

**The Search Stage: When, Where, and What Information Do Urban Public
High School Students Gather About College**

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Abstract

This qualitative longitudinal multiple case study offers a perspective into the college information gathering practices across a sample of low-income students at two large urban public high schools. The findings show that students engage in and benefit from comprehensive information gathering strategies but that disparities exist across academic performance levels and demographic factors. The study sheds light on the paramount role that school counselors play during the students' college information gathering "search" stage. The presented findings offer concrete strategies that can aid school counselors in evaluating and improving their own college-related services.

Keywords: college search, school counselor, urban high school, low-income student

The Search Stage: When, Where, and What Information Do Urban Public High School Students Gather About College

Making a decision whether to apply to college and if so, what institution to attend is a priority for many graduating high school seniors. Access to accurate and comprehensive information about college can aid individual student's post-secondary decision-making process. However, studies show that students' access to college information and their sources for such information greatly vary depending on their demographic circumstances (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Galotti & Mark, 1994). Given that nearly six in ten public school students are first-generation college-goers (Herrold & O'Donnell, 2008), the need to understand when, where, and what information students gather about college becomes pronounced. Yet, our empirical understanding of the college information gathering strategies among low-income and first-generation college students remains limited.

This longitudinal multiple case study serves to inform our understanding of the college information gathering strategies low-income and/or first-generation students from two large urban high schools employ in order to make informed decisions about their post-secondary futures. The findings show that students engage in and benefit from comprehensive information gathering strategies but that disparities exist across academic performance levels and demographic factors. The study also sheds light on the paramount role that school counselors play during students' college information gathering "search" stage. The study findings offer concrete strategies that can aid school counselors and other staff in evaluating and improving their own college-related services.

Literature Review

Over 90% of parents expect their children to obtain a higher education degree (Lippman, Guzman, Keith, Kinukawa, & Shwalb, 2008; Roderick, et al., 2008). It is thus, not surprising that some 95% of high school seniors say they plan to go to college (Rosenbaum, 2001). However, research suggests that demographic disparities in college enrollment and graduation rates persist. This may be attributed to the limited access traditionally underrepresented (underrepresented student in this study is defined as a low-income student who is also a student of color and/or an immigrant and/or first in his/her family to attend a higher education institution) students have to timely college information (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Choy, 2001; Epps, 1995; Pennington, 2004; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2004).

According to Hossler-Gallagher's (1987) model of college information collection, students engage in a three-step process when considering college: predisposition—whether to continue on to college after high school graduation; search—for college information; and choice—selecting the appropriate institution to attend. Literature on college access generally focuses on the predisposition and choice stages. Studies indicate that personal, familial, cultural, and environmental factors tend to be the predominant influences on the students' predispositions toward college (Butner et al., 2001; De La Rosa, 2006; Freeman, 2005; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997). There is also a burgeoning body of literature on the choice stage, the incentive structures that influence students' college decisions (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Kim, 2004; Pope & Fermin, 2003; Perna & Titus, 2004). However, little is known about the middle phase—the search stage.

One guiding theory on the search stage comes from Hossler and Stage (1992), which states that in order to make a college decision, students tend to gather information based on their economic, consumer, and/or sociological factors. A nationally representative sample of college-bound seniors indicates that students focus their search stage on major/program of study, courses, career opportunities, institutional reputation, financial aid, and safety (Ingels, Planty, & Bozick, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999); however, among underrepresented students, college information gathering tends to focus on the major of study, financial aid, and location, because students correlate major of study with employment opportunities and access to college with access to financial aid and proximity to home (De La Rosa 2006; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). These findings are comparable to Kern's (2000) study of low-income African American students, Santiago's (2007) study of Hispanic students, and the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007) study of eleven diverse focus groups.

The available literature on the search stage offers an important insight into the primary considerations underrepresented students make when gathering college information. However, the literature falls short of distilling the intricacies of the underrepresented students' college information gathering strategies. The ambiguities in the existing literature posit a need to examine the search stage practices of underrepresented students in urban schools—from the students' points of view.

Families and Counselors as Primary Sources of College Information

Families and school counselors represent the main sources of college information for high school students during the search stage. Families can significantly

assist students' postsecondary expectations, especially if they talk to their children about college, monitor their academic progress, and communicate to their children the importance of a higher degree as a prerequisite for a successful career (Catsambis & Garland, 1997; Hossler et al., 1999; Roderick et al., 2008). However, families from low-income backgrounds are less likely to regularly communicate with their children about academic progress and about the importance of higher education (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Dounay, 2006). A survey from the Institute for Higher Education Policy has found that 43% of low-income African American, Hispanic, and White parents were unaware of the college preparation processes and thus, did not collect specific institutional information, visited colleges with their children, or met with students' school counselors about college applications (Cunningham, Erisman, & Looney, 2007). The research on low-income parent engagement during the search stage indicates that more needs to be done on the part of educators to provide families with tools and strategies to help students adequately prepare for college.

School counselors are a second traditional source for gathering college information. For many high school students, however, access to school counselors is limited. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), the national student to school counselor ratio is 460:1. A study by Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, and Day-Vines (2009) has found that students attending large high-poverty high schools were less likely to have access to a school counselor than students who attended smaller, wealthier schools. This is in part due to disparities in students to school counseling staff ratios and in part due to the distribution of time school counselors were allotted for student college preparation purposes. This data is worrisome when we

consider that low-income students and students of color are more likely than their wealthier counterparts to seek college advice from their school counselors (Hosser & Stage, 1987) and to be more influenced by their school counselors' advice (Valadez, 1998). A survey by the Public Agenda (2009) of 614 22 to 33 year-olds has noted that students who received inadequate college-focused school counseling were less likely to obtain financial aid, less likely to select a school on its academic merits, and more likely to delay college all together. By contrast, students who regularly consulted their school counselor on college matters were more likely to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). What the examined literature indicates is that students depend on families and their school counselors during the search stage; however, the literature is limited as to what information is shared with students by these two sources, at what point this information is shared during the students' academic careers, and how this information informs students' overall college consideration process. This study serves to alleviate this information gap by offering a perspective from a sample of urban underrepresented youth.

Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to begin to understand how underrepresented students access college information during the search stage; when, where, and what information do low-income urban public high school senior students gather about college? To answer this research question, a longitudinal multi-case study tracking students' information gathering habits during their senior year was designed.

The study was conducted in a large urban city during the 2008-09 academic school year. The city was selected due to its multiple college preparatory services and

due to its robust selection of higher education institutions. According to the seven-year longitudinal study of the city's public school Class of 2000 (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2008), the city's public school students' two- and four-year college enrollment rate was five percentage points above the national average. Out of 2,964 Class of 2000 graduates, 64% (1,904) entered either a two- (35%) or a four-year (65%) institution between 2000 and 2007. Majority of African American and Hispanic students attended two-year colleges, while White and Asian students attended predominantly four-year institutions. Thirty-five percent of the sampled students graduated within seven years.

In order to select two schools for this study, the city's public high schools' mission statements, college-related services, and the schools' report cards were analyzed. The two large high schools that were selected were representative of the city's public school system student population, school composition, and college-related services available to students.

School A had 1188 students (data based on the 2008-09 school year). This Title I school was predominantly African American (40%) and Hispanic (49%). The bilingual rate was 14%. The school was considered in "corrective action" under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines. The school had 114 staff, and the school counseling ratio was 1:400 students. The school offered six AP courses; career training in business, technology, health, media, and law; a career services center; and college application support. Fifty-five percent of graduating seniors were accepted into four-year institutions and 22% into two-year institutions. Low-income and African American students made up a majority of students who went on to public state colleges. The first-to-second year college persistence rate was 83%.

School B had 754 students, 47% African American and 46% Hispanic, and was a high-poverty Title I school. Its bilingual population stood at 19%. The school was labeled as “restructuring” under NCLB and was one of the lowest performing schools in the district. There were 106 total staff members with four school counselors and two social workers. The school offered AP courses, participated in a national counseling program, a local mentorship program, and housed a career services center. Low-income and Hispanic students were the largest group of students who continued on to the State’s public colleges. Among students continuing on to public colleges, 76% were to two-year community colleges. The first-to-second year college persistence rate was 62%.

Students were selected by their school counselors to represent the racial, ethnic, and academic (as defined by their grade-point averages, GPAs) diversity. Selected students then elected to participate in the study or to opt out (no one did). Students who participated attended all required data collection components. Table 1 offers an overview of the study sample.

Table 1*Overview of the Study Participants*

	Alias Name	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Immigrant Status*	Grade Average
School A	Ashley	18	Female	African American	No	B
	Bob	18	Male	White	No	C
	Erica	18	Female	Hispanic	Yes	D
	Hanna	18	Female	White	Yes	A
	Robert	18	Male	Asian	Yes	A
	Therasha	19	Female	African American	No	C
School B	Bernard	18	Male	African American	No	B
	Davis	17	Male	Asian	Yes	C
	Janae	18	Female	African American	No	A
	Young JD	17	Male	African	Yes	B
	Yvette	17	Female	Hispanic	Yes	A

Note. Half of the study sample was comprised of immigrant students who came to the United States during their childhood or teenage years. At the time of this study, none were enrolled in an English Language Learner (ELL) program; however, English was their second language.

At School A, data was collected at the senior year college assembly, in two school counselor meetings, and during interviews with six students—as students were getting ready to apply to college and again, as they were making their final college decisions. At School B, data was collected during four site visits—a meeting with the Headmaster, a student focus group meeting, and two school counselors meetings. The interview protocols were identical in both schools; however, probes and additional questions were used when the conversations called for a more in-depth investigation. Data collected included field notes, interview memos, interview and focus group transcripts, and artifacts from the schools.

An inductive approach to data analysis was used. Data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed applying a conventional code analysis. The emergent coding schema,

criteria, and labels were derived from the text data and divided into context, recording, and thematic units. The codes were divided into descriptive, thematic, and emic codes. The coded data was categorized into concepts (content analysis) and themes (thematic analysis). Triangulation of data followed the coding and analysis processes. Field notes, memos, and school artifacts were coded and examined alongside the transcripts to verify student level data and to fill-in any data gaps. The findings were linked to the conceptual framework and to the broader literature on college information access.

The study design and data collection procedures raised a possibility of four validity threats (Maxwell, 1996), which were minimized throughout the data collection and analysis phases of research. To minimize participant reactivity in the research, two separate groups of students were examined. Further, the researcher refrained from dispensing advice about college application processes in order to reduce the potential influence on students' own college decision-making. In order to alleviate any descriptive threats, all focus group and interview sessions were audio recorded and were coupled with extensive field notes. To minimize the interpretation threat, interviewed participants had an opportunity to review field notes and to offer input to their individual interviews. Finally, to minimize the theoretical validity threat, additional school artifacts were collected and triangulated against the transcribed data and the school events observations. Further, discrepant cases and alternative interpretations during the data analysis process were examined.

Given the small sample size and the nature of the qualitative case study design, internal and external generalizability is not appropriate. The study offers several ideas

on how schools can support students' "search stage;" however, the study does not necessarily represent the views of all students across the two schools.

Results

When do Students Begin Gathering College Information?

The students in this study first began receiving messages about the importance of college from their parents; however, the timing and substance of these messages greatly varied from student to student. Janae, Yvette, Ashley, Bob, and Robert recalled talking with their parents about college and saving for college since elementary school. Yvette and Robert, recent immigrant students, noted that college was viewed by their families as a source of pride, a stamp that they "made it" in America. Ashley explained that her mother told her that college was a way out of poverty, and that she herself took that message as her own. Ashley explained:

I feel like college is the only way out. My mom... lives paycheck to paycheck, and I don't want to do that. I think that if I go to college and study, and have a degree, I will not have to live paycheck to paycheck and do things that she could not do for me, and I could do things for her that she couldn't do for herself.

In Theresha's household, college was discussed starting in her late childhood when her mother completed a nursing assistant program. Theresha recalled her mother encouraging her two daughters to pursue college. Theresha and her sister both decided to follow their mother's footsteps in the healthcare profession, seeking a nursing degree.

For Erica, Davis, Young JD, and Bernard, college was not discussed at home until their teenage years. All four students posit that their parents' focus on providing for the family took precedence over future planning. Their parents instead, encouraged

them to hold part-time jobs while in school and to help support the family. College was discussed when their older siblings or other family members started career institutes, which prompted students to speak with their parents about higher education.

Hanna, whose parents both hold higher education degrees, received specific college-readiness strategies by her family; her parents reminded her on a regular basis to complete her homework, to get good grades, to take challenging courses, and to enroll in extracurricular activities as a way to prepare for college. Hanna was the only student in the sample that noted that her parents offered specific strategies, while other parents primarily spoke about the importance of college in general terms, as the means to improve their lives. Therefore, most students acknowledged that they did not think about the mechanics of college readiness until their junior year of high school.

Ashley, Hanna, Robert, Janae, and Yvette recalled receiving information about college from their schools at the beginning of their junior year. Other students in the sample noted that they started gathering information about college at the end of their junior year and in some instances, not until the Fall of their senior year. While students had differing memories on when they first received college information from their high schools, the school counselors in both schools confirmed that all incoming juniors, regardless of academic performance, received the same packet about college applications, financial aid, SAT test dates, and about an annual college fair.

Where do Students get College Information? What Information do They Collect?

Students, beginning in their senior year, turned to family members (siblings and cousins), school counselors and teachers, after-school program staff, same-age peers and older peers, and conducted their own independent research in order to gain

information pertaining to college. Each source served a particular purpose: Students utilized siblings and cousins to get information about college life; they spoke with school counselors and after-school staff about college applications and financial aid; they reached out to teachers for application writing and letters of recommendations; they consulted same-age peers for moral support; and looked to older-age peers for strategies on how to succeed in college. Finally, they engaged in Web searches and site visits to get specific information about college majors, financial aid, admissions, and college life.

After students received college information from their schools, they turned to older siblings and cousins for information about college life. Specifically, they inquired about majors of study, class schedules, and campus life. Ashley, for example, reached out to her first cousin, who was the only family member to go to an out-of-state institution, to learn more about his university. After a series of phone calls, she decided that she too wanted to attend the same institution. While she did not visit the institution, she was determined to attend alongside her cousin because she felt that family support would help her get through a four-year institution.

While families served as a critical pillar of support, it was the school counselors and teachers that were sources of tangible information. Both schools offered comprehensive college information resources: (a) a packet of information about different higher education institutions, deadlines, and financial aid; (b) a senior year assembly featuring a PowerPoint on steps needed to apply to college (the assemblies also featured presentations by local after-school college preparatory providers who handed out program applications); (c) a career center filled with college catalogues and

computers for online searches; (d) English and math teachers who helped students with SAT preparations, letters of recommendations, and essay writing practice; (e) school counselors that assisted with common applications, financial aid, and admissions; (f) weekly newsletters highlighting college deadlines and scholarship opportunities; (g) a series of alumni lectures, where former graduates visited English classes to share their college experiences; and (h) a series of field trips to the local two- and four-year institutions.

The students in this study thought that their school counselors were knowledgeable about the college process and could guide them through the college search and choice stages. As Bob explained, “If you go to her office as a student, you can ask her anything about college, and she will help you with it. If you go to her office after school for instance, I guarantee there will be about 15 kids waiting around her office.”

While both schools have strategically designed a college-oriented culture among seniors, the level of satisfaction with the access to the school counselors, teachers, and career services appears to be divided along academic (GPA) lines. Students with a C average and below believed that their school was doing an adequate job in supporting their college planning, sharing information, offering individualized attention, and providing them with practice and support they needed to successfully apply to college. While they were aware of the outside college-preparatory programs, they did not consider enrolling for three specified reasons—they did not academically qualify; they thought that the programs were unnecessary given the available school resources; or, the after-school programs interfered with their work schedules. Students with a B and

above average did not working outside the school. They thought that their school offered basic college information, but was inadequate in meeting their individual needs. They expressed frustration with long wait periods to see their school counselors, with short consulting sessions, and with a lack of access to the career center outside of school hours. Thus, these students turned to after-school programs for help. As Ashley explained, “Although I have my guidance counselor, he is also 200 or 300 kids’ counselor... He doesn’t really have much time for me. He does what he is supposed to, but, I had somebody who really sat down with me, and went through the process step by step with me.”

The third commonly noted source of information was peers, and within this group, same-age and older-age peers. The students in this study believed that same-age peers were a great sounding board for college-related topics. What is interesting is that the students did not see same-age peers as a source for college information but rather, a source for sharing feelings about college, and examining and evaluating their expectations about college. All students in the study mentioned that they also turned to older peers for advice. They utilized older peers to get information about the specifics of college going experience, about homework, time management tips, and campus life.

Finally, students conducted their own independent research on individual colleges. This took two forms—searching the Web and signing up for school-led college visits. All the students in this study regularly accessed a computer, either at home or at school. They used the College Board Web site as the gateway to the individual college sites. The primary information they sought were admission requirements, major of

study, financial aid, and tuition. The secondary searches focused on extracurricular activities and on campus life.

Site visits were the final place students turned to for college information. On average, students saw one college via a school-sponsored trip and one institution independently. Students opted for second-hand accounts of particular institutions, Web searches, and waited until they were accepted before visiting a college in person. They thought that they did not have the tools to navigate a campus visit. Cost of travel to an institution outside the metropolitan area was another factor that students expressed restricted them from visiting.

The search stage was for these students an eye-opening experience. As Bernard explained, "When I was a freshman, I never realized how important my grades and my actions will be... If I had known that years ago, I would have prepared and tried to do the best I could to be able to have more opportunities." Janae too learned that college was not what she originally thought, "Watching TV shows and movies, the way they make college look like, all you do is go there, go to party, sleep and wake up, you go to classes... But now that I got all this information, I think that college is not easy."

The search stage not only reshaped how students viewed college but also how they planned to transition to college. During the fall interviews, students expressed interest in relaxing during the summer prior to college. However, during the follow-up interviews, a majority of the students decided to instead enroll in transition programs offered at their respective institutions in order to prepare for their freshmen year. Others focused on working full-time to save money for their living expenses while in college.

An Important Note

All students in this study, with one exception, were admitted into either two- or four-year institutions. With the exception of two students, all others accepted college offers within the local metropolitan area. While the search stage helped students narrow their focus of study and to which colleges to apply, the deciding factor was financial aid. Ashley's feelings were echoed throughout the study's sample, "I am just going to look at financial aid. Whichever gives me less money in loans and less out of my parents' pockets that is where I'll go to." Robert, who received a full scholarship to an Ivy League institution, spoke of the relief he felt for his parents, who both worked low-wage jobs, "[My parents] are working at least 14 hours a day... I just want to let them know that I work hard... so that they don't have to worry about my education. I want to give them back happiness and something to be proud of, of their son."

Discussion

The findings presented in this study support the existing literature: low-income students start to gather college information in the later part of their high school years; they tend to rely on close family, school counselors, and peers for most of their college information; and they do not have extensive college preparatory experiences. Students focus on possible majors, financial aid and tuition costs, and admissions criteria, as well as on college campus extracurricular activities and diversity.

While the study confirms nation-wide trends on college "search stage" strategies among low-income youth, the study also contributes to the existing literature by illuminating four important considerations for school counselors: (1) the importance of family involvement in the college process; (2) the timing of the "search stage;" (3) the

critical role after-school providers play in helping students get through the college application stage; and (4) the need to think comprehensively about college information.

Families Matter

Parents play a significant role in motivating children to consider college (Flint, 1992). As Wimberly and Noeth (2004) note:

Parents who are involved in their child's education can be a strong and positive influence on the student's academic achievement and postsecondary plans.

However, unless parents have the information and knowledge they need, it is difficult for them to help their children explore, plan, and make the successful transition from high school to college. (p. vi)

Parents are particularly critical during the search and choice stages (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hosser & Stage, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999). Older siblings and cousins are also important because they provide tangible information about college life that the parents might not be aware of, such as course offerings, workload, campus life, and strategies for succeeding in college (Ceja, 2006).

In this study, parents shared with their children the importance of college as a means to get out of poverty and have a better quality of life. Some parents also saved for their children's college. However, parents, with the exception of one student, did not offer specific strategies on how students can prepare for college. According to students' accounts, parents did not take them on college visits or assisted with college searches, relying instead on schools and other supports to help them navigate the college process. This can, in large part, be attributed to the fact that majority of the students came from households where neither parent had a post secondary degree and where

many parents came from immigrant backgrounds, unfamiliar with the expectations, protocols, and processes related to accessing U.S. college education.

While both schools have a family resource center, a parent council, and a family liaison, the interviewed students noted that their families were not aware of these tools and that they have not visited the school apart from an occasional back-to-school night. Bob's perception is indicative of other students' sentiments, "It is really left up to you to inform your parents what you are doing about college. I think the school doesn't press the issue with parents about college."

The school counselors acknowledged that they had low turnouts at college-related events at their schools. When School A hosted a financial aid night, the response rate was less than 10%. The school counseling staff noted that this was in part due to the city's busing system, whereby students attending a particular school do not necessarily reside in the surrounding neighborhoods. School A now hosts college-related family events in high schools nearest to the families' homes, and the turnout has increased.

From the gathered data, it appears that both students and counselors could do more to involve families. Students could share with parents the college information provided by their schools. The school counselors could send college packets directly to students' homes, informing families of the resources available to them at their child's school, and list in advance dates for specific family events. The school Web site can also be utilized, as well as information and event sharing via school district-wide tools.

It is Never too Early to Start College Preparation

College access literature suggests that students who begin searching information about college earlier in their educational career are more likely to go on to college (Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991). Entering the “search stage” prior to high school helps students become more aware of what is needed to access and succeed in college, which translates to greater investment by students in their academic life (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006; Mumper, 1998).

For students in this study, the search stage did not begin until the end of the junior year, and in most cases, not until their senior year, when students had to actively pursue college information, take the SATs, and apply. The students noted that while the message about the importance of college was reinforced at home, it was not reinforced in school or in their communities. Most students knew that they needed to keep their grades up, but did not strategically invest in particular skill-building activities.

When asked about the timing of the college search stage, the students in this study felt that the school should have prepared them for the SATs and the college search stage during their junior year. Some students thought that waiting until the senior year put them at a disadvantage, compared to students who started the search stage earlier, because they did not have the opportunity to boost their GPAs, to take more challenging coursework, to retake the SATs, or to tour different institutions.

The counselors of schools A and B recognized the issue of timing; however, the lack of resources and disinterest among younger students was cited as reasons for not sharing college information in earlier grades. However, sharing college information in

earlier grades of high school could help students learn about the specific strategies they should take to prepare for higher education (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006).

After-School Providers are Allies in the College Search Process

Research on college preparatory programs finds that quality after-school programs centered on college readiness can have a positive impact on students' academic success and their motivation to succeed in school and beyond (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, 2001). Nationally, programs geared towards low-income students, such as Higher Achievement or Say Yes show that multi-year programs could help prepare students for higher education.

However, research also points to the disparities in access to college preparatory programs, even if designed for low-income students. According to Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2004), student's academic track and performance is the primary predictor of whether a student accesses a preparatory program. The study has found that high performing students are more likely to have access to college preparatory experiences than do lower performing students. This is evidenced in this study as well. Students who had a GPA of 3.0 or above were enrolled in after-school programs that helped them during their search and choice stages, while students who had a GPA of 2.0 and below were not enrolled in such programs. Students' attributed this to their lack of academic merit, time commitment, and work obligations.

Given that school counseling staff and teachers are stretched for time and resources and given that most students want to have personalized attention, partnering with after-school providers is a promising way to alleviate schools' burden. However, efforts should be made on the schools' part to find college preparatory programs that do

not have merit-based barriers, so that students from all academic levels can receive comprehensive counseling and support earlier in their high school careers thus potentially aiding their post-secondary pathways.

Thinking Comprehensively About College Information

Students in this study did not rely on a singular source for college information. Rather, students employed a comprehensive strategy during their search stage speaking with diverse individuals, family members, peers, school counselors, teachers, and after-school program staff. Additionally, they conducted online research in order to obtain specific information about particular institutions. The most common way students gathered information was to approach family members first, then school counselors and teachers, then peers, and finally, to conduct their own independent search. Galotti and Mark (1994), found a similar pattern among middle-income students. It is interesting to note that peers ranked lower on the list among the students in this study as they turned to them after family and school resources and did not rely on them for specific college decisions. Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly (1991) corroborate this finding, noting that peers tend to be the least important factor students consider during the search stage.

The students in this study not only thought comprehensively about where they turned to for information regarding college, but also about what information they collected. While they focused much of their attention on the specifics of college applications, minimum requirements, and financial aid, they also considered whether they could see themselves at a particular campus, conducted Web searches on college life, and turned to family members and older peers to get their perspective on particular college campuses. This finding is surprising given that college access literature

encourages site visits over second-hand accounts of campus experiences.

While the students in this study cited financial considerations as critical to their final college decision, providing diverse access points to students (at school and in the community) to college information could help inform and inspire them to pursue their college dreams.

Limitations

The presented study offers a snapshot into the search stage, as experienced by a sample of seniors in two large urban high schools. While the study offers an important insight into the comprehensive strategies that students employ to gather college information, the study has limitations. The study followed only eleven students across two data points and was based primarily on first-person accounts. Due to the small sample size, unique context, and qualitative design, generalizations are not appropriate within the schools, across the schools, or to the general population. Further research should be conducted to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the search stage at both schools via a larger sample size, longitudinal tracking across grade levels, as well as thorough follow-up during students' post-secondary years. Research across other metropolitan high schools could help to offer a more comprehensive picture of both the schools and the school district. Given the literature gap on the search stage among underrepresented students, both qualitative and quantitative studies that examine when, where, and what college information students access could be invaluable in informing families, school counseling practices, and school and after-school provider strategies.

Implications for High School Counselors

This study found that school counselors played a pivotal role during the students' college search stage. The students in this study frequently turned to their school counselors to acquire information about the common college application, about access to and availability of financial aid, and how to understand and make admission decisions. During the students' senior year, the school counselors were the primary adults to whom the students turned for college information and advice. This was particularly true for students with a GPA of 2.0 and below, who relied heavily on their school counselors to guide them through post secondary planning and decisions.

The study also indicated that students thought that their school counselors had too many students. While students found their school counselors to be knowledgeable and responsive, students with a GPA of 3.0 or above believed that they were not able to get the assistance they desired. Thus, these students supplemented their college information gathering by including another resource—a college preparatory program staff member able to give extensive individualized attention.

Students were asked at the conclusion of this study to provide advice to their counselors on ways in which they can improve access to the college information that students receive at their schools. Students' suggestions included:

- Make college a priority during freshmen and sophomore assemblies, so that students have a clearer vision of the requirements, expectations, and steps they will need to take during their high school years.
- Emphasize the importance of considering diverse post-secondary paths, beyond the traditional community college or four-year college.

- Offer special services to first-generation college students and recent immigrants.
- Start the SAT preparation during the junior year. Offer practice classes both during the school day and also as a program after school.
- Stress to all students the importance of conducting their own independent college information search.
- Provide students with strategies on how to explore colleges, particularly how to visit colleges.
- Implement an appointment book where students have a particular slot, as opposed to seeking out sessions between classes, on lunch breaks, or immediately following the school day. During college application months, allow for extra guidance curriculum sessions for senior students.

The school counselors at both schools acknowledged that their schools could do more to target underrepresented populations, to emphasize diverse post secondary paths, and to offer more customized services; however, limited resources prevented both schools from expanding upon the existing strategies. Due to budget cuts, the school counselors in School B, for example, also served as social workers and as the school improvement team members, which stretched their capacity to offer extensive college counseling to senior year students. Many counselors appreciated that more academically ambitious students accessed after-school programs that met their needs. The counselors also hoped that in the future social workers and mentors could alleviate some of their duties, so that they can offer more comprehensive support to college-bound students.

The sentiments of both students and their counselors show that a part of students' access to accurate, quality, and timely college information continues to rest to a significant degree on the school counseling staff. Students want school counselors to provide college information early and often throughout their high school years, and to personalize services (e.g., first-generation students, English language learners). While the school counseling literature and the practice communities acknowledge that such strategies could improve students' access to college information, school budgets and school improvement policies often shortchange the critical support staff in favor of other goals. However, if an overarching goal of K-12 education is to get students college-ready and career-ready, then educators, researchers, and policymakers need to rethink how they support school counselors. Better funding for the school counseling departments, more comprehensive support staff, and availability of college and career centers on the school grounds could support the comprehensive college information framework that many students, and in particular, low-income students, seek during their "search stage."

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