh Promise is unique in that it is a program with a small focus, the students attending Pittsburgh public schools and charter schools. These programs are newer and target a much smaller population when compared to the state-administered merit-aid programs in the United States. It would be interesting to compare how state-based merit-aid programs influence college choice among graduates in their respective states. It is difficult to quantify “influence” in terms of how much of an influence these scholarships are in promoting or influencing college choices. A better approach might be to ask in what ways these larger state-based merit-aid programs promote and influence college choice. In what ways are these programs similar and different in regards to how students make their college choices?



## APPENDIX A

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Subject: How did you choose where to use your scholarship?

Dear Pittsburgh Promise Scholar:

I hope you have had a great school year! My name is Molly Mistretta, and I am a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh conducting research to better understand how Pittsburgh Promise recipients decide where to go to college or trade school.

I am looking for Pittsburgh Promise recipients who would be willing to talk with me about their college choice decision. I would meet or Skype with you at a time that is convenient for you. If you are currently busy with finals, I'd be happy to talk with you afterwards!

Please click on the following link to sign up for participation in this study.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SLHM3C5>

If you have trouble accessing this link, please feel free to email me at [mam232@pitt.edu](mailto:mam232@pitt.edu) or text me at 724-301-7878.

This research may help in identifying ways to better help Pittsburgh Promise scholars maximize the value of their award while making such a big life decision. Your participation in this research is greatly appreciated, and any information you share will be kept private.

Thanks,  
Molly A. Mistretta

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### The College Choice Experience of Pittsburgh Promise Recipients

H/G indicates questions based on Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage model of college choice  
B indicates questions related to Bandera's core properties of human agency  
P indicates questions related to Perna's proposed conceptual model of college choice, # indicates layer

#### Grand Tour

- Tell me how you came to be at \_\_\_\_\_ institution. What was that process like? (H/G, P,B)

#### Predisposition

- When was the first time you considered attending college? (H/G, P1, B)
- When did you first learn about the Pittsburgh Promise? (H/G, P4, B)
- How did the Pittsburgh Promise influence the way you thought about college? (H/G, P4, B)
- What was your motivation for attending college? (B)
- Did anyone in your family attend a college or university? (H/G, P1)
  - Did they obtain a degree?
  - How did their experience influence your perceptions of college? (H/G, P1)
- In what ways did your parents encourage you to attend college? (H/G, P1)
- In what ways did your teachers/guidance counselors encourage you to attend college? (P2)
- In what ways did the Pittsburgh Promise encourage you to "work hard" to get ready for college? (H/G, P2, B)
  - Grades

- Pittsburgh Promise informational sessions
- What fears/concerns did you have about attending college? (B)

### **Search**

- How did you gather information about colleges/universities? (H/G, B, P123)
- Did you visit any colleges/universities? Tell me about those visits. (P23)
- How did you decide on which college/universities to apply? (H/G, B, P3)
  - What schools did you apply to? (H/G, B)
- What qualities in a college/university were most important to you? (H/G, B, P3)
- Describe how your family participated in this process. (H/G, B, P1)
  - How did other significant people participate in this process (friends, teachers, coaches, mentors, etc.)? (H/G, P12)
- How did the potential cost of college affect your college choice decisions? (H/G, B, P34)
- How did the potential for student loans affect where you chose to enroll? (H/G, B, P34)
- Do you have student loans? (H/G, B)
  - If yes, do you know how much you will owe in student loans when finished?

### **Choice**

- What were your reasons for enrolling at \_\_\_\_\_? (H/G, B, P3)
- List your reasons in order of importance (index card). (H/G, B)
- Was this your ideal college choice? Why or why not? (B)
- Did many of your close friends also choose to attend college? (H/G, P1, B)
  - If so, where did they choose to attend college?
- Imagine the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship did not exist. How might that have affected your college search process? How might it have affected where you chose to enroll? (B)
- What has been the most satisfying experience about the college experience? What has been the most challenging? (B)

### **Wrap-Up**

- What are your plans for the future? (B)
- How has the Pittsburgh Promise assisted you in realizing those plans? (B)

## **APPENDIX C**

### **EXEMPT INFORMATIONAL SCRIPT**

The purpose of this research study is to determine how Pittsburgh Promise scholarship recipients went about making their college choices. For that reason, I am interviewing Pittsburgh Promise recipients attending a number of different institutions of higher education in Pennsylvania to explore the factors that influenced their enrollment decisions. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked about the factors that were important to you in selecting a college, and who influenced your decision-making process.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. Your identity will not be revealed through participation in this study, and what you share will be kept confidential. All information collected in this study will be kept under lock and key.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time. This study is being conducted by Molly Mistretta, who can be reached at 724-301-7878, if you have any questions.



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