ABSTRACT

MITCHALL, ALLISON MICHELLE. Influences on the Motivation of Low-Income, First Generation Students on the Path to College: A Cross-Case Analysis using Self-Determination Theory. (Under the direction of Dr. Audrey J. Jaeger.)

Low-income, first-generation students face numerous barriers on the path to college. However, millions of these students persevere and ultimately enroll. How do these students remain motivated on the road to higher education despite these challenges? This collective case study explored influences on the motivation of low-income, first generation students on the path to college using Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory and Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital as guiding frameworks. The case study highlighted the motivational experiences of seven low-income, first-generation college students and included interviews with their parents, counselors, and teachers. The findings indicated that relatedness - or the close, safe psychological relationships one has with others - was augmented by teachers and counselors who provided frequent contact and college planning reminders, demonstrated openness to building a relationship, advocated for the students, listened and acted as a sounding board, and served as a long-term presence in the students’ lives. For families, relatedness was enhanced when parents were involved in college planning, served as positive examples, and showed they cared. Serving as a role model for younger siblings was another key motivator for the students.

Competency - or the belief in one’s abilities to be effective in one’s environment - was fostered by school personnel who provided career encouragement and positive feedback on student’s academic abilities. Parental support for competency was enacted by emphasizing education early and fostering students’ academic competency, setting high expectations for grades, and providing positive feedback. Competency was forestalled by not
providing enough academic rigors in the school setting, focusing on testing versus college preparation, and low perceived teacher quality.

Autonomy - described as feeling volitional and having choice in one’s decisions - was enhanced when school staff expanded students’ choices about college, served as sounding boards, and listened and offered reminders, not directives. Autonomy-supportive strategies used by parents included being supportive but “hands off” with decisions, serving as a sounding board during decision-making, supporting students’ career goals, and encouraging the child’s help-seeking behavior. Autonomy was undermined when school personnel coddled students or did not provide validation or other forms of support during college planning. Parent and family approaches that undermined autonomy included providing little college push or process support, not having information to answer “what will it be like” questions, highlighting financial concerns, family obligations, and having low expectations of college-going.

In terms of social capital, those who provided students with high-volume forms of social capital provided emotional support, demonstrated a belief in students’ ability, and showed caring. They also offered accurate, high-quality information and facilitated students’ access to other social networks for support. Fewer sources for college information in social networks and a lack of college-going ethos in the community created low-volume forms of social capital that negatively impacted students. These findings have significant implications for school personnel, parents/guardians, and those working in college access organizations to improve postsecondary attainment for underserved students.
Influences on the Motivation of Low-Income, First-Generation Students on the Path to College: A Cross-Case Analysis using Self-Determination Theory

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Educational Research and Policy Analysis

Raleigh, North Carolina

2015

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Alice, who was 5th in her high school class but was not provided with the information she needed to make her college dreams come true.

Mom, I listened and I am trying to make a difference for all those students out there who, like you, just need a little help to change the trajectory of their lives.
BIOGRAPHY

Allison Mitchall received her bachelor’s degree in Journalism and Media Analysis from New York University. She completed her master’s degree in Higher Education Administration from the City University of New York’s Baruch College. She has worked in student affairs, diversity programs and academic advising roles at both public and private universities. After completing a Ph.D. in Educational Research and Policy Analysis, she plans to work for an organization dedicated to serving the needs of low-income, first-generation students on the path to and through higher education. As a first-generation, low-income student, she will be the first in her family to earn a doctorate.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am so grateful for all of the support, encouragement, prayers, and words of wisdom I have received during this journey. Like the students in my study, there were so many people who motivated me on this path to the PhD. As a full-time working mother of two children, it truly did take a village to help me reach this goal.

I would first like to begin by thanking my amazing husband and best friend Jonathan. You listened to me on many nights talk about college access and motivation theory when all you wanted to do was watch Sci-Fi Channel! Your many hugs and pep talks during the final stretch of the process kept me going when I felt I could not write another word (or rather when I could not stop writing and had to cut my article from 76 pages to 46). I could not have undertaken this process if I did not know that our children were well cared for by a loving dad who cooked dinner, picked up the children from school, helped with homework, and overall, did the things that good dads do. You took on so much more than your “share” on many days, but you never made me feel as if my decision to pursue this crazy journey was a mistake. You even decided to pursue a graduate degree of your own along the way! You kept me laughing, created funny Bitstrips of me studying, showed me clips on YouTube to cheer me up, and kept the light on when I was writing late at night. This process could not have happened without you.

I would like to thank the seven wonderful students and their parents, teachers, counselors and partners who shared their stories with me. For the students, I saw so much of myself in your stories, and it was a pleasure to be able to shine the light on your successes on the way to college. Thank you to the school personnel and parents who were amazing
examples of how important it is to have someone in your life who believes in you. I am very proud to have had a chance to highlight your stories.

I could not have asked for a better dissertation chair in Dr. Audrey “AJ” Jaeger. You were one of the first people I spoke with upon arriving at NC State University, thanks to the referral of my wonderful master’s adviser at Baruch College, Dr. John McGarraghy. You shared that you were a mom, too, and that even though I had two small children, I could do this. You have been one of my biggest supporters, and I think you truly believe in me more than I believe in myself sometimes! You encouraged me to join your research team, pushed me to publish and present at conferences, join professional development programs (shout out to my Bridges sisters!), and apply for prestigious awards. You have been a huge supporter of my goal to enter the college access arena and have shared many opportunities for me to get engaged in this field. You are so amazingly responsive, and you set a high bar and demonstrated your belief in me every step of the way. You have been for me what the teachers and counselors were for the students in the study. You have been a motivator for me on the path to the doctorate, and I knew that in asking you to be my chair that I would be in good hands. I cannot thank you enough.

I have been fortunate to have a wonderful group of dissertation committee members. Thank you to Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles who helped me to find a love of qualitative research and whose research project helped me gain an amazing overview of the college access literature. I created journal notes throughout this entire process! Thank you to Dr. Lance Fusarelli for being so supportive of my writing and for teaching me so much about qualitative inquiry and case study method. Thank you to Dr. Edwin Gerler, who has been such an encouraging and
affirming presence on my committee. Your expertise as a counselor shines through in how supportive you have been when you have stopped by my office with a word of encouragement. That truly meant a great deal to me. I am deeply grateful to many of the faculty members in the College of Education who shared such wonderful support and expertise - Dr. Carol Kasworm, Dr. DeLeon Gray, Dr. Mary Ann Danowitz, Dr. Jayne Fleener, Dr. Valerie Faulkner, and many more. I want to especially thank Dr. Tamara Young for hosting a support group for doctoral women of color and Dr. Paul Bitting for your support and wise words of advice. I also want to thank Dr. Stan Baker for allowing me to join your efforts to make outreach to local middle and high schools to provide in-service college access training. It was great working with you.

I am also deeply appreciative of those across campus whose advice and encouragement were immensely helpful - Dr. Tim Luckadoo; my entire NCBI community led by the amazing Beverly Williams; Dr. Roger Callanan whose support for me has been invaluable and whom I deeply admire; and Drs. Demetrius Richmond and Meagan Kittle Autry whose doctoral support programs helped keep me on track. I also want to thank the wonderful diversity staff on campus and beyond, especially Toni “Mama” Thorpe, Jamila, Shaefny, Lisa, Tameka, Ronnie, Jasmine, Roshaunda, Tracey, Thomas, and Janet Howard for your encouragement along the way.

I am most grateful to the amazing student services team members and my AWESOME students who have been my “family” on campus. To Dr. Anona Smith Williams, who provided me with the ability to pursue this degree knowing that my job was secure! Knowing that your supervisor wants to see you meet your goal is a wonderful and
reassuring thing. Thank you Anona! I also want to thank the wonderful current and former team members - Jeff, Robin, Deidre, Michael, Jodi, Audrey, Janice, Demetrius, Regina, Laura, Ankit, Tremaine, Tara, Delisha, Ariel, Natalie and Maya. Knowing that you all were there to offer hugs, a laugh, a listening ear, or a pun helped me stay motivated during this process. I also want to thank my wonderful new team at the College Advising Corps for their support. I am excited to take everything I have learned and put it to use to serve the organization’s mission.

My NC State students are too numerous to name, and if I missed one person, someone would be mad, but I cannot even begin to thank you for all of your support. You listened patiently when I went on a tangent about my doctoral process and cheered me up when I had those days when I felt like I could not get it all done. You texted or called to check up on me, stopped by my office to say hello, wrote a funny note on my door, or asked how my study was going. You reminded me that what I was doing was important and called me “Dr. Mitchall” long before it was even close to being a reality. I am grateful to have had you along on this journey.

I cannot begin to thank all of my graduate student peers who were along for this ride. To my STEM D-4++ research team – AJ, Tara, Alessandra, Kate, Ashley, Stepahny, and Karen – thank you for being so smart and thoughtful and fun. You always made me want to be at my best. I am so grateful for my classmates in the many “cohorts” that I seemed to belong to: Antonio & Renee, Sharonda, Regina, Tara, Brooke, Darris, Alex W., Robert M., Ashley G., Tracey F.W., Celethia, Deidre O., Christine P., Rachael, Natalie S., Shaefny, Ashley C., Stepahny, Callie, and the list goes on. Sitting in AJ’s kitchen laughing with you,
writing with you in the library, or commiserating over coffee was so much fun, and having you along on this journey made the process so much more enjoyable. I want to especially thank Tara Hudson for listening, encouraging, and sharing with me over lunch at Mitch’s or Jasmin’s and special thanks goes to Darris Means and Stephany Dunstan for being wonderful “go to” people when I had questions on the DAP, proposal, or three-article process. You were never too busy to answer my many questions! A warm thanks also goes to my editor, Dr. Tara Thompson. Your assistance in the final stretch of this process was a lifesaver. A special note of appreciation and gratitude goes to Melissa Simpson, whose warmth, listening ear and overwhelming confidence in my ability to achieve this goal really helped me keep it together many a day! I am grateful to call you a friend. And how could I not thank Carrie McLean! Dr. Carrie, you have been so encouraging from my earliest days at NC State, and I can still remember sitting in that restaurant at NCORE talking with you when we both decided that we were going to go for it and get our degrees. We made it!

I am lastly going to share my deepest thanks to those to whom I cannot possibly articulate my gratitude. How do I begin to express my gratitude to my mother-in-law, Juana Michel Clerville, one of the kindest people that I know? God gave me a gift when He brought you and your wonderful son into my life. You took such wonderful care of my girls and never once expected a “thank you”. (In fact, you got mad at me if I said “thank you” because you believe this is just what a mother does.) I am blessed to have you in my life.

To my mother who raised me to be the person that I am and who instilled in me that she believed I could do anything, I cannot write these words without tears in my eyes. The love, security and safety you provided to me at an early age laid the foundation for what I am
achieving in my life even today. You believe in me more than anyone else. I know that you believed that your life could have been so different if you had an opportunity to attend college. You did not realize that the story you told me about your own college dreams (over and over again) would one day become the impetus behind my desire to want to work in the college access field. See, I was listening, Ma!

A warm thank you goes to my dearest and closest family and friends – my big brother Corey, my amazing friend “Auntie” Kristina, the “Primrose” Moms Kathy, Amy, and Mary Pat, the most patient friend ever Anna Brown, Ludge, Tam, Ed, my Goddaughters, my other “brother” Woody, Deanne, Sue, Jess, Nicole and so many others. Thank you for always being there and for telling me “you can do this” and “you’ll be done soon.” I needed it.

Lastly, I am truly and forever grateful to my little pumpkin seeds - my girls. Nothing I ever do will be more precious to me than raising you both to become the strong, independent, loving and caring young ladies that you have become. I know that there were times when you wanted to do something fun, but I had to write. But you always knew that I had a goal, and you would rub my shoulders or give me a hug to let me know you cared. I lived off of those tiny hugs and those wise pats on the back. All I wanted was to one day see your faces as I walked across that stage. That image has been in my mind for years and helped keep me motivated! I wanted to be an example and a role model to you. I wanted you to see me accomplish my goal to make the world a little bit better by helping others reach their goals of going to college. I wanted you to know that even if your goal is hard to reach and you have to make sacrifices, you can do it. Girls, this is for you. I love you!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

For low-income students in the United States, the ability to attend college can significantly impact the trajectory of their lives, leading to greater social mobility, higher wages, improved health outcomes, and decreased rates of poverty and unemployment over a lifetime (Baum & Ma, 2007; Couturier & Cunningham, 2006). Students who graduate from college typically earn over 60% more than high school graduates; pursuing an advanced degree can lead to earning two to three times more than those of high school graduates (Baum & Ma, 2007). Yet, gaps in college enrollment rates by income and race/ethnicity persist. In 2008, 80% of students from families with incomes in the higher quintile enrolled in college within a year of graduating from high school, compared to 55% of students from families with incomes in the lowest quintile (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

Making it to college is daunting even for the most well-prepared and highly resourced students. Low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation, face numerous roadblocks that make college attainment more challenging. Lack of information about college options, concerns about ability to pay, lack of adequate academic preparation, limited access to quality college advising from school counselors, and confusion about the admissions process are among the most cited barriers to postsecondary access for low-income students (College Board, 2011; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; McKillip, Rawls & Barry, 2012; NCAN, 2011). Within the literature, the barriers to college are well documented; however, few studies describe why some persevere and others do not. Are there differences in motivation that may play a role? Specifically, are there
influences in the school and family environment that may affect low-income, first-generation students’ motivation to attend college?

In terms of family and school-based support, studies show that low-income students are also less likely to have supportive peer, family, and schooling networks during the college-preparation process. Less than half of low-SES high school students reported receiving help from an adult to prepare for college (College Board, 2011). Although many parents of low-income, first-generation students have a strong desire for their children to pursue postsecondary education, they may be ill-equipped to provide concrete guidance about college due to their own limited postsecondary experiences (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Therefore, low-income, first-generation students tend to rely more heavily on school personnel for information. However, many of these students attend under-resourced schools that face their own set of challenges, including overcrowding, high teacher turnover, lack of highly qualified teachers, and counselors burdened with high caseloads who may not have the time to spend on college planning (Jarsky, McDonough & Nunez, 2009; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Perna et al., 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). These barriers have a tremendous impact on postsecondary outcomes for these students.

For those low-income, first-generation students who overcome these barriers and successfully enroll in college, how did they remain motivated to attend college in spite of the numerous challenges they may have faced? And how did those in their social networks - particularly teachers, school counselors, and parents - support or undermine their motivation along the way? The purpose of this cross-case analysis was to explore the influences on
low-income, first-generation students’ motivation on the path to college using Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) as a guiding framework. Self-determination and other motivation theories have been used to explore differences in motivational influences in educational, health and familial settings (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). However, college access researchers have not widely used motivation theory to understand students’ experiences during their college access process. The purpose of this study was to explore the influences on the motivation of low-income, first-generation students as they plan for and pursue their postsecondary goals, using an asset-oriented approach. This approach, suggested by scholars such as Harper (2010), contrasts with deficit models which emphasize the barriers that reduce student access to college. Instead, it encourages researchers to explore the strategies successfully used by underrepresented students to remain motivated and to persevere on the path to higher education.

Theories of motivation have been used to explore a variety of human actions and behaviors. At its core, motivation theory seeks to explain what causes a person to act, behave, or think in a certain way (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). Motivation theories, such as Bandura’s self-efficacy theory, achievement goal theory, self-determination theory, as well as resilience theory have been widely utilized to understand students and their action (or inaction) in educational settings (Bandura, 1982; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Covington, 2000; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006). Motivation theorists seek to understand how “social contexts catalyze both within- and between-person differences in motivation and personal growth, resulting in people being more self-motivated, energized,
and integrated in some situations, domains, and cultures than in others” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Here, the aim was to understand what motivated low-income, first-generation students during the college access process and understand the influence of those in their social networks on students’ motivation.

In addition to SDT, I incorporated Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, particularly its concept of social capital, as a complementary framework to gain a deeper understanding of the role played by those in students’ social networks (Bandura, 1982). Specifically, the study looked at three key influences: (1) how those in the school context influenced motivation, (2) how parents/guardians and extended family affected students’ motivation, and (3) how the level and quality of information that those in students’ social networks provided impacted their motivation on the path to college. Research suggests that without access to high-level forms of social capital, students do not receive critical information necessary to successfully navigate the college access process (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Studies show that many counselors and teachers in under-resourced schools may lack proper training on college access strategies (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2008; McDonough, 1997). In addition, parents of low-income, first-generation students may also have limited college knowledge to assist during the access process (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2009; McKillip et al., 2012). The concept of social capital relates to Deci & Ryan’s notion of relatedness, and together these two frameworks expose how motivation and one’s social network intersect to support students’ postsecondary goals.
Background of the Study

The importance of college attainment for social mobility is well-documented. According to data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau, the difference in work-life earnings between workers with a high school diploma and those with a college degree is about $1 million (Julian, 2012). Over a lifetime, a high school graduate can expect, on average, to earn $1.3 million; those with a bachelor’s degree $2.4 million; and those with a master’s degree $2.8 million (Julian, 2012). A 2011 American Community Survey report demonstrated that educational attainment is by far the most important social characteristic for predicting earnings (Julian & Kominski, 2011). Higher levels of education also correspond to lower unemployment and poverty rates and numerous health and societal outcomes, including more positive perceptions of personal health and higher levels of volunteerism, civic engagement, voting and greater levels of openness to the opinions of others (Baum & Ma, 2007; Couturier & Cunningham, 2006).

However, disparities in college attainment based on socioeconomic status and parental education remain. “College enrollment rates of high school completers immediately after high school ranged from 45 percent for those whose parents had less than a high school education to 85 percent for those whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher” (Choy, 1999, p. 5). A 2001 study by Plank and Jordan found that, of the high-achieving students, over 85% of the highest SES respondents enrolled in 4-year institutions. This number decreased dramatically as SES decreased. “Of the high-achieving students, 70% of the third SES quartile, 57.3% of the second SES quartile, and approximately half of the lowest SES quartile enrolled in a 4-year institution” (Plank & Jordan, 2001, p. 957). Even for those most
academically qualified to attend college, disparities in college enrollment by income level persist.

The question remains, what happens along the way to cause some low-income, first-generation students who aspire to college to persist and causes others to abandon their goal? One study found that one-third of the low-income, high achieving students who received college counseling advice did not follow through on the advice received (Avery, 2010). Why? What influences their decisions? This study contributes to the literature on college access by using a motivational theory lens to explore the influence on students’ motivation and persistence on the path to college. There are multiple motivational theories that could have been employed to study this issue. Frameworks such as self-efficacy, resiliency theory, and achievement goal theory, among others, had the potential to shed light on this topic. For this study, Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (SDT) was used as a means to understand the factors that helped low-income, first-generation students remain motivated during the college access process. A core tenet of self-determination theory is that “understanding what fosters and inhibits motivation is significant because it can contribute not only to formal knowledge of the causes of human behavior, but also to the design of social environments that optimize people’s development, performance, and well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). SDT, first proposed in the 1980s, has been used in educational research for the past 30 years to explore students’ motivation to attain educational outcomes in classroom settings (Ryan & Deci, 2000) but has not been widely applied to understand students’ experiences during the college access process. Although a majority of low-income students may say they want to attend college, many do not enroll. Therefore, if we can
discern what motivates students to remain steadfast in their goals to attend college, those who work with youth (parents, teachers, school counselors, etc.) may be better able to support students to help them persist and overcome the barriers to college enrollment.

**Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this collective case study was to explore the influences on students’ motivation on the path to college by talking directly with low-income, first-generation students who are successfully enrolled in college. The participants were all low-income, first-generation students currently enrolled in college. They all graduated from high schools that primarily serve a low-income student body as evidenced by their percentage of students who qualify for free-and-reduced lunch. Students were selected from these schools because the school environment may provide barriers to information, resources, and support for college-going. One study found that “overcrowding, tiered tracking systems, and administrative hindrances fostered the marginalization of college counseling in predominantly minority and low-income schools” (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough. 2008, p. 80). This can ultimately lead to a lack of support for students’ college-going aspirations. Therefore, it was even more important to study the motivational experiences of students who persevere despite challenging school- and community-based barriers.

The decision to select student participants who are currently enrolled in college was purposeful. Numerous studies and policy reports on low-income, first-generation students illustrate the negative aspects of their experiences, documenting the low levels of college-going for this population. As Harper (2010) noted, this deficit model directs attention away from the millions of low-income students who do successfully persist to college, despite the
barriers. Therefore, all participants were low-income, first-generation students who are now enrolled full-time in their first or second year at a four-year college or university. The intention was to allow readers to learn from participant experiences, both positive and negative. This asset-oriented perspective contributed to our understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that augmented these students’ success.

I chose to study the experiences of low-income, first-generation students because they are often underrepresented on college campuses, statistically are less likely to attend a four-year institution, and often lack resources, information and other forms of social capital to support their postsecondary access goals (Bergerson, 2009; Choy, 2001; College Board, 2011; Hahn & Price, 2008; NCES, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Research also shows that these students tend to rely more heavily on school personnel as the primary source of college access information (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Jarsky et al., 2009; McDonough, 1997). Therefore, it was even more important to discern the positive and negative impact of school personnel and parents on these students’ motivation. Because the admissions process to attend a four-year versus a two-year college is often more complex, I chose to highlight those currently at four-year institutions. Many community colleges have open access policies and often admit students with less strenuous admissions and application requirements (Dowd, 2003; Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003). However, those who persevere through the complex, deadline-driven admissions process at a four-year institution often have to demonstrate a higher level of planning and persistence. Exploring how these students stayed motivated in the midst of that process was important.
In addition to speaking to students, participants included three groups that are frequently cited in the literature as successfully contributing to students’ trajectory to college: parents, school counselors, and teachers. As previously noted, parental influence is well-documented in the literature as the most significant influence on students’ postsecondary aspirations (Bryan et al., 2009; Perna et al., 2008; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Some parents or guardians begin talking with their children about college in elementary school and emphasize that attending college is expected. Other parents may not promote college due to their own lack of knowledge or experience with postsecondary education. However, they may compensate by providing general encouragement and moral support. Studies show that parents who are more involved in the school, talk with teachers and counselors more, and speak with their sons or daughters about college more often, have children who attend college in larger numbers than those whose parents are less involved (McKillip et al., 2012; Perna & Titus, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). For the purposes of this study, I broadened the definition of parent to include guardians to account for the extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) who may co-parent or serve as the primary guardian.

Counselors’ positive and negative influence on the college access process of low-income students is also well-documented in the literature. Research shows that school counselors are a critical source of social capital for low-income students and are often the sole source of information about the college access process for this population (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; McDonough, 1997). McDonough (2005) stressed that counselors are typically the ones who provide college access assistance, but “they are inappropriately trained and structurally constrained from fulfilling this role in public high schools” (p. 69).
In addition, schools often direct college preparatory resources to the highest achieving students, thus perpetuating disparities within the school context (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008; McDonough, 1997). Therefore, it was essential to the study to explore the role played by school counselors who worked with these students.

Teachers are also an important source of information and support for this population of students. One study found that low-income students relied more heavily on their teachers for college planning information than their school counselors (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). This is often because students see their teachers daily as opposed to their school counselors who, one study showed, spend an average of 38 minutes per year on each student for college advising (McDonough, 2005). Teachers also typically first recognize students’ academic capabilities and can powerfully influence students’ sense of competence in their ability to be successful at college-level work. However, in a national study by Kirst & Venezia (2004), teachers acknowledged that they knew little about specific requirements for college admissions. One teacher noted that “counselors have a monopoly on college access information and resented teachers who invaded their turf” (Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 246). This illustrates the challenge faced by teachers who wish to support their students’ postsecondary goals; they often lack the information and authority to assist their students.

Hearing from school counselors, teachers, and parents was essential for understanding the influence they may have on students’ self-determination and motivation to attend college. One study found that communication among students, parents, and school personnel about academic matters and post-secondary preparation increased an individual’s chances of enrolling at a two-year college (McKillip et al., 2012). Perna and Tutus (2005) reported that
parents who discussed education-related topics with their children, contacted the school to volunteer, and initiated contact with the school regarding academics, increased the odds of the child enrolling in a two- or four-year college relative to not enrolling.

Parents, counselors and teachers play a pivotal role in promoting college during each phase of the college access process. But how they provide support may or may not inhibit students’ self-determination to attend college. Therefore, I interviewed the parents/guardians, teachers, and school counselors who worked with these students. The aim was to provide a holistic, multi-faceted perspective on the student’s experiences by hearing from multiple voices who were involved in their college access journey.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored:

Research question: What are the ways in which parents/guardians, teachers, school counselors and others in students’ social networks augmented or undermined students’ motivation - autonomy, competence and relatedness - on the path to college?

Sub-question: How did the quantity and quality of information shared influence student’s motivation?

Using a qualitative approach offered the opportunity to listen to the voices of low-income students, as well as their parents, school counselors and teachers, to capture the nuances of their experiences. A collective case study design enabled me to address one particular issue in-depth from multiple perspectives and to compare and contrast the experiences of students from different school settings (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yin,
I also gathered data from interviews and journals to triangulate the data and increase credibility. These two methods provided an opportunity for students to describe their experiences during the college access process to consider the motivational strategies and social networks they used that enabled them to successfully make it to college.

**Conceptual Framework**

Within the literature on college access, multiple frameworks have been employed to understand the barriers faced by low-income and first-generation students. The most common frameworks used are process models, which view college choice as a series of developmental stages that students move through as they make their postsecondary decisions (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). The most widely cited college choice process model is Hossler and Gallagher’s developmental approach (1987), which presumes that students move in a linear fashion from educational aspirations (pre-disposition), to search, to the final choice and selection phase (Bergerson, 2009). Other process models by Chapman (1981), Hanson and Litten (1982), and Freeman (1997) define a set of characteristics (including economic, sociological and personal/individual factors) that impact students along the continuum from predisposition to enrollment (or decision not to enroll). More recent models such as Perna’s (2006) conceptual model of college choice describe how individual habitus, schools, policies and other contextual factors influence students’ postsecondary plans. To varying degrees, these comprehensive process models consider the stages through which students move during the access process and the factors that influence their decision-making.
Another significant framework used in college choice literature is Bourdieu’s (1977) social reproduction theory. Bourdieu (1977) suggests that those operating in social institutions such as schools make socially constrained choices that serve to reproduce the existing social order. Thus, those who have access to various forms of capital that are valued in society - economic, social, cultural - are able to maneuver through systems more easily than those whose capital is less valued (Bergerson, 2009; Portes, 1998). A critical element of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory relates to social capital, which is an “individual’s valuable networks or connections” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 42). According to this theory, social capital affects the information available to students and the sources from which they gain information.

Although these models have been central to facilitating our understanding of the college access process, they do not fully explore differences in student motivation as central tenets. Each provides a window into the experiences of students during this process but do not cohesively explain why some students remain motivated and others do not; nor do they specifically outline how to foster student’s motivation during the access process. Therefore, for this study, I utilized self-determination theory to explore the factors that impact students’ motivation during the college access process. Self-determination theory considers the ways in which an individual’s extrinsic and intrinsic motivation - and resultant feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness - can be facilitated or forestalled by those around them (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Being intrinsically motivated suggests that people engage in tasks because they are interested in or enjoy the task (Deci et al., 1996; Sheldon et al., 2004). They participate in the activity freely, and no prodding is needed.
Extrinsically motivated behavior is often a result of the following: directives, deadlines, pressure, threats of punishment or anticipation of a reward, guilt or shame, or to boost one’s ego or sense of worth (Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). SDT posits that to promote intrinsic motivation, one must create an environment that fosters student’s feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to one’s level of self-determination in regards to one’s actions. “People must not only experience competence or efficacy, they must also experience their behavior as self-determined for intrinsic motivation to be in evidence” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). This suggests that freedom to determine one’s options and the ability to create one’s own choice set are essential for motivation.

The concept of competence focuses on the belief in one’s ability to achieve a goal or complete a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). Relatedness, or a sense of safety, belonging, and support in interpersonal relationships, is also hypothesized to promote one’s motivation. “Intrinsic motivation is more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by a sense of security and relatedness” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). In numerous studies, intrinsic motivation has been shown to decrease in situations where educators (teachers, counselors, etc.) and parents showed coldness and a lack of caring and support (Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). This study enabled me to explore how relatedness and social connections with parents and school personnel influenced students’ motivation to pursue their postsecondary goals.

One of the most valuable uses of self-determination theory in understanding students’ motivation during the college access process is the model’s discussion of self-regulation of
extrinsic motivation. Most students do not intrinsically decide that they want to attend college. It is typically not something a child chooses to do out of their own interest. As Ryan and Deci (2000) noted, “The real question concerning nonintrinsically motivated practices is how individuals acquire motivation to carry them out and how this motivation affects ongoing persistence, behavioral quality and well-being” (p. 71). How do students’ become motivated to attend college and remain motivated along the way if they are not already inclined to do so?

Ryan and Deci (2000) created a “self-determination continuum” to describe the various stages of extrinsic motivation that a person might possess based on how integrated and internalized the task is to the individual. On the continuum, the authors outlined a series of classifications of extrinsically motivated behavior that move from more controlled to more autonomous levels of motivation (external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). Those who are more externally regulated tend to engage in certain actions due to outside pressure, directives or demands. Those further along on the continuum have identified with and integrated the behavioral goal or regulation “such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). Research in school settings demonstrates that more autonomous extrinsic motivation is associated with “more engagement, better performance, lower dropout, higher quality learning, and better teacher ratings among other outcomes” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). Together, self-determination theory offered a multifaceted perspective through which to explore the strategies parents and those in school
settings (school counselors, teachers, etc.) use that may promote or unwittingly impede students’ motivation on the path to college.

The decision to incorporate Bourdieu’s (1977) social reproduction theory in one of the articles also provided a deeper understanding of how students’ social networks impact motivation. Specifically, the study explored not just what type of information and support was provided, but the level and quality of the knowledge shared and the support offered to students during the college access process. Bourdieu’s concept of social capital proposes that without strong social networks (both within the family and in the schools), students may lack knowledge that is essential to effectively navigate the college access process (Bergerson, 2009; Bourdieu, 1977; Portes, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997.) Numerous quantitative and qualitative studies have found that students who have access to accurate college information (especially on financial aid, academic requirements, admissions procedures, etc.) are more likely to overcome barriers to college access and successfully enroll (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Fann, Jarzky & McDonough, 2009; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Hahn & Price, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005).

However, research has also documented that many school personnel, particularly in under-resourced schools, may lack the training needed to provide high-quality information to their students (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2005; McKillip et al., 2012; Savitz-Romer, 2012). In addition, parents of low-income students who may not have postsecondary experience themselves may not be equipped to offer a high level of support during the college access process. The quality of information shared may impact students’ motivation towards their college-going tasks. Understanding social capital and its
relationship to notions of relatedness, autonomy and competence illustrated the ways in which motivation and the social capital available in one’s social network influence students’ postsecondary goals.

**Definitions**

There were several key terms that were defined to provide clarity and consistency of meaning throughout the study:

**College access knowledge or information:** This is a term used to define the type of information that may aid students and their families during the college decision-making process. This might include information about why one would attend college, college options, types of colleges, differences between two- and four-year institutions, non-profit versus for-profit, financial aid, scholarship options, enrollment information, application details, admissions criteria, courses to take for college readiness, types of majors, alternatives to college, etc. (Bergerson, 2009; Vargas, 2004).

**Low-income students:** As per the College Board, low-income students are defined as students whose families are eligible to receive economic subsidies targeted to low-income families, including students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs, part of a family receiving public assistance and/or residents of federally subsidized housing (College Board, 2011). I used the College Board’s definition for the purpose of this study.

**First-generation student:** I defined first-generation status using the same guidelines adopted by the Federal TRIO programs. This is a student whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but did not attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
Low-income, or high-poverty, schools: According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), mid-high poverty schools are defined as public schools where 51 percent to 75 percent of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and high-poverty schools are those schools where 76 percent or more of its students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Therefore, low-income schools were defined as public high schools where more than 50% of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Motivation: This term was defined according to self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2000) note that “motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence and equifinality – all aspects of activation and intention” (p. 69). This means that motivation concerns action and the intent behind action. People are moved to act for several different reasons. The theory also considers different types of motivation: both intrinsic and extrinsic.

Intrinsic motivation: Deci and Ryan describe intrinsic motivation as the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn. This is an innate tendency that develops at a very early age (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Tasks that are intrinsically motivated are often carried out because of one’s own interest, enjoyment, happiness, fulfillment or satisfaction.

Extrinsic motivation: This term refers to “the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Actions undertaken for this form of motivation are often done for a reward that is not focused on personal satisfaction but for some outward goal separate from one’s enjoyment or fulfillment with the task itself (Deci et al., 1999).
Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the literature on college access by highlighting the factors that influenced low-income students’ motivation during the college access process. These students are often in need of considerable support during their college planning process and rely heavily on concerned and caring adults for information. However, this study identified ways in which those in students’ social networks augmented or impeded student’s motivation on the path to college. Using self-determination theory and social reproduction theory as core frameworks, the goal of the study was to highlight students’ experiences as they reflect on their college-going process to determine which strategies supported or undermined their feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This study also added to the literature by providing readers with information about the strategies, tools, and information networks that low-income, first-generation students utilized to help them remain motivated during their college access process. By sharing thick description of this group of students’ experiences, as well as experiences of their counselors, teachers, and parents/guardians, I gained a deeper understanding of these students’ perspectives as they moved through their college access journey.

Regarding contributions to theory, this study created a more nuanced understanding of the impact of motivation on student’s experiences during the college access process. The use of motivation theory is not widely used in the literature on college access, and its integration here highlighted instances in which low-income, first-generation students were in most danger of losing motivation during the access process. Thus, this study enhances
research on college access by describing how concepts of autonomy, relatedness, and competency factor into students’ experiences.

Secondly, the results also documented how the actions of school personnel and families, although well-meaning, may unwittingly lead low-income, first-generation students to become less motivated to pursue their college going goals. The research uncovered aspects of the college access processes of these students that have been under-explored in the literature. Although process models and concepts of social capital are certainly useful, the literature lacked the integration of theoretical frameworks that allow us to gain insight into why students may act or not act in certain ways. As previously noted, studies show that many academically eligible students opt not to attend college, and often, their decision-making process is little understood. It was essential to delve more deeply into why some high-achieving, low-income students persist to college and why others do not. Clearly, motivation plays a larger role than previously understood, but few studies have explored the role of motivation in college access. This study contributes to those conversations and adds to our understanding of this issue.

Integrating social reproduction theory and concepts of social capital into the study also allowed for consideration of how the quality of the information that students receive may impact their motivation to attend college. Often studies do not consider how the level of college knowledge of those in a student’s social networks (family, counselors, teachers, etc.) affects students’ motivation. If the sources of social capital for low-income students are less informed, the ability of low-income students to be successful in the college access process could be hindered. By exploring the influence of social capital sources and how their level of
knowledge impacts student motivation, theorists can better understand the gaps in support that may impact students’ college planning.

More practically, one of the primary contributions of this study was to inform those who support low-income, first-generation students—school administrators, counselors, parents, university admissions staff, community partners, etc.—of how they can enhance the motivation and self-determination of low-income students during their college planning process. If we can determine how to foster student motivation, we can target resources more effectively, rethink how we talk about college in schools and in our homes, reframe college marketing and promotional outreach, and begin to take actions that augment rather than impede student motivation. The results can influence how we talk to students about college at an early age. In addition, the results help us reframe our language around college access to be more autonomy-supportive and ensure that students have a sense of relatedness throughout their college access process. Policies, funding and other resources can then be redirected or refocused to target those behaviors, programs and actions that support students’ autonomy, competence and relatedness in a more meaningful way.

**Overview of Methodological Approach**

This study utilized a collective case study design. The uniqueness and complexity of each case is tied to the constructivist paradigm which assumes that “reality is not an absolute but is socially constructed and that multiple realities exist that are time and context dependent” (Mertens, 2010, p. 226). Conducting a collective case study - using multiple cases to illuminate a particular issue - facilitates the documentation of trends and patterns in the experiences of these students with the goal of answering the research questions from
different perspectives. One can discover the meaning that participants make of their choices and explore the issue “traced through time” instead of simply looking at one incident or a set of frequencies (Yin, 2009, p. 9).

The intent was to use purposeful sampling to identify seven college students and develop an in-depth analysis of each of their individual cases. Case study design allows us to “enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 1). I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the students and asked that they keep a journal to reflect on their college access process. To further build each student’s case as a unit of analysis, I then interviewed one to three contacts who the students noted had motivated them during college planning. For many, this included their school counselor, teachers, and/or their parents/guardians.

The collective case study design enabled me to explore if there were any differences due to school setting, as well as the family structure and race/ethnicity of the student. Other than differences in high school setting, gender, and race/ethnicity, where possible, participants were selected with similar characteristics (age, year in college, low-income, first-generation, etc.) Minimizing variance among the cases allowed me to highlight specific instances where their experiences differed or were similar. All students were traditional college age, between ages 18-24, and went directly from high school to college. All students selected were in their first year or second year of college at a four-year institution in the same Southeastern state. First- and second-year students have just been through the college access
and admissions process and can reflect back on their experiences with easier recall. Contrasting seven distinct cases added credibility to the study (Mertens, 2010).

The goal was to select participants who graduated from schools with a high free-and-reduced lunch population. The high schools selected were all public schools in a Southeastern state. No graduates from early college high schools or other specialized charter or magnet schools were included in the sample, which facilitated understanding of the dynamics present at a more traditional or typical school, rather than one which may be specialized, has specific entrance criteria or a college-oriented focus. Choosing those schools may bias the results since students who are selected for or who apply to such schools may already be more motivated to attend college.

After conducting the interviews and collecting the journals, data analysis included transcribing and coding the transcripts and journal responses, conducting open and then focused coding (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002), and formulating themes. I conducted within-case analysis of key themes for each student’s case, and then conducted a cross-case analysis to see what larger themes or differences surfaced among the cases (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009).

**Chapter Summary and Organization of the Study**

As this is a three-article dissertation, the study begins with an exploration of the literature on low-income, first-generation student’s experiences during the college access process and some of the challenges they face on the path to college. The conceptual frameworks are outlined in more depth, and the case study design and sampling procedures are described in detail. Due to the limitations of space, the results of the within-case analysis
are briefly described in the case profiles in the appendix (see Appendix J). The three articles begin with an overview of literature pertinent to the article’s topic, a methodology section, and then key findings. The cross-case analysis results and key overarching themes are explored. Each article concludes with a discussion of the findings using the theories as a guide and key implications for future research, theory, and practice.

Examining how low-income students stay motivated during the college access process has important implications. The information can be of use to those who support low-income students, such as teachers; school counselors; those who work in TRIO programs, such as Upward Bound and GEAR UP; college access organizations, such as the College Advising Corps; and other community-based college access groups. Parents can also benefit from these findings by using the results to shift how they present college access information to their children, even at an early age. This study also adds to the literature on college access by providing a detailed account of what strategies facilitated or forestalled low-income, first-generation students’ self-determination towards college. Based on the results, the hope is that more college access researchers will incorporate motivation as a key consideration in their research and in future college choice theory development. Lastly, policy makers, higher education officials and school administrators can utilize the results of this study to become better informed about the ways in which they can educate and support low-income students as they embark upon the college access journey.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

President Obama has stated that one of the central elements of his education agenda is to improve the graduation and college-going rates for America’s youth. “Because economic progress and educational achievement go hand in hand, educating every American student to graduate prepared for college and for success in a new workforce is a national imperative” (White House Press Secretary Fact Sheet, 2010). Yet, the most troubling research on college access suggests that even when academic levels are comparable, disparities in enrollment persist. “Among students with top test scores, virtually all students from the top quarter of families in terms of income and parental education enroll in postsecondary education, but about 25 percent of those in the lowest socioeconomic quartile do not continue their education after high school” (Baum & Ma, 2007, p. 2). NCES (2012) data also indicates that immediate college enrollment of high school completers from low-income families was 52%, 30 percentage points lower than the rate of completers from high-income families.

Research points to the dire need for services and initiatives to address the persistent gap between low-income students and their higher income peers in terms of postsecondary access and success (Baum & Ma, 2007). However, little is known about the impact that motivation plays in students’ college access process and the strategies that parents, teachers, and counselors use that support or impede student’s motivation on the path to college. For the purpose of this study, I utilized Deci & Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory and its conceptualizations of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to explore factors that impact students’ self-determination during the college access process. In addition, I considered how
the level of knowledge embedded in a student’s social networks influenced student motivation to overcome barriers and persist on their college journey.

The literature review is structured into four sections. First, I provide an overview and critique of the two core frameworks to be used in this study: self-determination theory and Bourdieu’s (1977) social reproduction theory (specifically its conceptualization of social capital.) From there, I describe some of the pivotal challenges impacting college access for low-income students, including the role that parent/family networks, the school context and the broader higher education and policy context play. In the final section of the literature review, I synthesize the literature to determine what we know and what remains to be discovered about how low-income students remain motivated during the college access process and the role that parents, teachers, and school counselors play in supporting students’ postsecondary planning.

**Conceptual Frameworks and Theoretical Foundation**

Within the extensive body of research on college access, there are several conceptual frameworks most often utilized to explore the barriers to college access for various student groups. Economic and process models, which describe students’ college choice process and the various stages in which students’ make critical college decisions, are frequently cited in the literature on college access. Bourdieu’s (1977) social reproduction theory and its conceptualizations of social capital and habitus are also frequently utilized frameworks, especially to describe the challenges that economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and/or first-generation students face. Motivation theories, such as self-determination theory, self-efficacy theory, and achievement goal theory, as well as resilience theory, have
been used to study various aspects of students’ experiences in classrooms and other educational settings including family environments. However, few researchers have used motivation theory to inform our understanding of students’ college access experiences.

I begin by first describing the most widely cited college choice model that has been employed in the literature to study the experiences of students during the college access process, followed by a brief overview of two more recent choice models used in access literature. From there, I describe Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory and its conceptualizations of social capital that have been widely cited in college access research. I then segue into a discussion of motivation theories typically used in educational research, concluding with a detailed description of self-determination theory, the framework used for this study.

The most widely cited process model in college access literature is Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college choice model, which posits that students move through three developmental stages from college aspirations to college enrollment (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). Each stage was generally associated with an age or grade. The first phase is predisposition, whereby a student begins to determine early college aspirations. This phase could begin as early as elementary school or as late as high school for some. Hossler et al. (1999) found that the most successful interventions occurred by eighth or ninth grade.

The second stage of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model is search. Within this phase, students explore various college options and make decisions about which institutions would be an ideal fit (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler et al., 1989). Students typically enter this
phase in high school during the tenth through twelfth grades (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). During this phase, students should begin to hear from or seek out school personnel, such as school counselors, about their college options. One report documented that “low-income students are less likely to receive early information and support needed to plan ahead. As a result, they often miss critical deadlines for college admissions tests, admissions applications and financial aid” (NCAN, 2011, p. 3). Receiving accurate, up-to-date information at this stage is critical.

The third stage of the Hossler and Ghallager’s (1987) model is the choice phase, which typically occurs in the eleventh to twelfth grades. Here, students begin to make decisions about which institution to attend based on the information available to them (Bergerson, 2009). Cost and financial considerations also play a central role in this phase (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler et al., 1989). Yet Choy (2001) found that students whose parents did not attend college “tended to report lower educational expectations, be less prepared academically, and receive less support from their families in planning and preparing for college than their peers whose parents attended college” (p. 10). In sum, the college choice model provides a comprehensive description of the process that students move through but says little about persistence, motivation, or other factors that address why a student may or may not persist to college. Differences in how socioeconomic status, gender, race/ethnicity and other cultural nuances may influence the choice process for diverse student groups are not well-integrated. The impact of student motivation at different stages of the access process is also not considered.
Building on Hossler & Gallagher’s (1987) work, Freeman (1997) presented a model of college choice specifically to explore how African-Americans make their college choice decisions. Her model suggests that there is a culture-specific element that is lacking in previous college choice models. “Researchers have tended to focus on increasing the motivation and aspiration of African American students to attend higher education while excluding cultural considerations,” (Freeman, 1997, p. 525). Freeman’s model adds the element of cultural support to Hossler and Gallagher’s choice model and reframes the predisposition stage as predetermination. “Freeman’s data suggests that in order for African American students to make college their choice, they need aspiration, ability, and cultural support,” (Muhammad, 2008, p. 85). Although this model incorporates cultural considerations and highlights the role that strong social support plays, it does not fully explore concepts of individual student motivation that may impact access.

Another process model that has more recently been featured in the literature is Perna’s (2006) conceptual model of college choice. Incorporating Bourdieu’s (1977) notions of social capital and habitus, Perna described four layers of influence on a student’s college choice: individual habitus; school and community context; the higher education context; and the social, economic and policy context. Individual habitus focuses on a person’s background characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, social class, and parents’ education. In particular, the model suggests that “the presence of social and cultural capital all combine to form an individual’s habitus, from which postsecondary aspirations and plans arise” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 37). Within the school and community context, Perna noted that school characteristics can impact college choice, including the availability of counseling, school
size, and the knowledge of college discussed and made available in the school environment. The higher education context relates to the availability of institutions within the community and the regional norms surrounding college-going. The final context focuses on the political, social, and economic environment including labor market trends and specific policies that encourage or discourage college attendance (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006). Perna’s model, in contrast to that of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), more explicitly considers the layered contexts that impact a student’s college choice decisions.

Process models have been essential to our understanding of the challenges students experience during the college access and choice process. Yet they are not without their critics. One of the most common critiques of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model in particular is that the model assumes that all students have access to the same information, resources and support and does not take into account the ways in which the college choice process may differ for high- and low-income students (Bergerson, 2009). Some critics also note that the model does not fully address the differences that may impact college-going for diverse groups. For instance, according to McDonough (1997), there are differing levels of access to school counselors depending on the type of school attended. The quality of the interaction with school counselors varies considerably depending on whether one attends a private or public school and depending on the school and community context. These nuances are not fully captured in Hossler and Gallagher’s model. Freeman’s (1997) and Perna’s (2006) models do incorporate cultural considerations and highlight the critical role that social networks and social capital play in students’ college access process. However, although process models help broaden our awareness of how students decide to attend college and
make choices about which college to attend, they do not contribute to our understanding of individual student motivation. This link may prove pivotal to discovering additional challenges that impact students on their access journey.

**Social reproduction theory.** In addition to understanding the process that students follow on their trajectory to college, researchers began to incorporate theoretical frameworks from disciplines such as sociology and psychology to understand the nuances of students’ experiences, particularly the additional challenges faced by students typically underserved in schools. A key theoretical framework used in college access literature borrowed from sociology is Bourdieu’s social (1977) reproduction theory, particularly Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital. The main premise of Bourdieu’s work is that “individuals operating in social institutions such as schools make socially constrained choices that serve to reproduce the existing social order” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 41).

Three key features of Bourdieu’s (1977) theory involve habitus, capital, and social capital. Habitus is described as the ways in which a member of a society delimits options based on the opportunities available in one’s environment (Perna, 2006). “Individuals often do not see choices outside what they perceive to be available to their particular social group” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 41). The power of habitus is that without access to options, individuals often do not make choices beyond what they are exposed to in their environment. “The relationship to schooling is established when it is understood that some habitus constitute cultural capital as far as the school is concerned, and are thus reinforced with ‘success,’ while others do not” (Harker, 1984, p. 118). McDonough (1997) in her study of school counseling and habitus in different school contexts noted that students face a differing set of options and
choices in their college access process depending on economic and cultural contexts. “Not all college-bound students face equal choices if they start out with different family and school resources that enable or constrain their educational and occupational mobility possibilities” (McDonough, 1997, p. 150). Thus, one’s habitus can influence which institutions a student will consider, if they consider college at all.

The concept of capital is also central to Bourdieu’s (1977) theory. Capital is described as a form of power in a given field (Bergerson, 2009). Economic capital relates to resources that have a monetary value. Social capital is enacted through changes in the relationships among people that facilitate action (Coleman, 1988). Thus, the theory suggests that some students have access to information channels by which they gain critical information needed to make college choice decisions. As Coleman (1988) notes, “Social relations are not valuable just in terms of the obligations that exist between individuals, but in the form of the information that these individuals can provide” (p. 104). Access to informed social networks can provide a valuable source of social capital to students particularly for first-generation students whose parents or other relatives did not attend college.

Cultural capital is another form of capital often discussed in the college access literature. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1977), is defined as those instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth that are designated by society as being worthy of being sought and possessed. Cultural capital might include cultural knowledge and awareness; aesthetic preferences for art, music and literature; educational credentials; knowledge of how to navigate the school system; even language facility, among others (Bergeson, 2009). For instance, DiMaggio (1982) noted that teachers tend to communicate more easily with
students who participate in certain elite status cultures; teachers give them more attention, more special assistance, and are more likely to perceive them as gifted or intelligent. Bourdieu argues that schools “take the cultural capital of the dominant group as the natural and only proper sort of capital, and treat all children as if they had equal access to it” (Harker, 1984, p. 118). Schools then make judgments about students in the school setting based on whether they assimilate to the norms set by elite society (Bourdieu, 1977; Harker, 1984). Cultural capital can also impact how comfortable a student or a parent feels in accessing support and information about educational opportunities in the school setting (Bergerson, 2009).

Although social reproduction theories and concepts of social and cultural capital are extensively used to explore students’ experiences during the college access, these models are not without their detractors. Critics of social capital and social reproduction theory note that although this concept has value, it has not yet been operationalized in a consistent manner in order to be measured quantitatively (World Bank, 2011). College access studies using social capital often use other variables as proxies, which may be insufficient for fully understanding students’ experiences. Differences in how the construct is measured also make it difficult to duplicate and/or compare findings across studies (World Bank, 2011).

Some also argue that Bourdieu’s (1977) conception of habitus, social and cultural capital suggests that those from more privileged classes have “better” forms of capital than others. This creates a negative view of the forms of capital inherent in some cultural communities:
This definition of Students of Color as being inherently lacking in ‘preferred’ cultural capital ignores the strengths that Students of Color gain from their racial and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, such a definition has resulted in a lengthy history of educational literature that theorizes Communities of Color as having an inherent cultural deficit, resulting in school environments that ‘subtract’ or dismiss the heritage of Students of Color (Straubhaar, 2013, p. 95).

Another critique of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory is that it “displays no faith in subordinate classes and groups, no hope in their ability or willingness to reinvent and reconstruct the conditions under which they live, work and learn” (Giroux, as cited in Harker, 1984, p. 121). Individuals appear to be “locked” into structures of habitus and capital that they cannot readily change. Others have challenged this critique, highlighting that human agency is present and possible within Bourdieu’s conceptions of social reproduction and although challenging, change is quite possible within the context of one’s habitus (Harker, 1984).

In summary, social reproduction theory and its conceptions of habitus, social capital, and cultural capital have been powerful lenses through which to explore the opportunities and barriers for low-income, first-generation students on the path to college. Although not without its detractors, Bourdieu’s concept of social capital was used for this study to explore how the quality of information present in one’s social network influenced student motivation during the college access process.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory (SDT) was first described by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985) nearly 30 years ago. The theory is
concerned with the “investigation of people’s inherent growth tendencies and the innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). A key component of understanding motivation, according to Deci and Ryan, concerns why people undertake certain behaviors. To be motivated, one is focused on behaving with the intent of achieving some outcome (Deci et al., 1996). Yet, the theorists were focused not just on what actions someone undertakes or what motivates someone to act, but also what type of motivation is being enacted in a given situation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, self-determination theory is most relevant to answer questions about what type of motivation is underlying certain actions and what factors in the social-contextual environment facilitate or forestall motivation in certain situations.

Several fundamental concepts underlie the theory. First, Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest that as humans, we attempt to satisfy three psychological needs—feelings of competency, autonomy and relatedness. Thus, in order to achieve healthy functioning and personal well-being, one seeks to satisfy the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Autonomy relates to one’s level of choice and volition in one’s actions and behaviors. Autonomy-supportive environments are ones in which students have a sense of self-direction, freedom of choice, and their feelings are acknowledged and validated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One’s autonomy is often described in terms of whether one has an internal perceived locus of causality (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000), meaning one is self-directed and has the freedom to act according to one’s own wishes or needs. Whereas, an
external perceived locus of causality is where one feels driven to act due to external factors or rewards (Sheldon et al., 2004).

Competence refers to a belief in one’s ability to successfully engage in a task or behavior. Deci and Ryan (1985) note that one of the central ways in which competence is achieved is by being presented with optimal challenges. “To be intrinsically motivated, a target activity must provide an optimal challenge by being optimally discrepant from one’s skill level” (Deci et al., 1996, p. 176). Thus, activities must provide enough challenge, but not lead someone to feel overwhelmed, which could lead to greater anxiety and less motivation to complete the task. One study found that positive feedback also reinforced one’s perceived competence and enhanced intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1996), whereas, as one would expect, negative feedback detracted from one’s feelings of competency. This has implications for how students receive feedback during the college access process.

Finally SDT’s concept of relatedness refers to the social connections that one has and whether a person feels safe, secure, and has psychological closeness with others, especially in their early years (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes only when there is a sense of relatedness to others (Deci et al., 1996, p. 178). Numerous studies using SDT and motivation have found that students who felt more secure with their parents and teachers and who felt they could turn to them when they were having problems tended to “cope more positively with academic failures, to be more autonomous in regulating their school behaviors, were more engaged in learning and to feel better about themselves” (Deci et al., 1996, p. 178). This is a strong indicator of the potential impact of one’s social network on students’ motivation during the college access process.
Another central tenet of self-determination theory relates to the type of motivation that underlies action and whether one is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Intrinsically motivated actions are those that are undertaken due to one’s own interest. Engaging in intrinsically-motivated activities creates pleasure, enjoyment, interest or satisfaction, in and of itself. “When intrinsically motivated, people feel wholly volitional in behaving—they experience the behavior as an expression of themselves” (Deci et al., 1996, p. 167). For instance, students who are intrinsically motivated to attend college might do so because they are excited about learning more about the field and believe college will enable them to delve more deeply into a subject matter they love.

In contrast, extrinsically motivated behavior involves actions that are performed to attain some separate outcome or consequence, not solely due to enjoyment of the activity (Sheldon et al., 2004). Examples might include engaging in an activity to attain a reward or prize, to avoid punishment or pressure, to satisfy a threat or directive, to avoid looking incompetent, or to please others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Behaviors that are extrinsically motivated are generally not spontaneous and often require external prompting by others.

Building on the core concepts of relatedness, competence and autonomy, and the influence of whether one is extrinsically or intrinsically motivated, SDT addresses a central question: what social-contextual conditions facilitate or forestall self-motivation? “SDT has argued that it is crucial to distinguish whether people act because they are autonomous and feel volitional in doing the behavior or rather because they are controlled and feel they have to do the behavior” (Sheldon et al., 2004, p. 475). Deci and Ryan (1985) believe that differentiating among certain types of motivation can broaden our understanding of why
humans act as they do, especially in educational settings. Translating this to college access, SDT is useful as a framework for understanding how and whether students remain motivated during their college search process and which actions or environments forestall or facilitate their motivation. To enhance our understanding of the different types of motivation that underlie certain actions, Ryan and Deci (2000) created a “self-determination continuum” within a sub-theory of self-determination theory called organismic integration theory (OIT). OIT considers the various stages of extrinsic motivation that a person might possess based on how integrated and internalized the task is to the individual (see Figure 1).

![Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) showing types of motivation with their regulatory styles.](image)

*Figure 1. Organismic Integration Theory (OIT) showing types of motivation with their regulatory styles. Copyright 2000 by the American Psychological Association.*

At the far right of the continuum is amotivation during which a person acts but does not value the activity, feel competent to complete the activity, or believe that the outcome is desirable. Next on the continuum, the authors outline a series of four classifications of extrinsically motivated behavior: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The most extrinsically motivated
classification is external regulation. An example of external regulation might be a student who is induced to act based on external demands or rewards (fear of punishment, desire to please the teacher, to get a good grade, or simply because he or she is required to do it.) This level of self-regulation is often experienced as having an external perceived locus of causality.

Next, introjected regulation refers to taking in a regulation, but not fully accepting it as one’s own (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Introjected behaviors are carried out to avoid guilt, blame or anxiety, or to attain ego enhancements such as feelings of pride or worth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is often experienced as a regulation based on one’s level of self-esteem (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An example of this behavior might be a student who opts to study because she does not want to be embarrassed in class. It is important to note that although studying for a quiz could be considered a positive behavior, the motivation behind the choice to study is extrinsically motivated and relates to ego involvement, which can be problematic for sustained motivation.

Next on the continuum toward more autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation is identified regulation, which has a more internal locus of causality. Identified behaviors are those where “there is a conscious valuing of a behavioral goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). In this instance, a student might do his homework because of the sense of satisfaction he feels with his accomplishment. The last and most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is termed integrated regulation. “Integration occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one’s other
values and needs” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). Although this level of motivation is still extrinsic, these actions are more likely to be autonomous and lead to more pleasure, enjoyment, and personal fulfillment. Research studies of these factors have demonstrated that more autonomous extrinsic motivation was associated with “more engagement, better performance, lower dropout, higher quality learning and better teacher ratings among other outcomes” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). A young lady who fills out her college applications in order to someday get a better job and create a better life might be considered to display integrated regulation.

A key component of self-regulation relates to the types of conditions and environmental factors that promote one’s autonomy, relatedness, and competence and which forestall these factors. “Despite the fact that humans are liberally endowed with intrinsic motivational tendencies, the evidence is now clear that the maintenance and enhancement of this inherent propensity require supportive conditions, as it can be fairly readily disrupted by various non-supportive conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Numerous studies have found that educational environments that are autonomy-supportive and promote students’ feelings of competence and relatedness enhance student levels of intrinsic motivation and promote integrated regulation (Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Because most extrinsically motivated behaviors are not inherently interesting, researchers have found that one of the primary reasons that people engage in such actions is the level of relatedness they feel towards those who promote the behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). “Relatedness, or the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others, is centrally important for internalization” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). Another key finding was that if someone feels
a higher level of competence with regard to a behavior or action, and it is a behavior that those in their social group value, then they are more likely to internalize the behavior (Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ultimately, the theorists posit that having support for one’s level of competence facilitates internalization.

Other key strategies that researchers have discovered that encourage, rather than undermine, motivation and self-determination are: providing a meaningful rationale for uninteresting behavior, supporting one’s autonomy or freedom to make their own choices, acknowledgement of feelings, opportunities for self-direction, providing structure or limits in an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling way, and offering positive feedback using autonomy-supportive language (Deci et al., 1999; Grolnick, Deci & Ryan, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sheldon and colleagues (2004) also found that in order to promote a higher level of well-being, people are advised to pursue goals involving “growth, connection, and contribution rather than goals involving money, beauty and popularity; and goals that are interesting and personally important rather than goals they are forced or pressured to pursue” (p. 485). Together engaging in these strategies can create environments and interpersonal relationships that foster autonomy, competence and relatedness, and ultimately enhance motivation. As practitioners consider how to promote a college-going culture among low-income students in their schools and communities, these tactics could prove to be essential.

However, critics of self-determination theory argue that pursuing extrinsic goals in and of themselves may not be as detrimental to one’s mental health as is posited by the theorists. Researchers have questioned whether what one is motivated to achieve (either personal happiness or wealth and status) is of central importance or if the more important
consideration is *why* one seeks it (Carver and Baird, 1998). In essence, some suggest that “the reasons why a person aspires either to financial success or to community involvement are more important than is the aspiration itself” (Carver & Baird, 1998, p. 290). These critics suggest that it is not just what you aspire but why you aspire that matters more. In answer to these criticisms, self-determination theorists cite findings that show that those who strongly pursue extrinsic goals tend to “have superficial relationships, operate with contingent self-worth, engage in more frequent social comparisons, and allow extrinsic pursuits to crowd out enjoyable and satisfying activities” (Sheldon et al., 2004, p. 484). They also hypothesize that those who tend to be more extrinsically oriented in their goals tend to have other psychological factors that may be at play such as low self-esteem or high insecurity (Sheldon et al., 2004).

Another critic of SDT relates to its focus on autonomy. Some have characterized autonomy as independence or individualism, which goes against the cultural values of many from collectivist cultures in which being connected to one’s family and community involves making decisions that benefit the greater whole. The authors address these concerns by noting that “within SDT, autonomy refers not to being independent, detached or selfish but rather to the feeling of volition that can accompany any act, whether independent or dependent, collectivist or individualistic” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74).

Overall, SDT is an important theory for explaining the motivation behind one’s actions and in particular, uses a more nuanced approach to explore what types of motivation might be at play. The theory is also highly useful for exploring the strategies parents and school personnel can use to facilitate student motivation for college-going. In *Ready, Willing
and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access & Success, the authors described how a lack of awareness of students’ developmental processes and unfamiliarity with motivation theory can undermine the efforts of those working to promote college-going. Often well-meaning counselors, teachers, and other college access staff highlight the benefits of college by emphasizing the money students can earn with a certain degree, which may impact motivation. “Research suggests that focus solely on extrinsic reasons . . . might have even made the youth who responded to them less likely to succeed and graduate once they were in college than if they had been motivated by more personal reasons” (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, p. 7).

An understanding of motivation theory and the nuances in motivation that Ryan and Deci (2000) describe can inform practice and lead to a deeper awareness of how to best support students along the way. “Youth who find themselves going through the motions of college planning without real ownership and intrinsic interest in the process are the ones that we often see step off the path at key transition points” (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, p. 125). Applying motivation theory to research on student college access experiences can be a critical new lens for understanding if our efforts are truly reaching students in the ways that we intend.

Other Motivation Theories

There are several other motivation theories that have been used to explore student behavior in educational settings. In addition to self-determination theory, two central theories frequently cited are self-efficacy theory and achievement goal theory. A brief description of each is below.
**Self-efficacy concept.** Much of our current understanding about self-efficacy and motivation is due to the research of psychologist Albert Bandura and his work on social cognitive theory. Bandura described self-efficacy as the self-appraisal of one’s capabilities to successfully engage in actions that lead to certain desirable outcomes (Bandura, 1982). “Such beliefs influence the course of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put forth in given endeavors, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realize” (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 3).

Bandura posited that the ability to develop one’s self-efficacy flows from four major sources: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion and physiological responses (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Enactive master experiences include one’s prior experiences of a task in question. If one is successful, self-efficacy is edified; if one consistently fails, it is undermined (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Vicarious experience refers to the ability to establish self-efficacy beliefs based on how similar others’ perform on a task. This is referred to as modeling and is another source of efficacy information (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). If we see someone of similar ability master a task, we believe that we can achieve it as well. Verbal persuasion refers to the feedback we receive from others. “Persuasive communication and evaluative feedback from significant others influences one’s judgment of self-efficacy” (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 6). If the source is credible and the feedback is realistic, it is more likely to impact self-efficacy. Lastly, physiological reactions—such as changes in mood, pain,
sweating, headaches, etc. — can also influence efficacy (Bandura, 1982). These signals can lead some to adjust their sense of self-efficacy due to these physiological responses (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003).

Bandura explained that self-efficacy beliefs determine subsequent motivation and emotion through a self-regulatory mechanism. If we do not believe that we can be successful at a task, we will be anxious, stressed, and likely less motivated to perform the activity (Bandura, 1982; Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). According to Bandura, one’s level of self-efficacy can impact how much effort one will expend and how long someone will persist at a task in the face of challenges (Bandura, 1982). This has direct ramifications for our understanding of college access. According to Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy, a student’s judgment about his ability to persevere through the college access process is expected to be influenced by his self-assessment of how qualified and prepared he is for college. “Persons who have a strong sense of efficacy deploy their attention and effort to the demands of a situation and are spurred to greater effort by obstacles” (Bandura, 1982, p. 123).

Bandura also described how goal-setting behavior interrelates with efficacy and motivation. He suggests that self-motivation is best sustained by adopting more attainable sub-goals that lead to larger future ones (Bandura, 1982), and these goals serve as a vehicle for the development of efficacy. As one achieves each sub-goal or proximal goal, one’s feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment in oneself have the potential to increase. “Sub-goal attainments provide clear markers of progress along the way to verify a growing sense of self-efficacy” (Bandura, 1982, p. 134). This, Bandura suggested, builds intrinsic interest in the activity. The influence of this finding on college access suggests that understanding
self-efficacy and supporting students’ development of feelings of competency along the college access journey can impact their level of intrinsic motivation to persevere through to college.

Although Bandura’s conception of self-efficacy is interrelated with some of the core tenets of self-determination theory, SDT provides a more nuanced consideration of motivation and the specific ways in which motivation can be impeded or augmented. Understanding self-efficacy theory helps us understand whether a student believes he or she is capable of being successful in the college access process; however, the theory does not fully explain why otherwise capable and high-achieving students may not persist during the access process. A belief in one’s capabilities is but one facet of a student’s thought process during the access process. “Children and adolescents who perceive themselves as having high levels of academic competence are more engaged and self-motivated in school, perform better academically, exhibit higher expectations for success, and pursue more challenging academic goals” (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, p. 93).

Yet, some students who believe they have the ability to be successful in college and aspire to attend do not follow-through on the steps needed to persist through the access process. One study of students who did not attend college despite being academically qualified showed that almost all of the non-college-goers did not taking the steps necessary to enroll in college. “Only 15 percent of non-college-goers applied to any college; 12 percent applied for financial aid, and a mere 10 percent took the SAT and 7 percent the ACT. This suggests that the decision not to enroll in college may have been made long before high school graduation” (Hahn & Price, 2008, p. 11). However, interestingly, 88% of non-
college-goers and 91% of college-goers in the study rated personal motivation as a strong
determinant in their decision to attend college (Hahn & Price, 2008). Although we cannot
discern from Hahn & Price’s findings what these students meant by personal motivation,
these disparities suggest that there is a divide between belief in one’s ability to make it to
college and actually being motivated to take the steps necessary to achieve one’s goal.
Although Bandura’s self-efficacy theory is useful for exploring this issue, SDT was selected
to aid in the exploration of how different types of motivation impact students’ college access
journey.

Achievement goal theory. Another central theory for understanding motivation in
educational settings is achievement goal theory. Achievement goal theory has gained
prominence over the past 25 years as a means to understand differences in educational
achievement in schools. “Achievement goal theorists focus on students’ intentions or
reasons for engaging, choosing, and persisting at different learning activities” (Meece et al.,
2006, p. 490.) The central tenet of achievement goal theory relates to whether one has a
mastery-goal or a performance-goal focus. A mastery goal orientation is one that focuses on
one’s competence through mastering a new skill, trying to accomplish a challenging task, or
understanding new learning material (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Meece et al., 2006).
Performance goals are those that focus on one’s level of competence in relation to that of
others, striving to be better than others or using social comparison to gauge your performance
(Covington, 2000; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Meece et al., 2006). Achievement theorists
suggest that mastery goals “favor deep-level, strategic processing of information, which in
turn leads to increased school achievement; and second, that performance goals trigger
superficial, rote-level processing that exerts a stultifying influence on achievement” (Covington, 2000, p. 175).

Another distinction within achievement goal theory is whether one has a performance-approach or performance-avoidance goal tendency. Performance-approach goals are those that focus on the attainment of favorable judgments and are oriented towards doing well to outperform others. Performance-avoidance goals focus on avoiding unfavorable judgments of one’s ability. This can lead to a person not trying or reducing their effort in order to avoid failure, or creating excuses for having done poorly to save face (Covington, 2000; Meece et al., 2006). Some theorists associate having mastery goals as being intrinsically motivated and believe that “mastery goals are the ideal form of competence-based self-regulation” (Elliot & McGregor, 2001, p. 502). Research on achievement and motivation has found that “students show the most positive achievement patterns when they are focused on mastery goals. Students persist at difficult tasks; report high levels of task involvement; and report high levels of effort and persistence” (Meece et al., 2006, p. 491). They also report more positive feelings of self-efficacy and academic ability.

Much like self-determination theory, achievement goal theory goes one step further and describes the types of classroom environments that promote students’ feelings of mastery and which promote more performance-goal oriented behavior in students. The way teachers structure their classrooms has also been found to impact whether students are more motivated by mastery- or performance-oriented goals (Meece et al., 2006). This is an important finding.
because it suggests that schools and “classroom goal structures influence student behavior by shaping the type of personal goals that students adopt” (Meece et al., 2006, p. 495).

In considering how this relates to the college access process, Savitz-Romer & Bouffard (2012) noted:

Youth who plan for, enroll in, and engage in college for the sake of learning new skills and information (mastery goals) are more likely to succeed, perform well and persist than those who are solely there to prove they can do it, or to avoid the disappointment of family, friends, or communities. This latter group of youth is less likely to internalize their commitment to higher education, which can lead them to question why they are there. (p. 127)

This is particularly challenging for students who come from first-generation, low-income homes. For these students, breaking out of poverty and/or being the first to attend college can be powerful motivators; however, researchers caution that attending college solely focused on these goals can cause students to struggle emotionally and academically in college once these inducements diminish (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Students in environments where there is a focus on mastery and learning for its own sake and where there is less competition to achieve tend to flourish. This knowledge has the potential to influence how we structure our language around issues of college access and which specific tactics would best augment student’s mastery goals during the college access process.

Achievement goal theory has the potential to influence our understanding of the types of goals students set during their college access process. For instance, the theory suggests that whether a student chooses to attend college to avoid ending up in poverty or in order to
pursue a fulfilling career, or both can make a difference in the student’s persistence. Although achievement goal theory has value for exploring issues of motivation, self-determination theory presented a better framework for answering questions about which factors impacted students’ motivation, not just their goal-setting behavior. Therefore, although achievement goal theory is not the central theory being explored here, its conceptualization of mastery versus performance goals and the relationship to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are worth noting. Yet SDT allowed further exploration of the ways in which students’ feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness were augmented or forestalled during college planning, which was the central focus of this study.

**Resilience Theory**

Another theoretical framework that has been employed to understand how students at risk persevere to reach their goals is resilience theory. Resilience refers to “the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risk” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 399). Most research on resilience uses a strengths-based approach to understand how students demonstrate resilient qualities to cope with or overcome negative experiences and setbacks that they may face (Richardson, 2002). An essential element of resilience is exposure to risk factors and the presence of “promotive factors that either help bring about positive outcomes or reduce or avoid a negative outcome” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 399).

The factors that can assist youth in avoiding the risks they face can either be assets or resources. Resources tend to be external and may include parental or school-based support,
mentoring, or resources available through church or community organizations (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Assets typically consist of positive factors within the individual such as coping skills, competence, or self-efficacy (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Resilience research that focuses specifically on the experiences of adolescents helps us understand how they attain healthy development in spite of their exposure to risk factors. An important early longitudinal study on resilience identified several resilient qualities that youth demonstrated over time in the face of high-risk situations, including “being female, robust, socially responsible, adaptable, tolerant, achievement-oriented, a good communicator and having good self-esteem” (Richardson, 2002, p. 309).

Another important element of resilience theory is its discussion of how resilient qualities develop. In considering how this works in an educational setting, the theorists propose that “resilient qualities are attained through a law of disruption and reintegration” (Richardson, 2002, p. 310). In essence, when faced with disruptive life events, we have the ability to choose consciously or unconsciously how we will handle the challenging episode (Richardson, 2002). Someone can experience a challenge and “reintegrate resiliently, return back to homeostasis, or with loss” (Richardson, 2002, p. 310). In the case of college access, a student may find out that he did not get the score needed on the SAT to apply to a prestigious university. The student may opt to rebound from this setback by reintegrating resiliently and vowing to study harder in order to retake the SAT. Or the student may return to homeostasis by just putting this setback past them and deciding to apply to their “safety school” rather than stretching for a more prestigious school. When a student recovers with loss, that “means that person gives up some motivation, hope, or drive because of the
demands from life prompts” (Richardson, 2002, p. 312). In this example, a student may cope with the SAT situation by choosing to attend a community college where SAT is not a requirement. Dysfunctional reintegration results when a person resorts to negative coping mechanisms to deal with the situation, such as drugs or alcohol or other forms of destructive behaviors (Richardson, 2002). In the SAT example, a student who experiences dysfunctional reintegration may choose to forego postsecondary education altogether or self-sabotage other academic pursuits, despite this one setback.

Resilience research has examined academic persistence and identified several risk factors that may affect one’s success. This includes “being a minority student attending an inner city school or coming from a low-income home where English is not the primary language” (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortes, 2009, p. 155). Factors found to promote resilience include a positive self-evaluation of their academic status at school, an internal locus of control over their academic success, and belief in one’s abilities to be successful academically (Morales, 2008; Perez et al., 2009). Other protective factors include having a strong network of supportive family, peers and school-personnel, such as teachers and counselors (Perez et al., 2009).

Although resilience theory is helpful for understanding how students who are exposed to risk factors overcome these obstacles and which traits they experience in certain contexts, the theory has limitations. First, differing uses of terminology in resilience research has hindered the ability of the research to be more widely used (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Measures of resilience are also difficult because resilience is so context-specific. One may be resilient in certain situations, but not in others (Morales, 2008). Since resilience is also
typically studied over time, instruments that measure resilience at one point in time with a self-report may be inaccurately capturing students’ experiences of the phenomenon (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The nuances of how resilience works for different students may also be difficult to capture. Fergus & Zimmerman (2005) noted that resilience for urban and suburban youth, males versus females, or for those from low- or high-SES backgrounds may differ considerably. Even defining risk factors can be contentious. The break-up of a toxic marriage may be seen as a negative by one student, but a positive for another, depending on the nature of the marriage, the relationship of the child with the parents, whether one was oldest or youngest, etc. “Researchers may therefore not always want to assume that because an event is normatively considered negative (or positive), it is experienced as negative (or positive) by all youth” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 406).

Resilience theory presents a useful framework for capturing the traits that those who persevere despite risk factors exhibit, but the theory is limited in its integration of motivation as a key variable. Many of the traits demonstrated by resilient youth include those that are related to self-determination theory—an autonomous-orientation, belief in one’s abilities or level of competency and a sense of relatedness with those around them. One might be more resilient because one’s environment was more autonomy-supportive or enhanced one’s feelings of competence or relatedness. Therefore, self-determination theory appears to encompass many of the elements described within resilience theory and goes one step further. SDT highlights specific tactics that those in students’ environments can take to enhance or promote students’ motivation and self-determination to college.
Summary. Overall, motivation theories, and related concepts such as resilience theory, have great explicative power to enhance our understanding of students’ action or inaction during the college access process. Self-efficacy, achievement goal, resilience theory, and self-determination theories are key constructs for exploring motivation and persistence, but there are numerous others that were not explored here. In essence, the goal is to facilitate our knowledge of how low-income, often first-generation students remain motivated to continue through the often daunting process of college access. One study showed that “eighteen percent of those most qualified students did not apply to a four-year institution” (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001, p. 121). Motivation theories may explain why some are successful in taking the steps in the college access process and others of equal ability are not. Yet many practitioners may be unaware of the tenets of these theories and may actually undermine students’ motivation by focusing on rewards or goals that do not lead to student success. As Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) noted, “it is important for everyone who works with youth to be intentional and thoughtful about how their messages can influence motivation, in everything from emphasizing mastery goals to encouraging young people to see the value of effort and hard work” (p. 139).

This study employed self-determination theory to better understand factors that support or undermine students’ motivation during the college access process. Much of the research on college access has neglected to incorporate motivation theories to explore this issue. The intention of this study was to incorporate self-determination theory to uncover nuances in low-income students’ college access experiences that may not have been previously discovered. Overall, the goal was to utilize the findings to enhance theory and
future research on college access and inform counselors, teachers, parents and others responsible for supporting low-income students’ in their often challenging college access journey.

**Challenges to College Access for Low-income Students**

Low-income students face a daunting task on the path to college. The literature abounds with study after study describing the difficulties many low-income students face leading up to postsecondary access. Research on this topic is extensive and can be broken down into several key categories of influence on students’ trajectory to college. I limited my exploration of the barriers to college access to those frequently highlighted in college access research in these contexts: parental/family influence, school context, and the policy context, which includes considerations of financial aid.

**Parent/family influence.** Research indicates that the most important predictors of college enrollment are the level of parental education and parental income. “Enrollment rates of high school completers immediately after high school ranged from 45 percent for those whose parents had less than a high school education to 85 percent for those whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher” (Choy, 1999, p. 5). First-generation students are less likely to complete the necessary steps to enroll in a four-year institution. “Only 36% aspire to a bachelor’s degree or higher…while 78% of students for whom at least one parent has a bachelor’s degree aspire to a bachelor’s degree or higher” (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1997, p. 1). Choy (1999) found that college enrollment rates increase with family income, even when academic levels are equal. These studies point to a persistent gap in the ability of low-income students to match the college-going rates of their higher income peers.
One of the key reasons cited for these continued disparities relates to the type of information that low-income, first generation students receive about college. Parents who did not attend college often do not have a frame of reference to share concrete information with their children about the steps in the college access process. One study documented that, at most, “23% of the lowest-SES parents can provide their children with any guidance based on first-hand collegiate experiences. In contrast, nearly all of the highest-SES students (99.3%) grew up in families knowledgeable of postsecondary education” (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001, p. 134). The disparities in college knowledge between lower and higher income families are troubling.

The level of parent involvement in a student’s educational process overall has been shown to impact student’s college-going rates. Studies document that higher-income parents tend to intervene more in the schools, contact teachers more often, and feel more capable of assisting their children with school-related tasks, such as homework (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Gándara (2002) found that immigrant and minority parents are less likely to intervene at school for a variety of reasons, including general low rates of participation at the school and differing belief systems about the appropriateness of connecting with the school. The fallout is that parents and students are constrained from engaging with those school-based personnel who may have information and resources that could assist with the college access process.

Other factors in the parental/family context that may disadvantage low-income students include limited access to Internet or broadband at home, lack of complete, accurate information about financial aid, lack of encouragement from family who may be unfamiliar
with college, and concerns about moving away from local communities for college (National College Access Network, 2011; Vargas, 2004). Leaving one’s home community and culture to attend college is another challenge for low-income, first generation students.

“Racial/ethnic minority students and low-income students are also more likely to live at home while attending college for cultural reasons” (NCAN, 2011, p. 4). The cultural and community issues, often absent from traditional college choice models, are factors that must be considered when describing the disparity between college enrollment for low-income students.

Other studies have found instances where families were either apathetic or attempted to actually thwart students’ college-going plans. In a study of school counselors in urban schools working with low-income, first-generation student populations, counselors reported that there were instances when family members were unsupportive of students’ college aspirations. Reluctance to share financial documents, contentious divorce agreements, religious or cultural opposition to college attendance, and cultural expectations were among the factors cited as hindering students’ college-going goals (Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Yet in general, parent influence on students’ educational goals is critical. In a comprehensive review of the literature on family involvement, Jun and Colyar (2002) found that “students performed better and had higher levels of motivation when they were raised in homes characterized by supportive and demanding parents who were involved in schools and . . . expected academic success” (p. 195).

School context. In a 2009 study, Bergerson described Bourdieu’s theory, explaining that Bourdieu contends that schools and other educational institutions perpetuate the social
reproduction of inequalities. This is evidenced by the differential access between higher- and lower-income students to schools with high quality teachers, well-trained counselors, a college-readiness culture and adequate teacher-to-student and counselor-to-student ratios. Holland and Farmer-Hinton (2009) looked at district-wide survey data from the Chicago Public School system and found that “many of these students attended large, overcrowded and underfunded high schools with high teacher/counselor-to-student ratios, received their core academic instruction from professionals teaching outside of their fields, and are tracked into the least academically rigorous courses” (p. 29).

The importance of receiving support within the school context is especially critical for low-income, first generation students. Numerous studies have documented that these students tend to rely more heavily on school personnel for information (Roderick, Coca, & Nagoaka, 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Yet, less than half of low-SES high school students reported receiving help from an adult in preparing for college (College Board, 2011). School counselors indicate that large caseloads are one of the major challenges they face in their ability to provide personalized assistance with college readiness counseling (Bergerson, 2009; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Savitz-Romer, 2012). One study indicated that the average school counselor spends 38 minutes per year on each student for college advising (McDonough, 2006). One of the most troubling consequences of high counselor-to-student ratios is that counselors often filter the type of information they share with students by focusing their outreach on college access to the highest achieving students (Corwin, Venegas, Oliveras, & Corwin, 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008). High loads also cause counselors to take a reactive rather than proactive approach, expecting students and
their families to take the initiative to reach out to them for college access help (Perna et al., 2008).

Another potential disparity relates to who receives the majority of counselors’ time. “I know the ‘disruptive’ students better than the college-bound students” said one counselor (Corwin et al., 2004, p. 450). Another noted, “I don’t spend a lot of time on the college bound and the honors kids. They’re all bright, they know how to do this, they don’t need me” (Perna et al., 2008, p. 142). The fallout from high caseloads is that counselors often forfeit time spent on college readiness planning due to the triage nature of the school environment or the demands of having to spend time on administrative duties, testing or substitute teaching (Perna et al, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). The result is that those students for whom going to college is not the norm are less likely to receive sufficient college counseling. One study found that those schools that offered more school-based assistance with filling out applications, financial aid forms, writing essays, and allowing days off for college tours had students who were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution rather than enrolling in a two-year college or not at all (McKillip et al., 2012). The importance of school-based college access support for underserved populations cannot be overstated.

The quality of the counselor’s knowledge is also essential. Savitz-Romer (2012) noted that a strong knowledge base is essential for providing effective college readiness counseling, including “general knowledge of postsecondary education history, college choice theories and policies, aspiration formation, and barriers to postsecondary enrollment and persistence” (p. 99). However, this information is rarely featured in graduate level counselor education coursework, which instead focuses on training counselors in clinical practices and
conducting vocational and psychological assessments (Savitz-Romer, 2012). In 2004, the National Association for College Admissions Counseling reported that of the 466 counselor education programs listed by the American School Counselor Association, fewer than 30 programs offered a college readiness course (Savitz-Romer, 2012, p.101). Recently, groups like the College Board’s National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) have advocated for the adoption of guidelines for school counselor training on college access, but as of this writing, no specific mandates had been enacted by the accrediting body for counselor licensure (Savitz-Romer, 2012). Confounding the issue, few pre-service teacher education programs include information or coursework that focuses on college information that could enable teachers to better assist with the college access process (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Within the school context, taking a rigorous set of college preparatory courses and planning for this coursework early are also essential benchmarks for college access. In particular, high school mathematics course taking was shown to be strongly associated with eventual enrollment in a four-year college and mathematics course enrollment is linked to parent’s level of education (Choy, 2001). One national report found that strong academic preparation in high school narrowed the gap in college persistence between students whose parents did not go to college and those who have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Yet, discriminatory tracking processes that limit students’ access to honors courses or accelerated tracks and minimal offerings of AP or advanced classes at low-income schools often thwart students’ access to the coursework that
will position them for college readiness (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Again disparities by socioeconomic and educational attainment status are often at play.

Therefore, school administrators need to create a school environment that promotes college readiness for all students. Policy makers and researchers focused on college access promote the idea of schools creating a college-going culture as one attempt to level the playing field (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Jarsky et al., 2009). However, school-wide attitudes and ideas about who can and should go to college need to be addressed (Jarsky et al., 2009). A 2011 NCAN report noted that “many low-income students fail to receive needed encouragement from high school staff to properly assess their academic performance and apply to and enroll in institutions that are well-matched with their academic ability. As a result, underrepresented students often underestimate their academic abilities, leading them to undermatch” (NCAN, 2011, p. 3). Undermatch refers to the practice whereby well-qualified students attend a college or university that is not as selective as they could attend based on their academic credentials (Roderick et al., 2011). For example, a student may have a strong SAT and GPA but chooses to attend a two-year non-selective community college rather than a more selective four-year institution. Alon and Tienda (2005) found that “Hispanic and black students’ probabilities of graduation are higher at selective than at nonselective institutions, contrary to the predictions of the mismatch hypothesis. . . . The racial and ethnic gap in graduation narrows as institutional selectivity increases” (p. 303).

The reasons for undermatch among low-income, first-generation students often relate back to the quality of advising that these students receive within their social networks. If family and peers have not attended college, they may lack awareness of the different college
options available and therefore, reinforce a student’s narrow choice set (Alon & Tienda, 2005; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Low-income students often “engaged in a limited college search and tend to enroll within traditional feeder patterns of their high schools: predominantly two-year and large public universities with lower levels of selectivity” (Roderick et al., 2011, p. 186). Students from rural communities may also be less inclined to leave familiar settings to pursue their education at an institution that may be a better match for their qualifications, but farther from home (Ardoin, 2013).

Those in the school environment have the potential to play a key role in assisting students in exploring a broad range of appropriate college options and to ensure students are exploring a set of colleges that best fits their qualifications (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011). Roderick et al. (2011) study found strong positive effects of a college-going climate in the high school setting on the odds that a student would enroll in a match or overmatch college. It is essential to acknowledge the power that those in the school context have to either aid or hinder college access for low-income, first generation students.

**Financial aid and other higher education policy factors.** For low income, first-generation students, concerns about how to pay for college can be a significant barrier to college enrollment (Choy, 2001). One study found that for each $150 increase in the net price of college attendance, the enrollments of students from the lowest income group decreased by about 1.8% (McPherson and Shapiro, 1998, p. 39). Thus “price sensitivity to enrollment is concentrated among low-income students, with little or no price responses observed among higher-income students” (McPherson & Shapiro, 1998, p. 40). This directly affects where students choose to attend college. McPherson and Shapiro (1998) found that
“41% of upper-income and 47% of the richest students attend a university (private or public), compared with only 13.5% of lower income students” (p. 45). Where do these students ultimately enroll? Nearly half of these low-income students enroll in community colleges.

A lack of information about financial aid and other sources of funding for college can also limit students’ access to college. Students may rule out suitable postsecondary institutions simply due to lack of information about how to pay often favoring schools closer to home regardless of quality (NCAN, 2011). “Parents with lower incomes and lower levels of education know less about various types of financial aid, and Black and Hispanic students and parents were particularly uninformed or poorly informed about college prices and financial aid (Perna, 2006, p. 109). Non-college goers in one report pointed to college cost and the availability of aid as a primary obstacle to college enrollment (Hahn & Price, 2008). Efforts need to be made to create greater transparency about the amount and types of financial aid available.

Parents and students who take steps to proactively accumulate information about financial aid also influence a student’s chances of enrolling. Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) found that “for every 1-unit increase in the amount of financial aid information, a high school student improves his or her likelihood of applying by 5%” (p. 140). Students said they viewed counselors as the best sources of knowledge about financial aid and scholarships (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon & Perna, 2009). Yet, how well-informed are counselors in providing this type of information? McDonough cited a National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) report that found that “while 86% of schools rely on school counselors to provide students with information about financial aid, 76% of counselors reported needing
more support and training to provide financial aid advice” (McDonough, 2006, p. 3). Without adequate information about college costs and ways to pay, students may unnecessarily opt out of the college access pipeline.

Other higher education state and federal policies and trends continue to have a significant impact on the college readiness and enrollment of low-income, first generation students. These include a lack of collaboration between higher education and K-12, which hinders the ability of schools to align coursework and create a seamless academic transition for students (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Lack of feedback on students’ postsecondary performance limits school counselors’ ability to improve their college readiness practice and inform curriculum decisions (Savitz-Romer, 2012), and few states invest in systems that track students from K-12 through to college completion (Conner & Rabovsky, 2011). In addition, declines in state funding are leading to tuition increases at publicly funded institutions, which disproportionately impacts low-income students (McPherson & Shapiro, 1998), and the increased reliance on loans as the primary source of funding support has also affected low-income students who are often more loan averse than their higher income counterparts (Bergerson, 2009; Hahn & Price, 2008). Moreover, legal challenges to affirmative action have impacted minority student enrollments (Conner & Rabovsky, 2011), and the trend toward institutions offering more merit-based aid has the potential to affect the availability of funds for lower-income students (McPherson & Shapiro, 1998).

Together, these challenges confound to create formidable barriers to college access for low-income, first-generation students and those who support them. Yet despite these
barriers, many students are able to overcome these challenges to pursue a college education. There are numerous reasons why some students make it past these barriers and persevere to college and some do not. Those differences may relate to one’s level of self-determination and one’s feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness on the road to college. The aim of this study was to learn more about the challenges students faced and explore how they remained motivated to persist despite these barriers. In addition, the goal was to determine the strategies parents and school personnel used that supported or hindered students’ motivation, as well as explore whether the quality of information shared impacted motivation.

**Summary of the Literature**

In closing, a comprehensive review of the literature demonstrates that low-income students face significant barriers during the college access process. These factors range from familial-based challenges such as a lack of information about college access shared in the home; cultural factors that dictate expected roles for parents in the school environment; to ambivalence from parents or other family members about a students’ decision to attend school farther from home. School-based challenges are critical and include lack of information shared equitably with students, high caseloads which keep counselors from being able to devote dedicated time to college counseling, and lack of proper course tracking to ensure students are academically prepared for college, among others. Policy and financial aid concerns include a lack of adequate information available about financial aid, limited collaboration and tracking between the K-12 system and colleges and universities, and the widespread shift from need-based to merit-based financial aid. Together, these factors
confound to create a challenging environment that low-income, first-generation students must navigate.

It is essential that researchers and practitioners are aware of the changing landscape of college access and how interconnected all of these barriers have become. Policy factors at the state and federal level influence the K-12 school context; family and cultural dynamics affect the way in which schools and universities engage in efforts to support students’ college-going processes. These interrelated effects intersect to influence students’ experiences during the access process. In recent literature, there has been a concerted attempt to study the ways in which the college access and choice process differs for students based on race/ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, and immigration status, among many others (Harper, 2007; Martinez, 2013; Perez, 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Current researchers on college access have taken great strides to disaggregate data and begin to explore the ways in which each of the challenges along the path to college influence different groups in different ways. The strategies that may be working for one racial/ethnic group or gender may not have the same effect for those of another. However, in considering these differences, a gap remains in our knowledge of how differing levels of motivation influence the college access process, specifically for low-income, first-generation students. There is also little discussion in the literature about how the quality and level of knowledge available in one’s social network may be influencing one’s motivation. This study contributes to that gap in the literature.

Numerous theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explore the factors that impact low-income, first-generation students on the path to college. As noted earlier, process
models have been evolving over the years to take into account a broader range of factors within the social-contextual environment that influence students’ college access and choice processes. Later models described the impact of race/ethnicity and other aspects of one’s culture on the choice processes and more recently, models such as Perna’s (2006) highlight the contextual influences in the family, school, and policy environments. More recent research has incorporated the influence of social and cultural capital, habitus, and the way in which information available in one’s social networks influences students’ trajectory to college. These models have been highly influential to our understanding of the processes that students undertake and have presented findings that describe what those who support students’ postsecondary attainment goals can do to better support students’ efforts.

Despite the wealth of information available about college access and the challenges and opportunities, inherent in the process for low-income students, the literature is lacking an integration of theories of motivation to our understanding of this issue. Social capital’s influence on research of college access and its focus on the power of one’s social networks have been well-documented, but those frameworks do not fully explain differences in motivation between those who persist and those who do not. It is possible that the level and quality of knowledge available in one’s social network may impact not just a student’s access to critical information for the search and choice process, but also their motivation to persist. And although process models have clearly delineated the steps and strategies students use to make it to college and the barriers that students may face along the way, these models do not fully describe how the type of motivational context in which students make decisions may influence students’ choice to persevere to college. Process models and concepts of social
capital describe the importance of providing college information, but it is possible that it is not just what we say about college, but how we speak about college and why we say someone should attend that may have an effect on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Are we creating environments that support students’ feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as they move through this process? Without this deeper level of understanding that theories of motivation can provide, we may be unwittingly undermining our best efforts to support students’ college attainment goals.

Though there are numerous motivation theories that could shed light on this issue, self-determination theory’s focus on different types of motivation and its concepts of autonomy, relatedness, and competence create a unique and nuanced theoretical foundation from which to explore this issue. Motivation theories, such as achievement goal and self-efficacy theories and constructs such as resilience theory, although widely used in educational research in K-12 settings, have not been widely used to explore issues surrounding college access. Each model captures nuances of students’ experiences that can enhance our understanding of how to ameliorate some of the barriers to college access for underserved populations. Incorporating SDT and its conceptualization of how motivation impacts action – particularly the forms of motivation that lead to the integration of extrinsically-motivated behaviors -- create a powerful new contribution to the literature on this topic and ultimately, better inform our understanding of how to help low-income, first-generation students persevere to college.

The decision to also incorporate social reproduction theory and its focus on social capital as a complementary theory to explore this issue was to capture the essential role that
students’ social networks play in the college access process, which has been widely presented in the literature (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). In certain large, urban schools and in “schools that disproportionately serve African-American and Latino students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students are less likely to have access to the human and material resources that are critical for college preparation” (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009, p. 25). However, few studies have described how the level and quality of information present in one’s social networks impact students’ motivation and one’s feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence on the path to college. The integration of self-determination theory and social reproduction theory offered a deeper level of awareness of the factors that influence low-income, first-generation students as they move through the college access process and successfully enroll.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study, including an overview of the research design and research questions, a rationale for the use of qualitative inquiry, site selection and sampling criteria, as well as data collection and analysis. Trustworthiness, reflexivity, and study limitations were also discussed.

Researcher Paradigm, Role, and Reflexivity

All researchers carry with them their own values, experiences and perspectives that impact how they view their research, their participants, and their theoretical and ethical considerations. My research paradigm aligns with constructivism and the notion that “reality is not absolute, but is socially constructed and that multiple realities exist that are time and context dependent” (Mertens, 2010, p. 226). The choice to conduct a qualitative study is grounded in the idea that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning that people have constructed of their own world and are concerned with experiences as they are lived or felt (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010). As such, qualitative researchers should acknowledge the lenses through which they see the world and proactively address how their beliefs, culture, and/or point of view may impact their research (Creswell, 2007).

Reflexivity in qualitative research is defined as “the awareness that all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced; it is grounded in social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, pp. 38-39). This indicates that all of the choices one makes in designing and carrying out a research study -- from the choice of research question and the decisions about the sample to
the final conclusion and findings -- are shaped and influenced by the writer. My decision to study the issue of motivation among low-income, first-generation students stems from my own experiences. Neither of my parents attended college, and I came from a low-income home. However, I was always motivated to attend college from an early age. Therefore, the question of motivation intrigues me. I have worked closely with many first-generation, low-income students who shared with me that they did not have a great deal of encouragement to attend college. Many made their way to college with little concrete guidance or advice from family other than moral or emotional support. I often wondered what motivated them to persist, while many of their peers did not, which led to the rationale behind this study.

Since the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative studies (Mertens, 2010), the goal of a reflexivity statement is to describe the ways in which the researcher’s interpretations of the data may be impacted by the researcher’s own biases or preconceived notions. At the time the study was conducted, I was working in a higher education setting in a student services role. By choosing to conduct a study that might have included my own institution, I was careful that my interpretations were not influenced by my awareness of policies, procedures, or other considerations that might have colored how I interpreted what was shared by participants. To minimize potential bias, I did not select any student participants that I knew well, nor did I interview any students who were members of my department or college.

As someone from a first-generation, low-income background, I shared a similar background with my participants. This helped me to create a connection with my participants. However, I was careful not to allow my own experiences to influence my
interpretations of their experiences or cause me to lead my participants during the interviews. Merriam (1998) explains, “Because the primary instrument in qualitative research is human, all observations and analyses are filtered through that human being’s worldview, values and perspective” (p. 22). Thus, it was essential to acknowledge my potential biases as a researcher and to take steps to engage in the research process sensitively, ethically, and with a high level of awareness.

**Research Design**

The methodology selected for this study was a qualitative collective case study design. Qualitative research was an appropriate choice to study the experiences of low-income students’ motivation to attend college for several reasons. First, the qualitative approach provided a chance to listen to the voices of students and those in their social networks as they reflected on the access process. Creswell (2007) explains that we “conduct qualitative research because we need a complex, detailed understanding of an issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people. . .” (p. 40). A qualitative study offered a strong approach through which to understand students’ experiences within a unique context.

Case study methodology is often selected to better understand a process, situation or context in-depth by understanding the experiences of those involved (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). “The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). In this instance, case study design allowed me to uncover more about the shifts in the motivational process that occurred as students progressed through the college access process. How did their
motivation shift at different times during the process? Who or what impacted their motivation? How did a lack of information within their social networks affect their feelings of autonomy or competence? According to Yin (2009), case study method is best utilized for research questions that seek to explain why and how a social phenomenon works. This study’s questions about students’ motivational processes were best answered using case study design.

One of the strengths of case study methodology is the opportunity to collect data from multiple sources (Yin, 2009). In this study, the ability to capture data from multiple informants - teachers, parents, school counselors, etc. - was useful for understanding the ways students were or were not motivated. Case study provided a way to capture all of this data to enrich our understanding of the cases and create a compelling and convincing argument based on multiple sources of evidence (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

The choice to conduct a collective case study – using multiple cases to illuminate a particular issue – provided a way to capture several perspectives on this issue. This afforded the opportunity to conduct cross-case analysis to see what differences and similarities exist. “The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Yin, 2009, p. 53). Yin suggests that, for multiple cases, researchers should consider a replication design. This is where each case is selected with the goal to replicate the same design each time (literal replication) or to alter specific variables within each case to see if the results differ (theoretical replication) (Yin, 2009).
For the purpose of this study, I aligned more with a literal replication, which is designed to predict similar results across the cases (Yin, 2009). Therefore, where possible, participants were selected with similar characteristics such as age, low-income socioeconomic status, first-generation designation, and year in college (freshmen or sophomores only). All students came from traditional, public high schools in a Southeastern state serving predominantly low-income student populations, which provided the basis for exploring the impact of the school context. Although there may be differences in race/ethnicity, gender, and location of high school setting, there will be no other purposeful differences in the cases. Using similar cases minimized variance which shed light on the issues of interest.

**Research Questions**

As noted previously, the first research question guiding this study was, “What are the ways in which parents/guardians, teachers, school counselors and others in students’ social networks augmented or undermined students’ motivation on the path to college?” The sub-question was, “How did the quantity and quality of information shared influence student’s motivation?”

**Site Selection and Sampling Criteria**

Using a collective case study design offered the opportunity to address an issue from multiple perspectives. Of particular importance to case study is the decision of how to bind the case. “The single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). The units of analysis for this case were seven college students in their first or second year at a four-year college or university who all
graduated from different public traditional high schools. This allowed for comparison of experiences in seven distinct school settings.

Yin (2009) notes that consideration of subgroups for comparison can influence the number of cases. Therefore, I attempted to select a diverse sample, including those from Caucasian, Latino, African-American and Asian race/ethnicities, to explore if there were any differences in motivation based on race. Of the seven students, three identified as bi- or multi-racial, and six identified as female. The collective case study design allowed for the exploration of whether students’ motivation or access to social capital differed based on variances in race. However, differences in motivation based on gender were not able to be explored because the sample was primarily female. Otherwise, where possible, the students were similar in other key areas. This aligned with Yin’s (2009) description of literal replication.

The students selected all graduated from high schools located in the same Southeastern state. The students attended schools following a traditional curriculum based on the standards for this state, as opposed to early college high schools, charter schools, or other specialized schools that may have a unique curriculum. The goal was to capture the experience of those from “typical” schools to allow for greater transferability to other school settings across the country. In terms of school setting, six of the seven students in the study identified their schools as rural.

The choice to study the experiences of low-income students related to the challenges that these students face since they may have fewer networks for finding information and, therefore, may rely more heavily on school personnel such as teachers and counselors for
information (McDonough, 2005; Savitz-Romer, 2012). To confirm that students were low-income, I sought out students who were eligible for federal Work-study or for federal Pell-Grant assistance, and/or are enrolled in a program on a college campus that is targeted to very low-income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). “The median income of all Pell Grant recipients (independent and dependent) is $17,217, a number that has not changed significantly in real terms since the inception of the program” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 7). Some campuses have programs like TRIO’s Student Support Services that targets low-income students who are enrolled in two- and four-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

As noted above, I reached out to those programs to find potential participants.

In addition to being low-income, the students targeted for this study were also classified as first-generation. The definition of first-generation status used by the Federal TRIO programs is students whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but did not attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Other studies have defined first-generation students as those whose parents have no education beyond high school (Choy, 2001). For this study, I adopted the definition of first-generation used by the Federal TRIO programs. This provided a broader range of students to target.

The students chosen for this study all graduated from high schools that primarily serve low-income students. The percentage of students eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program was used as a proxy for the concentration of low-income students within a school (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). According to NCES, mid-high poverty schools are defined as public schools where 51% to 75% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and high-poverty schools are those schools where 76% or more of its students
are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Thus, for the purpose of this study, I targeted students who graduated from public high schools where more than 50% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. I created a list of schools within this Southeastern state using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, 2012). I pulled a list of public high schools using the Elementary/Secondary Information Systems database from 2011-2012, which was the most recent full data that was available at the time. As students responded to the Qualtrics questionnaire, I confirmed whether their high school was on the list. One of the high schools was not on the list; however, I learned that the school is so small that they do not provide lunch at the school. I did confirm with the school counselor that the high school does have more than 50% of its students who would receive free lunch if it was provided.

Another key variable was whether the students participated in a college access program, either through the school or in their community. This might include federal TRIO programs such as Upward Bound, Gear Up, Talent Search, or programs offered through local community centers or churches. These programs may impact a students’ trajectory to college since these programs often provide supplemental information about college, assistance with college applications, financial aid resources, funding for college fees, SAT or ACT preparation and/or guidance on course tracking and college tours (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These programs may impact motivation and could alter our understanding of what a typical student would experience who is not in one of these specialized programs. In addition, the limited funding and accessibility of these programs suggests that they can
only target a small number of students and may have admissions criteria that already favors those students and their families who are highly motivated to take the initiative to apply (Swail & Perna, 2002). Therefore, I specifically selected students who did not participate in one of these programs. Studying the motivational experiences of students who were not in a college access program highlighted the experiences of those who had to call upon their own resources to persevere to college.

The decisions about how to delineate who would participate were made with specific goals in mind. Stratified purposeful sampling was used. This strategy involved selecting cases such that “subgroups are chosen based on specified criteria, and a sample of cases is then selected within those strata” (Mertens, 2010, p. 322). This approach provided the chance to target the sample: current first- and second-year college students who graduated from a low-income high school in the same Southeastern state and are now attending a four-year college or university. The students selected had parents who did not attain a bachelor’s degree and are considered low-income, as evidenced by their eligibility for work-study or Pell Grants.

All students selected were enrolled at a large, public institution, fictitiously named “West Central University,” in a mid-sized city located in a Southern state. The institution is considered competitive in the region. Its acceptance rate is 51.8%; and its incoming freshman class had an average 4.4 GPA and a combined SAT score (verbal and math) of over 1200. After receiving approval to conduct the study from the university institutional review board, I contacted the institutional research (IR) office at West Central University to solicit names of students who fit the criteria (first or second year students, in good academic
standing, who are first-generation and low-income based on the financial need guidelines described and who graduated from a low-income high school as per the guidelines noted above.) I emailed 171 of the 174 students on the list IR provided, removing three students who were in my department. I also solicited participants through connections with those who work in TRIO Student Support Services, which serves a low-income, first-generation population of current college students. (As noted above, I specifically chose students who had not been enrolled in a college access program before arriving to college, but students could be currently involved in a university-based support program, like TRIO Student Support Services or others.) In addition, I solicited students through the Multicultural Student Affairs office at West Central University, since one of the goals was to include a racially diverse group of students in the study.

Eighteen students expressed interest in participating in the study. Once a student demonstrated interest by responding to my email, I distributed a questionnaire (developed in Qualtrics) to the student asking him/her specific questions to further determine eligibility for the study (see Appendix F.) Based on the questionnaire responses, I determined if the student was eligible to continue in the study. If she or he met the criteria, I notified her/him via email and asked if she/he wanted to be interviewed. Seven students fitting the criteria agreed to participate.

As per the study’s IRB guidelines, there were two compensation strategies used. If the students initially selected had parents/guardians, counselors or teachers who were not willing to be interviewed or if the student did not want to provide those contacts, I offered them an opportunity to still participate with a smaller incentive.
In addition to reaching out to campus contacts at the study institution, I also solicited participants from two private institutions to provide a point of contrast. I contacted a mid-size college for women and a small historically black college and university (HBCU) in the same state to solicit participants. I went through the IRB process at both institutions. After receiving IRB approval, the registrar at the women’s college sent emails to those students fitting the study criteria but did not have any students who were willing to participate. The HBCU did have three students who were willing to participate. I interviewed those participants, as well as two additional students from the study institution. However, these students did not fully meet all of the study criteria and therefore, their experiences were not included in this study. The goal is to utilize their cases in future research.

Limitations to the sampling strategy. There were limitations to the sampling procedure. First, selecting students in only one state limited the opportunity to explore differences that might exist in other regions of the country. Also, the choice to do a literal replication did not provide as much variance in capturing different perspectives by looking at students who may have differing characteristics (age, socioeconomic status, year in college, those from private or early college high schools, or those who were involved in a pre-college program versus those who were not, etc.) The choice of seven students from seven different high school sites could not capture the picture of the diverse counties in the state that may have varying student populations or school contexts. However, it did provide an in-depth look at the experiences of these students to shed light on the research questions at hand.

Another limitation is that in choosing student participants who are currently enrolled in college, they are several years past their high school years and at times, struggled with
recall of key moments of motivation during their college access process. Parents and school personnel also struggled with recalling the student’s college access process and specific instances that inspired or undermined a student’s motivation. The reflection journals did allow for students to use the prompts to spur their recollection of their college access experiences.

Also, students who have successfully persisted through the first or second year of college may have different recollections than a current high school student. However, we know that some students who apply to and enroll in college may opt out during the summer before college (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). In addition, depending on the nature of how their first semester of college progresses, a student may reflect back on their college access experiences with bias due to the tumultuous nature of the transition experience. Because participants had successfully enrolled in college, they had the ability to look back from an asset-based perspective and see the steps that brought them to this point. They also were able to share deeper reflections having been through the academic and social transition to college. Their reflections were richer but may have differed from someone who had not yet entered college or was unsuccessful in their college access pursuits.

**Data Collection**

In keeping with the constructivist paradigm and the tenets of sound case study research, the researcher served as the primarily instrument for data collection (Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). The primary data collection methods for this study were interviews and document review.
Interviews. One of the most important elements of case study research design is the interview (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). This is where the researcher asks about facts of the matter as well as their opinions about events over an extended period of time (Yin, 2009). For the purpose of this case study, the students were the primary informants. Others interviewed included anyone that the student said influenced his/her motivation on the path to college. This included a student’s parents or guardian, the student’s school counselor or other counseling staff, and teachers who the student identified as having provided college access support. Having multiple informants added credibility to the study and provided a point of triangulation to confirm or corroborate information shared by the students (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). A second interview with all students was conducted. Journals were collected at that time or prior. In cases where the journal was received before the second interview, the researcher was able to probe any topics that surfaced from the journals.

Use of semi-structured interview protocols allowed for specific questions to be addressed, but with an open-ended approach that allowed the participants to guide the discussion. Separate interview protocols were created for parents, students (first and second interviews), counselors, and teachers (see Appendices A-E). The semi-structured interview “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). All student interviews lasted approximately 20 to 70 minutes and took place in person in a private office on campus. Interviews with informants lasted 20 to 70 minutes and took place by phone. All interviews were audio-taped.
**Document analysis.** Document review was also conducted. According to Yin (2009), the most important use of documents is to corroborate evidence from other sources. For the purpose of this study, the researcher asked each student to respond to brief journal prompts (see Appendix G) to reflect on their college access experiences. This is described as a researcher-generated document since the journal was not already produced by the participant but was created for the purpose of the study itself at the request of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). The goal of the journal was to provide the students with open-ended prompts to spark their thinking about their own motivational processes during their college access journey. The prompts were shared with students after the initial interview. The rationale was that the participant should come to the initial interview with no pre-conceived notions about the interview protocol, but afterwards, the student may think more deeply about their own experiences and recall resources they used, common college access questions they had, challenges that affected their motivation, etc. The journal was a mechanism for them to write down their thoughts as they reflected on their own motivational experiences.

Each student was asked to respond to the same two prompts tailored to self-determination theory following the interview. The journals were collected and coded as part of the research process. The journal responses augmented information shared in the initial interview and corroborated findings from other sources (Yin, 2009). It is important, however, to note that journals can be highly subjective, and at times unreliable because the author includes only what he/she feels is pertinent and important to record (Merriam, 1998). Therefore one must be cautious in the use of personal journals and consider using other accounts to corroborate the evidence (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009).
**Case study memos.** Finally, I created memos as a method of capturing my initial impressions of the students’ experiences and to document any changes in my thought processes throughout the study. I also noted any biases that surfaced or other reflexive notes on my own interpretations. Early codes or emerging themes were captured here as well. Yin (2009) noted that there are a variety of ways to structure these notes, but their common characteristic is that “they be organized, categorized, complete and available for later access” (p. 120). These notes were included in the case study database (see Appendix H) to document my thoughts during data collection, coding, and analysis.

**Timeline for the Study**

I submitted the study for review by the Internal Review Board (IRB) in September 2014 and received IRB approval in late September. I conducted outreach to campus units to solicit participants for the study. As participants were identified, I conducted interviews with each student first and found out who their motivational influences were. Next, I reached out to them to secure interviews. After my first interview with the students, I provided the journal prompts and collected them prior to or at the second interview.

I conducted second interviews with all student participants generally within 3-4 weeks of the initial interview, but after speaking with their parents, teachers or counselors. All interviews were completed by May 2015. A professional service transcribed all of the audiotapes in May, and all transcripts and journals were coded during May and June. I developed key themes, began writing the final report, conducted member checks, and engaged in peer review during July, August and September, with the goal of defending in October.
Data Analysis

The data gained from this study was analyzed using several approaches appropriate for multiple case study design. Case analysis involves organizing the data in a way that allows for in-depth study and comparative analysis (Patton, 2002). “Well-constructed case studies are holistic and context sensitive” (Patton, 2002, p. 447). In keeping with multiple case study design, cross-case synthesis was used as the primary method of analyzing data. Cross-case synthesis is a technique used in multiple case studies where the researcher compares patterns between two or more cases searching for common or contrasting themes or codes (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Since this is more of an exploratory study, there were no specific propositions to be posited, so the best analytic approach was creating an in-depth case description. Stake (1995) notes that, “with instrumental case studies, where the case serves to help us understand phenomena or relationships within it, the need for categorical data and measurements is greater” (p. 77). A comprehensive description of the phenomenon with core themes defined was developed (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009) using a three-article approach. The findings from the individual cases were compared and contrasted, and within each article, the overarching themes were described after a careful, holistic analysis.

The researcher used a professional transcription service for all items transcribed, then listened to all audiotapes to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed data. Any discrepancies were corrected. All data gathered was collected as part of the case study database (Yin, 2009).

The first step in the analysis involved uploading all of the transcribed data into NVivo version 10, a qualitative analysis software. Within NVivo, I created a coding scheme for the
data. Initial coding of the data included a review of the student interview data, transcripts from key informants, and the journal responses. In addition, any findings from the case study memos were reviewed as well. Initial coding involved “coding individual words, lines, segments or incidents” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). A codebook was developed in NVivo to capture the initial codes that inductively evolved from a careful reading of the data (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 2010) (see Appendix I). Initial codes were refined through numerous readings of the transcripts and other documents, and overarching patterns or themes began to emerge (Patton, 2002). This was focused coding, which involved “testing the initial codes against the more extensive body of data to determine how resilient the codes are in the bigger picture that emerges from the analysis” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). The theoretical framework and research questions guided the analyses. Focused coding involved making decisions about which initial codes made the most logical and analytic sense to categorize the data in a meaningful way (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002). Patterns and themes across the cases were compared to create a cross-case synthesis that compared and contrasted the experiences of the seven students’ cases to create a comprehensive multiple case syntheses.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure a high level of trustworthiness, the following procedures were utilized. Credibility was maintained by conducting two in-depth interviews with each student and capturing their reflections from their journals. The journals allowed participants to reflect on the interviews and add additional interpretations that arose. Conducting follow-up interviews with each student provided an additional opportunity to engage with the students to further capture their experiences.
Member checks were conducted to ensure that the interview data and resulting themes were accurate. Guba and Lincoln described doing member checks as “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (as cited in Shenton, 2004, p. 68). After the overarching themes were created, this information was shared with a subset of the participants via email to get their feedback. Their feedback confirmed that the key themes in each article accurately reflected their experiences of the phenomenon.

Triangulation involved using multiple sources of data – journal analysis and interviews with multiple informants – to promote the credibility of the results. Dependability was maintained by using case study memos to document the level of change in the study, such as the rationale behind the addition of an informant. This information is part of the case study database (Yin, 2009).

To improve the confirmability of the case study and minimize bias, three strategies were be used. A confirmability audit, or peer review, was conducted where the articles and key themes were shared with two peer reviewers to discuss how the conclusions were supported by data. A case study database was also created to further substantiate the findings in the report and includes the raw data which, if requested, can be provided for independent inspection (Yin, 2009).

**Ethical Considerations**

Steps were taken throughout the process to maintain high ethical standards when working with the participants and in storing the data. With regards to data collection, I ensured the confidentiality of the participants by using pseudonyms and securing any interview transcripts or other documentation data in a locked file cabinet at my home. I also
took steps to select participants whom I did not know and who were not enrolled in my department at the university. I also reassured the participants about the confidentiality of the data and the steps to be taken to ensure anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms for them and the name of the institution and removal of any identifying information. IRB consent forms were reviewed with all participants, reminding them of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the study.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations of this study. One limitation was that students, as well as parents, counselors, and teachers, may have felt some form of social desirability bias with regard to the question of motivation. School personnel and parents may have felt uncomfortable admitting that they may, at times, not have been supportive of students’ college access plans. To minimize this potential bias, the researcher emphasized that confidentiality would be maintained and reiterated that honesty was important to allow the audience to fully understand the factors that supported or undermined students’ motivation during the access process. It was also important to build rapport and create a dynamic where participants felt comfortable being forthcoming about their experiences. I also framed my questions in ways that were friendly and non-threatening (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009).

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlighted the methodological decisions the researcher made to ensure that the study was of high quality. A qualitative collective case study method was selected as the research design in line with the constructivist worldview of the research. Considerations
of the researcher’s reflexivity were addressed and potential biases explored. Specific
decisions with regard to sampling procedures, site selection, data collection and data analysis
were outlined. Limitations of the study as well as a description of the study’s timelines were
presented. In addition, considerations with regard to trustworthiness were also discussed to
ensure that the study was conducted within the guidelines for a high-quality qualitative study.
Ethical considerations were outlined to confirm that the study adhered to the specifications
set by the institutional review board to protect the study’s participants. Ultimately, the
strength of the study design enabled readers to view the research results with confidence.
CHAPTER 4
ARTICLE OVERVIEW

This section provides an overview of the structure of this three-article dissertation. I have outlined the rationale behind the structure and offered a synopsis of the findings described in each article. This provides a “roadmap” for readers as they review the articles to follow.

Article structure

In lieu of presenting the findings from this dissertation study in a traditional five-chapter format, I am presenting the findings as a series of articles prepared for publication. This format is non-traditional in education, but more common in the hard sciences (Duke & Beck, 1999). Some scholars have proposed that committees should offer students alternative formats in which to present their dissertations. Krathwohl (1994) noted that “the typical four- or five-chapter dissertation structure trains students in a writing structure they will probably never again use” (p. 30). Students are more likely to write journal articles or grant proposals, which are usually bound by rigid space limits, in their chosen careers after the doctorate. However, writing the dissertation is typically the one time when students are not asked to adhere to any space constraints. Krathwohl (1994) and others feel that this is not preparing future scholars for the realities of publishing. Duke and Beck (1999) share this perspective and suggest that offering doctoral students alternative formats for writing the dissertation has numerous advantages.

First, it provides a way for future researchers to practice the type of writing expected in academia. “A doctoral recipient who has had the experience of writing multiple articles . . .
will be in a much better position to train others in this skill than one who has only written a single, weighty tome” (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 34). Second, this format provides the opportunity for doctoral students to publish their results in a more timely way (Duke & Beck, 1999). This puts new findings into the hands of researchers and practitioners more quickly, which addresses what some regard as a problem with the limited readership of most dissertations. “From the outset, the student would be writing the dissertation not solely for a small and familiar committee, but for a wider audience of professionals in the field” (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 34).

This format also allows the student and the committee to determine the best audience for the dissertation and provides flexibility for students to write each article differently depending on the reader one hopes to address. In addition, this format permits students to consider different angles on their data. “This is excellent preparation for an academic world in which scholars present and/or publish several different papers stemming from a single study” (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 34). If done with rigor, this format provides doctoral students with the flexibility to share their research more widely and in a much more expedient way than in the past (Duke & Beck, 1999; Krathwohl, 1994).

To that end, this study utilized a three-article format where each article included its own introduction, literature review, methods, results, conclusions and implications sections. There were similarities in some of these sections, due to the nature of the results emanating from the same methods and similar theoretical frameworks. Some sections are paraphrased and adapted to fit the theme of the article and the research questions. Each of the articles had
a specific theme based on the research questions and the most salient findings that emerged from the data.

Article 1 focuses on the following research question: What were the ways in which school personnel—teachers and counselors— influenced the motivation of low-income, first-generation students on the path to college? Within this article, I highlight the rich data that emerged from the interviews and journal responses from students, as well as from my conversations with the teachers and counselors. This study’s findings highlight the numerous ways in which teachers and counselors augmented students’ competency, feelings of relatedness, and their autonomy on the path to college. In the findings, I provide an overview of how school personnel augmented or undermined students’ sense of competency, autonomy, and relatedness, respectively. In the area of relatedness, I describe the process by which teachers and counselors supported students’ feelings of relatedness:

Figure 2. Model of School Personnel Relationship Development

School staff also fostered competency by providing career encouragement and positive feedback on student’s academic abilities. Competency was forestalled by not providing enough academic rigor in the school setting and by low perceived teacher quality. This also occurred when school personnel were perceived to be more focused on testing than preparing students for college level work. Autonomy was enhanced when teachers and counselors expanded students’ choices about college, served as sounding boards, and listened
and offered reminders, not directives. Autonomy was undermined when school personnel coddled students or did not provide validation or other forms of support during the college planning process.

Article 2 focuses on the answers to the research question: What are the ways in which parents and families influenced the motivation of first-generation, low-income students on the path to college? The choice of this topic stemmed from a careful review of the data showing the critical impact that parents and families had on students’ motivation to college. Based on these findings, I highlight the specific ways in which parents supported or undermined motivation and the ways that students persevered despite challenges in this context. I incorporate literature pertaining to the importance of parents and families in the access process and describe studies by SDT researchers that highlight the role parents and families play in students’ motivation. In the findings section, I describe the ways in which parents and families supported students’ motivation and then explore how they slowed students’ motivation. Autonomy-supportive strategies that parents used included being supportive but “hands off” with decisions, serving as a sounding board during decision-making, supporting students’ career goals, and providing information and encouraging the child’s help-seeking behavior.

Parental support for students’ competency was enacted by emphasizing education early and fostering students’ academic competency, setting high expectations for grades, and providing positive feedback. Relatedness was enhanced by families who were involved in the college planning process, served as positive examples, and showed they cared. Serving as a role model for younger siblings was another key motivator for the students. Strategies
parents used that appeared to undermine autonomy included providing little college push or process support, not having information to answer “what will it be like” questions, highlighting financial concerns, expecting students to fulfill family obligations, and having low expectations of college-going.

Lastly, Article 3 answered the research question: how do those in students’ social networks influence the motivation of first-generation, low-income college students on the path to college and does the level of college knowledge in one’s social network play a role? Here, the literature review is expanded to include an overview of Bourdieu’s notion of social capital and research on the influence of differing forms of social capital (high versus low) on college access. The data indicated that there were high-volume forms of social capital that influenced students’ motivation and low-volume forms that impeded students’ motivation. The high-volume forms of social capital provided emotional support, demonstrated a belief in students’ ability, and showed caring, which all fostered students’ autonomy, competency, and relatedness on the path to college. They also offered accurate, high-quality information and facilitated students’ access to other social networks for support. Having fewer knowledgeable sources for college information in their social networks and a lack of a college-going ethos in their communities resulted in low-volume forms of social capital that negatively impacted students’ motivation.

The discussion and implications sections in each article describe the findings in relationship to prior literature on the topic. Within the discussion, the ways in which SDT was confirmed or challenged were described, and the study’s contributions to the literature on college access were defined. The implications section highlighted the impact of the study
on future research, theory, policy and practice, and the conclusion outlined the importance of this topic to improve the postsecondary attainment of the low-income, first-generation student population.

As these articles were all designed to be more ready for publication than a five-chapter dissertation, there were page limits to consider. Target publications for these articles limit submissions to between 30-40 pages. My articles are a bit longer than the typical journal article because specific information that was important for the dissertation committee to see—a comprehensive literature review and methods section, for instance—were still included. When the time comes for publication, these sections would be edited to the appropriate page length. In addition, a traditional multiple case study would include a detailed description of each case. In the interest of length, a series of shorter case profiles was created and added to the appendices.

In closing, the aim was for this article format to provide an alternative perspective on the data by sharing the findings in three distinct ways. It also enables the researcher to make a more timely contribution to the literature on college access and impact practice in a more direct way. The overall goal is for this study to make a difference to those working diligently to improve college access for low-income, first-generation students across the country.
CHAPTER 5

ARTICLE 1: EXPLORING INFLUENCES ON STUDENTS’ MOTIVATION ON THE PATH TO COLLEGE: THE ROLE THAT SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND TEACHERS PLAY

Introduction

Increasing postsecondary access continues to be a priority for our nation. In 2009, President Obama identified a goal for the U.S. to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). To meet this goal, the percentage of college graduates in America would need to increase by 50% (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The benefits of a higher education – greater social mobility, increased earnings, improved health outcomes, and decreased rates of unemployment and poverty over a lifetime – have been well documented (Baum & Ma, 2007; Couturier & Cunningham, 2006). Yet, access to college remains stratified in the U.S. One study found that college enrollment rates ranged from 45% for those whose parents did not complete high school to 85% for those whose parents attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (Choy, 1999). The college enrollment rate of high school graduates from the lowest family-income quintile in 2012 was 52% followed by 65% for middle-income students and 82% for the highest-income graduates (Baum et al., 2013). Gaps in educational attainment persist.

Research shows that a lack of adequate academic preparation, fears about how to pay for college, limited access to quality college advising, and confusion about the admissions process are among the most cited barriers to higher education for low-income students.
(College Board, 2011; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McKillip et al., 2012). Despite these challenges, one study found that 91% of low-income, first-generation students aspire to achieve a college education (Ad Council, 2006). Yet few studies have documented why some students persevere through the college access process and others do not. Does the motivation of the individual student play a role? This study explored the role of motivation in college access and focused on the influence of those within the school context.

In particular, this qualitative study explored how counselors and teachers may impact students’ motivation using Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory as a guide. For over 30 years, self-determination theory (SDT) has been used to explore differences in motivational influences in education, healthcare, the workplace, and familial settings (Deci et al., 1999; Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT explores the types of motivation that may influence one’s actions, as well as the contexts in which one’s motivation is supported or undermined (Deci & Ryan, 2012). College access researchers have not fully explored the use of motivation theory to understand students’ experiences. Yet one study noted that 88% of non-college-goers and 91% of college-goers rated personal motivation as a strong determinant in their decision to attend college (Hahn & Price, 2008). Why? What role does motivation play in the college access process and how might those in the school context be an influence? This study described the ways in which school personnel affected the motivation of seven low-income, first-generation college students during the college-planning process.

**Low-income, First-generation Students**
Understanding the experiences of low-income, first-generation students is important because they are often underrepresented on college campuses, statistically are less likely to attend a four-year institution, and often lack resources to support their postsecondary access goals (Bergerson, 2009; Choy, 2001; College Board, 2011; Hahn & Price, 2008; NCES, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Yet despite the barriers, millions of these students overcome the odds to successfully enroll in college. Therefore, study participants were low-income, first-generation students who are now enrolled full-time in their first or second year at a four-year college or university. The intention was to allow readers to learn from their experiences, both positive and negative. This asset-oriented perspective (Harper, 2010) contributes to our understanding of the motivational strategies that augmented these students’ success.

**The School Context and College Access**

Receiving support within the school context is especially critical for low-income, first-generation students. Although many parents of these students have a strong desire for their children to pursue postsecondary education, they may be ill-equipped to provide concrete guidance due to their own limited postsecondary experiences (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). One study found that less than half of low-SES high school students reported receiving help from an adult in preparing for college (College Board, 2011). Due to the lack of parental college knowledge, studies have shown that low-income, first-generation students tend to rely more heavily on school personnel for information (Roderick et al., 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Therefore, it is even
more important to discern the positive and negative influence of school personnel on these students’ motivation.

School counselors are typically tasked with supporting students during the college planning process. However, counselors indicate that large caseloads and heavy administrative demands often limit their ability to provide personalized assistance with college planning (Bergerson, 2009; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Savitz-Romer, 2012). This often leads counselors to selectively target their college access efforts to the highest achieving students (Corwin et al., 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008) or to take a reactive approach, expecting students and parents to seek them out for help. Teachers also have the potential to be an important source of support since they tend to see students more often than their counselors (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). One study found that, for low-income students, “the relationships with their teachers gave them access to strong emotional support and to important information about college” (Gonzalez et al., 2003, p. 160). However, teachers are typically not offered the college admissions and financial aid information that counselors receive (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Those in the school environment have the potential to play a key role in bridging the knowledge gap for these students (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011). One study found strong positive effects of a college-going climate in the high school setting on the odds that students would enroll in a college that fit the students’ qualifications (Roderick et al., 2011). To better support low-income, first generation students, it is essential that we understand the ways those in the school context affect their motivation. Therefore, for this
study, teachers and school counselors were also interviewed to better understand how these school personnel influenced the motivation of this population.

**Literature Review & Conceptual Framework**

Motivation theory was used as the guiding framework to explore the research question about school-based influences on student motivation during the college access process. At its core, motivation theory seeks to explain what causes a person to act, behave, or think in a certain way (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). Although a majority of low-income students may say they want to attend college, many do not enroll. Therefore, if we can discern what motivates students to remain steadfast in their goals of reaching college, those who work with youth in the school context can better support students to help them “stay the course” and overcome the barriers to college enrollment.

Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) was selected because it is an empirically-tested and validated construct often used in educational research. SDT posits that understanding what facilitates motivation allows us to “design social environments that optimize people’s development, performance, and well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). SDT has frequently been used to explore students’ motivation to attain educational outcomes in classroom settings (Ryan & Deci, 2000), but has not been widely applied to understanding students’ experiences during the college access process.

Several underlying concepts form the foundation of SDT. One of its core tenets is its focus on intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to act. Intrinsic motivation is the desire to engage in an activity purely because of one’s personal interest, curiosity or enjoyment (Deci et al.,
Extrinsic motivation is engaging in an activity because of an external reward or benefit separate from one’s own pure enjoyment of the task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within SDT, the theorists specify that extrinsic motivation is not a static state but, instead, occurs along a continuum. Different forms of motivation may be displayed (Ryan & Deci, 2000), ranging from amotivation to various levels of extrinsic motivation and lastly, to intrinsic motivation.

SDT theorists also contend that humans have three basic needs that must be satisfied to have optimal psychological health: one’s need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy-supportive environments are ones in which students have a sense of self-direction, freedom of choice, and their feelings are acknowledged and validated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research shows that autonomy-supportive teachers lead students to be more interested in learning, demonstrate enhanced creativity and desire for challenge, and exhibit increased persistence on tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Competence is the need to be effective and to master one’s interactions with the environment (Reeve, 2012). Competence is often achieved by being presented with optimal challenges. These are activities that provide enough challenge, but not so much as to be overwhelming (Deci et al., 1996). Positive, non-controlling feedback is also essential for reinforcing competence (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Deci et al., 1996). However, negative feedback, particularly the type perceived as controlling rather than autonomous, detracts from one’s competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Finally SDT’s concept of relatedness refers to our inherent need to establish strong emotional bonds and secure attachments with others (Reeve, 2012). SDT posits that intrinsic
motivation flourishes best when there is a sense of relatedness to others (Deci et al., 1996). Deci et al. (1996) found that students who felt more secure with their parents and teachers tended to “cope more positively with academic failures, to be more autonomous in regulating their school behaviors, were more engaged in learning and to feel better about themselves” (p. 178). This is a strong indicator of the potential impact of those in the school context on students’ motivation during the college access process.

Within SDT, there are various sub-theories that researchers developed to more intricately define motivational influences. Organismic integration theory (OIT) is one such sub-theory. OIT describes the stages of extrinsic motivation that a person might possess based on how internalized the task is to the individual. Internalization refers to “the process of taking in a value or regulation;” whereas, integration is how an individual “more fully transforms that regulation into their own so that it will emanate from their sense of self” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 60). Ryan and Deci (2000) outlined a series of classifications of extrinsically motivated behavior (see Figure 3) that move from more controlled to more autonomous levels. The first stage is external regulation where one engages in certain actions due to outside pressure, threats, or demands. This might be a student who applies to college because of a parent’s ultimatum. The next stage, introjected regulation, is a controlled form of regulation because it involves “taking in a regulation but not fully accepting it as one’s own” (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The person engages in the behavior due to pride, ego, to avoid anxiety or guilt, or to enhance feelings of worth (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A student with an introjected regulation might apply to college to impress her peers or teachers.
Next, identified regulation is described as a more autonomous form of regulation that "reflects a conscious valuing of the behavior such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). Here, the student might apply to college to one day help her family financially. Lastly, the most autonomous extrinsically motivated behavior is described as integrated. This occurs when the actions or behavior are assimilated and are now in alignment with the person's own values or needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this instance, the student might apply to college to attain a job in an enjoyable career field. Research in school settings has demonstrated that more autonomous extrinsic motivation was associated with "more engagement, better performance, lower dropout, higher quality learning, and better teacher ratings among other outcomes" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). OIT helps us understand why people engage in activities they may not find intrinsically interesting, such as the many steps involved in the college access process. Overall, SDT
offers a multifaceted perspective through which to explore the approaches that may be
promoting or unwittingly impeding students’ motivation on the path to college.

Several studies have documented how students’ motivation has been influenced by
those in the school environment. Vallerand, Fortier and Guay (1997) conducted a study on
drop-out behavior among high school students and found that students who dropped out saw
themselves as less competent and autonomous at school. They also perceived their teachers,
parents, and school staff as being less supportive of their autonomy as compared to their
peers who remained in school. In addition, Reeve (2012) outlined tactics that undermined
student’s feelings of autonomy and choice in school including surveillance, deadlines,
imposed rules and limits, imposed goals, competition, and evaluation. Conversely,
motivational classrooms were those that provided choice, opportunities for self-direction,
explanatory rationales, acknowledgement of feelings and positive feedback (Reeve, 2012).

Prior research illustrates the impact that those in the school environment can have on
students’ motivation. Understanding the barriers faced by low-income, first-generation
students on the path to college is essential.

**Barriers to Access for Low-income, First-Generation Students**

Studies have documented the challenges that impact postsecondary opportunities for
low-income, first-generation students. One report noted that a smaller percentage of students
of low SES than students of middle SES attained a bachelor’s or higher degree within 8 years
of high school completion (14% vs. 29% ), compared to high-SES students (60%) (NCES,
2012). Baum & Ma (2007) found that despite comparable test scores, students from families
with lower income and parental education levels tend to enroll in college at lower rates than those from higher income families with more educated parents.

The school context for many of these students presents an added challenge. Schools serving high numbers of low-income students may not have the resources to devote to college readiness (Bergerson, 2009; Jarsky et al., 2009; McKillip et al., 2012). One study found that “overcrowding, tiered tracking systems, and administrative hindrances fostered the marginalization of college counseling in predominantly minority and low-income schools” (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008, p. 80). In addition, the limited funding and isolation of some rural schools may contribute to challenges in attracting quality teachers (Ardoin, 2013).

Financial fears continue to limit opportunities for low-income, first-generation students. Confusion about the financial aid process (NCAN, 2011), continuing limits in Pell Grant or other need-based aid in favor of merit aid (Couterier & Cunningham, 2006), and fears about incurring large amounts of debt (Hahn & Price, 2008) continue to influence low-income, first generation students’ college decisions. In a national study of non-college-goers, Hahn & Price (2008) found that non-college-goers were more concerned about the cost of higher education over every other consideration except personal motivation (p. 12). The ability of first-generation, low-income students to get accurate information about financial aid from school personnel is essential since this information is often not available from family (NCAN, 2011).

Counselors’ influence on the college access process of low-income students is also well-documented in the literature. School counselors are a critical source of social capital for
low-income students and are often the sole source of information about the college access 
process for this population (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; McDonough, 1997). According to one 
study, counselors had the potential to provide emotional support, privileged information, and 
access to rare opportunities for college (Gonzalez et al., 2003, p. 162). Exploring the role 
played by the school counselors who worked with these students was an essential element of 
the study.

Teachers are also an important source of support and information. One study found 
that low-income students relied more heavily on their teachers for college planning 
information than their school counselors (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). This is often due to the 
fact that students see their teachers daily as opposed to their school counselors who, one 
study showed, spend an average of 38 minutes per year on each student for college advising 
(McDonough, 2005). However, Kirst and Venezia (2004) found that teachers acknowledged 
that they knew little about specific requirements for college admissions. “Counselors have a 
monopoly on college access information and resented teachers who invaded their ‘turf’” 
(Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 246). This limits teachers’ ability to support students’ 
postsecondary goals.

One attempt to level the playing field is by creating a college-going culture in the 
schools (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Jarsky et al., 2009). However, a 2011 NCAN report noted 
that “many low-income students fail to receive needed encouragement from high school staff 
to properly assess their academic performance and apply to and enroll in institutions that are 
well-matched with their academic ability” (p. 3). This often leads to undermatch, where
students attend less selective institutions than their credentials would warrant. Lower SES students are more likely to undermatch than higher income students (Baum et al., 2013).

It is clear that counselors and teachers play a pivotal role in promoting college. But how they provide support may or may not inhibit students’ motivation to attend college. By talking directly with students who successfully enrolled and persisted in college and the school staff who influenced them, this study answers the following research question: what are the ways in which those in the school context influenced low-income, first-generation students’ motivation – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – on the path to college? The ultimate goal was to learn how students remained motivated, which tactics used by school personnel worked well for them, and which may have demotivated students during the college access process.

**Methodology**

Case study methodology is often selected to better understand a process, situation or context in-depth by understanding the experiences of those involved (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Conducting a collective case study—using multiple cases to explore a particular issue—facilitates the documentation of trends or patterns with the goal of answering the research questions from different perspectives (Yin, 2009). Case study methodology is also best suited to instances where “the context is highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). For this article, the school environment was the primary context of interest.

Studies using self-determination theory often utilize pre-designed scales to assess students’ levels of relatedness, autonomy, and competency (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009).
Although SDT is typically used in quantitative research, “SDT is allied with qualitative and critical theories in understanding the situational nature of learning and growth, and the importance of the individual’s frame of reference in shaping meanings and the behaviors that follow from them” (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009, p.268). Qualitative researchers using SDT in the health, sports and education fields (Hellström & Sarvimäki, 2007; Nordgren & Fridlund, 2001; Taylor, Ntoumanis & Smith, 2009; Trainor, 2005) have used qualitative analysis strategies to interpret the data. Since few researchers have utilized SDT to explore issues of college access, it was important to explore if these motivational influences were present by listening directly to the students and their informants rather than using pre-designed scales. As Harper (2007) notes, “In many ways, quantitative methods can reveal what works – but not how it works, who and what made it work, the facilitators and obstacles that were encountered along the way, and the meanings students ascribe to the experience” (p. 56). Using a qualitative approach provided that opportunity.

**Research Sites and Participants**

Of particular importance in case study design is the decision of how to bind the case (Merriam, 1998). A stratified purposeful sample was used to select the student cases (Mertens, 2010). I established the following criteria for the selection of participants: (a) traditional college age, between ages 18-24, (b) transitioned directly from high school to college, (c) enrolled as undergraduate students at a four-year institution, and were (d) in their first or second year of college, (e) first generation, (f) low-income, and (g) did not participate in a pre-college program.
To target low-income and first-generation students, the following strategies were used. All students targeted were classified as low-income as evidenced by their eligibility for federal Work-study, federal Pell-Grant assistance, and/or their enrollment in a program on campus targeted to low-income students such as TRIO Student Support Services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The definition typically used by federal TRIO programs for first-generation students – those whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but did not attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008) was adopted.

In addition, to understand the experiences of those in under-resourced schools, all students selected attended what NCES defines as mid-to-high poverty schools – high schools with 50% or more of their students who qualify for free-and-reduced lunch, based on 2011-2012 NCES Elementary/Secondary Information Systems data (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Students selected were not enrolled in pre-college programs to highlight the experiences of those who truly had to call on their own motivational resources to persevere to college.

All students selected were enrolled at a large, public institution, fictitiously named “West Central University,” in a mid-sized city located in a Southern state. The institution is considered competitive in the region. Its acceptance rate is 51.8%; and its incoming freshman class had an average 4.4 GPA and a combined SAT score (verbal and math) of over 1200.

I also interviewed those who the students noted had motivated them during the college planning process. The students each provided one to three contacts. I interviewed
two high school guidance counselors and five teachers. Although not the focus of this article, I also interviewed five parents/guardians, as well as the girlfriend of one student who noted that she was his strongest motivational support during college planning. Table 1 further describes the demographics of the student participants and their school data.

Table 1

**Student Participant Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Year in college</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>In K-12, Eligible for F&amp;R lunch</th>
<th>Eligible for need-based financial aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Meteorology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Textile Design</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

**Student Participant High School Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>Locale</th>
<th>No. of HS students*</th>
<th>% Free/reduced lunch*</th>
<th>SAT participation rate† (%)</th>
<th>SAT average score†</th>
<th>HS % of students at grade level†</th>
<th>HS grad rate† (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Westonbrook</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>60-80</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>Hatville</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>60-80</td>
<td>77.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>Mendelson</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>90+</td>
<td>93.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>Herrisburg</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>80-90</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Stinson</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1707</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>60-80</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Tipton</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>60-80</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>Zeyton</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>0†</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1068</td>
<td>90+</td>
<td>&gt;95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data based on NCES (ELSi) data (2011-2012)
† Data based on State School Report Cards (2011-2012)
ǂ School does not offer lunch

To target students fitting the study criteria, I contacted the institutional research office at a large, public university, and they provided the names of 174 students (three were
removed who were enrolled in my department). All were contacted via email. I also solicited participants through multicultural student affairs and TRIO Student Support Services, which serves a low-income student population. Each student who expressed interest in the study was asked to complete a pre-screening questionnaire, administered via Qualtrics (see Appendix F). Of the 18 students who responded, seven students fit the full criteria and agreed to participate.

**Researcher Role and Reflexivity**

As Merriam (1998) notes, “because the primary instrument in qualitative research is human, all observations and analyses are filtered through that human beings worldview, values and perspective” (p. 22). Thus it is essential to acknowledge our biases as researchers. My decision to study this issue stems from my experiences as a first-generation, low-income student. In my current position, I work closely with many first-generation, low-income students, and I often wonder what motivates them to persist, while others did not, which led to the rationale behind this study. My shared background allowed me to connect with the participants, but I was conscious not to let my experiences color my perceptions of the participants’ unique stories.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In keeping with the constructivist paradigm and the tenets of good case study research, the researcher served as the instrument for data collection (Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). Interviews and document review were the primary data collection methods. Six of the seven students were interviewed twice, in-person at West Central University (Zara was interviewed in-person but was not reachable for a second interview). Interviews lasted
between 20-50 minutes. I also conducted thirteen interviews with parents, counselors, teachers and peers via phone, lasting 20-70 minutes. Having multiple informants provided a point of triangulation to confirm or corroborate information shared by the students (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

A semi-structured interview “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Thus, five interview protocols were used for different participants (see Appendices A-E).

Students also completed brief journals with two questions about their motivation during college planning to elicit additional information that may have come up following the interviews (see Appendix G). The journal responses were between one to two pages long and were coded by the researcher. The intention was to utilize the journal responses to augment information shared in the initial interview and corroborate findings from other sources (Yin, 2009).

After conducting the interviews, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Data analysis included transcribing and coding the transcripts, conducting open and then focused coding (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002), and formulating themes. I uploaded all transcripts and journal responses to NVivo, a qualitative analysis software tool. I conducted within-case analysis of key themes for each student’s case and then cross-case analysis to determine larger themes or differences among the cases (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Cross-case synthesis is a technique used in multiple case studies where the researcher compares patterns
between two or more cases searching for common or contrasting themes (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Typically each student’s case would be presented with a detailed description of the phenomenon with core themes defined (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). For the purpose of length, I included the case descriptions in the Appendix (see Appendix J) and highlighted here the key themes that surfaced from the cross-case analysis.

Using NVivo, I created a coding scheme for the data using open coding. Open coding involves “coding individual words, lines, segments or incidents” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). Within NVivo, a codebook was developed to capture initial codes that inductively evolved from a careful reading of the data (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 2010) (see Appendix I). From there, using self-determination theory as a framework, the codes were categorized by whether participants noted that the actions supported or undermined student’s autonomy, relatedness, or competence. The open codes were further refined through numerous readings of the transcripts with the theoretical framework in mind, and overarching themes began to emerge (Patton, 2002).

I then engaged in focused coding which involved “testing the initial codes against the more extensive body of data to determine how resilient the codes are in the bigger picture that emerges from the analysis” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). Focused coding involves making decisions about which initial codes make the most logical and analytic sense to categorize the data in a meaningful way (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002). Themes were then analyzed to create a cross-case synthesis of the seven students’ experiences and the input of their teachers and counselors.
I also created memos during coding and analysis to capture my impressions of the students’ experiences and to document changes in my thought processes during the study. Emerging themes were captured here as well. Yin (2009) noted that there are a variety of ways to structure these notes but typically “they should be organized, categorized, complete and available for later access” (p. 120). These memos are included in the case study database (see Appendix H) to document my thoughts during data collection, coding, and analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure trustworthiness, the following procedures were utilized. Credibility was maintained by allowing for sufficient time in the field by conducting two in-depth interviews with each student and capturing their reflections from their journals. Triangulation – by having multiple sources of data and multiple informants – promoted the credibility of the results. Member checks were also conducted to ensure the accuracy of the resulting themes. Guba and Lincoln described member checks as “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (as cited in Shenton, 2004, p. 68). Once the key themes were developed, this information was shared with several participants for feedback. Member checks confirmed that the themes that surfaced from the data aligned with their experiences.

To improve the confirmability of the case study and minimize bias, two strategies were used. A confirmability audit was conducted where the key findings were shared with a peer reviewer to ensure the conclusions were supported by data. A case study database was also created to further substantiate the findings in the report and includes the raw data which, if requested, can be provided for independent inspection (Yin, 2009).
Limitations

There were limitations with this study. First, selecting students in only one state and from one institution limits the opportunity to explore differences that might exist in other regions of the country and at other institutional types. In addition, choosing student participants who were enrolled in college meant they may have struggled with recall of key moments of motivation during college-planning. However, since students were successfully enrolled in college, they had the ability to look back from an asset-based perspective and see the steps that brought them to that point. Their reflections may be more balanced than someone who has been unsuccessful in their college access pursuits.

Another limitation is that the choice of self-determination as the overarching theory did not allow for consideration of other motivation theories that could be used to explore this issue. However, as Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) noted “distinguishing among different types of motivation is essential to understanding why some youth are more successful at reaching the goals they set for themselves than others” (p. 120). Future research on this topic should incorporate other motivation theories as key frameworks.

Results

The results of the data analysis documented that school personnel had a strong impact on students’ self-determination during the college access process. Students articulated specific behavior of school staff that influenced their feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence and ultimately motivated them to persist through the college access process. I have captured those findings below.
School Personnel and Relatedness Support

Relatedness is the sense of “belongingness or connectedness to the persons, group or culture disseminating a goal” (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One of the major ways in which we begin to internalize or adopt values, behavior or actions that are originally extrinsically motivated is through the connections we have with those around us (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The findings support this assertion. Overwhelmingly, student’s commented that supportive and caring teachers and counselors enhanced their motivation to pursue a higher education. In the analysis of the findings, a process model emerged that described the evolution of how school personnel developed relationships with students. Below (see Figure 4), this process is described.

Figure 4. Model of School Personnel Relationship Development

Step 1: Teacher and counselor openness to forming relationships. School staff described the importance of being open to building relationships with students. Mr. Campbell, a veteran teacher in a large high school, noted:

As a teacher, get to know your students. . . . Get them to realize that you actually care about them individually and collectively. Develop some kind of relationship there and some children you can’t, it just doesn’t happen. But at least the availability.
Natalie, a freshman majoring in social work, described a teacher who took the time to reach out to her. “I went to his office one day to talk to him, and then he was asking me about the things I did in high school, and academics, and the clubs. He tried to get to know me.”

Ms. McNamara, a counselor, also made an effort to proactively connect with all of her students:

I had to create a schedule basically to make sure that the students that weren’t coming to me were being taken care of. I don’t think that they should fall through the cracks just because they don’t have that personality that’s going to go and have questions or ask for help. I feel like my job is to provide it whether they want it or not.

The willingness of school staff to build connections with students facilitated a feeling of relatedness among their students.

**Step 2: Frequent contact promoted relatedness.** Several staff members spoke of the frequent interactions they had with students which led to closer relationships. Ms. Fisher, an agriculture teacher, noted that her relationship with Emma began during Future Farmers of America (FFA) meetings, “I saw her a lot in the evenings and after school hours and weekends. . . .So because of that it was easier for me to talk to her about her college application process.” Zara, a freshman majoring in textiles, also appreciated her teacher’s attention outside of class:

But mostly my art teacher because I had a close relationship with . . . she really was a mentor for me. Just not only art, but mostly in my high school career. Because she really gave me an out-of-classroom experience in what I wanted to do.

Lily Ann, a sophomore in zoology, developed an initial relationship with her coach after
frequent visits when she was experiencing personal problems. Ms. Long, a school counselor, also noted that her open-door policy promoted relationship building:

They were free to come in there whenever they needed to and speak to me. Lily Ann was one that was in there, pretty much, I would say, at least if not more than once a week. Just talking to me about different things, about schools that she was thinking about applying to. What she wanted to do.

The ability to have frequent contact with their teachers and counselors facilitated students’ feeling a sense of connection and relatedness to those in the school environment. This often prompted the students to later come back to those same personnel for college advice.

**Step 3: Listening to students’ “non-college” issues facilitated relationship building.** Students described turning to their counselors or teachers when they experienced emotional issues, which led them to form a stronger bond. Nora, a sophomore majoring in social work, turned to her history teacher for emotional support: “When I had him in high school, I was really depressed. He definitely saw that, and he tried to help me as much as he could.” When her mother was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, Nora reached out to this same teacher for college support, “He was the one that really pushed me. He did all my financial aid with me because my mom was too sick. . . . He helped me a lot to get in here.”

Colonel Hillman, an ROTC instructor, explained how he creates an environment in his class where students can feel safe and open up. He then intentionally segues to discussions of academic subjects:
If they come to talk to me about, ‘Oh, I’m having an issue with this friend,’ or this issue with this girlfriend or that boyfriend. . . . It’ll get me to talking to them about academic stuff, and then I’ll say, ‘Well, if you’re going to talk to me about that, then to me the door is open for me to talk to you about school, so let’s discuss the school part . . .

Several teachers noted that the relationships they built with students extended even to those who were not enrolled in their classes. Jayda, a freshman in biology, formed a strong relationship with the athletic coach despite not playing sports. Natalie, a freshman majoring in social work, shared that the teacher who had the biggest influence on her was the ROTC instructor, Colonel Hillman, despite her never being in ROTC. “He made a strong effort to know who I was. I was never his student. He checked in on me and he really was a motivational factor in college.”

Mr. Campbell, a history teacher, said he offers what he calls “Charlie Brown’ moments where he brings students out into the hall for short conversations if he senses they are struggling:

I tell them, bring your nickel and come out and talk to me. They really seem to enjoy that. . . . I always tell them, if you have something that’s on your mind, you want to talk to me about it, stop me. I’ll walk out into the hallway.

This made students feel listened to and cared about by school personnel, which promoted feelings of relatedness. Students then felt comfortable returning to them for college access help.

**Step 4: Specific “process” support and advocacy solidified relationships.** Students
noted that school staff provided a high-level of motivational support by offering direct college planning assistance and by advocating for them. Interestingly, it was teachers rather than counselors who were most often cited as the personnel who assisted with college access.

Emma, a freshman majoring in agriculture education, had a strong relationship with her teacher. Emma’s guardian, Charlene, described the support she provided: “She also had her mentor, who is her agriculture teacher, Ms. Fisher, who was constantly talking to her, just encouraging her and letting her know when to do this, and getting the right reference letters.” Ms. Fisher, a teacher who graduated from West Central, said that she often assists students with the application process to this competitive school, “I do have a lot of students that come to me asking questions about their applications and different programs that are available, and I do try to take the time.”

Advocacy by school staff on students’ behalf was another way students said they felt listened to and cared about by school personnel. Mr. Campbell, a teacher, reached out to counselors at his school to encourage them to spend less time in the office and connect with students more, “The students need to come talk to you but they are not going to come and talk to you unless there is some connection. They have to have seen you somewhere.”

Colonel Hillman, an ROTC teacher, formed the College Scholars to support students’ college planning efforts. The organization developed after he heard students complain about the school’s lack of college support. Another teacher named Mr. Newton, created a similar program in his school:

I knew there was a lack of help for those students to help them to get into college. I asked my supervisor if I could start a program here where I brought in the parents and
the kids several different times in June and July to talk to them about this and they were all about it. They were all aboard. We started the program.

Emma, a college freshman, reiterated the importance of teacher support. “My teacher, she helped me with my application. I had help with submitting it and knowing what I needed to know. I don’t think I would have been able to do it without her.”

The willingness of teachers and counselors to offer specific “process” support to students as well as advocate for them with administration created a sense of connection. Students knew they could rely on these school staff for support, which fostered students’ motivation.

**Step 5: Frequent reminders and status check-ins promoted relatedness.**

Numerous students mentioned that the frequent reminders and check-ins from school staff helped them stay on task during the college planning. They appreciated the attention and the fact that school staff cared enough to remember them and foster their college goals.

Natalie’s teacher, Mr. Campbell, made an effort to remind her frequently about her college plans. “He checked in on me and he really was a motivational factor in college. ‘Miss Lanier did you apply for scholarships? Miss Lanier, do you know where you’re going?’ Things like that every day.” Nora also remembers frequent reminders from her history teacher about college. “Then definitely Mr. Campbell was like, ‘Nora, go to school. Go to school. Nora, go to school. You need to go to school’ all the time, every day.”

Ms. McNamara, a counselor, was also known for her consistent follow-up with students:

They just got to know I’m going to be asking them, ‘Have you finished that
application? Let me see your essay.’ I don’t think all students need that but I mean they’re high schoolers and they’re teenagers. They have so much else going on that if they know that Ms. McNamara is going to ask about it, then they’re going to do it.

These reminders were not perceived as frustrating by the students. It was a way that teachers showed they cared, which augmented their motivation to remain focused on their goals.

**Step 6: Feedback on student’s decisions and abilities augmented relatedness.**

One of the primary ways that students noted that their counselors and teachers supported them through the college planning process was by serving as a sounding board for them. Colonel Hillman provides a lot of direct, no-nonsense feedback, which appeals to students:

> They’ll come in and I’ll ask them, ‘Okay, what do you need?’ Then after they start talking, the conversation goes back and forth and I’m listening and I tell them, ‘Hey, that’s a great move. That’s not a great move,’ as opposed to my kids sitting there just feeding them a ton of information that they may or may not understand.

Jayda also highlighted that verbal reassurance was important for her during her college planning process, and her teacher, Mr. Newton, offered that support. “He knew what I was capable of, my intelligence and stuff, so he would like push me and make sure I was doing my work.” Mr. Campbell, Nora’s teacher, also made an effort to reassure her of her capabilities, “I would stay on her case. You need to be doing this. You need to be doing this. Getting ready. We had a pretty good relationship with that. I always told her she could do it.”

The counselors and teachers helped boost students’ confidence and reassured them of
their abilities, further deepening the feelings of relatedness between the students and staff.

**Step 7: Influenced motivation long-term; became friend.** It was interesting to note that several students described school personnel as “friends” or parent figures. The relationships deepened to the point where students still kept in touch after graduation, attended functions together, or returned to visit their former teachers when home on breaks. Ms. McNamara, a counselor, said that she keeps in touch with students after graduation:

> I’m able to keep a relationship and that’s the most important thing really, is just having a relationship with them that I still feel comfortable enough after they’ve graduated to give them a call or a text or stop by their work and say, ‘How’s it going? What’s your plan?’ I don’t think that that’s the case in other places like with here.

Natalie also plans to return to her high school to talk about college. When asked why, she said it was because her high school teacher did it for her class, “We were all panicking and didn’t know what to do, so he brought seniors back for us. Then he asked us to come back for the new seniors. It was a good trade.” Jayda also noted that her teacher, Mr. Newton, had become “like a friend” and Emma still texts her mentor, Ms. Fisher, at least once a week. Coach Newhouse also commented on the friendship she developed with her student, Lily Ann, who contacts her frequently. She recently invited her to her baby shower: “I just look forward to maintaining that. She’s a friend now. It’s really cool because we’ll go have lunch together and walk the dogs together and it’s like I’m talking to a friend.”

In closing, the depth of the relationships that students built with their teachers and counselors is a testament to the importance of relatedness in the school environment. Time and again, students said that knowing that someone cared, followed-up with them, and made
an effort to get to know them “as individuals” helped motivate them on the path to college.

School Personnel and Challenges to Relatedness

Just as school personnel were able to build strong relationships with students, there were also several instances where students felt that school personnel made little or no effort to develop close connections with them. However, despite the challenges, students remained focused on reaching their goals and utilized other sources of help to augment their motivation along the way.

Lack of time or interest in fostering relationships. Several students, as well as school staff, noted that there were some in the school setting who did not appear to want to build deeper relationships with students. There were a number of reasons offered for this: large caseloads, lack of teacher time for instruction beyond test preparation, or beliefs that college planning was “not my job.” Regardless, the impact felt by students was powerful.

Evan, a sophomore majoring in meteorology, noted he had little connection with school staff: “I can’t think of a time when someone actually told me I need to go to college other than like my classmates in high school.” Evan remarked that his counselors were often unavailable when he needed help. Nora also had a disappointing experience with her assigned counselor:

The fact that she just didn’t really make time, didn’t seem to care, was so busy with the people that were obviously going to get into these great schools that definitely made me feel . . . Like I don’t really matter, do I?

Sarah, Jayda’s mother, also remarked about the apathy she saw at her daughter’s school:

I think most of them did the best that they could like the counselors and things of that
nature. . . . But I think some of them just don’t care. They feel like it’s not my responsibility. I’m just a math teacher, or I’m just the English teacher.

Despite the reasons, many students felt that the lack of a desire by some staff to build relationships with students affected their ability to get the support they needed for college. However, Jayda, Nora and Evan sought out others in their networks, including peers, parents, or other teachers, for support that enabled them to recover from these motivational challenges.

**Focus on testing and district needs limits relatedness.** Several students and school personnel stressed that the focus on testing and the large number of students in the schools can undermine the time needed to build relationships. Mr. Campbell, a history teacher, spoke of what he’s seen in his 35 years in the schools, “I don’t know how much counseling you have seen, but sometimes they can get stuck in the office doing paperwork and testing. . . . I’d like to see them out among the students more if I were in charge.” Nora also recalled that the large number of students in her school affected her relationship with her counselor:

> I remember trying to talk to my guidance counselor who was not really that helpful. She was kind of just rude. I think that had a lot to do with the fact that we weren’t the smallest school, we weren’t the biggest school, but there weren’t enough . . . counselors.

A teacher remarked that the emphasis on testing limited the time available for college support, “A lot of schools are now teaching toward the end-of-course exams, so a lot of the students feel like they are not learning as much; they’re just being taught basically to the test.” Students felt this disconnect as well. Natalie commented, “What I like least is
probably that teachers are not as passionate about teaching because of the requirements. They can’t really teach. It’s all about testing. They don’t have as much passion.”

The time spent on testing and scheduling left little time for some school staff to build relationships. This appeared to affect relatedness and the potential for students to develop strong bonds with school staff. In contrast, those who had close relationships with their teachers and counselors received important information and gained positive feedback about the college access steps. These students appeared to be more motivated as a result of these interactions.

**Certain groups treated differently affected autonomy and relatedness.** The findings indicated that some staff did not engage students in college discussions equitably. Again, this led to some students not receiving pertinent information, negating their sense of autonomy. Some students described that the sense that others were being helped instead of them left them feeling less capable of maneuvering through the college access, which limited their feelings of competency. They also felt less “cared for” which impacted their sense of relatedness.

In a few cases, students noted that the high-achieving students were often overlooked. Natalie remarked about her counselors, “I would go to my senior meetings and they would be like, ‘Oh, you’re doing great. We don’t need to help you’. . . .I don’t think they understood that I really didn’t know what to do.” Mr. Newton, an African-American teacher, also worried that minority students may not be getting the help they needed at his predominantly White school:

In order for anybody to counsel anybody . . . I think they have to find a common
ground. I think a lot of times, the counselors, the people in charge; they don’t do a good job of finding that common ground. For example, if I’m a minority student and I walk in there and I talk to them about that, they tend to forget to mention the minority scholarships.

Nora described an incident where she felt her counselor was only helping those who had money:

I’m thinking, ‘She’s applying for the same school as I am, she makes almost the same exact grades as I do, we did a lot of the same stuff. Why are you more focused on her?’ Yeah, she has the money, but . . . . shouldn’t you be helping somebody that doesn’t have the money, that does need the help?

Inequitable treatment, although not common, left students feeling even more distanced from school personnel, which affected students’ motivation and feelings of relatedness. As Nora noted of her counselor, “I went to her for my FAFSA before I went to Mr. Campbell. I didn’t do it for three months because of her.” It was only when the teacher with whom she had a relationship offered to help her that she did her FAFSA, a pivotal step in the access process. Again, this speaks to the importance of close, safe, and caring relationships to one’s motivation.

**Limited relationships led to a lack of connectedness and forestalled motivation.**

For students who had strong relationships with counselors and teachers, they were passionate about the impact that school staff had on their college planning process. These relationships fostered their sense of motivation because they knew they had people in the school who cared about their success. These staff members provided critical information that promoted
students’ autonomy and strengthened and their sense of competence in their ability to navigate the college application process. However, those who did not have a great deal of help were vocal about how this lack of a connection with school staff limited their motivation during the college going process.

Evan and his girlfriend Candace, who attended the same high school, both described struggling due to the lack of college support from staff in their school. Candace suggested: Maybe if we had had better advisers or had people who cared about us . . . I feel like if we would have had good advisers to help us, if we would have had a college ready high school, maybe more people would have made it out.

Evan noted that he turned to peers for support rather than the school counselors who he felt were rude and dismissive to him. Natalie also had limited relationships with her school’s counselors, despite working in the guidance office. “I really didn’t talk to them. They thought I was brilliant, I guess. That’s their exact words, but I didn’t think fondly of them because they didn’t do anything for me other than tell me, ‘You’re on a great track.’”

Several students said that their limited relationships with school staff left them adrift during college planning. This was particularly related to the role of school counselors. The opportunity for true connection was lost due to limited time, a focus on scheduling, testing, or other school demands or the sense that school staff just did not prioritize building strong relationships. Despite their lack of relationships with some school staff, many students remained focused and were even more strongly motivated to find others to support them, such as peers, parents, or their few “favorite” teachers. They had to try harder to get information due to limited resources, which forestalled their sense of relatedness, autonomy,
and feeling of competency in their ability to maneuver through the access process. However, whereas some students might have “stopped out” of the process, thankfully these students were able to draw on their own motivational drive and turn to others in their networks for support.

School Personnel and Competency Support

Competency is the feeling that one is able to successfully master the tasks or behavior in one’s environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A major component of competency relates to positive feedback. Positive feedback is theorized to promote one’s intrinsic motivation; whereas, negative feedback detracted from one’s feelings of competency (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). The results show that school staff used two key competency-enhancing approaches: providing career encouragement and offering positive feedback about students’ academic abilities.

Providing career encouragement fostered feelings of competence. Students described several occurrences where teachers and/or counselors promoted their career goals or intrinsic interest in a particular field of study. In many cases, the students were so influenced by their teachers’ positive feedback that it led them to want to pursue the same career path as their teacher. Emma, who is currently pursuing a degree in agricultural education, was heavily influenced by the positive feedback from her agricultural teacher, Ms. Fisher:

It wasn’t until my senior year that I decided that I wanted to go into agriculture education. . . . She kind of suggested that I would make a good one. The idea of it just kind of stuck in my head. I still haven’t gotten it out.
Jayda is now majoring in biology after being influenced by her biology teacher’s feedback:

My biology teacher was probably my biggest influence. I really liked her class and she always kind of made me feel like biology was my domain and I could do big things. I had some other teachers that were also like that, but they didn’t particularly help me. My biology teacher though, she would tell me you should apply to this college . . .

Lily Ann is also studying in a science field and received competency-supportive feedback from her teachers about her science skills. She also received constructive criticism. “They were always encouraging me and letting me know what my strengths were and where I could work at my weaknesses as well.” Being able to get honest advice and feedback, which is important for augmenting one’s motivation, was essential for the students.

The encouragement students received seemed to solidify their interest in a particular field or exposed them to new careers where they found a passion. Their teachers were most often cited as helping them feel competent in a particular area of study. This had a positive impact on their motivation to attend college and pursue their intrinsic interest in a given field.

**Positive feedback on students’ academic abilities promoted competency.** The data also indicated that helping students see that they were “college material” and possessed strong academic skills, had an impact on students’ motivation on the path to college. Evan remembers his 8th grade teacher, “Yeah, she helped motivate me in a lot of little ways. I’d sit there and tell her about it and how proud she was, made me feel good about what I’m doing.” Her teaching style also augmented his competence:

She taught us like we were intellectuals. She didn’t try to dumb it down. She was a
real teacher. . . .She was dedicated to wanting us to learn. She was very involved and wanted to do things more than just follow the curriculum.

Jayda also acknowledged that her teachers’ faith in her ability to make it to college helped her feel confident that she was college material, “Nobody ever told me ‘maybe college isn’t for you.’ That was not a conversation I ever had.” Natalie also had teachers who supported her college goals: “Definitely, I had a lot of supportive teachers. Not as in they told me to go, that they never entertained me not going. It was like, it’s something that you’re going to do.”

Nora admits that running with the wrong crowd gave some teachers the impression that she was not on the college track. But her teacher, Mr. Campbell, believed in her and saw her college potential. Mr. Campbell also remarked that he makes an effort to help students see that college is possible, “I tell them all, you can do college work. It’s just a matter of how much do you want it. If you’re willing to put forth the effort . . .”

Positive feedback and affirmation of students’ academic abilities were frequently mentioned by students as important motivators. The phrases “they never doubted that I would go to college” seemed to reassure students that they were on the right track, leading students to remain motivated towards higher education.

**School Personnel and Lack of Competency Support**

Three major themes arose when talking with students and school staff about which approaches undermined students’ motivation on the path to college: a lack of academic rigor in the school, challenges with teacher quality, and a focus on teaching to the test. Together, these tactics left students feeling less confident in their readiness for college. However, these
factors, negative though they may be, often led students to work harder while in high school and in college. The consistent reassurance from school personnel about their academic abilities also moderated these challenges.

**Lack of rigor.** Several students noted that the lack of rigor in their schools left them unsure of their readiness for college-level work. By interviewing students who had completed their first year or two of college, the study allowed the exploration of how students felt after getting to college. Evan and Candace, who attended the same high school, were very vocal about the lack of rigor. In their school, higher-achieving students were mandated or “forced” into Advanced Placement (AP) classes, whether they chose them or not. Candace noted:

> I honestly don’t think that they prepared us for college at all with those AP classes because out of the 30 plus students that took AP classes, honestly only two of them ever passed the AP exam. . . . Most of us got 2s which was really depressing because they only taught us the stuff that was going to be on the exam, so the multiple choice. They didn’t really teach us how to write papers. They didn’t teach us very well in my opinion.

The resulting feelings of lack of competency were very disappointing for students and led to a lack of motivation to pursue college. “It made me feel really unprepared and really unsure about going to college, and that really showed during my first semester in college and Evan’s first semester in college because we both panicked when we got here.” (Candace)

Numerous students spoke of having easy classes in high school. Jayda, who is majoring in biology, described getting As despite never having to study, “I thought when I
got to college, oh, it would just be a breeze. I don’t have to study as much. That turned out not to be so true.” Once in college, everything changed. “Once I started and see how rigorous my courses were, I thought sometimes, ‘maybe I can’t do this. Maybe I should have stayed home.” (Jayda) Her feelings of competency in her academic abilities were diminished which affected her motivation because it led her to question her academic readiness for college-level work.

Evan, who was fourth in his high school graduating class, also reiterated how the lack of rigor in his AP classes negatively affected his college transition and motivation to persist:

The thing is they were easy. I’m going to tell you right now. I got more sleep in class then I did at home. . . . It didn’t help me for college at all. Aren’t AP classes supposed to be college level classes? Nowhere near, and I literally came here unprepared.

Nora also felt as if the academic rigor in her high school did not enable her to feel competent in her college readiness. As noted by SDT, a lack of feelings of competency in one’s abilities can directly influence one’s motivation. Nora explains:

I didn’t realize how much harder the workload would be here, mostly because I didn’t go to the greatest high school and I did so well. . . . I took a lot of AP classes and everybody was like, ‘That’s how college is going to be,’ except that’s not true at all. I honestly thought I’d do a lot better. I am definitely struggling.

This was one of the more prevalent findings in the study; by and large, students’ competency in their ability to do college-level work was impacted by the lack of academic rigor in their high schools. This limited their feelings of competency and ultimately their
motivation because they felt as if they were not well-prepared for college-level work.

**Teacher quality further impacted student’s feelings of competency.** For some of the students, the reason they felt that the rigor of their academic coursework suffered is a perceived lack of qualified teachers in their schools. Many spoke of teachers not being prepared or not having a passion for the subject matter. Others spoke of being in small communities where attracting highly trained teachers was a challenge. Students had diminished feelings of competency in their abilities due to the perceived quality of their academic preparation.

Jayda’s mom described how being in a small town impacted her daughter’s experience:

She wasn’t exposed. She came from a small school that didn’t have any money. She didn’t get these fancy labs and that kind of thing that other kids had. They didn’t offer the IB courses that a lot of schools have, because they’re so small. Even the AP classes were hard to come by because if enough kids didn’t sign up for that class, they didn’t have it.

When Jayda arrived in college, she felt less equipped to compete with students from large districts who had more access to more resources. Her competency in her abilities as a biology major was diminished, which could have influenced her motivation to continue as a science major. This speaks to the impact on students’ motivation during college and career planning.

Evan also noted that his AP courses were also taught by teachers who were not well trained to implement the curriculum, “Teachers weren’t properly trained like they would take
the courses where they could teach it, [but] they didn’t know how to teach. We had to get help from people from other AP courses.” By having classes that were not taught to a high standard, the resulting feeling of “am I good enough?” influenced students’ motivation by limiting their sense of competency. This also created academic challenges for them once in the college environment.

Ms. McNamara, a school counselor in a remote coastal community, noted that her school only has one teacher per subject, so providing variety in instruction is a challenge:

I think your education can be very limited just because it’s going to be limited to what your teacher knows or is comfortable teaching. I don’t think we’ve ever taught physics class on this island because our science teacher is more of a biology/chemistry person. . . . I actually graduated a student last year and I was like, ‘What is your planned major?’ He said, ‘Physics.’ I said, ‘How is that even possible? You’ve never even taken a physics class. How do you know if you like it?’

The awareness of the limits to quality teaching caused students to feel less prepared for the rigors of college level work. Students were well-aware of their questionable preparation, and although they persisted, it caused them to doubt whether college was a fit for them, which can forestall one’s motivation on the road to college.

“Teaching to the test” seen as undermining preparedness and students’ competency. As we saw earlier, one of the challenges of the emphasis on testing in the school environment is school personnel, namely teachers, feeling as if they have limited time to develop strong relationships with students. Another outcome of the heavy testing environment present in the schools these students attended was that there appeared to be little
time for teachers to spend on important material that students needed to be college ready. Colonel Hillman has witnessed this shift, “I think they get so caught up in test scores, and it’s ingrained or beat into them so much it’s about ‘you got to get better test scores’ that that becomes the driving force in what they’re teaching.” He mentioned a conversation with a fellow teacher who described his conflict over teaching to the test versus preparing his students for what to expect in college:

I talked to an English teacher yesterday, and he was telling about feeling bad because they’re teaching to the test so much, he never got a chance to show them how to go about doing a research paper. He said that he apologized to his class because he didn’t get a chance to do that.

Coach Newhouse, a coach and social studies teacher, agreed, “Well we’ve got to push them through because we don’t want our test scores to look bad or our school, report card to look bad. Sometimes that’s an issue that I feel like we face as teachers.”

As noted previously, the attention spent focusing on testing has narrowed the amount of time that teachers said they had to spend on properly preparing students for college. Students felt this negligence and noted that it led them to feel less ready for college level work, weakening their feelings of competency in their ability to succeed in college.

**School Personnel and Autonomy Support**

Autonomy, according to self-determination theory, is an essential element that fosters motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Autonomy is the feeling that one has volition or a sense of self-direction, free of threats, rewards or directives (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Feeling autonomous to act on one’s behalf can be a powerful motivating force (Deci & Ryan, 2012).
Parents as well as school personnel were noted as being instrumental in providing autonomy support during college planning. The three primary ways in which teachers and counselors made an impact on autonomy were making students aware of their college options, validating students’ feelings, and providing reminders but not directives.

**Expanding students’ choices promoted autonomy.** Many of these first-generation students were not very aware of the options available to them with regard to college, nor were they aware of available funding sources, so school personnel became critical sources of information that enabled them to make better decisions during college planning.

Ms. Long, a counselor, helps students consider options outside of the norm: “I think a lot of times when they come from small towns, it’s very difficult for them to see anything outside of the small town. It was always difficult for me to try and push them to expand their horizons.”

Mr. Newton at Jayda’s school hosts a college access program, and through this resource, he provided many options for her that she may have been less familiar with:

We really just looked at the different schools and we looked at her options. We met deadlines, which is what the program deals with. It talks about why going to college is important. We talk about what goes into choosing a college. . . . I think those are the things that really helped her out.

Ms. McNamara, another counselor in a rural district, also attempts to demystify the financial aid process so students can make good decisions:

Just convincing them to try to plan for college without thinking about money is hard because I want them to apply to a dream school and work hard and go to their dream
school without the fear that money is going to hold them back.

Colonel Hillman spends considerable time on financial aid information as well, “I hit on that early and hard because that’s a primary factor that will cause them not to go to college.”

School personnel who were willing to share information about the college admissions and financial aid process helped augment students’ sense of autonomy and promoted free choice.

**School personnel validated students’ feelings and served as sounding boards.**

Several teachers and counselors noted that students came to them for honest and open advice during the decision-making process. Students appreciated having someone who listened and shared advice. Lily Ann turned to her teacher for advice because they shared a similar upbringing:

She had went to the University of Texas and I think she had a similar situation, where she kind of put herself through college. I would talk to her about that. I had her as a teacher as well so she knew my learning style, my strengths, so, I would just ask her about certain decisions. And she was one of my recommendation letters as well.

Ms. Fisher, an agricultural teacher, also noted that helping students with an honest and realistic assessment of their admissibility assists them in making good choices:

I had a student I looked at this year, and her GPA was like a 3.2 and I had to tell her her SAT score was lackluster as well you know, that if West Central is the goal that you have, then you need to find another road to get there. . . . So that’s a tough conversation to have with a student, but it is one that I think that they need to have.

Colonel Hillman also helps students make decisions by being honest and upfront, “If they’re
doing something that I think is a risk move, I’ll let them know. I’ll question why they’re
doing certain things. . . . I keep it real with them.”

Serving as a sounding board and affirming students’ feelings was an important
function that school personnel provided. This allowed the students to feel autonomous to
make decisions, knowing that a trusted, knowledgeable person had listened to and validated
their college choices.

**Reminders, listening, and encouraging, rather than directives, enhanced autonomy.** School personnel were well aware that encouragement was important but they
were careful not to let help turn into making choices on the students’ behalf. Ms. Long, a
school counselor, always tried to provide options but not push a specific path:

> In my kids, I never try to discourage them for what they want to do. If they were
thinking about the four-year school, I always tell them ‘It doesn’t hurt to apply. It
doesn’t hurt to just kind of see if you can get in. Apply to the school. Do what is
needed.’ I always told them, ‘There’s always the back-up plan.’

Another counselor, Ms. McNamara, noted that pushing students to make certain decisions
can backfire:

> I do bug the students a lot but I try not to force them to do anything. I ask them to do
things and I encourage them to do things but at the end of the day if I can see that
they’re not . . . If it’s not something they want, there’s no point in forcing them.

Nora appreciated the push but added that she ended up making her own decisions, “I
definitely had a lot of help. It was more of help with motivating. I had to do the work, but
they had to push me to do it, with the exception of FAFSA.” Zara also felt as if students
were not pressured at her school, “You really had support there for you if you needed it. They were always . . . the school always pushed for the students to get to college if they wanted to.”

In summary, with the information presented to them in an equitable way, students felt more confident in making choices that fit their goals and needs. These tactics created an autonomy-supportive environment which spurred students on in the college-planning process.

School Personnel and Strategies that Undermined Autonomy

The data indicate that there were instances where counselors and teachers appeared to undermine students’ feelings of autonomy, namely not validating student’s concerns and coddling the students by doing too much for them. Although neither was a prevalent issue for the participants, several staffers commented that they see this in their schools.

Coddling students appeared to undermine autonomy. Audrey, a teacher, noted that the coddling she sees in the school setting does not prepare students for the college environment: “The professors don’t call mama when you’re not at school today and say, ‘Hey, where were you at?’ or ‘Where was little Johnny at today?’ So I think that’s probably the biggest eye-opening thing for them . . .” However, she also noted that she required one of her students to do her college application as a class assignment, which one could consider an autonomy-undermining behavior.

Coach Newhouse, a teacher, was more vocal about how school personnel undermine the autonomy of students by hand-holding:

A lot of times we’ve kind of walked them through and babied them so much that
when they get to college, they don’t know how to motivate themselves to do what they’re supposed to do and they fail out. They drop out.

At one of the smaller schools, the personal attention from school staff was noted as a benefit; however, it can also be enabling as Vicki, a parent, noted:

But here, they kind of lead you by the hand more. It’s a lot of one-on-one. But that could be a disadvantage for adjusting when you leave. It’s a big culture shock when they leave the island and they go off to the big, real world. It’s not the same.

The coddling and hand-holding mentioned by many of the school administrators did not support students’ autonomy and in a few cases led students to struggle in college.

**Lack of validation limited student’s confidence in their choices.** Many students felt as if having little or no support from school staff undermined their sense of volition because they had no one to turn to for advice or guidance about their decisions. This left them feeling stuck.

Colonel Hillman reiterated that the higher achieving students at his school were often the ones who received limited guidance:

A lot of times the guidance counselor will put them on autopilot because the thought process is, ‘Hey, they’re smart. They know what to do already,’ and they would tell me that that’s not always the case, but that was the assumption.

For Evan, counselors in his school were also known for not taking students’ concerns into account with regard to AP classes as noted earlier: “People weren’t allowed to get out of the classes basically. Basically them dictating what we did and how we couldn’t change anything made me want to be able to have the drive to get out of that.” Evan also used the
term “sideline motivators” to describe the type of general, or what I call “passive” support he received:

They didn’t really help me plan, but they were like a sideline motivator. We got out of high school, that’s fantastic, they would hope you do more. . . . None necessarily pushed me, directed me or gave me plenty of information, but they’re ones who were supportive and who were, you know, wanting us to excel. . . . Most others were just there.

The impact of this “passive support” left students with few staff members who provided the kind of validation and direct support that is essential when navigating the college planning process. For many, having no one to serve as a “sounding board” was difficult. Large caseloads and heavy demands on school staffers’ time often limited hands-on help, but the impact is that the motivation of low-income, first-generation students on the path to college was undermined, and these are the students who need support the most.

**Discussion**

This study documents the ways in which school staff influenced the motivation of low-income, first-generation students during college planning. Specifically, the results highlighted specific approaches used by school staff that appeared to either augment or undermine these students’ feelings of competency, autonomy, and relatedness.

As numerous studies have found, students who felt more secure with their parents and teachers tended to “cope more positively with academic failures, to be more autonomous in regulating their school behaviors, were more engaged in learning and to feel better about themselves” (Deci et al., 1996, p. 178). However, these prior studies tended to focus on
students’ experiences in the K-12 arena. This study adds an important new lens by documenting the influence on motivation not just on classroom outcomes, but on students’ college-going behavior. Students acknowledged that having caring and concerned teachers and counselors made them feel “seen” and valued, which spurred them to persevere on the path to college. Because many school-based behaviors are not intrinsically motivating, “the primary reason people are likely to be willing to do the behaviors is that they are valued by significant others. . .” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 64). Thus the relationships with school staff, even if it was only one teacher or counselor, appeared to reinforce the internalization of college-going goals. Often these relationships continued well into college, and these high school personnel continue to be a major part of their support system even today.

School personnel also benefited from these relationships, and their openness to these students also motivated them. Teachers and counselors seemed to truly enjoy the relationships they formed with these students, which reassured them of their own value as educators. One teacher, Coach Newhouse, remarked, “I think I’ve gained more from her than she did from me just because she’s just an awesome girl to work with and to stay in contact with. . . It just makes you feel good about teaching.” The motivational benefits appeared to go both ways.

This study highlighted the ways in which relatedness was undermined: when school staff demonstrated a lack of interest in forming relationships, focused more on school needs or district requirements than relationship-building, when certain students were treated differently or unfairly, and when no attempts were made by staff to provide direct process support. This finding documents the powerful influence of relatedness in the school
environment to promote student motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Reeve, 2012) by describing the connection between school-based personnel and student motivation during college planning. In particular, for low-income, first-generation students, studies document that they tend to rely more heavily on school personnel for college access information (College Board, 2011; Roderick et al., 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Therefore, the less comfortable students feel with staff in their schools, the less likely they might be to seek out college help.

This study extends prior literature on college access by documenting the specific role that school personnel, particularly teachers, had on students’ feelings of competency. For the students, having a trusted teacher in a similar field who could “vouch” for their academic abilities or affirm their career goals promoted students’ confidence that college was a fit for them. As several students noted, this feedback was not always positive, yet it was honest. This informational feedback was interpreted as affirming their potential and demonstrating care in helping the student improve, not as demeaning or controlling, which would have diminished competency (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Reeve, 2012). Teachers also promoted competency by spending time with students outside of class helping students explore careers and offering leadership experiences. This finding expands our understanding of the influence of student involvement on college-going behavior; students’ feelings of competency may be augmented by their ability to demonstrate competency through leadership, volunteerism, service and the like. Their “outside of the class” engagement with teachers and coaches contributed to their feelings of relatedness, resulting in a positive impact on their motivation towards college.

Competency was undermined for the students when teachers and counselors did not
hold students to a high standard of academic rigor, when they focused on teaching to the test rather than on content that was helpful for college readiness, and when the quality of instruction suffered. There were many reasons for the constraints on high quality education that were evident in these school settings. This finding affirms research describing the impact of the government’s mandated testing on the motivation of students, teachers, and other school administrators (Deci & Ryan, 2012) but incorporates the influence not just on learning, but on college access. “This has resulted in more teaching to the tests, and less teacher and student autonomy, reengagement and satisfaction at the bottom of this chain of embedded contexts” (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 86). The study showed that students felt woefully underprepared, which ultimately caused them to doubt their competency to pursue college.

Prior research has stressed the importance of students being aware of their college options, finding the proper college “match” or fit and the importance of demystifying the financial aid process, particularly for low-income students who are often more price sensitive (Hahn & Price, 2008; NCAN, 2011). The study documented how teachers and counselors created an autonomy-supportive environment: expanded students’ choice sets, listened to and validated their decisions, and offered frequent reminders but did not force certain choices upon students. The information that school personnel provided demystified the process and helped students make better decisions, augmenting autonomy. As opposed to having “sideline motivators,” students appreciated having school staff “alongside them” providing hands-on help while on the journey. The results shed light on the specific autonomy-supportive role that teachers and counselors played.
Students felt as if their volition or autonomy was undermined when school staff provided “passive” college access support, coddled them, or did not provide validation or feedback during their college planning process. Without this level of support, students admitted feeling lost. As SDT notes, autonomy-supportive environments are ones in which students feel as if they are understood, validated, listened to, and offered accurate information about choices and options (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). School contexts that undermined students’ feelings of autonomy limited their motivation as well. This finding suggests that it is not only the information provided by those in the school environment that matters, but the way in which information impacts students’ autonomy. This further illuminates why having supportive school staff is so important in the college-planning process for low-income, first-generation students.

Implications

Given the findings, several implications were derived from the data relating to theory, practice, and considerations for future research.

Implications for practice and policy

There are three major implications for practice and policy based on the study’s findings. First, the data indicate that low-income, first-generation students are often in need of considerable process support during college planning and rely heavily on both school counselors and teachers for college information. However, few studies have highlighted the essential role that teachers play in supporting students’ college-going behaviors. In this study, teachers often offered individualized assistance with applications, essays, and other information, and two took the initiative to create college access programs in their schools.
However, much of the emphasis in the college access literature is on the school counselor’s role (McDonough, 2006; McKillip et al., 2012; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Based on the findings, college access information should be shared more broadly with all school personnel so that students can seek support from multiple sources in the school context. As Ms. Fisher noted, “I may be able to offer a little bit of insight that an advisor didn’t hit on or may be able to offer a little bit more time because guidance counselors see 720 students and I see 90.”

Pre-service teacher training programs should also offer specific training on college access theories and best practices for supporting students during college planning. Few pre-service teaching programs prepare teachers for their role as college access supporters as this is often expected to be the domain of the school counselor (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Policy makers in school districts and colleges of education could require additional certifications or coursework based on college access knowledge. This could incentivize teachers to engage in college access training. Admissions, financial aid, and TRIO staff from local colleges could provide this training.

A second implication for practice and policy relates to the need for additional college access support in the schools. Consistently, students shared that a lack of information about college planning, financial aid, and what to expect in college left them feeling overwhelmed. Models such as the College Advising Corps, which places recent college graduates into schools to serve as college advisors and federal programs like Upward Bound and Gear Up can further enable low-income, first-generation students to get additional college planning support. One-on-one relationship building with these staff can also foster relatedness.
Policymakers in local, state and federal agencies should allocate funding for the expansion of these programs to serve low-income populations not currently being reached.

Schools should also partner with local colleges and universities and other community agencies to enlist volunteers to serve as college mentors. These mentors might include students in teacher education programs, admissions ambassadors, or school counseling students. These mentors could provide assistance by reviewing essays, assisting with the applications, helping with scholarship searches, describing college life, or demystifying course selection. It was interesting to note that the student participants did not mention receiving help from other community-based programs, such as churches, local afterschool programs, or others. Although the sampling criteria excluded students who were involved in pre-college programs like Upward Bound, AVID, or others, it was interesting to note that students did not describe receiving help from any other organizations. This again, speaks to the need for communities to adopt a “village” approach to getting college access information to students. This might include providing financial aid workshops through local churches, enlisting afterschool programs to promote postsecondary opportunities to elementary and middle school students, having local libraries host workshops on college planning, and enlisting local business and Chambers of Commerce to sponsor college tours for youth in the community. Ultimately, these efforts can provide the process support that students stressed was needed to keep them motivated.

Lastly, although this study focused on the role personnel in the school context play in motivating students on the path to college, it was clear in the data that parents are critical during students’ college planning process. Schools can support parents by providing training
to empower them to better augment their child’s motivation through relatedness and autonomy- and competency-building strategies. The training could be held in the evenings or on weekends, and schools could offer childcare for younger siblings. The sessions could include training on how to present options but leave final decisions to the student, offer competency-supportive feedback on your child’s academic abilities, and empower your child to reach out to school personnel for assistance. These sessions could highlight ways that parents can be an important motivational support during the college admissions and choice process.

**Implications for theory**

With regard to theory, this study has the potential to create a deeper understanding of the impact of motivation on student’s experiences during the college access process. The use of motivation theory is rarely found in the literature on college access, and its integration here can highlight the instances in which low-income students are in most danger of losing motivation and “stopping out” of the college access process.

Specifically, this study contributes to the literature by describing how concepts of autonomy, relatedness, and competency factor into student’s experiences that prove useful to those developing or refining college access theories. For instance, Hossler & Gallagher’s (1987) widely cited model explores the factors that impact the predisposition, choice, and search processes, but not why some students may be more or less inclined to take the required steps during the process. Incorporating motivation theories may expand our understanding of how and why students move through the process as they do. The study’s results also document how educators’ actions, although well-meaning, may be unwittingly
leading low-income, first-generation students to become less motivated to pursue college. Federal and local policies are affecting school personnel, which is ultimately impacting students’ motivation. Theories that incorporate contextual factors, such as Perna’s college choice model (2006), could benefit from the incorporation of motivation as another layered factor that impacts the choice process.

This research has the potential to uncover aspects of the college access processes of low-income students that may be overlooked in the literature. As noted previously, studies show that many academically eligible students are opting not to attend college, and often, their decision-making process is little understood. Motivation may play a larger role than previously understood, which can influence future research on the college access journey of this population.

Self-determination theory did not fully allow the researcher to explore why and how these students’ prior decisions to enroll in college remained intact even despite a lack of motivation. Several students spoke of instances where school personnel left them feeling unmotivated; however, they forged ahead “even despite this” or “to prove them wrong.” There appear to be other motivational influences that interact with one’s self-determination to persevere. Combining SDT with other motivational theories or psychological models is a potential area for future study. There are two other key areas for future research based on findings from this study.

**Implications for future research**

First, college access researchers should be aware of the importance that motivation theories have played in the educational arena and begin to infuse these theories into research
on college access. “Increasingly researchers and policy analysts recognize that the necessary qualities for persistence in and completion of postsecondary education involve more than just academic components” (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, p. 31). Studies that incorporate motivation theories can expand our understanding of factors that may impact student’s motivation in different contexts, at different timeframes (for instance, during middle school versus high school), or for different student populations (based on race, gender, etc.) This study’s findings highlighted few gender or racial implications; however, it would be interesting to explore if the impact on students’ motivation differs with a more diverse sample.

Secondly, although the scope of this study focused on how school personnel influenced students’ motivation on the path to college, it was clear that parents were an essential factor. Future studies should incorporate parents to uncover how schools can better partner with them to foster their child’s motivation. Learning from low-income parents about how they motivate their children to pursue college can potentially aid parents and inform schools about what they can do to facilitate parent involvement in the college access process.

**Conclusion**

Understanding students’ motivation can have numerous applications in the educational field (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many school staffers wonder why even academically eligible students may not pursue their college goals. The teachers and counselors in this study were interested to see the findings because they are still unclear on why some students persist to college and others do not. By understanding the role of
motivation, school staff can tailor outreach and ask questions to explore why motivation may be faltering.

If we can determine how to foster students’ motivation, we can target resources more effectively, rethink the ways in which we talk about college in schools, and begin to take actions that augment rather than impede students’ motivation. Together these efforts can create environments that foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and ultimately enhance motivation. As practitioners consider how to promote a college-going culture in their schools and communities, these motivational strategies could prove to be essential for leveling the playing field for underserved students.
CHAPTER 6

ARTICLE 2: PARENTAL INFLUENCES ON LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS’ MOTIVATION ON THE PATH TO COLLEGE

Improving college attainment rates continues to be a top priority for our country, especially for groups traditionally underrepresented in our nation’s colleges and universities (Education Pays, 2013). Yet disparities in college enrollment by socioeconomic status and level of parental education persist. College enrollment rates increase as the level of parental income increases (Couturier & Cunningham, 2006), and students whose parents have a college degree enroll in higher education at higher rates than those whose parents did not complete high school (Choy, 1999). With more than 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary institutions, understanding the challenges these students face on the path to college is essential (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Yet, what is clearly evident in the literature is the critical role that parents and families play in the college access and success trajectory of these students.

Dozens of studies show that parental encouragement and support for students’ educational aspirations is one of the most important factors impacting students’ decisions to pursue a higher education (Choy, 2001; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999; NCAN, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005). Parental involvement is associated with students having greater aspirations to attend college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001), higher postsecondary enrollment (Choy, 2001; Fann et al., 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005), and increased access to information about college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). However, little is known about the ways in which parents influence students’ motivation during the college access process. In a 2008 study,
Hahn and Price found that 88% of non-college-goers and 91% of college-goers rated personal motivation as a strong determinant in their decision to attend college (Hahn & Price, 2008). These findings suggest that motivation is an essential variable to consider, yet the literature on college access has not fully explored how parents and families specifically impact motivation. Therefore, the aim of this study was to talk directly with students, their parents and guardians, as well as those in the school context, to understand the influence that parents and families can have on the motivation of low-income, first-generation college students on the path to college.

In particular, this qualitative case study described how parents/guardians either enhanced or undermined low-income, first-generation students’ motivation using self-determination theory (SDT) as a guiding framework. Developed more than 30 years ago, SDT is an empirically validated construct used by researchers around the world to study differences in motivational influences in familial, educational, psychological, and healthcare contexts, among others (Deci et al., 1999; Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). At its core, motivation theory seeks to explain what causes a person to act, behave, or think in a certain way (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). However, few researchers have employed motivation theory to understand how students’ motivation during the college access process is affected by those around them. This study uses an asset-oriented approach to explore the influences of parents and guardians on students as they pursue their postsecondary goals. This approach contrasts with deficit models which emphasize the barriers to student access to college (Harper, 2010). Instead, an asset-oriented approach encourages researchers to explore the strategies successfully used by
underrepresented students that enabled them to remain motivated on their journey to higher education.

**Parental Influence on College Access**

Numerous researchers have documented the impact that parental involvement, parental levels of education, and parental level of income have on students’ postsecondary aspirations and ultimate enrollment. Perna and Titus (2005) conducted a study on the impact of parental involvement on the college enrollment of African Americans and Hispanics and found that if parents were engaged with the school as volunteers or initiated contact regarding academic issues, then students were more likely to enroll in a 2-year or 4-year college. Other studies have shown that parents who are more involved in the school, talk with teachers and counselors more, and speak with their sons or daughters about college more often have children who attend college in higher numbers than those whose parents are less involved (McKillip et al., 2012; Perna & Titus, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). This emphasizes the critical role parents play in the college access process.

In contrast, studies show that low-income students are often less likely to have supportive peer, family, and schooling networks during college planning. Less than half of low-SES high school students reported receiving help from an adult in preparing for college (College Board, 2011). Although many parents of low-income, first-generation students have a strong desire for their children to pursue higher education, they may not be equipped to provide concrete guidance about college due to their own limited postsecondary experiences (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Choy, 2001; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). One study documented that, at most, “23% of the lowest-SES parents can provide
their children with any guidance based on first-hand collegiate experiences. In contrast, nearly all of the highest-SES students (99.3%) grew up in families knowledgeable of postsecondary education” (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001, p. 134). A lack of accurate information about college can lead to undermatch, where a well-qualified student attends a less selective institution than his credentials would warrant (NCAN, 2011; Roderick et al., 2011). Lower SES students are more likely to undermatch than higher income students (Baum et al., 2013). One of the key reasons cited for this relates to the level of information these students receive from family and the school (Baum et al., 2013).

A lack of awareness about financial aid can also limit access. “Having incomplete or inaccurate information about financial aid also leads students to make college application decisions based on misperceptions, ruling out well-matched institutions even before they apply” (NCAN, 2011, p. 3). This also can lead students to limit their college choice set to schools that are traditional feeder patterns in the community regardless of quality or academic fit (NCAN, 2011), another contributing factor for undermatch. Researchers found that most ninth graders rely almost exclusively on family for information about college and financial costs (Bell et al., 2009, p. 678). However, parents who did not attend college may not have a frame of reference to share concrete information about college. The disparities in college knowledge by income and parental educational level continue to disadvantage these students.

In summary, parent influence on students’ educational goals is critical. In a comprehensive review of the literature on family involvement, Jun and Colyar (2002) noted that “a majority of the research consistently found that students performed better and had
higher levels of motivation when they were raised in homes characterized by supportive and demanding parents who were involved in schools and encouraged and expected academic success” (p. 195). Tierney (2002) also noted that “rather than isolate the child from the family, researchers now argue that family involvement is crucial to the educational success of the child” (p. 592). This study adds to the literature on the role of parents in college access by exploring the following research question: how do parents/guardians and families influence the motivation of low-income, first-generation students on the path to college?

**Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (SDT) was selected for this study because it is empirically validated and has been used widely in research in numerous settings – classrooms in K-12 schools, higher education, the workplace, healthcare, sports, etc. – to investigate social environments that augment or forestall motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan believed that differentiating among certain types of motivation can broaden our understanding of why humans act as they do (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory is a strong fit for studying the motivational influences on students on the path to college.

A central tenet of SDT relates to the type of motivation that underlies action and whether one is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Intrinsically motivated actions are those undertaken due to one’s own interest and with the absence of rewards or controls (Deci & Ryan, 1985). One engages in intrinsically-motivated activities for the pleasure, interest, or satisfaction of the task in and of itself (Deci et al., 1996). An intrinsically motivated reason to attend college would be a student choosing to enroll to study a subject she enjoys.
In contrast, extrinsically motivated actions are performed for some reason other than the pure enjoyment of the activity itself (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sheldon et al., 2004). There may be a desire to attain a reward or prize, to avoid punishment or pressure, to satisfy a threat, to avoid looking incompetent, or to please others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Behaviors that are extrinsically motivated are generally not spontaneous and often require external prompting by others. An extrinsically motivated reason for enrolling in college could be a parent’s ultimatum or because one’s friends are enrolling.

Another fundamental assumption underlying self-determination theory is that humans have a desire to satisfy three innate psychological needs – a need for autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy means to act with a sense of choice and willingness (Deci & Ryan, 2012). To be autonomous involves acting without being forced, obliged or coerced, with freedom to determine one’s options and choices. A student demonstrates autonomy when choosing to attend a college of her choice or opting to forego college altogether.

Competence focuses on the belief in one’s ability to achieve a goal or complete a task (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004). One feels competent when one feels “effective in one’s pursuits and interactions with the environment” (Reeve, 2012, p. 154). A student may feel a sense of competency when he is able to successfully complete a college admissions form or apply for financial aid. Optimal challenges also influence competency. An optimal challenge is a task that is challenging but not too far above one’s level of ability. “When they find optimal challenges, people work to conquer them, and they do so persistently”
The theory also suggests that positive feedback reinforces competence and enhances intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1996). Positive feedback administered in an informational way rather than a controlling way is posited to enhance feelings of competence (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Informational feedback is delivered such that the student feels a sense of autonomy in the action (for example, congratulating a student on a self-initiated task). Controlling positive feedback delivered might involve acknowledging a student for doing something that she “should” have done (Deci et al., 1991). Controlling feedback and negative feedback are both shown to detract from one’s competency (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Deci et al., 1991). This has powerful implications for how parents share feedback during college planning.

It is also important to note that, within self-determination theory, there is a distinction between an informational and a permissive environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). One would imagine that being in a permissive home would foster motivation because children would have autonomy to do what they wanted. However, an informational environment provides some type of feedback structure that enables the child to have a sense of competency in his ability to master the environment. A permissive environment may not thwart autonomy, but is not what the theorists consider informational. “Indeed, it is probably amotivating because it seems to interfere with the development of competence and may lead subjects to experience the situation as unmasterable” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 97). This is critical for understanding how having structure in one’s home can promote competency and autonomy.
Relatedness, or a sense of safety, belonging, and support in interpersonal relationships, is also theorized to promote intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In numerous studies, intrinsic motivation has been shown to decrease in situations where educators and parents showed coldness and a lack of caring and support (Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2004; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992). Expressions of caring, time spent together sharing feelings, and involvement in another’s life contribute to feelings of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Parents’ role in satisfying students’ need for relatedness cannot be overstated.

In addition to its conceptualization about our innate needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy, self-determination theorists have outlined a sub-theory within SDT – called organismic integration theory (OIT) – that describes different types of motivation that may be demonstrated in a given context. OIT explores the ways in which we internalize behavior that may not be intrinsically motivated, but is often seen as necessary for optimal functioning in a society or culture (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Internalization refers to “developing the capacities for mastering external demands, and in appropriate instances, for taking them on as one’s own. This in turns allows for greater autonomy and more effective functioning” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 130). People have a tendency to want to internalize behaviors that are valued by significant others such as their parents or teachers (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Although the behaviors are not initially intrinsically motivated, they ultimately become important to the child, leading to internalization (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Internalization is key because extrinsic motivation is enacted along a continuum, starting
with less intrinsically-motivated extrinsic behaviors towards more intrinsically-oriented extrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991) (see Figure 5 below).

At the far right of the continuum is amotivation during which a person acts but does not value the activity, feel competent to complete the activity, or believe that the outcome is desirable. Amotivation often occurs in situations where one feels that she is not competent to achieve desired outcomes or where one feels little to no sense of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An amotivated student is one who applies to college but has no interest in actually attending nor has confidence that he would be accepted. He is just going through the motions. Next on the continuum is external regulation, the most extrinsically-motivated classification (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An example of external regulation might be a student who does his or her homework in order to avoid being punished by a parent.
Next, introjected regulation refers to taking in a regulation but not fully making it one’s own (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Introjected behaviors are done to avoid guilt, blame, or anxiety, or to fuel the ego by enhancing feelings of pride, worth, or self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). An example might be a student who studies for an exam to impress a teacher. Although studying is widely seen as positive, the motivation behind the action is extrinsically motivated and relates to ego enhancement, which can be problematic for sustained motivation.

Identified regulation is next on the continuum and is a more intrinsically-oriented regulation. Identified behaviors are those in which “there is a conscious valuing of a behavioral goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). In this instance, a student might study for the exam because of the sense of satisfaction she feels with her accomplishment.

The last and most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is integrated regulation. Integrated self-regulation “represents the true meaning of socialization; one does not simply do what one thinks the social values dictate, one behaves, feels and thinks in a way that is congruent with the social values because one has accepted them as one’s own” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 138). Although still extrinsic, these actions are more likely to be autonomous and lead to more pleasure and personal fulfillment (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A student who studies for a test to master the material might be displaying an integrated regulation.
Self-determination Theory and Parental Involvement

Several studies have used SDT to specifically understand how parents influence the motivation of their children. In a study of elementary age children, researchers found that children who rated their parents as more involved and more autonomy supportive were themselves more intrinsically motivated and more autonomous. Grolnick, Ryan and Deci (1991) found that students who had more nurturing and supportive mothers have a tendency to “value intrinsic aspirations of personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community contributions more than the extrinsic aspiration of financial success. By contrast, children who were reared by more controlling, cold or uninvolved mothers were relatively more focused on material acquisition” (p. 150). Controlling and uninvolved parents often create insecurity in their children that leads them to emphasize external signs of worth over intrinsic values (Grolnick et al., 1991).

Another study of elementary-aged children found that parents who are more autonomy-supportive have children who act out less in the classroom and feel more competent in school (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). They also observed a relationship between parental autonomy support and academic achievement and grades (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). The mothers’ influence was particularly salient (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). A study of dropout among high school youth (9th and 10th grades) found that those whose parents were more autonomy supportive and provided positive feedback, acknowledged the child’s feelings, and promoted their competence were more self-determined in their motivational profiles (Vallerand et al., 1997). Again, parents can have a considerable influence on motivation.
Overall, SDT is an important theory for explaining the motivation behind one’s actions and uses a more nuanced approach to explore the types of motivation might be at play. The theory is also highly useful for exploring the strategies parents can use to facilitate students’ motivation for college-going. Applying motivation theory to research on students’ experiences of college access can be a critical new lens through which to ascertain if parents’ efforts are truly reaching students in the ways that they intended.

**Parental Influence and College Access**

The level of parent involvement in a student’s educational process has been widely shown to impact student’s college-going rates. Again, disparities in the level of parental involvement by parent’s educational and socioeconomic statuses persist. Studies document that higher-income parents tend to intervene more in the schools, contact teachers more often, and feel more capable of assisting their children with school-related tasks, such as homework (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Gándara (2002) found that immigrant and minority parents are less likely to intervene at school for various reasons, including differing belief systems about the appropriateness of school engagement. The result is that these families may be constrained from connecting with school personnel that could assist them during the college access process.

Researchers have also found evidence of the need to include parents as engaged partners (Auerbach, 2004; Auerbach, 2007; Fann et al., 2009; Perna et al., 2008). Auerbach (2004) studied parents in a college preparation program and found that, when provided with college knowledge and support, parents had the potential to become powerful allies and advocates for their children. The author noted that “in the absence of appropriate
information and support, many parents unfamiliar with college life . . . may construe college as a threat and resist the best laid plans of qualified students” (Auerbach, 2004, p. 126).

Parent outreach and education are essential.

A comprehensive case study analysis of 15 high schools in five states found that ninth grade students relied almost exclusively on parents and other family (siblings, cousins) for college information (Bell et al., 2009). However, students whose family members have not attended college may lack critical information or experience with the college process (Bell et al., 2009). Researchers noted that “although first-generation students receive significant support from their parents and families, parents are seldom in the position to provide thorough information about academic planning and college requirements” (Corwin et al., 2004, p. 454). These findings point to the need for parents to be equipped with accurate information to best support their children.

Researchers have offered recommendations on how to best engage parents as active partners. Strategies suggested include engaging with parents in a culturally sensitive way (Auerbach, 2007; Fann et al., 2009), providing information in multiple languages (Auerbach, 2004), being proactive in finding out the types of information parents need (Auerbach, 2004), and recognizing that parents’ own educational histories may be affecting their engagement with the school (Auerbach, 2007). It was also noted that parents have an intense need for more information, specifically around financial aid (Auerbach, 2004; Fann et al., 2009) and counselors and other school personnel can play a pivotal role in providing this information. Perna and Titus (2005) found that the likelihood of enrolling in college was related to the volume of resources available at the school via social networks with people like school
personnel and peers. In addition, their study found that parental involvement -- as evidenced by the frequency with which parents had education-related contact with the school (as opposed to behavioral-related contact) -- positively impacted a student’s likelihood of enrolling in college (Perna & Titus, 2005). Clearly the impact of parent-school connections can have a tremendous impact on students’ postsecondary planning.

Another factor in the family context that may disadvantage these students involves concerns about moving away from local communities for college (NCAN, 2011; Vargas, 2004). “Racial/ethnic minority students and low-income students are also more likely to live at home while attending college for cultural reasons – students who feel particularly connected to family and community may be more reluctant to leave home due to employment and family commitments” (NCAN, 2011, p. 4). These issues, often absent from traditional college choice models, must be considered to understand why the disparities in college enrollment for low-income, first-generation students persist.

Other studies have found instances where families were either apathetic or attempted to actually thwart students’ college-going plans. In a study of school counselors in urban schools, counselors reported instances when family members were unsupportive of students’ college aspirations. Reluctance to share financial documents, contentious divorce agreements, religious or cultural opposition to college attendance, and cultural expectations were among the factors cited as hindering students’ college-going goals (Savitz-Romer, 2012). At times, parents can be a limiting force for student’s motivation during the college access process.
In conclusion, parents, guardians and other family members play an important role in influencing students during college planning. Parents are critical to the process because of the level of daily contact and the emotional connection that students feel with their loved ones. As SDT suggests, non-intrinsically motivated behaviors like completing the FAFSA, applying to schools, and researching colleges may not be inherently interesting. Therefore it is often the values passed on by parents and the student’s own motivation that combine to lead the student to complete these tasks. Thus, the ability to understand how parents influenced their child’s motivation to college can yield important findings that can assist parents, as well as those who work with parents, to empower them to better support their children’s college-going aspirations.

Methodology

Case study methodology is best suited to studies where it is important for the researcher to understand a process, phenomenon or context in-depth (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). A collective case study involves using multiple cases to explore an issue with the goal of answering the research questions from different points of view (Yin, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the focus was on the parental and familial context during the college planning process.

Typically, researchers employing self-determination theory use quantitative methods and the SDT pre-designed scales to assess their subject’s motivation in different contexts (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). However, SDT has been used in qualitative research (Hellström & Sarvimäki, 2007; Nordgren & Fridlund, 2001; Taylor et al., 2009; Trainor, 2005) and is considered to be aligned with traditional qualitative analysis. “SDT is allied with qualitative
and critical theories in understanding the situational nature of learning and growth, and the importance of the individual’s frame of reference in shaping meanings and the behaviors that follow from them” (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009, p.268). Few college access studies have incorporated SDT; therefore, it was important to use inductive methods to determine the motivational influences on students rather than employing pre-designed scales that might not align with these students’ experiences. Qualitative methodology afforded that opportunity.

**Research Sites and Participants**

Stratified purposeful sampling (Mertens, 2010) was used to select the student cases. I developed this criteria to identify participants: (a) first generation, (b) low-income, (c) traditional college age, between ages 18-24, (d) transitioned directly from high school to college, (e) enrolled as undergraduate students at a four-year institution, and were (f) in their first or second year of college, (g) did not participate in a pre-college program.

All students selected were enrolled at a large, public institution fictitiously named “West Central University,” in a mid-sized city located in a Southern state. The institutional research (IR) office at West Central University provided a list of 171 students who fit the study criteria, and they were all contacted via email. In addition, I solicited participants through contacts in multicultural student affairs and TRIO Student Support Services (which serves a low-income, first-generation student population). Students who expressed interest in the study completed a pre-screening questionnaire in Qualtrics (see Appendix F). Of the 18 students who responded, seven students fit the full criteria and agreed to participate.

All student participants were low-income and first-generation. Their income level was determined by their eligibility for federal Work-study, Pell-Grant assistance, and/or their
enrollment in a program targeted to low-income students such as TRIO Student Support Services (Engle & Tinto, 2008). I also adopted the definition of “first-generation” typically used by federal TRIO programs: students whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but did not attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

In order to explore the experiences of students at under-resourced high schools, all students selected attended what NCES defines as mid-to-high poverty schools – high schools with 50% or more of their students who qualify for free-and-reduced lunch, based on 2011-2012 NCES Elementary/Secondary Information Systems data (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Selected student participants were also not enrolled in pre-college programs to highlight the other resources these students had to draw upon in order to persist to college.

I also interviewed those who the students noted had motivated them during college planning. The students each provided one to three contacts. So in addition to interviewing the seven students, I interviewed five parents/guardians, as well as the girlfriend of one student who noted that she was his strongest motivator. I also interviewed five high school teachers and two school counselors whom the students referred, although they were not the focus of this article. Tables 3 and 4 describe the student and parent participants. (Note that Emma is classified as a first-generation student because her biological parents did not attend college. However, since the age of 15, she has been living with her guardians—her aunt and uncle—who both have college degrees.)
Table 3

**Student Participant Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Year in college</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>No. of siblings</th>
<th>In K-12, eligible for F&amp;R lunch</th>
<th>Eligible for need-based financial aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Meteorology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Textile Design</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

**Parent Participant Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent participant</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Parent or guardian</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Parent/guardian education level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>High school grad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Some college; no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicki</td>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>High school grad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Researcher Role and Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, it is essential to acknowledge our biases as researchers (Merriam, 1998). As a first-generation, low-income student myself, my shared background allowed me to connect with the participants. However, it was important that I not let my experiences interfere with my interpretations of the participants’ unique stories.
Data Collection and Analysis

As noted by Mertens (2010) and Yin (2009), the researcher is the most important instrument of data collection. The primary data collection methods for this study were interviews and document review. Six of the seven students were interviewed twice, all in-person in a private setting at West Central University. (Zara was interviewed in-person but was not reachable for a second interview.) Interviews lasted between 20-50 minutes. Thirteen interviews with parents, counselors, teachers and peers were conducted via phone, lasting 20-70 minutes each. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. The use of multiple informants enables the researcher to triangulate the data from the students (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to “allow the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Interview protocols were used for students, parents, counselors and teachers (see Appendices A-E). After the first interview, students were also given brief journal prompts to elicit any insights that may have arisen following the first meeting (see Appendix G). All journal responses, mostly one to two pages, were coded in NVivo, a qualitative analysis software tool. The journal responses helped corroborate findings from other sources (Yin, 2009).

To conduct data analysis, all transcripts and journal responses were first uploaded to NVivo. Open and then focused coding were conducted (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002), and I began formulating themes. I engaged in within-case analysis of key themes for each
student’s case, integrating the perspective of the student’s informants as well. Then I engaged in cross-case analysis to determine the emerging overarching themes (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Typically each student’s case would be presented in detail (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009), but due to space limitations, I provided the case descriptions in the Appendix (see Appendix J) and emphasized here the key themes that emerged from cross-case analysis.

Within NVivo, a codebook was developed to capture open codes that inductively evolved from a careful reading of the data (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 2010) (See Appendix I). Open coding involves “coding individual words, lines, segments or incidents” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). As per the theory, codes were categorized by whether participants noted that the actions supported or undermined student’s autonomy, relatedness, or competence. From there, focused coding involved making decisions about which initial codes make the most logical and analytic sense to categorize the data in a meaningful way (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002). Numerous readings of the transcripts led to the development of overarching themes among the cases. Finally, the themes were analyzed to create a cross-case synthesis of the students’ experiences. For this article, teacher and counselor comments were not included unless they directly related to the parent and family role.

I also created memos during coding and analysis to capture my impressions of the students’ experiences and to document changes in my thought processes during the study. Emerging themes were captured here as well. These memos are included in the case study database (see Appendix H).
Trustworthiness

The following procedures facilitated trustworthiness. The researcher conducted two in-depth interviews with each student and captured reflections from their journals. By having multiple sources of data and multiple informants, triangulation occurred, which added to the credibility of the findings. Member checks with participants also ensured the themes were credible. Member checks are described as “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, as noted in Shenton, 2004, p. 68). Once the key themes emerged, they were shared with participants for feedback. Their responses assured the researcher that the themes were in alignment with their experiences.

Two strategies were used to augment the confirmability of the case study. The key findings and memos were shared with a peer reviewer to ensure the conclusions were supported by data. A case study database, including the raw data, was also created and is available for review upon request to further substantiate the findings in the report (Yin, 2009).

Results

The data indicates that parents/guardians in particular, and indirectly other family members (siblings, aunts, uncles, etc.), had a strong influence on students’ motivation on the path to college. Results also highlighted that the area where parents and families had the most influence was in relation to autonomy. Overall, in all of the interviews, the role of parents and guardians was often cited as the most important motivational influence on students’ decision to attend college. These findings extend prior literature by adding a motivational lens to our understanding of the influence of parents on student enrollment in
perspective enables us to understand why low-income, first-generation students may or may not have been motivated at different points in the college access process, which is essential to learn why some persist and others “stop out” of the process. I will first describe the strategies that supported students’ motivation. Later, I will address which tactics challenged students’ motivation during college planning.

**Parent and Family Support for Students’ Motivation**

Self-determination theory describes three psychological needs that all humans seek to fulfill – the need for a feeling of relatedness with others, a sense of competency in one’s abilities to achieve a desired outcome, and the freedom or volition to act in accordance with one’s one wishes or desires (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Results show that parents played an important role in augmenting students’ feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy during college planning.

**Parental support for autonomy.** Based on the frequency of responses, the area where parents appeared to provide the most motivational support related to autonomy. Students noted that their parents provided them with support but ultimately allowed them to make their own decisions and have free choice during the planning process. Parents have to determine how best to help their children during the many “choice moments” that arise during college planning. For most of the students, their parents/guardians handled this task in a way that enhanced autonomy.

**Being supportive but “hands off” with decisions augmented autonomy.** Several parents spoke of the importance of providing choice during college planning. Charlene is
Emma’s aunt and has been her guardian since Emma came to live with her family in ninth grade. Emma is now a freshman majoring in agricultural education at West Central. Charlene stressed the importance of a child having choices, “To me, it’s the responsibility of a parent to make sure that that child is going to be nurtured and encouraged and given whatever kind of opportunity they have to make a choice when it comes time for education . . .” Dorothy is a single mother of two. Her daughter, Nora, is a sophomore majoring in social work at West Central, and her son is in graduate school. Dorothy also stressed the importance of supporting Nora’s choices:

Her questions to me were always geared more towards just trying to select certain programs and the effects of that, and what she thought my opinion would be of the choices long term. My response to her was always, ‘You just have to do what you’re happy with. You can’t always look at financial numbers . . . you have to look at happiness.’

Lily Ann, a sophomore in zoology who was primarily raised by her grandparents, added, “They weren’t like the parents that were like, you got to go here. They were like, you can go wherever you want. They were supportive in that.” It is clear that parents/guardians believed that enabling their children to make their own choices was an important way for them to support their child’s college-planning process. It is important to acknowledge that this was done intentionally, which suggests that the parents/guardians were not simply uninterested or overly permissive, but were thoughtful to ensure that their children felt autonomous to make their own choices. This created an informational environment rather
than a permissive one, which SDT suggests promotes autonomy and fosters students’ motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Serving as a sounding board during decision-making fostered autonomy. Several students described turning to their parents for advice and validation during college planning. Jayda, a freshman majoring in biology, relied on her mother, Sarah, as a major source of advice:

Like I had a full scholarship for [Southern], but I looked into it hard but she kind of mentioned that they wouldn’t be as comfortable with me going there just because of the reputation [Southern] has of certain things and I was just like, ‘Okay, I’ll take that into consideration.’ So I took that a little bit into consideration, but ultimately, the decision was up to me. If I said I wanted to go to [Southern], they would not stop me.

Natalie, a freshman majoring in social work, remembers her mother, Carla, helping her consider the long-term outcome of not going to college:

She always told me to do whatever I wanted to do. That was about it. There was a time when I wasn’t thinking about going to college. She said, ‘If that’s what you want, just consider the options.’ She made me think long term, so I think that was motivating.

Vicki’s daughter Zara, a freshman studying textiles at West Central, also turned to her for advice during the college planning process. Vicki’s approach supported Zara’s decisions:

I suppose just being supportive of their decision and helping them out in terms of where to go, what they want to do. Maybe not put too much pressure on them as far
as ... You know, a lot of parents tend to tell their kids, ‘this is what you should do,’ versus ‘what do you want to do?’

Overall, the parents and students spoke of the importance of parents listening, providing suggestions and advice, but ultimately leaving the decision to the student. This left students feeling as if they had the freedom to make their own decisions, promoting autonomy.

_Supported students’ career goals and desire to attend college to “better themselves.”_

One interesting way in which parents supported their sons and daughters was by respecting their decisions to pursue their chosen career path. The parents also spoke of encouraging their children to attend college, even if it meant they would miss them. Thus, students felt autonomy to make decisions rather than being confined by their parents’ wishes. Vicki is very close to her daughter Zara, but she wanted her to pursue her goals, “The fact that she was going to move out was kind of daunting. But she was all excited about it, so I was happy for her.” When I asked Natalie’s mom, Carla, why she wanted her daughter to attend college, she responded, “To do better than I did. Have a better career. Because I was a mom, so I don’t have that. Pretty much, I just want her to have a better life than I have.”

Dorothy was sick during her daughter’s high school years yet; she and her ex-husband made sure Nora knew that she should still attend college. “For a while, she debated holding off on starting college because she was concerned about me, so we just told her she needed to go anyways. Just go, go, go. Her staying back here wasn’t going to change anything.” Nora reiterated that her mother’s support enabled her to make her own decisions:
My mom’s been sick, but like I said, she’ll never be the type of person that tells me to stay just because of her. She wants her kid to do as best as she can. . . . I knew that staying home, for her, would be a bad excuse, and she’d be really angry with me.

Students also noted that they received support from their parents with regard to their career goals. Carla supported her daughter Natalie’s interest in a career in social work:

She’s not worried about the money. She’ll tell you in a heartbeat, that’s not why she chose it. I like that. I know money is important, but, if you’re not happy with your job, you’re not going to do a good job.

Several students also added that even if they had opted not to attend college, they feel their parents would have been supportive. Nora believes her family would have supported her choice to start a business or go to community college in lieu of a four-year school, “I think they’d all be really okay with that. My mom would be fine with that.” Sarah, Natalie’s mom, shared the same sentiment, “I guess I’m weird, because at the end of the day I think it’s their decision. Some kids aren’t ready to go right away.” This autonomy support from their parents empowered the students to act in their own best interests during the college planning process.

*Providing information and encouraging the child’s help-seeking behavior fostered autonomy.* Several parents noted they had little experience with the access process having not attended college themselves. Yet despite this, they provided direct help with college planning or pointed the student to school personnel who could assist. This enabled students to have critical information to make wise choices, thus promoting autonomy.
Though they both lacked understanding of the process, Evan, a sophomore studying meteorology, received help with the financial aid process from his father. As Evan remembered:

I mean my dad definitely did it, because he had the financial information, but we were on a learning process together. We definitely messed it up, because we had to go through verification, because something was wrong. . . . We were just learning on the way.

Jayda noted that her mom, Sarah, provided her with information that enabled her to act, “Kind of like me, where if she doesn’t know something, she’s going to look it up. I think she did a lot of research beforehand and then kind of knew what to expect and I trusted it.” This enabled Jayda to trust her mom as a sounding board, which increased her confidence to make decisions.

Several of the parents described being directly involved in the school: meeting with teachers, consulting with the counselor, or directing their children to get help from school staff. Dorothy noted, “When my son went through, I was at every meeting they had for financial aid, for scholarships, for everything else.” Jayda’s mother Sarah was also heavily involved: “My mom was a big factor helping me. All I had to do was my applications basically. She took care of a lot of it.” Natalie’s aunt and uncle also provided direct college help, “They took me to different colleges because I didn’t go on the tours and stuff, and they basically told me to research the university that I was going to. They both attended West Central, so they pushed.”
Some wished that they had more information from the schools to enable them to assist their children with the process. Sarah was interested in creating a network with other parents: “Maybe a network of parents whose children were also going. That way we could touch base with each other and let the kids have at least a little bit of a connection before they get there.” Dorothy, who was battling a serious illness when Nora was college-planning, also wanted more information directly from the school:

It’s that small town mentality where they don’t want to bother anybody who’s sick. Sometimes I just wish I would have got that knock on the door, like, ‘We just want to let you know what’s going on.’ Cause I would find out everything second hand.

In closing, parents were cited as promoting students’ autonomy in numerous ways. They served as sounding boards, validated students’ decisions, supported students’ choice of career path, ensured that their children felt autonomous to choose whether to attend college, and provided information to help students make decisions. Together, these autonomy-supportive strategies facilitated students’ motivation on the path to college.

**Parental support for competence.** Parents were also influential in augmenting students’ feelings of competency in their academic readiness for college. Nearly all of the students in the study noted that their parents reassured them that they were “college material.” They also set high standards for academic achievement and promoted the value of education at an early age. Many of the parents were quite demanding in this area and felt that it helped their children excel. Together, these strategies appeared to facilitate students’ feelings of competency.
Early emphasis on education fostered students’ academic competency. For the most part, parents in the study stressed that emphasizing education at an early age was essential as they raised their children. They also noted that when they see youth in their communities opt not to attend college, they often attribute it to parents’ lack of early emphasis on education.

Sarah, a mother of five, stressed early that college was an expectation for her kids. When asked when she first started talking with her children about college, she noted: “Early, early, early. Probably fifth grade. Maybe even earlier than that. By middle school, we have ingrained in doing that. There’s no option. You don’t have any other option. You go to college.” Dorothy, Nora’s mom, also set a strong foundation for education with her two children:

It was just instilled in them at such a young age. This is what’s going to happen, you’re going to finish high school and you’re going to go to college. They were already picking out colleges by the time they were in fifth grade.

Jayda also noted that college was expected in her home:

It was always a given. You’re going to graduate high school, then go to college, then that’s what I worked for. I didn’t really understand the significance of it when I was younger but that’s just what people did, I assumed.

It is also important to note that many of the parents noticed their child’s academic strengths early and then further reinforced their child’s academic efficacy. As Nora noted of her mother, “She never really pushed for my brother and I to do well in school because we always did well in school.” Lily Ann was also pushed to go to college because of her early academic success, “I ended up skipping a grade and they knew that there was something
special, I guess, about me.” Therefore, it is worth noting that the parental push may have developed after seeing the child’s early achievements in school. Regardless of what prompted the effort, many parents stressed education to their children and provided early competency support for academics.

Parents’ high expectations for good grades and “college-going” fostered competency. Parents in the study often emphasized that doing well in school and attending college were “expected” in their households. They were often strict about this expectation and set a high bar for academic achievement. The students interviewed appeared to adopt these high standards as their own and rise to the occasion.

Carla, Natalie’s mother, made it clear that going to college was expected. “It’s like a given for me, for my kids. You make excellent grades, you work your butt off to get good grades, there’s no reason for you not to go. It’d just be a waste in a way.” Emma’s aunt and uncle also encouraged her to have high standards in school, “They always said that school was my only job. Even though I had a job and I had a social life, they said that making good grades was my only job.” Emma began internalizing the values her guardians set for her. Dorothy, Nora’s mother, considers herself a strict mom and stressed that college was expected, “If she wanted to continue to have any support from me and I hated to put it to her that way, but it was just like I wasn’t going to negotiate it with her. It was going to happen.”

Jayda and Lily Ann’s stories exemplify the way in which parents’ high standards often lead their children to internalize similar values. Jayda noted:

Right up behind me was my mom. If I ever made a B, she was always, ‘hmm you can do better than that.’ I guess in theory I could but I never really made a B in high
school because I was always striving to be up there. Not only for myself but because my parents really wanted me to and it was going to set a good example and I liked being the best.

Lily Ann’s dad also set a high bar for academic achievement based on his belief in Lily Ann’s abilities. This led Lily Ann to push herself:

My dad would get mad at me if I brought home a B, because he knew like, ‘You’re capable of more.’ Since they knew how motivated and capable I was, they were kind of disappointed if I didn’t reach their expectations. . . . Since they push me so hard, I kind of had high expectations for myself.

Essentially, parents/guardians had an impact on their children’s motivation by pushing their children to excel because they believed it was important and that the child had the ability. This enhanced their motivation by causing them to work hard to maintain those standards. They also internalized these values by setting a high bar for themselves.

Parents’ beliefs in their students’ competency to attend college was reinforced with positive feedback. An important competency-supportive strategy is the provision of positive feedback. Positive feedback affirms one’s sense of competency because it denotes a belief in your abilities to master a task. Parents in the study were consistently described as providing positive feedback to their children with regard to grades and their academic fit for college. Emma mentioned that her aunt believed in her and saw her potential to excel in college:

I’d usually talk to my aunt, who I call my mom. I’d usually call her. She encouraged me that I made the right choice and that I had it in me if I could get through high
school the way I did, with all I had going on, that I could definitely get through college.

When asked what their reaction would be if he opted not to attend college, Evan remarked, “My parents, you know, if I went and joined the army like by brother did, they’d be a little upset, because they knew I could go to school. I had the ability…” Jayda noted how important her parent’s feedback was when she doubted her choice of major:

The only thing that kept me from switching majors was talking to my parents and them reassuring me I was most likely in the right major because I love biology and the human body. . . . I couldn’t help but believe they were right and I was in the right major.

Lily Ann noted in her journal response:

If I didn’t have people that I did have motivating me, I probably wouldn’t have believed in my ability to go to college as I did. I probably would be where they are now, still at home, working for a living.

This emphasizes the importance of parental feedback. Many students had parents who never doubted that they were “college material.” Positive feedback and encouragement appeared to foster students’ motivation by augmenting their competency during the college access process.

**Parental Support and Relatedness**

As one might imagine, many students have a strong connection with their families. This was true of these students as well. Although the level of parent involvement differed,
the students all had a strong sense of relatedness with their parents/guardians. This appeared to enhance their motivation towards college.

**Involved parents fostered students’ sense of relatedness.** Parents and guardians in the study demonstrated their care by listening to students’ concerns, sharing in their successes and failures, and serving as “partners” in the college process. Two parents/guardians in particular consistently used the word “we” when describing their involvement in their child’s experience. Charlene, Emma’s guardian, shared, “When her sophomore year hit, we started taking SATs and ACTs, so that she could just get a general idea of where she needed to work harder.” Sarah, Jayda’s mom, also used the term, “First and foremost, we started taking honors classes and AP classes right away. Then her sophomore year we started taking ACT and the SAT early.” Jayda noted that her mom’s active involvement made her feel as if her mom was her ally:

> It’s kind of like a support, if I had any doubts about anything I’d just go back and reconfirm with her and see what she had to say about it. Just things like that. If I was worried about anything, I could just kind of mention it and she . . . would give me affirmation and make me feel better about the decision I was making.

Relatedness is described as having a close person to turn to. For these students, their parents were available when they had moments of doubt and also shared in their successes. Lily Ann lit up when describing her grandmother whom she speaks to every day:

> Then after my parents divorced, we were left in the care of my grandma for five years. We’re just very, very close, and she’s always been the person there by my side, motivating me, and would do anything to provide for me.
Nora recalled her mother’s tear-filled joy when she got into college and received funding:

Telling my mom I wanted to go to school and then seeing her reaction when I got in, then when I was able to go. . . . Her reaction definitely makes being here much more worth it.

Knowing their parents/guardians were “partners” in the process and celebrated in their challenges and triumphs enabled the students to feel a strong sense of relatedness that served as a motivator during the ups and downs of the access process.

**Parents’ example served as a motivator.** Several students mentioned that seeing their parents overcome adversity also caused them to persevere. Emma, whose birth mother died when she was three, remembers her father’s stories about her mom:

He’d always just tell me things about my mom and how she went to college and how she worked hard and how he wished that he would’ve stayed in college instead of going to the army, or, not that he wished he hadn’t gone to the military, but he wished that he would’ve paid more attention to college.

Nora, who struggled with depression in high school, also saw her mother as a role model:

I find it interesting, because no matter how depressed I’ve been, I’ve also recognized that . . . I’m a strong person and I know that. A lot of that has to do with my mom. My mom’s a really strong woman. She’s like a mythical beast. She’s battling cancer.

She should have died by now. I know that I’m very strong.

For Emma, seeing her guardians’ success fueled her resolve to persevere to college, “Definitely my aunt and uncle. They’re both very successful in their jobs. When I look up to
that, I knew that I wanted that in my life one day. So it was just something that always kept me going.”

Students’ sense of relatedness with their parents and guardians sparked a desire to follow in their footsteps or learn from their mistakes. The fact that this was expressed by nearly every student indicates the impact of having strong connections on one’s motivation.

**Extended family augmented students’ feelings of relatedness.** Several of the student participants had siblings and were influenced by them either by following in their footsteps to college or because they wanted to be a good example to them. Their sense of relatedness to their siblings fostered their motivation to persist to college.

Nora’s older brother attended college, and she said seeing him go influenced her, “Then, when my brother went to college, that was the big eye-opener like ‘Oh, I can go there, too, if he could.’” Jayda is the oldest of five children and was committed to serving as a positive example:

More and more as I got older, I decided it was more important for me to go to college because of my brothers and sisters coming up behind me. I needed to be a good influence on them and I needed to basically lead the way because whether I liked it or not, I was going to set the tone for rest of everybody else.

Natalie is also the oldest of eight and is very close to her siblings. She remarked:

Probably the most influential thing in my decision making is that I have eight younger siblings. I don’t want them to say, ‘Oh I could have done it if Natalie would have done it.’ Because they’re little copycats. I was like, I have to set a good example.
Margaret, Lily Ann’s grandmother, also noted that Lily Ann is having a similar influence on her younger sister and other relatives. Zara is the youngest of five and the first to attend college. She noted that her family played an important role in encouraging her to go to college, “I think my family kept me motivated because I don’t think I would be as enthusiastic about going if I didn’t have support in the first place. If they were say not as supportive, I might take on that viewpoint. It would just be more difficult. Natalie’s aunt and uncle also offered assistance. “They showed me the colleges and showed me the financial aid programs. So I didn’t really worry. . . . They made sure that I was able to find a job really easily. They take care of me.”

In closing, the findings indicate that students had a great deal of motivational support from their parents and extended family that augmented their feelings of relatedness, competency and autonomy during the college planning process. However, in contrast, students also acknowledged instances where parents’ efforts actually undermined their competency, relatedness and autonomy, often unintentionally. Those results are described below.

**Parent Behaviors that Undermined Motivation**

Here, I outline the parental and familial actions that caused students’ sense of autonomy, competency, and/or autonomy to waiver. Although the students ultimately overcame these “stopping points,” it is important to note where they felt stalled by the actions or feedback of their family. In this section, I also included feedback from teachers and counselors who described the actions they see parents engage in that undermine students’ motivation to college.
Lack of college “push” and little process support from parents undermines autonomy and competency. Several students noted that not having a parent or guardian assist with the admissions process, what I call “process support,” undermined motivation. This lack of push from parents often left students feeling stuck.

Candace, Evan’s girlfriend, commented that his parents’ lack of direct help limited him. “Evan’s parents didn’t really push him like that. He’s the kind of person where he sees they didn’t push him so he pushes himself, and most people aren’t like him...” Carla, Natalie’s mother, also took a neutral approach with her daughter’s college decision-making process:

I’ve just pretty much let her do what she wanted. The way I look at it, you’re 18, I’ve done my job, in a way I’m still going to support you, but, anything after you’re 18 is her choice. . . . Any decision that she makes from now on, is hers.”

This hands-off approach could have backfired, but her daughter opted to still attend. Ms. Long, a counselor at a low-income school, noticed that this lack of push from parents often led to apathy on the part of students:

I’ve seen it where they don’t really motivate at all. There’s no ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ It’s just kind of whatever the student wants to do. I think that has an impact on how motivated that child is to apply. Some will do it upon themselves and be like, ‘I am going.’ When there is no push in either direction, sometimes that student just flounders.

One of the teachers interviewed, Ms. Fisher, also noted that the lack of direction and direct support caused two of her first-generation students to struggle:
I’m thinking of two students as a prime example. They both got in at [Northern] and they had very, very low income, very un-involved parents and they didn’t have that push to study while they were up there, that push, that drive, just a little extra oomph behind them to keep them going, and I know they came home within a year.

The lack of push from parents also left some students feeling apathetic at times. Evan’s parents were hands-off, but he wanted more encouragement to attend college: “They were like accepting and wanted me to do that, but they were never like, ‘You need to go do this.’ Either I did or I didn’t.” Lily Ann shared in her journal response, “I felt alone in the struggle/journey a lot of the time since I was figuring it out all on my own, with no one to help guide me or to go to with questions.” Overall, parents’ inability to provide direct process support left students’ feeling unsure of how to progress, which weakened their sense of competence and autonomy during college planning.

Parents not able to help with “what it will be like” questions, which forestalled competency. A frequent theme among the students centered on their lack of awareness of what to expect in college. They mentioned being unsure of the academic expectations, dorm life, and the social environment. They wanted to turn to their parents for information, but they too were unfamiliar with the college environment. Once in college, students felt even less able to share their questions and challenges with their parents, which limited relatedness and competency.

Evan was very open about his academic challenges during his first year in college. Now a sophomore, he wishes his parents understood his situation, but he feels alone:

You kind of jump into an abyss by yourself. You’re just like, ‘Well, here we go.’
Once you get there, it’s kind of like, ‘Well, I’m here, but what do I do now?’ Having no resources, no background really. I mean I’m glad to say my mom got an associate’s degree but honestly, she was no help at all, either because things have changed and she’s been out of school and work so long…”

Jayda also acknowledged the challenge of not being able to turn to her mother for advice:

Even though she went to college, she didn’t go to college, she took online classes and that kind of thing. I couldn’t have those kinds of questions answered because I didn’t have a parent that had already been through it.

Emma shared that not knowing what to expect caused her to feel less competent academically in college. She added that she wishes her parents’ involvement with school could have continued:

I think the only thing that would have made a difference in my confidence would have been if my parents were here to hold me accountable for my grades. They’re the reason I was able to buckle down when I needed to . . . If I’d reached out . . . and communicated with them more, I believe I would have been more successful in my first semester.

It is possible that the heavy involvement of parents in high school became a “crutch” for some, limiting their autonomy to be successful once in college. Yet for a few students, they wished their parent’s involvement in their academic life in college could have continued.

**Financial worries limited students’ autonomy.** Several students noted that financial fears created doubt about whether to attend college. They also made decisions
about colleges based on funding, which narrowed their choice set and impacted their autonomy. Emma worried about her aunt and uncle’s ability to pay for college. But she also used this as a motivator:

I knew that they couldn’t provide for me for college. . . . I knew that I needed something to allow me to go to college, like a scholarship. That was another thing that always pushed me. I needed to do my best in high school in order to earn scholarships.

Natalie, who worked nearly 60 hours a week in high school to earn money, also had fears about incurring debt. She knew that she could not rely on her parents for financial support:

Coming from a low income family, I also contemplated if I was willing to be in debt for the best years of my adult life. The decision weighed so heavily on me that I didn’t confirm I was going to college until the last possible minute.

Lack of parental help with the financial aid process also affected students’ confidence in their ability to maneuver through the college process. Evan described struggling with applying for scholarships with little help from school staff or family. And when Lily Ann was asked what caused her to be less motivated towards college, she mentioned her family’s talks about money:

That would cause me to rethink if I wanted to go to a four-year institution or just go to community college for a couple years. Because my parents, I knew that they wouldn’t be able to support me. . . . So that made me feel a little less motivated when I had to think about the finances of college and how I was going to get through.

Although most students did receive the financial aid they needed for college, the
worry about how to pay was a burden that left them feeling demotivated. For some, they
shouldered these burdens alone since their families were unfamiliar with the financial aid
process. These factors appeared to contribute to students having less autonomy to choose the
best college to fit their needs and fueled doubts about their competency to pay for school.

**Family obligations and expectations undermined autonomy.** Another key finding
related to family obligations and expectations. Although not prevalent, some students shared
that family expectations about who goes to college negatively influenced their college plans.
For others, the need to help their parents or siblings left them less motivated toward college.
These factors undermined student’s ability to act in their own best interest, limiting
autonomy.

Coping with a parent’s illness was a factor that caused Evan and Nora to weigh
whether they would pursue college. Evan’s mother was diagnosed with cancer when he was
a high school, so her health was a factor in his college choices. “Based on how she was,
determined if I was going to come here.” He added: “But if things are still bad or worse
comes to worse or the unmentionable happens, I want to be able to stay at home and help
support my family.” He did stress that he would have opted for a community college instead
of foregoing college altogether.

Nora’s mother battled cancer and a serious infection during her teen years, so her
health was definitely at the forefront as she considered the Peace Corps after college:

With the Peace Corps, it’s difficult because I only have my mom and my brother and
my mom is sick normally. She’s not the type of person that would be like, ‘Don’t
join the Peace Corps’ but it also would be really hard if she did get sick.
Ms. Long, a school counselor, also sees family obligations as being a major deterrent to college for some. “I know that a lot of times these parents. . . . They rely on these students to support and take care of younger siblings and do all those things even after they graduate.” She noted that this affects whether they go away to a four-year school or stay closer to home and attend a community college. Dorothy, Nora’s mother, has also seen instances where family dynamics make it difficult for the child to focus on college. “I think in some households they have such deep rooted problems that they’re just trying to get through day to day life. So that the thought of a higher education is the last thing that they’re thinking of.” Lily Ann also noticed that pressure to help the family financially had an effect on students’ motivation to attend college, “There were people that had to stay back and take care of family. Whether it be siblings because their parents worked or parents who had disabilities...”

Mr. Newton, a teacher in a rural mountainous community, also noted that gender differences within the family influenced students’ support for college:

We deal with a lot of sexism. I hate to say it, but, [Weston] is kind of back in the sticks. We deal with a lot of ‘women aren’t supposed to have power roles’ and ‘women aren’t supposed to go to school.’

He recalled a story of an academically gifted student athlete whose parents kept her from attending college due to their belief that going to college was not a fit for her, “It was one of those situations where they wanted her to stay home and wash mom and dad’s clothes and her brother’s clothes and cook for mom, dad and brother.” Lily Ann noted that going to college was not expected of the women in her family, “Especially if you’re a girl, you get married and have kids. . . .My aunt, my grandma, they all didn’t finish high school, got
married, had kids.” Zara described a similar expectation of women’s roles within her family:

My grandma didn’t encourage the girls to go. Only the two boys in that family went. They always sort of expressed how that they didn’t like how that happened. I guess that affected me … to want to go more.

Nora also recalled a boyfriend who pressured her not to attend college, “He was like, ‘I don’t want you to go to school. I want you to stay here. I want you to get pregnant and have all my babies.’” She, like Zara and Lily Ann, chose to still pursue an education despite these beliefs. Yet, for some, these expectations can limit student autonomy on the path to college.

In summary, worries about financial aid; family obligations and expectations; lack of parent help with the admissions process; and parents’ inability to share what to expect were cited as undermining students’ motivation. Despite these challenges, these students remained steadfast towards college. However, these hurdles could have easily derailed their motivation to pursue their postsecondary aspirations.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to describe the ways in which parents and families had an influence on the motivation of their children during the college planning process, using self-determination theory as a guide. In order to answer this question, a qualitative collective case study was conducted with low-income, first-generation students, as well as their parents, guardians, teachers, and school counselors. The data from this study shows that the motivation of low-income, first-generation students on the path to college was indeed heavily influenced by parents and family members, both positively and negatively.

The findings illustrate that direct planning help, validation, positive feedback and
encouragement from family appeared to foster students’ autonomy, competency, and sense of relatedness during the college admissions and choice process. Parents were most often cited as contributing to students’ autonomy support. They served as sounding boards for students, validated their decisions, and encouraged their children to make their own choices with regard to college. This finding corroborates self-determination theory research showing that students who rate their parents as autonomy-supportive and involved tended to have children who were more intrinsically motivated and autonomous (Grolnick et al., 1991). Yet it extends those findings by describing how parents influenced the motivation of current college students during their college planning process, which brings a new perspective to existing college access and self-determination research.

By and large, parents in the study also provided positive feedback, which, according to SDT, is essential for augmenting feelings of competency (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Hearing that their parents thought they were smart helped students believe in their college readiness. This feedback was administered informationally, such that students still had volition to make decisions. This extends our understanding of how informational feedback impacts college-age students; it promotes a belief in one’s abilities, whereas controlling feedback detracts from one’s feelings of competency (Deci, et al., 1991).

In addition, most of the parent participants were very clear at an early age that education was important. Getting good grades and treating school “like a job” were strategies that these parents emphasized, even demanded, at an early age. Going to college was expected. This fostered a sense of competency for students who seemed to flourish knowing that their parents expected them to excel. This builds upon Jun and Colyar’s (2002)
research which demonstrated that students were more motivated and did better in schools when they were raised by supportive, demanding, and involved parents who emphasized academic success. Here, the results make a new contribution by highlighting that these parents not only promote academic success, but their efforts appear to also foster motivation.

The high academic standards set by several parents appeared to resonate with the students such that they internalized similar values. This finding is aligned with prior SDT research on the internalization process, which describes the way in which an extrinsically motivated action becomes integrated into one’s internal value system (Deci & Ryan, 2012). According to SDT, when parents convey that they value a behavior, their children begin to internalize the value of the behavior as well (Deci & Ryan, 2012). This was evident in the findings. The students appeared to adopt the high standards set by their parents, which led them to remain motivated to college. However, the literature has not previously described how these early standards promote a student’s motivation towards college. The data presented here inform our understanding of this important connection, which has clear implications for college access research and practice.

This work contributes to the literature by adding a motivational lens through which to understand why parental involvement and encouragement is so critical. Prior research has documented that parental involvement and encouragement is essential to promoting students’ educational aspirations (Choy, 2001; NCAN, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005). However, these findings expand our understanding of why parental involvement can be such a strong motivator for students on the path to college. Data from this study show that students’ feelings of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are fostered when parents are highly
Overwhelmingly, the students described their parents as caring and many had strong relationships with their siblings as well. Many of the students wanted to be positive examples to their siblings, which motivated them to attend college. This finding expands the literature on self-determination theory by describing how a close relationship with one’s family can influence college-going. This has not been widely studied in SDT research, which has typically focused more on K-12 educational implications. As Grolnick, Ryan and Deci (1991) found, students who have more nurturing and supportive mothers were more likely to “value aspirations of personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community contributions more than the extrinsic aspirations of financial success.” Thus, it is interesting to note that most students in the study described an interest in a field with a focus on “community contribution” rather than solely financial success – the students are majoring in social work, education, sports medicine, nursing and veterinary science. The findings showed that parents supported students’ career goals because they wanted them to be happy, promoting intrinsic motivation. It is possible that the level of support from parents for students’ career goals left them feeling comfortable and confident about pursuing a field based on their intrinsic interests. This has interesting implications for the future happiness of these students in their chosen field.

It is important to note that not every parent or family member in the study provided strong motivational support. Some of the tactics used by families that were not working to promote motivation included not providing direct “process” support, not assisting with “what it will be like” questions, not providing financial aid assistance, or highlighting fears about...
paying for college. Studies show that many low-income, first-generation students do not receive direct assistance with college planning from their parents (Auerbach, 2004; Bell et al., 2009; Corwin et al., 2004). These findings add a new perspective by describing the impact this has on motivation. The data show that several parents were not able to offer concrete guidance and often expected the student to get assistance from the school instead, which worked well for some but not others. This has implications for students’ motivation, which can impact college access, especially for those students who do not have other sources from which to gain support or information.

Another barrier to students’ motivation was having parents who provided too little college “push.” School personnel shared examples of students who floundered due to a lack of parent encouragement. SDT research suggests that students actually thrive in environments which are structured rather than overly permissive. “Permissive environments are ones that are not only without controls, but are also devoid of structure. Thus, functionally, they amount to neglect” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 97). The findings from the study highlight that a structured environment and strong parental push were important during the college access process. Those with permissive parents found the lack of push demotivating. Participants seemed to thrive with strict and demanding parents, and some wished this could continue beyond high school. This has interesting implications for the role parents can or should play during the college years.

Finally, some of the female students were aware that community norms encouraged girls to marry and have children after high school. This finding was surprising but not uncommon in the literature on college access. Savitz-Romer (2012) found that parents’
reluctance for their children to attend college often stemmed from religious differences, cultural opposition to college attendance, contentious divorce agreements, and expectations that work or family demands take precedence. This limited students’ college aspirations and their choice of institutions. For Lily Ann, Nora, and Zara, countering those beliefs and deciding to go to college was an autonomous act, fueled by the support of their parents and their belief in their academic abilities. This speaks to the importance of parent’s early emphasis on education and the power of parental autonomy support.

Implications

Findings from this study contribute to our understanding of the influence of parents and family on the motivation of low-income, first generation students during the college access process. The participants pointed to specific parental or familial actions or behaviors that either augmented or undermined their competency, autonomy, and sense of relatedness. These findings could be of interest to those working to impact college access, such as parents, school personnel, higher education staff, and those working with youth in college access programs. Based on these findings, several implications were derived from the data relating to practice, theory, and considerations for future research.

Implications for Practice

There are several implications for practice based on the results of the study. I will first describe the practical implications for parents, followed by an overview of ways school personnel can best put this information into practice.

**Practical implications for parents.** The data suggest that parents have the potential to have a considerable influence on the autonomy of their children. Providing choices,
validating students’ decisions, offering advice and sharing accurate information are essential for autonomy and competency-support. Parents should solicit information from their children about how the college planning process is progressing, create an open dialogue with school personnel about their child’s academic progress, listen and ask questions to elicit the student’s perspective, and encourage their children to seek information from school staff.

Providing accurate information was an important way in which students said their parents supported them. Research abounds that shows that improving the accessibility of college knowledge is one of the most important ways to “level the playing field” for low-income, first-generation students (Conley, 2008). As one study found, higher income parents tend to intervene more in the schools and contact teachers more often for information (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Other studies have shown that parental involvement in the schools for education-related reasons positively impacted student’s likelihood of enrolling in college (Perna & Titus, 2005). Therefore, another key strategy is for parents to reach out to school personnel, solicit information, request to meet with the counselor to discuss college planning, and attend parent nights. These activities are not always easy due to family and work demands, but creating a dialogue with a teacher or counselor can improve the parent’s ability to get key information to aid their child. And even if parents lack information, they can still provide a high level of motivational support by simply serving as a sounding board, offering advice, and directing their child to others who may be able to provide information.

Students acknowledged that knowing their parents were there for moral support during the highs and lows of the process fostered their sense of relatedness, which kept them motivated. This knowledge can empower parents to serve as allies.
Another way parents can support the motivation of their students is by continuing to offer support and encouragement once the students enrolls in college. One way to do this is to visit the campus with your child, attend new student orientation, and talk with your child about their social and academic adjustment to college. For parents, having an ally on campus that they can call to get information is another way to facilitate a successful transition to college. Nearly all of the students remarked that they did not know what to expect in college. Many campuses have offices such as Parent and Family Services, academic advising units, and Federal TRIO offices (such as Student Support Services) that can provide support for low-income, first-generation students. Having connections with these units empowers parents so they can better foster their child’s motivation while on campus.

Another critical motivator for students was the early emphasis their parents placed on academics. Parents in the study stressed the importance of getting good grades, excelling in school, and going to college. As Dorothy noted, “You’ve got to set the foundation. I think you can do that when your children are very, very young and they will want to go to school. They will want higher education and they will succeed.” Studies have shown that students make decisions about whether they will attend college as early as the eighth or ninth grade (Choy, 2001). Thus, parents should emphasize education early and not wait until middle or high school to discuss educational expectations.

Another strategy that parents used that resonated with students was encouraging students not to be bound by parent needs or wishes. This was important because students, parents, and school staff described many instances where family obligations undermined students’ choice of whether and where to attend college. Despite being sick, Dorothy
encouraged her daughter to attend the college of her choice. Lily Ann’s grandmother reassured her that they would “find a way” to pay for school. Other parents wanted their children to stay nearby, yet still allowed their children to make the best choice for them. This was a challenge but one that fosters relatedness and promotes autonomy without the needs of the parent circumventing the wishes of the student.

**Practical implications for school and university personnel.** There are also several implications for practice for K-12 personnel as well as those working in college and universities. The parents in the study clearly appreciated having caring and knowledgeable school staff to assist their students during college planning. Based on this finding, school personnel should make reaching out to low-income, first-generation parents a priority. One technique is to promote connections among parents whose children are college-bound to encourage them to create a parent network. Another suggestion is to provide information directly to parents rather than second-hand via the student. Offer to call or visit those parents who cannot physically make it to the school for information fairs or college nights.

Many postsecondary institutions do not track students’ first-generation status, so programs for parents may not specifically address the needs of families new to the college environment. Orientation and visitation programs often do not consider instances where parents are not able to travel to campus due to childcare needs, lack of time off of work, or transportation concerns. Dorothy noted that she was ill and could not travel; Sarah lives over 6 hours away from campus and has four children at home; and Vicki lives in a remote island community and has to take a ferry over two hours just to get to the mainland. Universities could provide more information about campus transitions online to help first-generation
families know what to expect. And, community organizations could offer to include parents on college tours. Together, these tactics could empower parents to provide more motivational support to their students.

In addition, K-12 schools, college access programs like the College Advising Corps and other community-based organizations, and universities could offer specific training for parents on how to provide an environment at home that is competency and autonomy-supportive and that fosters students’ feelings of relatedness. With training in motivational techniques, parents can learn how they might be unintentionally undermining the motivation of their children. These training sessions could be hosted by school counselors, College Advising Corps advisers, Boys & Girls club staff, and local churches, among others. Parents at the elementary, middle, and high school levels could receive information via brochures, parent nights, or on the web. Armed with this information, parents can serve as even stronger partners to foster their child’s success.

**Implications for theory.** Another possible implication from this study relates to theory. As noted previously, few college access researchers have integrated motivation theory to understand students’ experiences. Instead, college choice models or concepts of social capital are more widely used as guiding frameworks. By integrating motivation theories in research on college access, we can better ascertain why some first-generation, low-income students may “stop out” of the college admissions process. Specifically this study adds to the literature by discussing how concepts like autonomy, relatedness, and competency factor into student’s experiences. Researchers who are revamping or expanding on existing college choice models, such as Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) developmental
model of college choice, may find that incorporating motivation as a variable expands our understanding of students’ developmental process. For example, incorporating relatedness may explain why some students may be less inclined to pursue college. Perhaps they feel less connected with school personnel or are not supported by their parents at home.

Students’ early feelings of academic competency may also influence predisposition, the phase in Hossler and Gallagher’s model (1987) where students make decisions about whether to attend. As this study showed, early parental support for competency may be what drives students to want to attend college during the predisposition phase. Motivation theory can deepen our awareness of the factors that impact autonomy, competency, and relatedness at each of the phases of the college choice process.

Literature on gender and college access may benefit from the inclusion of motivation theory to describe how cultural norms influence motivation. This study highlighted how familial and cultural expectations negatively influenced several female students’ autonomy with regard to their college aspirations. In addition, researchers using culturally nuanced models – such as concepts of cultural capital, community cultural wealth, asset-based approaches and critical theories – may benefit from considering motivation in their research. By including motivation theory, researchers will be able to add another lens through which to explore the complexity of how low-income, first-generation students maneuver through the college access process.

The study’s results also document how certain actions by parents may be unknowingly causing low-income, first-generation students to be less motivated to pursue college. Having an understanding of the impact of context on student motivation was
essential. Theories that incorporate contextual factors, such as Perna’s college choice model (2006) could benefit from adding motivation as another dynamic that impacts college choices. Researchers using social capital theories as a conceptual underpinning can also better understand how a student’s social networks – parents, extended family, school personnel, peers, etc. – influence their college access process. Perhaps one’s social networks not only facilitate the sharing of information, but the relatedness inherent in these connections may also foster motivation. This study has the potential to expand our understanding of why strong social networks may be so important.

The use of self-determination theory however, did not enable the researcher to definitely ascertain which influences in these students’ lives most prominently enabled them to remain motivated in the face of obstacles. In these cases, these students encountered numerous challenges on the path to college, and their familial connections appeared to moderate some of those negative influences. However, many were already determined, some at an early age, to reach their college-going goal. We do not yet know if their early internalized values about education from family were the most pressing factor. Was it a combination of parental support, personal drive, or other personality or psychological traits? Using SDT alone did not enable the researcher to uncover those nuances. However, the combination of SDT with theories from psychology or sociology or other motivational theories might prove useful in discerning whether differences in personality may have impacted these students’ college-going trajectory.

This research has helped explore aspects of the college access processes of low-income students that may be overlooked or unexplored using current models. As Savitz-
Romer and Bouffard (2012) noted, “A lack of understanding of motivational processes, especially about how different kinds of goals can help or hurt in the long run, can actually undermine the very outcomes that practitioners are trying to promote” (p. 7). These findings show that student’s feelings of autonomy, competency, and relatedness can influence college access more than previously understood, which can impact future research and theory development. This study contributes to those conversations in the literature.

Implications for future research. There are several implications for future research stemming from this study. Motivational theories have been used widely in educational research. College access researchers should more broadly infuse these theories into research on access. Hahn & Price’s (2008) study asked about motivation but did not expand on what students meant when they described their motivation. SDT’s description of the types of motivation that may be enacted in different situations can deepen research on college access. Future studies could incorporate motivation theories to uncover how differences in school contexts (ex. public versus private schools; small versus larger schools), communities (rural or urban), timeframes (middle school versus high school), or differences in student populations (by race, gender, etc.) influence motivation on the path to college.

Secondly, although this study focused on the influence of parents and guardians, it was clear that school personnel play a significant role. Although this study primarily included parents, counselors, and teachers, future research should include students’ expanded social network (peers, employers, staff in local community agencies, churches or college access advisers, etc.) to determine how they influence motivation. Hearing from these other
individuals can further expand our awareness of how college access is impacted in different contexts.

And although a qualitative approach was used for this study to describe these students’ experiences, a mixed methods approach using the pre-designed SDT scales alongside qualitative inquiry could also yield compelling results.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, research has shown that understanding students’ motivation can have important applications in the educational arena (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Specifically, the literature on how parents affect students’ motivation has highlighted strategies that parents can use to support their children’s autonomy, competency, and feelings of relatedness (Grolnick et al., 1991). This study has implications for parents and those working with youth to uncover why some academically talented students may opt to forego college. The findings here suggest that students may opt out of college because they lack feelings of competency in their academic readiness; have parents who do not enable their children to make their own choices; have family obligations that stifle autonomy; or lack a caring and safe environment at home that fosters relatedness. By better understanding the influence of motivation as a key factor in students’ experiences, those who work with youth can better tailor their support to discover why motivation may be wavering. Incorporating positive motivational strategies could prove to be essential for leveling the playing field and promoting college access for first-generation, low-income students.
CHAPTER 7

ARTICLE 3: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LOW-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS’ SELF-DETERMINATION ON THE PATH TO COLLEGE

Higher education continues to attract low-income, first-generation students. A 2006 report found that 91% of the low-income, first-generation students surveyed aspire to attend college (Ad Council, 2006). Noeth and Wimberly (2002) found that 90% of the urban youth of color they surveyed viewed college as essential to reach their career goals. Yet despite these high aspirations, the reality of who makes it to college is more sobering. In 2010, the immediate college enrollment rates for high school completers from low-income families was 52%, 30 percent points lower compared to high school completers from high-income homes (82%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). And despite comparable test scores, students from families with the highest income and parental education levels tend to enroll in college at higher rates than their less-affluent peers with less educated parents (Baum & Ma, 2007).

One strategy that has been shown to level the playing field for low-income, first-generation students is having access to social capital via one’s social networks. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) described social capital as “social relationships from which an individual is potentially able to derive institutional support, particularly support that includes the delivery of knowledge-based resources” (p. 119). Research has documented that having access to social capital in the form of strong school, community, and familial networks, promotes access to information and support that are pivotal during the college planning
process (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Gonzalez, et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997). However, despite being college ready and having access to information, some academically-eligible students do not complete the steps necessary to apply for and ultimately enroll in college. One study of students who did not attend college, despite being academically qualified, showed that “only 15 percent of non-college-goers applied to any college; 12 percent applied for financial aid, and a mere 10 percent took the SAT and 7 percent the ACT” (Hahn & Price, 2008, p. 11). Why? What causes academically-eligible students to “stop out” during college planning and how does one’s social network influence that process? Interestingly one study showed that 88% of non-college-goers and 91% of college-goers rated personal motivation as a strong determinant in their decision to attend college (Hahn & Price, 2008). However, little is known about what causes some low-income students who aspire to college to persist and causes others abandon the process.

Therefore, the goal of this qualitative case study was to integrate motivation theory and the concept of social capital to describe students’ motivational experiences on the path to college. With more than 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary institutions – representing 24 percent of the overall undergraduate population (Engle & Tinto, 2008) – it is essential to understand how students’ social networks aided or impeded their motivation on the path to college. This information can prove useful to school personnel, parents, higher education professionals, and others focused on fostering the motivation of low-income, first-generation students as they attempt to reach their postsecondary goals.
Specifically, this study explored the influences that parents, peers, teachers, and counselors had on the motivation of low-income, first-generation students on the path to college using self-determination theory (SDT) (1985) and Bourdieu’s concept (1977) of social capital as guiding frameworks. Self-determination theory has been widely used to study motivational influences in familial, educational, sports and healthcare contexts, among others (Deci, et al., 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A core tenet of self-determination theory is that an awareness of what supports or undermines motivation facilitates the “design of social environments that optimize people’s development, performance, and well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). However, few researchers have used motivation theory to better understand students’ experiences during the college planning process.

In contrast, social reproduction theory and concepts of social capital have frequently been used in college access literature (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Straubhaar, 2013). Social capital is defined as a form of power that is enacted through relationships among people who facilitate action (Coleman, 1988). In a study of school inequality, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) noted that “success within the educational system for working class and minority youth is dependent on the formation of genuine supportive relationships with institutional agents” (p. 116-117). Those in students’ social networks can provide key information that can impact college access. However, few studies have integrated these two constructs to explore the influence of one’s social networks on students’ motivation during college planning. This study addresses this gap in the literature.
For the purpose of this case study, the students selected were all current college students enrolled in their first or second year at a four-year institution. This provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of students who successfully reached their college goals. This asset-oriented approach provided the opportunity to learn from students who persisted to college *despite* the challenges. As noted by scholars such as Harper (2010) and others, this approach shines the light on the millions of low-income first generation students who do persist to college rather than focusing solely on the barriers these students face. This asset-focused approach enables readers to understand the strategies and social networks these students used that enabled them to remain motivated to reach their postsecondary goals.

**Literature Review & Conceptual Framework**

Within the literature on college access, there are a number of frameworks that are widely used to explore the experiences of students on the path to college. I will first provide an overview of self-determination theory, followed by a description of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory and its conceptualization of social capital. I will then highlight some of the key research pertaining to the influence of one’s social networks on college access.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory (SDT) was first developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan nearly 30 years ago. A key component of understanding motivation, according to Deci and Ryan, concerns why people undertake certain behaviors. Yet, the theorists were focused not just on what motivates someone to act, but what type of motivation is being enacted in a given situation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, self-determination theory is most relevant to answer questions
about what type of motivation is underlying certain actions and which aspects of the environment facilitate or forestall motivation in certain situations.

Several fundamental concepts underlie the theory. First, the researchers posit that as humans, we attempt to satisfy three psychological needs in order to achieve healthy functioning and personal well-being: feelings of competency, autonomy and relatedness. Autonomy relates to one’s level of choice in one’s actions and behaviors. In an autonomy-supportive environment, students feel a sense of self-direction and volition, and their feelings are validated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy-supportive teachers have been shown to lead students to be more interested in learning, exhibit enhanced creativity and desire for challenge, and display increased persistence on tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A belief in one’s ability to successfully engage in a task is described as one’s sense of competency. According to SDT, competence is developed when one is presented with optimal challenges (Deci et al., 1996). However, the tasks cannot cause someone to feel overwhelmed. The theory also suggests that positive feedback reinforces competence (Deci et al., 1996); whereas, negative feedback has the opposite effect. This has powerful implications for how those in one’s social network give feedback during college planning.

Finally, relatedness describes the social connections one has and whether a person feels safe and has psychological closeness with others, especially in early years (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to the theory, intrinsic motivation is enhanced when there is a sense of relatedness to others (Deci et al., 1996, p. 178). Studies using SDT have found that students who felt a stronger connection with their parents and teachers tended to “cope more positively with academic failures, to be more autonomous in regulating their school
behaviors, were more engaged in learning and to feel better about themselves” (Deci et al., 1996, p. 178). This demonstrates the potential impact that students’ access to social capital can have on their motivation during the access process.

Another core concept in self-determination theory involves whether one is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. To be intrinsically motivated is to engage in a task due to one’s own interest and enjoyment of the activity. Engaging in intrinsically-motivated activities creates pleasure, enjoyment, or satisfaction, in and of itself (Deci et al., 1996). For instance, a student who is intrinsically motivated to attend college might do so because he is excited to learn about a particular field of interest. Conversely, extrinsically motivated behavior involves actions that are performed to attain some separate outcome or consequence, not solely due to enjoyment of the activity (Sheldon et al., 2004). Examples might include engaging in an activity to avoid punishment, to earn a reward, to fulfill a threat, to avoid looking inept, or to satisfy others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An example might be a student applying to college due to a parent’s demands.

SDT is useful as a framework for understanding how and whether students remain motivated during the college access process and which actions or environments can forestall or facilitate their motivation. To enhance understanding of the different types of motivation that underlie certain actions, Ryan and Deci created a “self-determination continuum” within a sub-theory of self-determination theory called organismic integration theory (OIT). OIT considers the various stages of extrinsic motivation that a person might possess based on how integrated and internalized the task is to the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). (See Figure 6).
The continuum begins at the far right with amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When a person is amotivated, he/she is may not feel competent to complete an activity or expect one’s actions to yield desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This might be exemplified by a student who does not complete a college application because he feels certain that he will not be accepted. Next on the continuum, the authors outlined a series of four classifications of extrinsically motivated behavior (external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The most extrinsically motivated classification is external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An example of external regulation is a student who is motivated to act due to external demands (fear of retaliation, desire to please others, or simply because they are required to do it.) This is often regarded as having an external perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Here, a student might apply to college only because her parents require her to do so.
On the continuum, introjected regulation follows and refers to taking in a regulation but not fully accepting it as one’s own (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Introjected behaviors are carried out to avoid shame or guilt or to enhance one’s ego through feelings of self-esteem, pride, or worth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). “Although introjected regulation is internal to the person, it bears more resemblance to external control than to self-determined forms of regulation because it involves coercion or seduction and does not entail true choice” (Deci et al., 1991, p. 329). An example is a student who applies to college to impress a teacher or to avoid embarrassment in front of one’s peers. Although the action is internally driven, it is done to enhance one’s ego.

Identified regulation is next on the continuum and has a more internal locus of causality. Identified behaviors are those where “there is a conscious valuing of a behavioral goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). For example, a student may do her homework without prompting from a parent because she likes the feeling of accomplishment. The final step on the continuum is integrated regulation. Although still extrinsically motivated, these actions are more likely to be autonomous and lead to more pleasure and fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Research has demonstrated that more autonomous extrinsic motivation was associated with “more engagement, better performance, lower dropout, higher quality learning and better teacher ratings among other outcomes” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73). A student who applies to college to one day enjoy a fulfilling career might be displaying an integrated regulation.

A key component of self-regulation relates to the conditions that promote or forestall one’s motivation. Because most extrinsically motivated behaviors are not inherently
interesting, researchers have found that one of the primary reasons that people engage in such actions is the level of relatedness they feel with those who promote the behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Another key finding was that if someone feels a higher level of competence with regard to a behavior, and it is a behavior that those in their social group value, they are more likely to internalize the behavior (Deci et al., 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This speaks to the importance of supportive social networks to one’s motivation.

Overall, SDT is an important theory for explaining the motivation behind one’s actions. The theory is also highly useful for exploring the strategies that those in student’s social networks – parents, extended family, peers and school personnel – can use to facilitate students’ motivation for college-going. Often well-meaning parents and school personnel highlight the benefits of college by emphasizing extrinsic rewards, like the money students can earn with a certain degree, which may negatively affect motivation. Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012), in their work with youth, found that “focusing solely on extrinsic reasons like these might have even made the youth who responded to them less likely to succeed and graduate once they were in college than if they had been motivated by more personal reasons” (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, p. 7). Applying motivation theory to research on college access can be a critical new lens through which to ascertain if our efforts are truly reaching students in the ways that we intend.

**Social reproduction theory.** A key theoretical framework used in college access literature borrowed from sociology is Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, particularly his conceptualization of social capital. In her book on college choice and access to college, Bergerson (2009) described one of the main premises of Bourdieu’s work: “individuals
operating in social institutions such as schools make socially constrained choices that serve to reproduce the existing social order” (p. 41). Key features of Bourdieu’s theory involve habitus and various forms of capital.

Habitus is described as the ways in which a member of a society delimits their available options based on the opportunities available in one’s environment (Perna, 2006). “Individuals often do not see choices outside what they perceive to be available to their particular social group” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 41). McDonough (1997), in her study of habitus in the school context, noted that students face a differing set of choices in their college access process depending on economic and cultural contexts. “Not all college-bound students face equal choices if they start out with different family and school resources that enable or constrain their educational and occupational mobility possibilities” (McDonough, 1997, p. 150). Thus, one’s habitus can determine which institutions students will consider, if they consider college at all.

The concept of capital is also central to Bourdieu’s theory. Capital is described as a form of power in a given field (Bergerson, 2009) and Bourdieu suggested that there are three main forms – economic, cultural, and social capital. Economic capital relates to resources that have a monetary value. Economic capital might provide a student with the ability to pay for SAT prep classes, tutoring, or the services of a private college counselor.

Social capital is enacted through changes in the relationships among people that facilitate action (Coleman, 1988). Thus, the theory suggests that some students have access to information channels by which they gain the knowledge needed to make college decisions. As Coleman (1988) noted, “social relations are not valuable just in terms of the obligations
that exist between individuals, but in the form of the information that these individuals can provide” (p. 104). Access to well-informed networks can provide a key source of social capital, particularly for students whose families did not attend college and therefore may lack access to information.

Researchers have also described the impact of students having high- or low-volume forms of social capital. Drawing on Stanton-Salazar’s (1997) depiction of institutional agents of social capital, Gonzalez et al. (2003) described high-volume forms of social capital as those individuals who provide emotional support, share critical college information, and offer access to college admissions services. Low-volume forms of social capital might only be able to transmit one of these resources (Gonzalez et al., 2003). Students who had the most access to high-volume sources of social capital in their families, among peers, and in the school context were more likely to ultimately enroll in a four-year elite institution (Gonzalez et al., 2003).

Studies have also shown that the quality of information accessible through one’s social networks also plays a role in college access. In their study of school counselors, Farmer-Hinton & McCullough (2008) found that “counselors in less affluent and predominantly minority schools offered more low-volume social capital because they did not begin college advising until students’ senior year” (p. 80). They also noted that the counselors provided low-volume social capital because they were untrained and lacked the skills to be high school counselors (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). Family and community contacts as well as school personnel have the potential to be “high-volume agents of social capital” during the college access process if they have accurate information and
provide strong support that can impact the choices made by students (McKillip et al., 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). However, the lack of high quality information from those in one’s social network can potentially impact student’s motivation.

Cultural capital is another form of capital often discussed in the college access literature. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, is defined as those instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth that are designated by society as being worthy of being sought and possessed (Bourdieu, 1977). Cultural capital might include cultural knowledge and awareness; aesthetic preferences for art, music and literature; educational credentials; knowledge of how to navigate the school system; and language facility (Bergeson, 2009). For instance, DiMaggio (1982) noted that teachers tend to communicate more easily with students who participate in certain elite status cultures; teachers give them more attention, more special assistance, and were more likely to perceive them as gifted. Bourdieu argues that our schools “take the cultural capital of the dominant group as the natural and only proper sort of capital and treat all children as if they had equal access to it” (Harker, 1984, p. 118). Schools then make judgments about students in the school setting based on whether they assimilate to the norms set by elite society (Bourdieu, 1977; Harker, 1984). Cultural capital can impact how comfortable a student or a parent feels in accessing information about educational opportunities in the school setting (Bergerson, 2009).

Although social reproduction theories and concepts of social and cultural capital are widely used in college access literature, these models are not without their detractors. Differences in how the construct is defined and measured make it difficult to duplicate or compare findings across studies (World Bank, 2011). Some also argue that Bourdieu’s
conception of habitus and social and cultural capital suggests that those from more privileged classes have better forms of capital than others, which creates a negative view of the forms of capital inherent in some cultural communities (Straubhaur, 2013). Another critique of social reproduction theory is that individuals appear to be “locked” into societal structures that they cannot easily change (Harker, 1984). Others have challenged this critique, highlighting that human agency is present and possible within Bourdieu’s conceptions of social reproduction and although challenging, change is quite possible within the context of one’s habitus (Harker, 1984).

In summary, social reproduction theory and its conceptions of social capital have been powerful lenses through which to explore the opportunities and barriers for low-income, first-generation students on the path to college. Bourdieu’s conception of social capital is closely aligned with relatedness, one of the central tenets of self-determination theory, and describes the importance of having a network of people surrounding you who support your goals. Together, these two models complement one another and help us understand how having a strong support network during the college access process can foster students’ motivation.

**Social capital and college access for underserved students.** Numerous quantitative and qualitative studies have found that students who have access to accurate college information are more likely to overcome barriers to college access and successfully enroll (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Fann et al., 2009; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Hahn & Price, 2008; Perna & Titus, 2005; ). However, Bourdieu contends that schools perpetuate the social reproduction of inequalities (Bergerson, 2009). Farmer-Hinton and McCullough
(2008) noted that students should ideally “receive information on how to find and apply to colleges (i.e., information channels) through their relationships with family members, friends, and neighbors. However, there is inequality in access to social capital” (p. 78).

Parents who did not attend college also often do not have a frame of reference to share concrete information with their children about the steps in the college access process. One study documented that, at most, “23% of the lowest-SES parents can provide their children with any guidance based on first-hand collegiate experiences. In contrast, nearly all of the highest-SES students (99.3%) grew up in families knowledgeable of postsecondary education” (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001, p. 134). Limited access to resources in the home means some students turn to their peers for information about college. Noeth and Wimberly (2002) found that, for African-American and Latino students, peers often supplemented information that students’ parents were unable to provide because their parents had limited college knowledge.

In addition to turning to peers, several studies have documented that low-income, first-generation students tend to rely more heavily on school personnel for information (Roderick et al., 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2012). School counselors are typically the school staff tasked to assist with college access. However, counselors indicate that large caseloads are one of the major challenges they face in their ability to provide personalized assistance with college readiness counseling (Bergerson, 2009; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Savitz-Romer, 2012). One study indicated that the average school counselor spends 38 minutes per year on each student for college advising (McDonough, 2006). One of the most troubling consequences of high counselor-to-student ratios is that
counselors often filter the type of information they share by focusing their college outreach to the highest achieving students (Corwin et al., 2004; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008). High loads also cause counselors to take a reactive approach, expecting students and families to proactively reach out to them for college access help (Perna et al., 2008).

The quality of the counselor’s knowledge is also important. Savitz-Romer (2012) noted that a strong knowledge base is essential for providing effective college readiness counseling. However, this information is rarely featured in graduate level counselor education coursework. Of the 466 counselor education programs listed by the American School Counselor Association, fewer than 30 programs offer a college readiness course (Savitz-Romer, 2012). And few pre-service teaching programs include coursework on college planning that would enable teachers to better assist with the college access process (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Poorly trained staff can impact the level of high-volume social capital available in students’ networks.

Lack of information about financial aid and other sources of funding for college is another major hurdle for students. Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) found that “for every 1-unit increase in the amount of financial aid information, a high school student improves his or her likelihood of applying by 5%” (p. 140). Yet, McDonough noted that “while 86% of schools rely on school counselors to provide students with information about financial aid, 76% of counselors reported needing more support and training to provide financial aid advice” (McDonough, 2006, p. 3). Without adequate information about college costs, students may forego college altogether.
Together, these challenges confound to create formidable barriers to college access for low-income, first-generation students. Yet despite these barriers, many students remain motivated and successfully pursue a college education. Those in the school and family context have the potential to play a key role in assisting students in their college access pursuits (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011). Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the influence that parents, teachers, counselors and peers can have as forms of social capital to augment the motivation of low-income, first generation students on the path to higher education.

**Methodology**

Qualitative, collective case study design was selected as the methodology for this study. Researchers conduct case studies to more deeply understand a process or context by exploring individuals’ experiences (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Choosing to employ collective case study design provided the opportunity to use multiple cases to understand an issue (Yin, 2009). Here, case study methodology was used to understand the ways in which those in low-income, first-generation students’ social networks influenced their motivation to college.

Researchers using self-determination theory typically employ the pre-designed SDT scales to assess students’ motivation (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). However, although SDT is frequently used in quantitative research, theorists noted that it also has value for qualitative inquiry. “SDT is allied with qualitative and critical theories in understanding the situational nature of learning and growth, and the importance of the individual’s frame of reference in shaping meanings and the behaviors that follow from them” (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009, p.268).
Few researchers have incorporated self-determination theory as a conceptual framework in college access studies. Therefore using qualitative methods enabled the researcher to understand the influence on motivation rather than relying on pre-designed scales that might not fully explain the nuances of these students’ experiences.

**Research Sites and Participants**

Merriam (1998) noted that deciding how to bind a case is one of the most important considerations in case study methodology. A stratified purposeful sample was used to select the cases (Mertens, 2010). Students selected were all (a) traditional college age, between ages 18-24, (b) enrolled as undergraduate students at a four-year institution, and were (d) in their first or second year of college, (e) first generation, (f) low-income, and (g) did not participate in a pre-college program. To solicit participants, I contacted the institutional research (IR) office at a large, public university to procure a list of students who fit the study criteria. The IR office provided the contact information for 171 students; all were contacted via email. I also solicited participants through multicultural student affairs and TRIO Student Support Services, which serves a low-income, first-generation student population. A pre-screening questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics (see Appendix F) to each potential student participant. Of the 18 students who responded, seven students fit the full criteria and agreed to participate.

During the study, each student participant was currently enrolled in their first or second year at a large, public institution, fictitiously named “West Central University,” in a mid-sized city located in a Southern state. The institution is considered competitive in the
region. Its acceptance rate is 51.8%; and its incoming freshman class had an average 4.4 GPA and a combined SAT score (verbal and math) of over 1200.

To determine whether a student was classified as low-income, I used their eligibility for federal Work-study, federal Pell-Grant assistance, and/or their enrollment in a program on campus targeted to low-income students, such as TRIO Student Support Services, as a guide (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation status was determined using the definition employed by the federal TRIO programs: students whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificates, or associate’s degrees, but did not attain a bachelor’s degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This facilitated the inclusion of a broader range of students.

Another choice was to only include students who attended under-resourced high schools. This provided an opportunity to consider how students in these schools found resources and motivational support. All students selected attended mid-to-high poverty schools which are high schools where 50% or more of their students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch based on 2011-2012 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Elementary/Secondary Information Systems data (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). All students selected also were not enrolled in pre-college programs. This provided the chance to highlight the experiences of students who had to draw upon their own motivational resources on the journey to college.

In addition to the seven students, I also interviewed those in students’ networks who were described as being motivational influences during the college planning process. The students each provided one to three contacts. I interviewed five parents/guardians; the girlfriend of one student; two high school guidance counselors and five high school teachers
(see Table 5). (Note that Emma is classified as a first-generation student because her parents did not finish college. However, since the age of 15, she has been living with her guardians—her aunt and uncle—who both have college degrees.)

Table 5

*Student Participant Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Year in college</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>In K-12, Eligible for F&amp;R Lunch</th>
<th>Eligible for need-based financial aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Meteorology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Textile Design</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

*Parent Participant Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Participant</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Parent or Guardian?</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian Education Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>High school grad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Some college; no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicki</td>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>High school grad</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7

Motivational Supporters—Other Participant Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Referred by</th>
<th>Position/Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey Fisher</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Agriculture Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candace Jones</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>Girlfriend/College Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Newton</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Jayda</td>
<td>Coach/Health &amp; PE Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonel Hillman</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>ROTC Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Campbell</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>History Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine Long</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laney Newhouse</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lily Ann</td>
<td>Coach/Social Studies Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle McNamara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Zara</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researcher Role and Reflexivity

My decision to study the experience of these students stems from my own experiences as a first-generation, low-income student. As a university administrator, I work closely with many first-generation, low-income students, and I am often curious about what motivated them to persist to college while others did not. This led to my desire to study their experiences. My shared story and similar background as a first-generation, low-income student allowed me to connect with the student participants and better understand their perspectives. However, I was aware that their stories are distinct and different from my own, and I attended to their stories with openness.

Data Collection

The primary data collection methods for this study were interviews and document review. One of the most important elements of case study research design is the inclusion of interview data (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). A semi-structured interview protocol was used which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview
of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Five separate semi-structured interview protocols were used for each participant type (see Appendices A-E). Of the seven student participants, six were interviewed twice, all in-person at West Central University. Each interview generally lasted between 20-50 minutes. In addition, I conducted thirteen interviews with parents, counselors, teachers and peers via phone, each lasting 20-70 minutes each. The inclusion of multiple participants enhanced triangulation and provided the opportunity to corroborate or refute information provided by the students (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2009). All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

After the first in-person interview, students were also given brief journal prompts to elicit insights that may have arisen for them following the first meeting (see Appendix G). The researcher collected all journal responses, mostly one to two pages in length, and coded them in NVivo along with the interviews. The journal responses were used to gather additional insights and corroborated findings from other informants (Yin, 2009). Quotes from the journal responses are incorporated in the findings along with the interview data.

**Data Analysis**

In keeping with multiple case study design, cross-case synthesis was used as a primary method of analyzing data. Cross-case synthesis is used in collective case study research to compare patterns between two or more cases searching for common or contrasting themes (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Here, data analysis included transcribing and coding the transcripts, conducting open and then focused coding (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2002), and developing overarching themes. I conducted within-case analysis of key themes
from each student followed by cross-case analysis to discover the common themes and/or differences that surfaced across cases (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). For the purpose of length, I highlighted the key themes that surfaced from the cross-case analysis for this article and included the case descriptions in the Appendix (see Appendix J).

Using NVivo software, I analyzed the data first using open coding, which involves “coding individual words, lines, segments or incidents” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). A codebook was created which captured initial codes that emerged from a careful reading of the data (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 2010) (See Appendix I). From there, using social capital and SDT as guiding frameworks, initial codes from the interviews and journal responses were classified by whether participants noted that those in their social networks augmented or forestalled their feelings of autonomy, relatedness, or competence. After numerous readings of the data, broader themes began to emerge (Patton, 2002). From there, focused coding was conducted, which entails “testing the initial codes against the more extensive body of data to determine how resilient the codes are in the bigger picture that emerges from the analysis” (Mertens, 2010, p. 426). The researcher then analyzed the themes to create a cross-case synthesis that described the students’ motivational influences.

**Trustworthiness**

Credibility was enhanced by conducting two in-depth interviews with each student and capturing reflections from their journals. Triangulating the data by having multiple sources of data and by interviewing multiple informants also promoted the credibility of the results. I also conducted member checks to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Member checks are often defined as “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a
study’s credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, as noted in Shenton, 2004, p. 68). Once the key themes emerged, this information was shared with select participants via email to elicit their feedback. Their feedback was incorporated into the analyses to ensure that the themes accurately reflected their experiences of this phenomenon.

Several strategies were used to improve the confirmability of the case study. A confirmability audit was conducted where the key findings were shared with a knowledgeable peer to confirm that the conclusions were well-supported by the data. The development of a case study database also further substantiated the findings. This database includes the raw data which can be made available for review if requested (Yin, 2009).

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. By choosing current college students, they may have had difficulty recalling their motivational influences during high school. However, because students were successfully enrolled in college, they were able to reflect on their experiences from an asset-based perspective. Still, their observations may differ from those who were unsuccessful in their college pursuits or are currently in high school.

Results

The findings of this study confirm that those in students’ social networks served as critical sources of social capital and had a considerable influence on students’ motivation during college planning. I will first describe how those in students’ social networks augmented students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness and provided a high-volume source of social capital. Later, I will address some of the challenges in students’ social
networks and the ways that having a low-volume of social capital undermined their motivation to college.

**High-volume forms of social capital and their influence on student’s motivation**

In reviewing the data, there were three primary ways in which those in the students’ social networks served as high-volume sources of social capital and appeared to augment students’ motivation. As Stanton-Salazar (1997) and Gonzalez et al. (2003) noted, high-volume sources of social capital provide emotional support, offer access to critical information, and provide college access and admissions opportunities. In this case, I included those elements in combination with the strategies that Deci and Ryan (2000) described as promoting one’s autonomy, competency, and feelings of relatedness. Parents, counselors, teachers and peers (1) provided emotional support, belief in the student’s abilities, and demonstrated caring, which augmented relatedness and competency, (2) provided high-quality information about college options, which expanded students’ choice set, augmenting autonomy, and (3) facilitated students’ access to other networks for support and information, which augmented autonomy and ultimately fostered relatedness. I will describe each of these strategies below.

**Provided emotional support, belief in students’ abilities, and demonstrated caring.** Self-determination theory posits that having someone who believes in your ability to successfully engage in a task enhances competence and fosters motivation. Having one’s feelings acknowledged and validated augments autonomy, and knowing that one has strong, close social relationships with others also facilitates relatedness. Overwhelmingly, the students in the study described teachers, counselors, peers and parents as providing these
types of supports, which fueled their motivation to persevere during the college planning process.

As one would expect, parents were frequently described as providing a high-level of support and encouragement, contributing to students’ sense of relatedness. Charlene, Emma’s guardian, noted, “It’s a great, big responsibility for parents … to be that push giver, encourager, saying, ‘Yeah, you can do this. Yeah, it’s hard, but this is what’s going to come after.’” Dorothy, Nora’s mother, added that she made a concerted effort to ensure her children knew she believed in them at an early age: “Every child has that potential, every single one of them. Every single kid is born with potential. You just have to work it.” Vicki, Zara’s mom, also made sure that her daughter knew she was there to help with decision-making during college planning:

You know, a lot of parents tend to tell their kids, ‘this is what you should do,’ versus ‘what do you want to do?’ I know it’s tough for them to really know when they’re that young, but…you just have to sort of be supportive as far as what they want to do.

Parents’ encouragement enabled their children to see that they not only believed in them, which enhanced their feelings of competency, but that they were alongside them during the difficult decision-making process. Together, this enhanced students’ sense of relatedness and connection with their parents and led students to remain motivated.

Students also described teachers that demonstrated caring and offered support and feedback to them which augmented their feelings of relatedness and competency. Emma’s teacher positively impacted not only her college planning process, but her career choice. She is now pursuing a major in agricultural education because of her interaction with Ms. Fisher:
“But I really developed a relationship with my teacher. She changed my life. I knew that I wanted to change someone’s life the way mine was changed. I wanted to encourage people.”

Lily Ann also had a strong relationship with the teachers at her school:

- My teachers at my high school, I loved them. They made such an impact on my life. They really truly cared about their students. And they pushed us to go to college and actually do something. They always encouraged you by saying your strengths . . .

Caring teachers in students’ social networks augmented students’ feelings of relatedness and provided competency support, which fostered their motivation during college planning.

Counselors, although not as prominently mentioned by students as their parents and teachers, were also noted as providing emotional support. Lily Ann had a strong relationship with her counselor and knew she could turn to her for motivational support:

- And my counselor had already been a great support system through the divorce. . . .

- There were plenty of times when I was in her office like crying about something related to that, so we had our relationship with that.

Knowing that she had a prior relationship with her counselor led Lily Ann to return to her for college planning advice. This level of relatedness with school personnel shows the importance of forming strong, supportive networks with those in the school context who can assist during college planning.

Peers served as another source of emotional support and connection during college planning. Evan described relying on peers in his schools, including his girlfriend Candace, because he received little direct support from family or school networks:
Yeah, my friends in general, my peer group, I was part of the kids who wanted to do more, like, it wasn’t their goal to stay home. They wanted to become the next leaders, they wanted to become like everything that we weren’t used too.

Together, the caring and emotional support that those in students’ social networks provided created a strong sense of relatedness and fostered in students a belief in their competency. They felt that they had people “rooting for them” during the college planning process. According to SDT, these strategies promote one’s motivation.

Another important way that students’ motivation was enhanced by the sources of social capital around them was with regard to competency. All of the students could recall that their parents, teachers, counselors, and peers in their social networks expressed a belief in them and their academic abilities, which left the students feeling as if they were “college ready.” They also provided positive feedback, which is an important way that one’s competency is enhanced. Dorothy, Nora’s mother, stressed that college was expected of her daughter:

It was going to happen. She had a scholarship, she had the grades, she had the ambition and I just let her know that one little bump in the road should not cause her to make such a dramatic life decision that she would regret. You can’t do that. Jayda’s teacher also provided competency support and feedback on her academic abilities, “My biology teacher was probably my biggest influence. I really liked her class and she always kind of made me feel like biology was my domain and I could do big things.” Nora’s teacher, Mr. Campbell, encouraged her towards college, even though other teachers dismissed her because she ran with what she described as the wrong crowd, “I talk about him
because he really made a difference. The fact that he saw the potential made me realize, ‘Yeah, he’s right. I should not be sitting here doing nothing.’”

Parents were also credited with providing a strong sense of competency support by offering feedback. Lily Ann’s parents reinforced in her a belief that she was college material:

My parents always told me, you can do whatever you put your mind to. And that’s always stuck with me my whole life. . . . So, I knew I wanted to go to college and so my mind always knew, I can do this, I can do this. Because they told me that my whole life.

Parents, teachers, counselors as well as peers helped students by providing emotional support, positive feedback, reinforcing their academic abilities, and expressing a belief that they were “college material.” This left students feeling competent and with a high sense of relatedness knowing that they had a strong network of support for their college-going goals.

**Provided accurate, high-quality information about college options.** Teachers, parents, counselors, and extended family also served as high-volume sources of social capital by providing accurate information about financial aid, college options and majors and careers. School-based personnel appeared to provide the most information, particularly teachers. When asked who motivated them the most during college planning, all seven students offered the name of a teacher who had motivated them. Two teachers in particular, Colonel Hillman and Mr. Newton, created college access programs in their schools to offer more concrete information to students on the college-planning process. This was not their
jobs nor were they required to facilitate these programs. Mr. Newton, a coach and physical education teacher, noted that his program serves mostly first-generation students:

When I came back here, this was my hometown…. I knew there was a lack of help for those students to help them to get into college. I asked my supervisor if I could start a program here where I brought in the parents and the kids several different times in June and July to talk to them about this and they were all about it.

Ms. Fisher, an Agricultural teacher, attended a very competitive school in the state, and students often turned to her for help when applying to that institution. Her “insider” knowledge provided a high-volume source of information for these students:

The counselors interviewed, both at smaller schools, also provided critical information about college as well. Charlene, Emma’s guardian, noted that Emma’s counselor was very helpful with specific college information, which empowered her and Emma during the process:

Her guidance counselor was great in always sending out emails and getting us involved, having seminars, and meetings, trying to get them ready for their different tests, when scholarships are available and when to apply. She did a great job there.

Peers also provided information and resources that augmented students’ motivation and fostered their autonomy by enabling them to make the best possible college choices.

Colonel Hillman found that his students shared information with one another:

They rely on each other a lot. I think one or two may get information from the internet. We had one last year; she was the president of the honor society. She had a sister who graduated two years prior . . . so she would get a lot of information from
her about scholarships, financial aid, different colleges, and she would just shoot it out via social media to the other students.

Parents were also noted as providing information, though not to the same extent as the school-based staff. Jayda was one of the few students who relied heavily on her mom, Sarah, to assist her with finding college information:

I think that she did a lot of research. Kind of like me where if she doesn’t know something, she’s going to look it up. I think she did a lot of research beforehand and then I kind of knew what to expect and I trusted it.

Most often, students turned to their parents for general help and encouragement during decision-making rather than for direct college access information. This level of support with decision-making provided considerable autonomy support, which fostered their motivation.

Lily Ann turned to her parents and her grandparents for moral support:

I don’t think they understand fully how college works. But I know they knew that it was like to further education and they were totally supportive of pushing me, getting me there, and getting me through the process of getting out of high school, like graduation and everything and paying off the deposit here and everything.

Overall, students utilized teachers, counselors, peers, and parents for information and resources during the college planning process. Access to accurate, quality information appeared to foster their motivation by enabling them to feel confident that they had the information they needed to make wise choices. This fostered students’ sense of competency in their ability to maneuver through the college planning process and left them feeling
autonomous to make sound decisions for their futures. The assistance also promoted a feeling of relatedness because they knew they could turn to others for advice and feedback.

**Facilitated students’ access to other networks for support and information.**

Another important way in which those in students’ social networks facilitated students’ motivation on the path to college was by encouraging students to build stronger networks with others who could aid them during college planning. Several teachers, counselors, and parents stressed that helping students find others who could help them was an important way to expand students’ access to information, which ultimately enhanced their access to additional sources of social capital.

Zara’s art teacher assisted her by directing her to special programs in her area of interest:

She would help me find different art programs to get involved in. She would mentor and she took her own time to teach me different things in art. And to do outside contests and other things like that. On her own time outside the classroom.

ROTC teacher Colonel Hillman runs a college scholars program for high-achievers at his school and invites former students in to share information with his current students:

I had 10 former . . . scholar students that were in their first year of college come back during their spring break and we just had a roundtable discussion. . . . When we did that, the 50 kids that were there came out saying they felt more comfortable about college.

Several of the students appreciated that teachers and counselors brought in admissions representatives from local community colleges and universities to share
information. The counselor at Zara’s small school, Ms. McNamara, makes a concerted effort to expand the exposure of her students to campuses outside of their rural community:

Our seniors this year, I know that they have been off island visiting students that just recently graduated. We have a couple students that are at North University and I know just two weekends ago, our seniors were all at North University visiting them. . . . They’ve been in contact with our alumni, going and seeing them and talking to them about schools. That’s been awesome for our seniors this year.

Ms. Long, a school counselor, also uses her networks to find information for students:

I knew that I was pretty much the person that looked up the resources for them. I was the one that got them the information. Stuff that parents would normally do. That I would call the admissions offices. That I would do those types of things for these students. They knew they could count on me to get them what they needed.

Several teachers also advocated for their students with others in their social networks. Mr. Campbell spoke with other teachers and counselors to ensure that they were aware of the needs of students during college planning. Ms. Long and Colonel Hillman did the same.

Sarah, one of the parents who made the most effort to directly seek out resources for her daughter, Jayda, found information by connecting with other mothers in her community:

She was the one who told me to take the SAT and ACT 3 times. You need to get those started. She was the one to put little bugs in my ear about things I needed to do along the way. Otherwise it was just gut and research off the internet.
For those parents who could not provide as much direct college assistance, they did ensure that their children reached out to the schools for information. Margaret, Lily Ann’s grandmother, encouraged her to reach out for help at school:

That’s the reason I tell her go . . . ask them for a little bit of help to try to get it solved, not to worry yourself to death. You always ask for help if you don’t understand things.

Although some parents were not sure how to directly find resources, the school filled in by providing contacts to university staff and offering information about different institutions. This expanded students’ choice set and enabled them to have more freedom to explore their options, which ultimately promoted students’ sense of autonomy.

**Low-volume forms of social capital and their influence on student’s motivation**

Although students did experience challenges associated with having low-volume forms of social capital, they were resourceful in finding others in their social networks to assist them. This is indicative of the students’ commitment to reaching their college-going goals. However, it is important to recognize the barriers that slowed, but did not stall, their motivation on the path to college. I have noted the steps they took to overcome these obstacles, which highlights their resourcefulness. The two primary areas of challenge related to a lack of knowledgeable sources of college information and lack of a college-going ethos in their communities.

**Lack of knowledgeable sources of college information in their social networks.**

One of the most challenging barriers for students was the lack of knowledgeable sources of information about college access in the school and familial environment. The students
particularly noted that their parents’ lack of direct information was, at times, a hindrance. Evan, Jayda, and Nora noted that although their parents had some level of higher education, their knowledge was often outdated. Their parents could not easily relate to the challenges inherent in applying to and attending a four-year, competitive institution such as West Central University.

Dorothy, Nora’s mom, acknowledged that she did not provide much college help:

In hindsight, maybe it was better that I wasn’t the first person that she would turn to because to be honest, my son knew more about what was going on than I did. It’s been a while since I was in college and everything else. There’s so much that changed.

Nora ended up turning to a teacher and, to a lesser extent, her brother for information instead of her parent. Lily Ann also shared that her family was not able to assist with financial aid:

With my parents being divorced and me not really staying with them, that whole process was confusing to me. I didn’t know who to put down as like who I lived with and who to put down as my primary income. That was really confusing and since they didn’t really know what FAFSA was, they couldn’t really help me.

Thankfully Lily Ann was able to rely on teachers and her counselor for financial aid help.

In terms of school-based support, students noted that inaccessible counselors or teachers limited their ability to secure information. Evan had few contacts at his school that provided college information, which left him feeling unmotivated at times, “Yeah, we didn’t have a good high school to where we had a guidance that helped push us.” Evan went to college fairs and found information on the internet or through peers instead.
Natalie, a freshman in social work, believed that she did not receive help from her counselors because they believed she was smart and therefore, did not need much help.

I really didn’t talk to them. They thought I was brilliant, I guess. That’s their exact words, but I didn’t think fondly of them because they didn’t do anything for me other than tell me, ‘You’re on a great track.’

For Nora, her guidance office was not helpful because of high student to counselor ratios:

I remember trying to talk to my guidance counselor who was not really that helpful. She was kind of just rude. I think that had a lot to do with the fact that . . . there weren’t enough guidance counselors.

Instead, Natalie and Nora turned to teachers, which kept their college planning process on track.

Another challenge for some students and families was having school counselors who were new and lacked training to provide college access assistance. Sarah, Jayda’s mother, noted that her daughter was unable to get much help from a new counselor:

The only issue with her counselor was that she was a first-year counselor that had never done it before so she had a lot of pressure on her. She was really great. She just, it wasn’t a good way to get information.

Evan also noted that the scholarship coordinator at his school was new and therefore could not provide much assistance.

Despite the barriers, the students sought out alternative sources for information within their social networks when they faced roadblocks, which facilitated their sense of autonomy or freedom of choice. This appeared to enhance their motivation toward college.
Lack of a college-going ethos in their community networks. Many of the students interviewed described their communities as primarily rural or remote. Though they appreciated many aspects of small town living, they noted that there were few people in their hometowns who had attended college. This limited their exposure to role models in their social networks who could provide first-hand college knowledge. Emma noted that being from a small town with limited exposure to college was a challenge, “When you grow up in a small town, you think this is it. This is what the world has to offer. I know this is familiar. It’s comfortable.” She felt that the lack of exposure to college would have stopped her from reaching her goal if she had not left her hometown of Tennessee and moved in with her aunt, “No one in my family really went to college, so I felt if I was there, maybe I would follow in the same path.” Jayda also described the challenges of living in a small town with few examples of successful college graduates:

I think a lot of them graduated, they went to college and then a lot of them just come back. They either fail out because it gets hard or they are uncomfortable. They’re like wow, I live in this small town forever, it just kind of gets scary and they come back. She added that the small town environment also affected her feelings of academic competency:

My town is really small, so sometimes I feel like I was under-prepared because I didn’t have the same opportunities as some kids from the larger schools have. Like even our AP classes, some of them were probably under the rigor as some of the bigger classes would have been. So just that, specifically, sometimes I feel like I was cheated a little bit just because I was from the small town.
Mr. Newton, a teacher at a rural school, added that beliefs about who goes to college in his community also limited students’ aspirations:

It varies because there’s still a lot of the same concepts and ideologies from back in the 50’s. They think that women are always supposed to be at home and men are the breadwinners. I mean, it’s a real backwards way of thinking.

Jayda’s mother, Sarah, also saw some school staff foster fear among students about what to expect in college, “I’ve seen teachers that scare the students into not going. Telling them how hard it is and that living in the city is difficult. Going to Stanford when you’re poor is hard. That kind of thing.” By not having much exposure to those who have successfully attended these institutions, students’ access to accurate information in one’s social networks was often limited. This led to myths about “big city” schools or beliefs that college was just about partying. Many also relayed stories of students who went to college but dropped out or graduated only to now be “laying sheetrock.” These myths were hard to negate due to the lack of firsthand knowledge in the community. Margaret, Lily Ann’s grandmother, shared that many parents in her town wondered why they should pay good money just to send kids off to party. They also harbored fears about the college environment:

Well you hear all this stuff about rape and people killing each other, taking them and all this stuff. I worry about her because she walks a lot of places instead of driving. It’s right there all on campus and it just worries me. . . . She says, ‘Nana, I’m safe. I want you to go look where I’m at.’ I did and I was pleased with it.
However, several students noted that being in a small town environment actually spurred them to want more for themselves. Lily Ann described how this motivated her:

Majority of my family, they get married, have kids at a very young age and no one in my family really went to college but I was always like this odd person who really liked school. As far as I can remember, I always had the mindset of going to college. I wanted to be something big and get out of my town mainly, was the main thing.

Evan summarized this feeling:

Just because I’m from Milton County where you go and you come back doesn’t mean I’m going to continue that trend. I’m going to do something where it’s for me and if anyone wants to be envious, they can be envious. It’s kind of like, being the underdog in the story where you’re used to being the person who hears about all these great things people do but you don’t see it, it’s kind of like, ‘Well, you know what, I’m going to be the person that experiences these things.’ It’s something that I just need to do.

Ultimately, despite the perceived lack of college-going expectations in their communities, these students worked even harder to break the stereotypes that they felt were embedded in their community networks. They aligned themselves with sources of social capital – family, friends, teachers, counselors, etc. – who believed in their ability to be successful, which reinforced their motivation to persevere to college.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to explore how those in students’ social networks influenced their motivation on the path to college. To answer this question, a qualitative case
study was conducted to discover how parents, counselors, teachers and peers either augmented or forestalled the motivation of low-income, first-generation students during college planning. The findings indicate that those within students’ social networks served primarily as high-volume sources of social capital. They provided college information, valuable connections, emotional support, and demonstrated a belief in the students’ academic capabilities. Together, these tactics appeared to augment low-income, first-generation students’ sense of relatedness, competency, and autonomy during the college planning process.

It is important to note the critical role that parents played in motivating their sons and daughters on to college. It is well-documented that parental encouragement and support for students’ educational aspirations are critical factors impacting students’ decisions to pursue a higher education (Choy, 2001; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999; NCAN, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005). However, the integration of self-determination theory enables us to better understand why parents have such a powerful influence. Although parents were, at times, unable to provide specific college information, they provided moral support, encouragement, a belief in their child’s academic abilities, and assistance with decision-making. These strategies appeared to augment students’ feelings of competency, relatedness and autonomy. Parents also provided feedback, which is “hypothesized to be extremely important for the internalization process” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 144.) Parents offered this and other forms of motivational support, which ultimately served as a critical source of social capital for the students.
This study expands our understanding of why parental involvement is so essential and specifically highlights the tactics that these parents used that motivated their sons and daughters. Prior research documents the role of parents but does not describe the intricacies of why parental involvement is so important. This finding deepens that understanding. It is consistent with Auerbach (2004) who found that, when provided with college knowledge and support, parents have the potential to become powerful allies and advocates for their children.

Another significant finding is that students often utilized multiple sources of support, including parents, peers, extended family, as well as school staff. The “it takes a village” approach provided a high-volume source of social capital to the students in the form of information, connections, and encouragement. It was interesting to note that parents and teachers appeared to be the most frequently noted sources of motivational support. Peers and counselors were also influential. Even if a student only had one teacher who they turned to for assistance, this person often served in multiple roles. He or she may have been a source of information, a sounding board for decisions, an emotional support, and a “connector” to other K-12 school or university personnel. This further expanded students’ access to high-volume social capital. This speaks to the impact that having just one knowledgeable and caring person in one’s social network can have on a students’ college trajectory.

For many of these first-generation, low-income students, their parents were unable to provide concrete college information. Therefore, students tended to turn to school personnel for assistance, which is well-documented (Bell et al., 2009; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Choy, 2001; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012.) However, this study extends prior
research by highlighting the importance of school personnel’s impact on motivation during college planning, both positively and negatively. Many of the barriers these students experienced related to having few sources of college access information – either because counselors were new, teachers did not see this as their job, or because the counselors had high caseloads (Bergerson, 2009; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997). This reminds us of how important school-based sources of social capital can be for promoting students’ motivation on the path to college and reaffirms the need for accessible and knowledgeable staff in the school context that can collaborate to provide this support.

This study also builds upon Kirst and Venezia’s assertion (2004) that teachers can be valuable sources of support during the college access process and provides details about how teachers specifically enhanced motivation. We typically think of teachers as assisting with college planning by helping with essays or sharing their college stories. However, teachers in this study created their own college access programs, guided students to resources, provided direct assistance with applications, demystified the admissions and financial aid process, and brought in guest speakers. Often teachers collaborated with school counselors and shared feedback that aided counselors in better reaching students. The fact that teachers’ influence is not well-researched in the college access literature is indicative of the perception that counselors primarily provide postsecondary assistance (McDonough, 2006). The findings from this study challenge that notion. For the seven students studied, all had teachers who provided direct help and offered important feedback during their college planning process. As studies have shown, positive feedback enhances intrinsic motivation because “when people get positive feedback that is authentic, they are likely to infer that they
are responsible for their good performance, thus experiencing autonomy as well as competence satisfaction,” (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 94). This finding contributes to the literature by highlighting distinct ways in which teachers served as critical motivators in students’ social networks.

Lastly, the experiences of these students also illustrate the impact of having a college-going culture and high expectations for postsecondary access within the school and larger community. SDT has shown that “people have an inclination…to internalize the regulation of behaviors that are valued by important others in their environments,” (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 88). Several students described feeling as if going to college was not expected in their hometowns and being in small towns left them with few networks within which to get accurate, first-hand impressions of what college is like. This left students feeling as if they had to fight against the norm that college-going was not expected. This affirms the notion of habitus, or a students’ belief about the choices available to those in their community environment (McDonough, 1997). As Savitz-Romer (2012) and Ardoin (2013) discovered, cultural norms and community beliefs about college-going can create barriers for students. However, the students noted that several teachers brought in former students to share their stories and serve as college role models. Again, this illustrates the importance of having within one’s social networks those who have attended college. It also speaks to the importance of having school staff and parents who can collaborate to connect students to peers who have successfully persisted to and completed college. Seeing role models who had successfully navigated the college environment motivated the students to recognize their own potential to do the same.
The results also highlighted that in some instances, students encountered low-volume forms of social capital. This was primarily due to a lack of information about college available in one’s social network. Specifically, students noted that they had new counselors or scholarship coordinators who were not as well-trained in providing college information. Savitz-Romer (2012) highlighted the impact that a lack of well-trained school counselors can have on students. This study expanded upon that research and highlighted how a lack of well-trained staff impacts students’ motivation. Without accurate information and support, student’s choices were stifled, resulting in undermined autonomy. However, it was impactful to see how students still managed to overcome these challenges to persevere to college. They often turned to others (teachers, parents, peers, etc.) for information, which demonstrates the importance of students having multiple knowledgeable sources of social capital from which to garner support.

These findings validate the integration of these two theories to expand the literature on college access for low-income, first-generation students. The results merit attention in higher education research because only when we better understand how students remain motivated, can we develop school, familial and community contexts that foster their motivation. What this asset-oriented approach provided is a chance to see how these first-generation, low-income students utilized those in their social networks and how their parents, teachers, counselors and peers proactively served as high-volume sources of social capital on the path to college.
Implications

Findings from this study contribute to our understanding of how one’s social networks influence the motivation of low-income, first generation students during the college access process. The study highlighted specific actions or behaviors that either augmented or undermined students’ competency, autonomy and, sense of relatedness. These findings could be of interest to those working to impact college access, such as parents, school personnel, higher education staff, and those working with youth in college access organizations. Based on these findings, there were several implications for practice, theory and future research.

Implications for theory

With regard to theory, there are three major implications and two key limitations. First, this study provided an opportunity to integrate motivation theory, which has not been widely utilized as a construct to explore students’ experiences on the college access trajectory. Motivation theory’s inclusion here highlights why some low-income students may lose motivation and opt out during college planning. This study enables researchers to better understand how autonomy, relatedness, and competency influence student’s experiences. This is useful for theorists developing or refining new models or theoretical frameworks. For example, expanding on widely cited models like Hossler & Gallagher’s (1977) developmental models by incorporating a motivational lens can expand our knowledge of how and why students move through the college choice process as they do. This could prove to be particularly useful for understanding the experience of students who are facing the most challenging barriers to college such as low-income, first-generation students, students of color, and non-traditional populations like older students, foster youth.
students working full-time, etc. Integrating motivation theory can shine the light on how these groups remain motivated despite the challenges they may face, which can inform theory development.

Second, college access theories that integrate contextual factors, such as Perna’s (2006) layered contextual model of college choice, could benefit from the addition of motivation as another variable that impacts the choice process. Perna’s model describes how individual habitus, families, schools, policies and other contextual factors influence students’ postsecondary plans. This study documented how influences in the family and school contexts can have an impact on student’s motivation. Federal and state policies about counselor training, mandated school counselor caseloads, and pre-service teacher preparation can also influence a school’s ability to have time and resources to devote to college access. This can limit the ability of those in students’ social networks to be effective sources of high-volume social capital. College access theoretical models that integrate contextual factors would benefit from the consideration of how context can impact motivation, not just access.

Lastly, this study has uncovered aspects of the college access processes of first-generation, low-income students that have not been widely explored in current literature. Yet research indicates that many academically eligible students are still foregoing college. The role of motivation may be more influential than previously thought. Future theories of college choice could benefit from the integration of motivation theory alongside constructs such as social capital to expand our understanding of this population. Current theories describe the development processes that students take on the journey to college, and many integrate social or cultural capital to explore this issue, but the nuances of students’
experiences demands further study. As Hahn and Price (2008) noted, over 88% of non-college-goers rated personal motivation as a major factor in their decision to attend college. If students noted that motivation is so important, theorists would be well-served to explore who motivates these students, how they remain motivated, which aspects demotivated them, and why. New theoretical development or enhancements to existing theories could result.

There were two limitations to the use of these two theories. First, as noted earlier, defining and measuring social capital can be challenging (World Bank, 2011). Within this study, what remains to be explored is whether having one knowledgeable high-volume source of social capital in the form of a well-informed teacher is more impactful than having three or four less knowledgeable but supportive family members, peers or school contacts. Is the volume of social capital more important than the depth of knowledge they possess, or some combination of both? Does the number of people in your social network differently affect relatedness, autonomy, or one’s feeling of competency? If those who provide you with some form of social capital collaborate in some way, perhaps by serving in a defined student support team, could that further enhance motivation? This was not discernible by using these two theories.

Second, motivation theory is useful for understanding how those in one’s environment influence motivation. However, it was evident that these students persisted in some cases despite a lack of motivation. Some seemed to have an inner drive that enabled them to persevere. This may have been sparked by their family’s early emphasis on education and college or by their desire to change their life circumstances. The use of SDT did not enable me to discern the personality traits or psychological processes that may have
been at play. Using SDT alongside other theories from psychology or sociology may enable the exploration of those issues.

**Implications for practice**

There are three major implications for practice based on the findings of this study. First, students described the importance of having school personnel in their networks who could provide accurate, high-quality information about college. For many of the students, this resource was essential because their families were unable to provide up-to-date college admissions and financial aid information. Thus, having well-training school counselors, scholarship coordinators, and teachers was essential for expanding students’ access to high-volume sources of social capital. Therefore, one major implication for practice relates to the need for well-trained staff. As researchers have noted, many teacher-education programs do not include coursework or training on college access, and few school counseling programs nationwide integrate specific coursework in this area. Counselor education and pre-service teacher training programs should offer specific training or coursework on college access to their trainees. School counseling professional organizations and other national counseling licensing agencies should also consider expanding their mandates to include required coursework on college choice models and relevant theory focused on expanding students’ college access opportunities. This should involve developing specific courses or workshop series focused on college-access.

Many national and local college access organizations, such as the College Board, the National College Access Network, the College Advising Corps, federal TRIO programs, and other community-based non-profit organizations offer training of new college advisors for
their own staff. These organizations might be consulted to develop trainings for new school counselors or pre-service teacher training programs. Many school districts also have continuing education expectations for new teachers and counselors, and this training could also be embedded as part of those professional development activities. Admissions and financial aid staff at local colleges are another potential resource to train K-12 staff on college admissions and financial aid information. Federal, state or local governments could help fund this in-service training in local schools. Together these groups can collaborate to empower school personnel to become high-volume sources of social capital for their students.

Second, this study described parents as a critical source of social capital for students. Parents provided moral support and encouragement, assisted with decision-making, and demonstrated a belief in their child’s academic readiness for college. This clearly appeared to augment students’ motivation. However, parents were often not able to provide the kind of direct information that could have expanded their child’s knowledge base about college. Therefore schools, community-based college access organizations, as well as higher education institutions should collaborate to provide more information directly to parents. This might involve local churches hosting workshops on college planning for students and parents, local businesses sponsoring college and career nights to expose families to college opportunities, and afterschool programs offering early information to elementary and middle school students and their families about academic planning for college. This “village” approach can expand students’ social capital and educate parents on the options available.
Schools should provide evening or weekend training sessions for parents and extended family members, offer materials and college brochures, place phone calls and send emails to ask parents/guardians about their college questions, and ensure that parents know that their role as partners in the access process is valued. Parent training should not just include information on college, but help parents discuss college in an autonomy- and competency-supportive way that enhances relatedness.

To demystify the college experience, schools or universities could also arrange college tours where parents and families are invited to join in. Corporations, foundations, and local governments could sponsor a series of “Parent College Tours” to educate parents and guardians about the higher education opportunities available in their region. This can go a long way in ensuring that parents, particularly those who have limited college knowledge, are best able to serve as high-volume sources of social capital for their children and beyond. Once the parents have information, they can become sources of social capital for others.

Another major implication for practice relates to the finding that teachers were leading their own college access programs in the schools. This effort takes time, energy, and shows considerable initiative on the part of educators. Being acknowledged and paid for this extra effort would be an excellent incentive for more teachers to partner with counselors to provide this service. As one teacher, Ms. Fisher, noted, “I may be able to offer a little bit of insight that an advisor didn’t hit on or may be able to offer a little bit more time because guidance counselors see 720 students and I see 90.” One of the greatest tactics used by teachers leading college programs was bringing in former students to talk about their college experiences, both good and bad. Several students noted that this helped them learn what
college was really like, demystified the process, motivated them to persevere, and pushed them to take college-level work seriously. Being in such remote and/or rural communities left many students feeling as if college was not expected for them. It was excellent for them to see peers who excelled despite the barriers. This expanded their social network and ultimately influenced their motivation. More programs such as those offered by Colonel Hillman and Mr. Newton would be beneficial if expanded to other schools. Schools could also train “college knowledgeable” students or college alumni to serve as peer mentors or ambassadors, which can further enhance students’ social network. Offering a college access peer mentor program could be another way to extend the reach of overloaded guidance counselors and supplement limited sources of information in students’ social networks. Funding from foundations, community groups, local businesses, or state government to support this initiative could go a long way to promoting a college-going ethos in these communities.

Implications for research

First, researchers should consider new theoretical frameworks from other fields of study to explore issues of college access. Motivation theories such as self-determination theory have been widely used in the educational arena, and these theories have a relationship to research on college access. “Increasingly researchers and policy analysts recognize that the necessary qualities for persistence in and completion of postsecondary education involve more than just academic components” (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, p. 31). Studies that integrate motivation theory with more widely used models, such as social capital or college choice theories, can expand our understanding of influence on student’s motivation in
different contexts. It is important to understand the ways in which motivation differs for certain populations. Perhaps male and female motivational influences on the path to college differ, or there may be differences for students of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds. This study’s findings highlighted few gender or racial implications; however, with a larger, more diverse sample, it would be interesting to explore if the impact on students’ motivation differs.

It is also important to note that this asset-oriented study focused on the students who did make it to college, but a study highlighting the impact of social capital on the motivation of students who did not ultimately enroll in college could yield very interesting results. Research shows that low-income, first-generation students aspire to college (Ad Council, 2006), but we know that millions do not persist through the process. This study’s students were able to successfully overcome the challenges; however, future studies should investigate why some low-income, first-generation students did not attend college and how those in their social networks influenced their decision. Perhaps their level of motivation was already low when they began the college access process. Therefore, future researchers should also consider conducting studies of motivation with younger students, perhaps in the 8th or 9th grade, to determine the early influences on motivation on the path to college. These studies can contribute to the literature and to theory by expanding our awareness of the pitfalls on the path to college during the predisposition, search, and choice process (Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999).
Conclusion

Research has shown that understanding students’ motivation can have numerous applications in the educational field (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000). By better understanding the role of motivation, those in students’ social networks can tailor support and outreach to augment students’ motivation. This study contributes to the literature on college access by highlighting the influence on low-income, first-generation students’ motivation during college planning. These students are often in need of considerable support during their college planning process and rely heavily on concerned and caring adults for information. Using self-determination theory and social reproduction theory as core frameworks highlighted students’ experiences as they reflected on their college-going process to determine the aspects that supported or undermined their feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The results enabled me to discern which strategies are working to promote motivation, and conversely, how our actions, although well-meaning, may be unwittingly leading low-income, first-generation students to become less motivated to pursue their college going goals.

With millions of dollars being spent on strategies to improve postsecondary access among America’s youth, it is more important than ever to explore why some high-achieving low-income students make it to college and why others do not. Policies, funding and other resources can then be redirected or refocused to target those behaviors, programs, and actions that expand students’ college support networks, support students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and ultimately help students reach their postsecondary goals.
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Publications.
Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Student Interviews

1. In what town or state did you grow up? Would you consider your town urban, rural or suburban?

2. Where did you attend high school? Can you describe your high school environment?
   a. What was it like demographically?
   b. What was your high school ‘known for,’ for instance sports or business track, etc.?
   c. How did you and your family select your high school?

3. Everyone’s family structure is a little different. Can you tell me a little about your family structure growing up?
   a. Do you have brothers and sisters? (If so, how many? Older/younger?)
   b. Were there any other family members living with you?

4. Where are you currently attending college? What year are you in? What is your major?

5. What led you to want to attend college?
   a. Did you always want to go? When did you know you wanted to attend?
   b. How did you think going to college would benefit you?
   c. Who first talked with you about college or from where did you first hear about college? (Family, television, school, etc.)

6. What were your parents’ or guardians perceptions about college?
   a. In what ways did they show their support?
   b. If they were not supportive, how did you know?

7. Were there other people in your life that encouraged you to consider college?

8. How would you describe your approach to college planning? For instance, were you self-directed about your college plans or did you need a push?

9. Talk about who helped keep you motivated along the way?
   a. How did they assist you in staying motivated?
   b. What did they do? What did they say?

10. What were some of the challenges you experienced along the way?
    a. Of those challenges, which were the most difficult ones to overcome? Why?
    b. How did you overcome them?
    c. What types of things did you do or tell yourself to stay motivated despite these challenges?

11. When you look back, were there things that those around you (parents, teachers, counselors, etc.) did or said that caused you to feel more motivated to attend college?
    a. What were those actions or statements?
b. How did they affect you? How did you overcome these challenges?

12. Were there things that those around you (parents, teachers, counselors, etc.) did or said that caused you to feel less motivated to attend college?
   a. What were those actions or statements?
   b. How did they affect you? How did you overcome these challenges?

13. What schools were you considering for college?
   a. What were some of the factors you were considering in making your choice?
   b. How did you go about deciding on XYZ College?
   c. How did you go about deciding on XYZ major?

14. Do you feel as if you had help during the college-going process or did you do it mostly on your own?

15. There are a lot of choices to be made during the college-going process. How did you go about making decisions during the process?
   a. Did you utilize help? If not, why? If so, for what purpose?
   b. How did those around you feel about your decisions or choices?

16. What was your relationship like with your high school guidance counselor?
   a. How did you utilize his/her help during the college access process?

17. What was your relationship like with your high school teachers? Did you have a favorite teacher?
   a. How did you utilize your teachers’ help during the college access process?

18. What information or resources did you utilize most? How did you get access to that information/resource?

19. How college-ready did you feel (academically, socially, emotionally)?
   a. Did you feel well-prepared to tackle college-level work? Why or why not?
   b. Did you have fears about your ability to be successful? If so, what were those fears? How did you handle them?

20. If you had decided not to attend college, what do you think the response would have been about that decision? (From parents/family, other school contacts, peers, others?)

21. For those in your social circle, what were their perspectives on college?
   a. Did most of your friends go to college?
   b. For those who did not attend, what did they say were the reasons?
   c. Looking back, what do you think were the reasons?

22. For your peers who opted not to attend college, how did they feel about your decision to attend?

23. Did you ever feel pressure from friends or family not to attend college? If so, how did they communicate this?
   a. How did you handle this? What did you say or do in response?
24. If a high school student similar in background to you asked you, why should I go to college? What would you tell them?

25. As you look back, were there aspects of your cultural or ethnic background that influenced your decision to go to college?
   a. If so, can you share an example?

26. Were there aspects of your community environment, religious beliefs or other aspects of your identity that influenced your decision to go to college?
   a. If so, can you share an example?

27. We know that many young people who come from low-income backgrounds make it to college but some do not. What about your personality or personal beliefs do you think made you able to persevere and make it to college?

28. Finish this statement: “When times were tough (difficult class, lack of college information, challenging project), I stayed focused because…”

29. Is there anything more you would like to add or anything you want to be sure that I capture about your experience?
Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Student Interviews: SECOND INTERVIEW

1. A big part of this study is a chance for me to describe a little about you and your personality. How would your friends describe you? How would your family describe you?
   a. What key words come to mind?
   b. What is a common misconception that people may have about you?
2. How would you describe the town/city where you grew up? Draw me a visual picture. What did you like most about it? What did you like least?
3. What was most important for you to experience during college? What were you most looking forward to?
4. I had a chance to interview your ___________. She/he spoke about _______________. How would you describe your relationship with him/her?
5. You mentioned previously that your high school was ______________. What did you like most/least about your high school? What was the best and worst part, for you, about high school?
6. Were you working while going through college planning? Where were you working?
7. Tell me more about _________. How would you describe your relationship? What is an example of a way she/he assisted you with the college planning process?
8. So when you faced a difficulty in school or with college planning, what did you say to yourself to keep going?
9. Tell me more about how _______________ helped keep you motivated. Share an example of something she/he said or did that helped you stay motivated.
10. What was most surprising to you when you got to college? What were the most difficult challenges to overcome?
11. There are different reasons that people choose to go to college. What was the most important reason for you to attend?
12. Tell me a little more about your parents. What are their occupations? What kinds of things did they share with you early on about college?
Anything else?
Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Counselor Interviews

1. Can you tell me a little about the school’s demographics? (Number of students, socioeconomically, racial/ethnic make-up, etc.)
2. How do most students get placed in the school (lottery, application, base population, etc.)?
   a. What is the school “known for,” for instance, athletics, business program, etc.?
3. How long have you been a school counselor?
   a. How long have you been at this school?
4. What is the structure of the school counseling department?
5. How many students are currently in your caseload?
6. How much of your time do you spend assisting students on college planning?
7. How do you typically help students with the college access process?
   a. What type of college access information or resources do you offer to or share with students?
8. What kind of help do your students seem to need or want the most?
9. For those who are unsure about attending college, what kinds of things do you say or do to help get them excited about or motivated to attend college?
10. For those who know college is for them, what kinds of things do you say or do to help them stay motivated to enroll in college?
11. What is most challenging for you in helping students with college access planning?
12. Where do you think most students in your school get college access information?
   a. Peers, family, school counselors, teachers, others?
13. For students from this school who do not go to college, what do they say are the reasons?
   a. What do you think are the biggest reasons why students may not go to college?
14. For students who do go to college from this school, where do they typically go?
   a. How do you get information about how they do when they are there?
15. For those students who say they do not want to go to college, how do you approach them?
   a. What kinds of information or advice do you share?
16. How ready – academically, emotionally and socially – do you feel your students are for college?
a. How confident do they feel in their ability to be successful in college-level work?

b. How do you and the other school staff help them feel more prepared?

17. Some bright, qualified students make it to college and others don’t. For those students who do enroll in college, what do you think they do that perhaps other students don’t?

18. Do you think there are differences in thought process or motivation between those who enroll in college and those who do not enroll?

19. What role do you see parents play in working with those who do make it to college? Do you see a difference in how they motivate or work with their sons or daughters?

20. Some students are very self-directed about their college access process and others need more of a push. How do you see your role in helping to keep students motivated?
   a. Does the type of relationship you have with the student factor in?

21. Are there strategies you’ve used or that you see other counselors or teachers use that you look back on and think, “that didn’t work?”
   a. What were they? How did you know or how could you tell it wasn’t working?
   b. Did that influence your tactics going forward?

22. In what ways do you see teachers assisting with students’ college access process?
   a. Are there other ways in which you would like to see teachers get involved?

23. Are there strategies that you see parents use that you see are not working to get kids motivated to attend college?
   a. What are they? How could you tell it wasn’t working?

24. What differences or similarities in college-going patterns do you notice between students based on race/ethnicity, SES, female/males, first-generation?

25. What role do college access programs such as TRIO, Upward Bound, etc. or community-based programs play for your students in terms of their college planning?
   a. How do students get information about these programs? How are they selected?
   b. Approximately how many of your students participate in these programs?

26. What resources or support do you wish you had access to in order to better support students and families from your school in the college-going process?

27. Are there any other questions or anything I forgot to ask that you feel would be important to share on this issue?
Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Teacher Interviews

1. Can you tell me a little about the school’s demographics? (Number of students, socioeconomically, racial/ethnic make-up, etc.?)
2. How do most students get placed in the school (lottery, application, base population, etc.)?
   - What is the school “known for,” for instance, athletics, business program, etc.?
3. How long have you been a teacher at this school?
   - What subject(s) do you teach?
   - Do you lead any other programs or extracurricular activities?
4. Do you spend time during the school day working with students on college planning?
   - If so, how do you typically help students with the college access process?
   - What type of college access information or resources do you share with students?
5. What kind of help do your students seem to need or want the most?
6. How do your school’s counselors assist students with the college-going process?
7. For those who are unsure about attending college, what kinds of things do you say or do to help get them excited about or motivated to attend college?
8. As a teacher, what is most challenging for you in helping students with college access planning?
9. Where do you think most students in your school get college access information?
   - Peers, family, school counselors, teachers, others?
10. For students from this school who do not go to college, what do they say are the reasons?
11. What do you think are the biggest reasons why students may not go to college?
12. For students who do go to college from this school, where do they typically go?
   - Do you have a sense of how they do when they are there?
13. For those students who say they do not want to go to college, how do you approach them?
   - What kinds of information or advice do you share?
14. Some bright, qualified students make it to college and others don’t. For those students who do enroll in college, what do you think they do that perhaps other students don’t?
15. Do you think there are differences in thought process or motivation between those who enroll in college and those who do not enroll?
16. What role do you see parents play in working with those who do make it to college? Do you see a difference in how they motivate or work with their sons or daughters?
17. Some students are very self-directed about their college access process and others need more of a push. How do you see your role in helping to keep students motivated?
   o Does the type of relationship you have with the student factor in?
18. Are there strategies you’ve used or that you have seen counselors or teachers use where you thought, “that didn’t work?”
   o What were they? How did you know or how could you tell it wasn’t working?
   o Did that influence your tactics going forward?
19. Are there strategies that you see parents use that you see that are not working to get kids motivated to attend college?
   o What are they? How did you know or how could you tell it wasn’t working?
20. How ready – academically, emotionally and socially – do you feel your students are for college?
   o How confident do they feel in their ability to be successful in college-level work?
   o How do you and the other school staff help them feel more prepared?
21. How does your school’s administration support or assist students during the college-going process?
22. In what ways do you feel that your school could enhance or expand its services to help students make it to college?
23. What resources do you wish you had access to in order to better support students and families from your school in the college-going process?
24. Is there anything more you would like to add or anything you want to be sure that I capture?
Appendix E

Interview Protocol for Parent Interviews

1. How old is your son/daughter? How many children do you have? What grades are they in?
2. What was your son/daughter’s high school experience like?
   o What type of high school did they attend?
3. Is this your first child who has attended college? If not, how many others?
4. When did you first begin talking with your son or daughter about college?
5. In what ways did you help your child with the college access process?
   o What type of college access information or resources did you share, if any?
   o What kind of help did your child seem to need or want the most?
6. Growing up, what were your plans after high school?
   o Did you intend to go to college? If so, what challenges did you face along the way?
7. What kinds of things did you say or do to help get him/her excited about or motivated to attend college?
8. What were his/her biggest challenges with college planning?
9. Where do you think your child got the most college access information?
   o Peers, family, school counselors, teachers, others?
10. In what ways did your son/daughter get help from the high school staff with college planning?
    o Were you satisfied with the level of support they received at school? If not, why?
11. Were you nervous about him/her going to college? If not, why?
12. What do you think are the biggest reasons why students may not go to college from your community or neighborhood?
13. What role do you think parents should play in working with those who do make it to college? Do you see a difference in how they motivate or work with their sons or daughters?
    o Does the type of relationship you have factor in?
14. Some students are very self-directed about their college access process and others need more of a push. How would you describe your son’s or daughter’s approach during the college planning process?

15. Are there strategies that you’ve used or that you’ve seen other parents use that you look back on and think, “that didn’t work?”
   - What were they? How did you know or how could you tell it wasn’t working?
   - Did that influence your tactics going forward?

16. Are there strategies that you see teachers or counselors use that you see are not working to get kids motivated to attend college?
   - What were they? How did you know or how could you tell it wasn’t working?

17. What resources do you wish you had access to in order to better support your son/daughter in the college-going process?

18. What ways did aspects of your culture, race/ethnicity, or upbringing influence you and your child during the college access process?

19. How did your child go about making decisions during the college-going process?
   - Did he/she seek advice from others?
   - What role did you play in their decision-making process?
   - How did you both handle disagreements?

20. Do you feel as if your child felt “prepared” for college (academically, socially, personally?)
   - Did you feel prepared from a parent point of view?
   - How confident did you feel in your child’s ability to be successful in college-level work?

21. How did you help him/her feel more prepared academically, emotionally, and socially?
   - What would your response have been if he/she had decided not to attend?

22. Is there anything more you would like to add or that you want to be sure that I capture about your experience or your son or daughter’s experience?
Appendix F

Questionnaire for Sampling Procedure
Administered via Qualtrics

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. Please fill out the form below completely and be sure to click submit. Upon receiving all responses, those students who fit the study criteria will be contacted via email to confirm their participation. If you have any questions, please contact Allison Mitchell at ____________.

What is your first name?
Fill in: ____________________________

What is your last name?
Fill in: ____________________________

What is your email address (Please list your university address)?
Fill in: ____________________________

What university do you currently attend?
Fill in: ____________________________

What year are you currently in at your institution?
  a. Freshman
  b. Sophomore
  c. Junior
  d. Senior

How long have you been attending this university as a full-time undergraduate student?
  a. One year (or less)
  b. Two years
  c. Three years
  d. Four years
  e. Five years or more

What high school(s) did you attend? (List any/all that you attended and the city/state for each.)
Name of high school: ______________________________
City/state: ______________________________
Name of high school: ______________________________
City/state: ______________________________
Did you ever attend an early college high school (early college high schools enable students to enroll in college level classes and potentially earn an associate’s degrees)?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not sure/don’t know
   d. Other: ________________________________

Did you enter your current university as a freshman directly after high school or did you transfer from another institution?
   a. I entered as a freshman/first-year student
   b. I transferred from a 2-year college (community college, etc.)
   c. I transferred from another 4-year college or university
   d. Other: ________________________________

Were you involved in a pre-college program such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, Gear Up, AVID, MSEN, etc. at any point during high school?
   a. Yes
   b. No

If yes, please list the name of the programs you were involved in? Check all that apply.
   a. Upward Bound
   b. Gear Up
   c. Talent Search
   d. MSEN (Math, Science & Engineering Network)
   e. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination)
   f. DUKE TIP (Talent Identification Program)
   g. Other: ______________________________

If yes, how long were you involved in the pre-college program(s) above? For example, Upward Bound (2 years), AVID (6 months), etc.
Fill in: ________________________________

Have you participated in any community-based pre-college preparation programs? (This might include programs through local YMCA or Boys & Girls clubs, churches, community centers, etc.)
   a. Yes
   b. No

If yes, please list the name and add a brief description of each pre-college program. For example, YMCA Achievers program (provides help with tutoring and SAT prep), etc.
Fill in: ________________________________
During your high school years, were you eligible for free and/or reduced price lunch?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not sure/Don’t know

At your current college/university, are you receiving federal need-based financial aid such as a Pell Grant, Perkins Loan, Stafford loan or a Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant Program (FSEOG)?:
   a. Yes, I am receiving/participating in one or more of the above financial aid programs
   b. No, I am not eligible for those types of funding/financial aid
   c. No, I am eligible for those types of funding/financial aid but I did NOT choose to use them
   d. Not sure/don’t know

At your current college/university, are you eligible for a work-study position as part of your financial aid award? (You do not currently have to be doing a work-study job. This just asks if you are eligible for work-study.)
   a. Yes, I am eligible to get a work-study position
   b. No, I am not eligible to get a work-study position
   c. Not sure/don’t know

Are you currently involved in any university-based programs that support low-income and/or first-generation college students?
   a. Yes
   b. No

What is the name of the program you are involved in?
Fill in: __________________________________________

What is the highest level of education that your father/male guardian completed?
   a. Did not finish high school
   b. Graduated from high school
   c. Attended college but did not complete degree
   d. Completed a 2-year associate’s degree or certificate program
   e. Completed a 4-year bachelor’s degree
   f. Some graduate or professional coursework; no degree completed
   g. Completed a master’s degree
   h. Completed a doctoral degree or other professional degree (dentistry, medicine etc.)
   i. Not sure/don’t know
What is the highest level of education that your mother/female guardian completed?
   a. Did not finish high school
   b. Graduated from high school
   c. Attended college but did not complete degree
   d. Completed a 2-year associate’s degree or certificate program
   e. Completed a 4-year bachelor’s degree
   f. Some graduate or professional coursework; no degree
   g. Completed a master’s degree
   h. Completed a doctoral degree or other professional degree (dentistry, vet medicine etc.)
   i. Not sure/don’t know

What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)
   a. African-American/Black
   b. American Indian or Alaska Native
   c. Asian/Pacific Islander
   d. Hispanic/Latino
   e. White/Caucasian
   f. Other: ___________________________

How would you describe your socio-economic background when you were growing up?
   a. Low-income
   b. Working class
   c. Middle class
   d. Upper middle class/professional class
   e. Upper class/wealthy
Appendix G

Journal Prompts

Dissertation Study on Motivation in the College Access Process

Questions for Reflections Journal

Instructions: Please carefully think through each question below and write (electronically or handwritten) your responses. There is no page limit but I hope you would reflect for at least 1-2 paragraphs on each question.
Thank you!

1. Think about students from your high school, community or family that you know who were academically eligible (good grades, etc.), but did not go to college. What do you think were the issues/factors that made it difficult for them to make it to college? What would you have done in that same situation?

2. When you arrived in college, what were the things you wish someone had told you before you started? What information or support would have made you feel more confident in your ability to be successful in college (academically, socially, and emotionally)?
Appendix H

MEMOS

January 2015—Reflection on Data Collection Process

This memo was written during the data collection process after I had conducted several initial interviews with students, parents and school staff.

Career goals (intrinsic motivation): Intrinsic motivation is evident in the clarity of career goals. Those students who seem clearer of their career goals seem to be motivated by the notion of college.

Competency: Students who are smart are given reinforcement to consider college. Their competency is reinforced by parents, teachers and peers. You are smart so you should go to college.

Academic shock: There is definite academic shock that happens when students from less rigorous schools arrive in college. The students said they were not feeling as prepared and several students changed their major already even as freshmen. One moved from biology to nutrition, meteorology to nursing and textiles to art. It makes me wonder if they had enough exposure to careers beforehand. [Choice set; lack of knowledge of what to expect]

Fitting in: I wonder if students also struggle with fitting in. A few students mentioned that they have no friends. Fitting in seems to be an issue. NL said she has no friends. EW said “so many white people here.” He has few friends. NCL too spoke on this. Social integration for LIFG students may be a bigger challenge because of isolation from the home area, SES challenges and others. Ask more about this. (Introverts v. extrovert.) -- POSSIBLE THIRD PAPER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS.

February 2015 – Reflections on the Participants

This memo describes some of my thinking after having my either initial or second interview with several of the student participants:

ZH: Very positive young lady. Very open to having me connect/call her family. I was nervous after the 1st two students said no or were hesitant about me calling family. She spoke openly about her town. Laughed frequently during the interview, almost like she was amused by my questions or how I cared to ask them. Described not fitting in, few friends. Considering major change.
EW: Really enjoyed my interactions with EW. He seemed very open, honest, and willing to help with the information I was asking. We talked about being in a diverse community and he seemed to hope for that and was disappointed he did not find that at his college. He was talkative and almost wanted me to ask more questions. Struck by the fact that he said he doesn’t fit in at a PWI. Also he spoke of severe underpreparedness by his high school. Well meaning teachers but he was somewhat bitter about his school experience and lack of help. Some racial tension at his college with similar peers. Doesn’t fit in. Due to his lack of preparedness, struggled academically his first year. Considering major change.

EmW: Very polite, kind of quiet. Not sure she fit the criteria but she explained that her birth parents did not have a college degree but her guardian does. Very much influenced by her Ag Ed teacher and strict environment by her aunt. Her aunt kept her on task, firm, high standards. She was humble in our conversation. She seemed very open and friendly to me.

NCL: Enjoyed talking with her. Honest, straight talk. She struggled as first-gen. Very few friends. Little connection to the students in her college. They don’t “dress like her.” She encouraged me to talk to her mom who was also very no-nonsense. Her mom made sure she pushed her to do well in school and go to college. Doesn’t fit in. The music scene, etc. Switched major to social work.

JH: Lovely girl, very smiley but in an amused way. Seemed to be a bit more comfortable in urban/city setting than in small town where she grew up. She wore sporty attire at interview.

**June 1, 2015—Reflection on Initial Coding**

*Key thoughts on the initial coding process:*

1) Distinguishing among the variables autonomy and competency support/undermine was a challenge at times. In some cases, I coded both or other times, I tried to think through whether the statement focused more on competency primarily or autonomy primarily. During a second round of coding, this should be more clearly addressed in my codebook.

2) As new codes emerged, it is clear that I will need to go back and recode some of the initial data to capture those codes added later. Codes added later included: not sure what to expect in college, military, sports influence, is college worth it, college support during transition.

3) Themes that have arisen often include: competency supportive strategies that parents and school personnel used; importance of relatedness and one’s social networks for information and support; fears/myths about college keep families from encouraging college; family obligations are a major deterrent for college (esp. for girls). The importance of parental support was overarching all interviews -- students, parents and counselors. The challenges as first-generation students from homes or communities with low aspirations were something
that the students each spoke of having to overcome. Need to “get away” or pursue a career to avoid hardship were often motivators, in addition to a desire to help people. Money was mentioned as a motivator simply as a way to ensure comfort, stability, etc.

4) Another theme that came up was this notion that high school is enough or if you want to go to college, it’s your choice. Although that may seem autonomy supportive, it actually can lead to student indecision and apathy because with no push, students often do not progress. This goes against the theory in some instances. Without that push, students languish. So it’s as if too much choice/freedom is undermining students’ belief that they can OR should go to college.

5) The gender implications are interesting. They did not come up often but there was this sense that women are expected to get married and stay home and work to help the family rather than go to school. Interesting...

June 5, 2015 – Reflections on Parent & Guardian Coding

I have just finished coding all of the parent and guardian transcripts and several key thoughts and themes came up during the process:

1) There were several times when parents or guardians mentioned “those students who went off to college and come back.” The themes ran from: the kids went off and instead of doing their academics, they were partying. Others spoke of those who went to college and came back and were laying sheetrock or working at a gas station. Other times they mentioned a college degree being “wasted” and students not finishing or using their degree to get a better job. This seemed to be one of the reasons why those interviewed believed that parents did not encourage college for their sons/daughters. They had heard these “horror stories” and felt that the cost was “not worth it.”

2) I realize the “myth” of some of these stories seemed to be pretty prevalent in the stories, perhaps due to these being small towns. If one student does come back to the area, is it possible it’s because he/she could not find success elsewhere? And therefore those who do come back are the ones who become the examples? Are the successful students coming back and sharing their stories? I also wonder if the social capital is limited, there may not be many in the hometown environments that can be held up as success stories of going to college and making a better life for themselves. The lack of those role models or exemplars in the community might be a factor in keeping those myths alive.

3) Parents also spoke of fears about college: rape, murder, etc. They had fears of this “unknown place” where they were sending their kids. Many worried about it being “far.” They also talked about college portrayals in movies as another place where they were getting their “intel” about college. This related more to partying. Again, maybe if the parents had
more exposure to college environments or someone to give first-hand knowledge, they would have broadened perspectives on what college is like. When you haven’t experienced it yourself, you don’t know.

4) Another reason people don’t go is the perception that “I got you to graduation and now I’m done” mentality in some towns/families. No push to help them beyond that. “I did my job.”

5) I had trouble coding some of the actions of the parents. Is keeping a very strict household autonomy supportive or undermining? Not letting a child go out with friends if they had not studied or had gotten a “B” grade? Punishments are considered extrinsic? But many spoke of their parents as “keeping them on track” which moved them towards college. Is having your mom fill out your applications competency undermining or helpful? I’ll need to explore this more in the theory.

6) Some of the parents were more hands off and relied more on the students getting help from the school (not even sure who). Others had a more intentional role and were more apt to get involved by going up to the school. Some wished they had been involved more or given more information.

7) Fear is a prevalent reason that many stated that kids from their community don’t go to school. Fear of the unfamiliar and fear of leaving home. May need to add this as a code.

8) A lot of the parents were critical of those parents who do not push their kids, who expect them to just become exemplary without pushing or who do not start their kids early on focusing on college. They put a lot of the blame for lack of college-going on the parents.

**June 7, 2015 – Reflections on Peer Coding**

*I have just finished coding the peer transcript (girlfriend) and here are my observations:*

1) She confirmed many of the topics that were shared by Evan. There was a heavy emphasis on the lack of academic preparedness they felt coming from their high school. The bar was very low for academics and they did not feel academically ready for college, which has led them both to change their majors in the STEM areas (meteorology to nursing; biology to nutrition).

2) The school showed little caring in terms of providing them with support or assistance with college help. It appears that the strongest influence was peers who provided information and support to one another.
3) Candace’s mom provided some measure of assistance to Candace which transferred to Evan.

4) It was important for Candace that Evan had a college-going goal. They both reinforce each other’s college-going goals.

5) They felt that the district’s focus was on “using them” to get funding but did not listen or take into account what their needs were. Little relatedness if any by counselors or teachers.

6) Their desires about which courses to take were also not taken into consideration, undermining their feelings of autonomy. Initiative that they took (buying the drama show curtains) were not acknowledged or appreciated, further undermining autonomy (feelings of validation).

7) Because they were smart, they were catered to and coddled, which made them feel overconfident when they got to college. They then did poorly in college coursework which undermined their feelings of competency. What a terrible feeling!

8) Academic underpreparedness and competency undermined were major themes here.

9) Lack of parent support was prevalent in this community. Status quo, don’t push the students to do better or want for more. General sense in the community of just sticking around and doing the same as your family before you.

June 12, 2015 – Reflections after Journal Coding

I completed the coding of the short journal prompts that students answered regarding the reasons why students in their community did not attend college and what they wish they had known before coming to college. Key insights are below:

1) Students seemed to have a “rose-colored glasses” approach to college. Many stressed that they were underprepared for the academic rigor and how different it would be both socially and academically. They seemed almost blindsided by it. For many students, we know that is true but it seemed even more challenging for this group because they stated that, as first gen students, they had few people to give them this first-hand knowledge. This is one of the challenges for first-gen students and their families. Some rely on media or TV to tell them what college is like. So they all stressed that having someone give them accurate info would have been helpful.

2) The students all seemed committed to going to college, even if they had experienced obstacles. They spoke of how they would have overcome them, which for most included going to either a 4-year school near their homes, going to CC and then transferring or
working to save money until they could go to college. So there was a strong urge to go that was intrinsic for them at this point. One student did note that she considered whether the benefits outweighed the risks (debt, no job in the field after college, etc.) But she opted to move forward due to family encouragement. Several spoke of the fact that without encouragement from family as well as peers, they would not have felt as compelled to go to college. This is a huge factor in why relatedness, social capital and those who support your ambitions is so important. (Building social networks/capacity is essential; CAC, counselor, teachers, peers, college peer mentors, etc.)

3) The students often spoke of the socially isolating aspects of higher education. Many did not feel as if they made friends easily nor did they feel that they had a strong social network. For some, this also was an expectation that was fueled by “media” or what they had “heard” was supposed to happen. This was a reality check for many.

**June 27 – Reflections after coding for the most frequently coded themes:**

**Autonomy**

It is interesting that I am finding that most of the coding having to do with autonomy are coming from parents or related to parents. Although counselors and teachers played a role, I found that parents seemed to have more of an influence (based on number of references coded and the type of statements coded under autonomy support) on autonomy-supportive actions than others interviewed. It is possible that parents have a greater influence on students’ choices than those in the school environment.

I hypothesize that more of the comments regarding competency are related more closely to teachers and to a smaller extent counselors’ influence.

**Community Environment**

This was a common theme in the study. I tended to put things under “Community Environment” when I felt it had to do with their surroundings -- hometown, neighborhood, expectations of those in their community. Therefore this theme has a variety of different topics coded within. **I am sensing that this theme is actually related to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, or expectations within one’s environment.** I am finding that the neighborhood or community is having an influence on students’ motivation in different ways. Some of the students are really focused on ensuring that they try to remember where they come from. For others, they want to get as far away from their town as possible and it motivated them to get to college. Others feel as if systemic issues in their hometown (poorly trained teachers, bad district policies, etc.) have influenced their academic readiness for college. These aspects of “habitus” have impacts on motivation that are not fully defined in the SDT theory.

This MAY be captured under contexts that influence motivation and perhaps the community context is one variable that can influence motivation (LOOK FOR STUDIES ON THIS).
Being first-generation students, many spoke of the fact that having no one who had gone to college in their home made them feel as if it was less likely for them. This made them feel as if college was less likely and it hampered their motivation. Is this habitus, being first-gen, influence of the community? Interesting, Evan speaks of desiring more b/c of his community being near a military base. This led him to want more for himself also.

**Third article may focus on social capital and community environment and the impact on motivation.** Bringing in the social capital & habitus elements of Bourdieu’s theory.
## Appendix I

**NVivo Codebook**

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Lack of counselor support
Lack of jobs
Lack of motivation for college
Lack of parent support
Lack of teacher support
Leave but come back
Low expectations
Major
Make others proud
Military
Military family
Motivation for college
Negative myths or stories about college
No communication at transitions
No future long-term orientation
No help because smart
No persistence
Not like others in family
Not self-directed
Not socially engaged
Not sure what to expect in college
Parent early influence
Parent involvement with school
Parent level of education
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Parent plan after HS
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Appendix J

Case Profiles

Case #1 – Emma Weston

Emma is a 19-year-old bi-racial (Native American and White) freshman majoring in agricultural education at West Central University. She said her family and friends would describe her as “funny, loyal, responsible and honest,” and a common misconception people have of her is that she is a pushover. She refutes that myth and says that if someone tries to push her, she will not take it. However, she is very friendly in her demeanor with a welcoming face and a warm yet shy personality.

Emma grew up in a rural town in Tennessee. She described the town as being very small and spread out, with lots of dirt roads. Her mother passed away when she was about two or three, so she grew up with her father and his wife along with her little brother and two older step-brothers. She is the second to the youngest and notes that she has many cousins and extended family members in Tennessee. She was living with her grandparents there until her grandparents’ home was damaged in a fire at age 15. At that point, her aunt asked if she wanted to come live with her in Weston, a small rural community in the southeast. Emma agreed and moved in with her guardians—her aunt and uncle—during high school. Her parents did not graduate from college, and other than her guardians, she is the first in her large family to attend college. Her aunt owns a franchise in town. They have been strong mentors for her and have pushed her to “want more” for her future. They pushed her very hard to excel in school.

Emma attended Westonbrook High School, a rural school with about 670 students. It was there that she developed a passion for teaching after building a relationship with her agriculture teacher. Through her connections with her teacher and Future Farmers of America (FFA), Emma decided to become an agriculture teacher also. She is now at West Central University studying agricultural education. She has acclimated well to college socially but admits that she has struggled academically without her guardians there to push
her. She wants to make her family proud since she feels she is being held to a high standard as the “smart one” in the family. She also wants to do this for herself and her future.

Case #2 – Evan Winslow

Evan is a 19-year-old white male currently in his sophomore year at West Central University. He has a slight build, dark brown hair, and a friendly smile. He was polite and said “yes, ma’am” often, which is very typical of students in this southern region. In meeting Evan, it was clear that he was self-assured. He appeared confident in his academic abilities and noted that he was ranked 4th in his graduating class of about 400 students. However, Evan realizes that he may not have been fully college ready and admitted that he struggled during his first year in college. When asked how friends and family would describe him, he used the words “quiet, dependable, reliable, and always there for everyone.”

Evan grew up in Hatville, a small town located near a large military base. According to Evan, Hatville is a rural community with one post office and one main two-lane road. The sounds of military drills are a common occurrence in town, which can be a surprise to visitors to the area. Despite the occasional “boom” of military maneuvers, what Evan enjoys the most about the town is its peacefulness, lack of traffic, and the small town atmosphere. The flip side of this for Evan is that Hatville does not provide many opportunities for professional development or job opportunities other than in fast food. There are also few places to have “safe fun” and Evan uses the words “hole in the wall” to describe how some from outside view the town. The impression Evan gives is that one has to leave the community to find career opportunities.

Evan’s decision to pursue a career in meteorology stemmed from his decision to help people. His goal was to aid in better storm predictions to help save lives, such as during weather events like Hurricane Katrina or other natural disasters. However, currently Evan is planning to switch universities and shift his major to nursing (his current institution does not have a nursing program.) He realized upon entering college that being a meteorologist focuses heavily on doing weather models, and that was not appealing to him. So after taking a career inventory, he learned that the medical field was highly recommended for him. He believes he can follow his passion to help people and make a difference by being a nurse.
Evan noted that he was a “minority” at his high school, Hatville County High. According to Evan, his high school was racially diverse with about 45-50% African-American, 20% White, 20% Native American and the rest being a mix of Hispanic and interracial students. Hatville is the only high school in the county, so all students living in the county were assigned to the one high school. There were about 1,800 students enrolled in the school. Evan described his socioeconomic background as “working class” and noted that he was eligible for free and reduced lunch while in high school.

Evan has three siblings: one older half-brother and two younger siblings ages 16 and 12. Both of Evan’s parents did not complete a four-year degree; Evan’s mother earned an Associate’s Degree and his father completed high school but did not go on to higher education. Currently, his mother is a stay at home mom, and his father is a full-time firefighter. At home, Evan is known as “the mediator” between his siblings and his parents. He notes that his parents were fairly hands-off during his college planning process. He credits his girlfriend, Candace, as well as his peers, as being his main motivational influences on the path to college. Evan noted that he is dating interracially - his girlfriend is African-American and Hispanic - and that has created challenges for him in making friends at the university. He says many of his peers do not react well upon learning of his interracial relationship, which creates a barrier for him when making friends at the predominantly white institution he attends. He notes that after coming from such a diverse high school, he has not felt that he “fits in” at West Central, and he is considering transferring to the university that his girlfriend attends.

Case #3 – Jayda Hastings

Jayda is a 19-year-old multiracial student (African-American, Hispanic, and White) who is majoring in the sciences at West Central University. She was a freshman at the time of the study. She is a lovely girl with a sporty demeanor and short black, curly hair. During the interview, she had a slightly amused look, as if wondering why I was asking all of these questions. When asked how her family and friends would describe her, she mentioned intelligent, outgoing, silly and ambitious. She said the most common misconception from others is that she is snooty because she focuses on her school work, but she notes that outside
Jayda is the oldest of five, with two younger brothers and two younger sisters who range in age from three to seventeen. Jayda lives with her mother and stepfather. Her mother, she notes, is much like her and tries to research anything she does not understand. Her father is more laid back. She credits her mother with helping her most with college planning. Her mother expected her to get good grades and helped her with all aspects of college planning.

Currently Jayda is pursuing a major in the life sciences with hopes of pursuing sports medicine. She developed this interest due to her relationship with a coach and her biology teacher. Both made her feel as if she was good at science, and the coach gave her good advice about college and possible careers through a program he created in his district focused on college access. Jayda was very aware that as the oldest of five, she needed to set an example for her younger siblings by going to college. She worked hard to reach this goal. However, in college, she has struggled to find a friendship group that she can trust and has experienced the challenges of being first-generation in college and not knowing what to expect socially and academically. However, she remains committed to her goal of her college graduation.

Case #4 – Lily Ann Watson

Lily Ann is a 19-year-old white female currently pursuing a major in zoology at West Central University. She was friendly and outgoing, with a sporty build, dark hair, and a friendly face. She seemed to be very good-natured and was happy to assist with the research project. She said that her friends and family would describe her as “very outgoing, makes
friends easily, but also introverted and someone who likes to be alone too.” A common misconception people have of her, she says, is that she is intimidating or snooty, simply because she is smart. But she says that most people when they get to know her realize that she is really nice and approachable.

She attended a small high school in the rural town of Herrisburg, located in the southeast. She describes Herrisburg as a “little farmer’s town” about 90-120 minutes away from West Central University. It has a Piggly Wiggly and a couple of stoplights in the downtown area. Everybody knows everyone in the town. Her school’s graduating class was approximately 120 students and the school had a total enrollment of about 675 students. She noted that the school is in a low-income county where they typically bring in teachers from special programs that place teachers in low-income districts. Herrisburg High School was fairly diverse with a mix of students from African-American, Hispanic, and White backgrounds.

Lily Ann’s family structure was somewhat complex. She is the oldest and has a sister who is three years younger, as well as step siblings after her dad remarried. After her parents’ divorced when she was 11 years old, she went to live with her grandparents until she graduated from high school. The custody issues during the divorce were very tough on Lily Ann, and even now, her parents do not talk much. Currently her mom has been in and out of work, and her father has a job with a local cable company. Neither of her parents graduated high school. Although she sees her mother and father, she has lived with her grandmother and grandfather most of her life. She said that although she has great parents, she considers her grandmother her parent figure and is very close to her. Lily Ann noted that she is very “different” from her family members. Some of her family members seemed content to stay in town, get married, and have kids. However, she has always been driven to be a successful and “powerful” woman and to not have to struggle. Her parents and grandparents all pushed her to aspire to something more and urged her not to “make the same mistakes that we made.”

Her decision to pursue a major in zoology stemmed from her love of animals. She had hoped to go to veterinary school, but after starting to do research with faculty, she is now
considering going to graduate school to further conduct animal research. She was a very motivated and driven student during high school and was very involved in sports, including basketball, volleyball and track. One of her main goals was to be valedictorian, and although it eluded her, she worked hard to reach that goal. She described loving her teachers and counselors and appreciating the support and encouragement she received from them. School staff described her as a warm, motivated, and hardworking young lady, and she has become a friend to many of them. They helped her with the college access process and encouraged her to do a summer bridge program at West Central which really helped her meet friends and get acclimated to campus. Her biggest challenge in college has still been making friends and finding a community. She recently became a Christian in college and has found a new community of friends on campus through the campus ministry. She feels even more motivated by her faith to keep moving forward towards her goals.

Case #5 – Natalie Lanier

Natalie is an 18-year-old, bi-racial (African-American and White) student who is currently studying social work in her first year at West Central University. She had fluffy brown hair tied back into a headband, with slight freckles on her face. She had a quiet, confident demeanor and gave short, to the point, answers to my questions. When asked how her family and friends would describe her, she said “hardworking, driven, serious and considerate.” She said a common misconception about her is that she is sarcastic, but she said she’s very genuine in what she says. She is from a military family but has generally been stationed in a Stinson, a military town, for the past several years.

Natalie attended Stinson High School, which has about 1,500 students. According to Natalie, the school demographic was primarily African-American students. Natalie has eight younger siblings. Her parents are divorced, and she currently lives with her mother and two of her sisters. She noted that she wants to pursue a college education in order to be a role model for her siblings. She decided to pursue a major in social work to help the students in her hometown, which has a reputation in the region as being troubled by crime. She wants to give back to her community, which she says is not as bad as people think it is. She said “she does not dodge bullets” in her hometown.
While in high school, Natalie worked over 60 hours a week and described being extremely tired while in school. She shared that being financially secure was a huge motivator for her and motivated her to attend college. She also was honest that she was not even considering college because her parents did not go. It was only when she went on a campus tour did she begin thinking that college might be an option. She struggled to get help from the counselors, despite working in the guidance office. She said they assumed that because she was smart, she did not need help. She turned to one of the teachers at her school as her primary source of information and support during her college planning process. She also had an aunt and uncle who helped expose her to the college environment. Now in college, she is struggling to find a social group on campus. She shared that she has “no friends.” She described that, being bi-racial, she feels that she does not quite fit in with the black students or with the white students. Also, the reputation of where she lives also leaves people thinking she is “some sort of gangster.” This has left her feeling somewhat isolated in the college environment. However, she is doing well academically and has acclimated well to the campus environment.

**Case #6 – Nora Coleman**

Nora is a 20-year-old white female currently in her sophomore year at West Central University. She grew up with her mother and her older brother. Her father died tragically when she was about two years old. She described her high school environment as being very diverse racially, but many students drop out of school. She added that drugs are prevalent among the young people in her town. During high school, Nora’s mom was very sick and at one point, contracted a severe bacterial infection and also battled cancer. Her mother nearly died. She shared that she struggled with depression and was in a relationship with a boy who was not good for her. He often discredited her desire to go to college and instead wanted her to get married and “have his kids.” These challenges left her struggling to excel academically, and she admits that in school, she was known for smoking and running with the “wrong crowd.” This often caused her to get into arguments with her mother, and she ended up leaving home for about six months and attended another high school. She did
return though but had to push hard to be able to graduate on time. She is very proud of this accomplishment.

Because of her challenges at home, she was often angry, and she credits her teachers with helping her to learn self-control and how to calm down. She also built a special relationship with her history teacher, Mr. Campbell. He noticed that she and a friend were smoking, and he tried to get them to stop. After talking with her, Mr. Campbell would offer her the chance to step outside of the classroom for a quick “check in” when he sensed that something was wrong. This is something he did with many students who he sensed were upset or coping with difficulties. Although they were awkward at first, through the check-ins, Nora grew comfortable with him and began opening up about issues she was having. She shared that she often cried in his classroom. It was through these personal connections that Nora began to seek out Mr. Campbell for college advice and support. He helped her with her financial aid process and would constantly remind her about applying. She did not receive much help from her school counselor or other teachers. She believes that because she was “from the wrong crowd” many teachers felt she was not serious about college. Her counselor, Nora noted, seemed intent on helping the students who already had money for college. She was disappointed that her counselor would not offer her much help and did not see her potential. Few teachers in her school offered help. She added that she resented many of her teachers because they constantly compared her to her brother, who is now enrolled in an engineering graduate program at West Central, the same university that Nora attends. Her brother was very smart, and this often left Nora feeling judged by teachers against her brother’s legacy.

Nora’s biggest motivation to college was her mother. Seeing her mother complete an associate’s degree while raising two children alone and witnessing her mother’s battle with two life-threatening illnesses reinforced in her that she was also strong. She believes that she deserves good things in her life and fought hard to go to college so she would not be poor. She also has a strong desire to help people, much as Mr. Campbell helped her. Initially, she started college as a teacher education major and is now pursuing social work with a goal to join the Peace Corps. Nora also turned to her peers quite often for support. They helped
boost her confidence that she was college material. And although she believes they would have been proud of her if she had gone to a two-year school or started her own business (she wanted to open a bakery), she pushed forward towards college because she wants a better life for her children, and she believes she deserves it now.

Now in college, Nora struggles with fitting in, the academic challenges, and the social atmosphere. She acknowledged that she has no friends other than those she meets through her new boyfriend and her brother, whom she lives with. She wants to make her mother proud, yet she is conscious that college is much harder than she expected it to be.

Case #7 – Zara Hoffman

Zara Hoffman is an 18-year-old white female in her freshman year studying textile design at West Central University. She was a first-year student when the study was conducted. When meeting Zara, she had a friendly and open demeanor. She laughed often and seemed to feel comfortable with me quickly. She appeared to be artistic and fashionably dressed, which seemed to fit her choice of major in textiles and her love of art. She originally wanted to do textile or apparel design, but she is not enjoying it. So her plan is to switch her major to art studies.

Zara grew up in Zeyton, a small community on an island in the southeast where commercial fishing and tourism are the main industries. She attended a very small K-12 school, which has less than 150 students in total. The community where Zara grew up was very close-knit where everyone knew each other. In this environment, she was able to build strong relationships with her teachers and her school’s counselor. It is interesting to note that in Zeyton, the closest community college is nearly two and a half hours away and requires taking a ferry to get there. This often limits college access for those in the community because even if they plan to get an Associate’s Degree, they often cannot do so while living at home. This also limits students’ exposure to seeing what college life is really like.

In terms of family, Zara is the youngest of eight children. She has five older siblings and three half-siblings. She lives with her mother, who divorced when Zara was very young. Her mother graduated high school but did not attend college. Her father attended some college, but did not finish. Although her mother did not attend college, Zara said her mother
always encouraged her in school and saw her potential. Her mother felt that college would give her a better future and get her away from doing the hard, manual labor that is common in their coastal community. Interestingly, Zara mentioned that on her mother’s side of the family, the girls were often not encouraged to pursue college. Instead, her grandmother pushed the boys to go. She said her aunts and her mother encouraged her to want to change this for future generations.

Her school counselor described Zara as a hard worker with a great attitude. Although she did not have as much direct assistance from home, Zara “always had it in her” and was very self-motivated. Zara noted that she just wanted to make her family proud and to pursue a career that she was passionate about, which motivated her to keep going.