ABSTRACT

LAWTER, VERNON L. College Bound High School Seniors’ Perceptions of the Community College. (Under the direction of Dr. Duane Akroyd and Dr. Susan Bracken).

A summary of the literature on public perceptions of the community college reveals that perceptions vary widely. The literature also reveals that many factors (including media, institutional history, and institutional mission) are potential influences on the perception of the community college. It appears that most of the data collected in the past concerning the image of the community college is quantitative or categorical, and that very few qualitative studies have been conducted.

The purpose of this qualitative intrinsic case study is to examine, from a constructivist perspective, perceptions of the community college, and the roots of those perceptions, held by a select group of 27 college bound North Carolina high school seniors. Both semi-structured participant interviews and written questionnaires were utilized in the study. The following research questions guide the focus of this study:

1. How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?
2. How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?
3. What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

Significant findings include the tendency of community college students to be viewed as underachievers and the pervasive perception of the community college as a “last chance”
institution. Findings also suggest that, from student perspectives, counseling at the high school level may have some inconsistencies along racial lines when related to community college enrollment. Finally, the study suggests that college location, social opportunities, and athletic opportunities and events play significant roles in how participants perceive colleges.
COLLEGE BOUND HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

VERNON L. LAWTER, JR.

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Duane Akroyd
Co-chair

Dr. Susan Bracken
Co-chair

Dr. Conrad Glass

Dr. Denis Jackson
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Gina, and our two children, Haleigh and Nathan. I suspect they know that I love them dearly, but I’m saying it again just to be sure.
BIOGRAPHY

Vernon Linwood Lawter Jr. was born in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1965. He is the son of Vernon and Margaret Laughter, and grew up as a middle child with two sisters, Amanda and Rebecca. In 1992, Vernon married Gina Robinson. Their daughter, Haleigh Marie, was born in 1994. Their son, Nathaniel Garrett, was born in 1998.

After attending the Governor’s School of North Carolina in 1981, Vernon graduated from Hunter Huss High School in 1983. Following in his father’s footsteps, Vernon worked in the metalworking field for fifteen years while attending college in the evenings and on weekends. Along the way Vernon earned degrees from Gaston College (A.A.), UNC-Charlotte (B.A. and M.A.), and Appalachian State University (Ed.S.). He also engaged in additional graduate study at UNC-Greensboro, Wake Forest University, and Gardner-Webb University. Vernon is also a graduate of the Duke University Certificate Program in Nonprofit Management and the Indiana University Certificate in Distance Education Program. Vernon began the Ed.D. program in Higher Education Administration at N.C. State University in 1999.

In 2000, Vernon left the metalworking field to accept a position at Mitchell Community College where he now serves as Mooresville Center Director.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mother and father for their unconditional support for as far back as I can retrieve memories. I can remember lying curled up on the warm backseat floorboard of our Chevy Impala as a child, listening to my parents talking to each other in the front seat as my father drove. I wasn’t really concerned about the specifics of their conversations. I knew, essentially, when you broke the conversations down the basic message was always “I love you” and “I love you too.” They have been having that same basic conversation for over forty years now. If I can ever grow to be half the man my father is, I will be twice the man I thought I could be. And my mother will never know how much I have counted on her over the years. Her love is a pillar of strength for not one, but several family units.

I would also like to thank my wife and children. Gina may deserve this degree more than I do, and Haleigh and Nathan have inspired me in ways they will only understand once they become parents themselves.

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Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

As evidenced by several recent statewide initiatives, a number of community college systems are now taking great interest in their public images. The Chancellor’s Office of the California Community Colleges recently launched a statewide media campaign to increase awareness of the state’s community colleges among voters and policymakers (California Community College, 2002). In 2002, the Louisiana Board of Regents approved a $1.3 million consulting contract which includes determining public perceptions of the state’s forty-two technical college campuses (Dyer, 2002). In an attempt to bolster the college entrance rate in his state, the president of Maine’s technical-college system, John Fitzsimmons, proposed that colleges in his state change their names from technical colleges to community colleges “to reflect their changing mission in a changing economy” (Technically Community, 2002). And, in Virginia, Glenn DuBois (2001) identified “raising the public image and awareness of the VCCS as a system, and the 23 community colleges that comprise the system, throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation” (p.4) as one of his four major goals as new system Chancellor.

Many community college insiders and outsiders alike seem to agree that gauging, improving, and managing the public’s perception of the contemporary community college is a beneficial, if not essential, endeavor (Raisman, 2000; Sims, 1997; Zeiss 1986). Sevier (1996) discusses the importance of addressing the community college image issue:
Strong images don’t happen by accident; they occur because of design. They require the commitment of top administrators. They require a clear understanding of how the institution is perceived by its target markets. They require a concise set of achievable image goals. And they require long-term budgetary support. In other words, images must be managed. (p.12)

While these authors and others might agree that the image of the community college is an issue worthy of careful consideration, further review of the literature on the topic reveals no such consensus concerning which perceptions, if any, best represent the public’s opinion of the contemporary institution. Mitkos (2001) suggests that public perceptions of the community college have been contradictory at best, and that the image crisis has not improved with the maturing of the institution. Kent (1996) asserts that community colleges are virtually unknown as a national institution, and that little qualitative national image research has been conducted to determine what people think of the colleges based on personal experiences and perceptions. “To say that defining a national image for community colleges poses a challenge falls into the realm of understatement” (Kent, 1996, p.32). Maxwell (1992) comments on the generic nature of perceptions on the community college when he states, “Public community colleges are pictured in the college choice research literature in a gray, faceless manner as if they all have essentially the same image of convenient distance, low cost, tolerant standards, and homogeneous academic reputation” (p.239). Bailey (2002) attempts to reconcile how institutions enrolling over half of all students in credit-bearing courses in higher education have remained “hidden institutions” in the United States.
Community colleges struggle with the same troubling issues as do other postsecondary institutions, such as escalating costs and restricted revenues. But they miss out on the positive publicity from high-profile sports teams, frequently interviewed experts, and expectations surrounding research and development that baccalaureate institutions enjoy. Few people praise or even understand the value of the associate degree or the role that community colleges play within the overall landscape of higher education.” (p.1)

Rouche and Baker (1987) state “acquiring a distinct identity has been a persistent problem which has challenged community colleges over the years” (p.iii) and suggest that the diversity of functions and services offered by the comprehensive colleges tend to blur their image. The literature reveals other supporters of the belief that the colleges themselves are partly to blame as even community college insiders struggle to reach agreement on the most appropriate image to project. According to Pedersen (1997), the public community college’s own confusion concerning its purpose and place within the national schooling system has contributed to its current identity crisis. Raisman (2000) proposes that by attempting to respond to every need and request the community college spread its image until “it was so thin it started to disappear” (p.4). Raisman goes on to suggest that even community college faculty have no clear “unifying image” of the community college or the community college mission. While comprehensiveness may have evolved through a genuine commitment to be responsive to community needs, Brewer (1999) offers the opinion that “the many tasks undertaken by community colleges lead to a lack of clear purpose, tensions among faculty and students who are separated along programmatic lines, and resources spread too thin” (p.2).
This study examines perceptions of the community college from a variety of viewpoints through a review of the literature on the community college relating to its image, then focuses specifically on the perceptions of 27 college bound high school seniors. The study assumes that diverse perceptions of the contemporary community college, both external and internal (including those of high school seniors), have not evolved in an entirely arbitrary manner, and that the ability to accurately attribute perceptions to specific influences would be of considerable value to those in community college circles.

Statement of Problem

Mitkos (2001) suggests “the question of public image is not one that can be left to chance without potentially disastrous results” (p.1). Potential students are courted by a myriad of public and private educational institutions. Alfred (1998) suggests that while recent community college enrollment growth is attributable to the community college’s willingness to challenge the orthodoxy of the four-year university, technological advances, such as the advent of on-line education, have given birth to a host of new competitors now challenging the orthodoxy of even the community college. Zeiss (1998) believes, “if we [community colleges] don’t meet the needs and expectations of students, the for-profit colleges and training organizations certainly will; indeed they already have the jump on us” (p.8). Like any institution faced with the prospect of increasingly aggressive competition and simultaneously dwindling resources, the community college, as a collective American entity, might benefit from taking stock of its own current market position as a precursor to developing a strategy for future success. Community college leaders might do well to get a firm handle on what – exactly – about their institutions
constitutes a unique educational value to society as “legislators and governors question why there should be so many state institutions of higher education performing essentially the same function” (Townshend, 1989, p.24). Such an assessment might logically begin by surveying all organizational stakeholders concerning their opinions of the current value and direction of the institution. The assessment might also begin with a thorough review of existing and anticipated competition. However the assessment begins, a review of the perceptions of the institution’s stakeholders, external critics, and advocates alike will need to be conducted. Beyond this, the determination of the factors that shape such perceptions of the community college among various segments of the public, including the select group of high school seniors examined by this study, might allow community college insiders and advocates to begin to effectively and efficiently address institutional image concerns in an informed manner.

Purpose of the Study

With an institution as large and culturally pervasive as the community college in the United States, a comprehensive study of institutional image within American society would be a monumental task with an extremely large and diverse population. The scope of this research project is considerably, and necessarily, narrower. The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of the community college, and the roots of those perceptions, from the perspective of a select group of North Carolina high school seniors. The rationale for selecting high school seniors for the research population is the fact that the Bureau of the Census reports that in 2000 approximately 25% of all students attending colleges in the United States were either 18 or 19 years of age (Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2002, p.168). This two-year age group is the largest two-
year age demographic in college enrollment. Because graduating high school seniors are typically in, or about to enter, this age demographic, and because high school graduation marks a pivotal point at which important decisions about continued education are being contemplated and acted upon, this study has a select group of college bound high school seniors as its target population. The following research questions guide the focus of this study:

4. How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?

5. How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

6. What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

Within the parameters of the first broad research question lie more specific questions. What role do high school seniors foresee the community college playing in their lives? How do college bound high school seniors believe community colleges compare to four-year colleges and universities? What level of familiarity do the students have with community college programs? How do high school seniors perceive the role or mission of the community college?

The second and third research questions attempt to identify the source(s) of the opinions held by high school seniors concerning the community college. Which relationships and life experiences have affected their own assessments of the community college? To what extent have other factors shaped their perception of the community
college? This third and final question also entails an examination of whether or not patterns of influence emerge along gender, racial, or socioeconomic distinctions?

Assumptions

This research study will be conducted under the following assumptions:

1. Research participants will have given previous consideration to their options for engaging in postsecondary education following high school graduation.
2. Participant perceptions of the community college have not evolved in an entirely arbitrary fashion.
3. Research participants will provide honest and accurate representations of their perceptions of the community college during interviews.
4. Research participants will provide honest and accurate information concerning factors (i.e., personal experiences, family members, friends, counselors, media) that have influenced their perception of the community college.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college, and to determine potential factors that influence these perceptions. To achieve in-depth, comprehensive, student-driven answers to the research questions, a qualitative research methodology will be used for this study. This approach allows for the emergence of unanticipated themes and opinions previously unconsidered by other researchers. Shaw, Rhoades and Valdez (1999) claim that macro-level, quantitative analyses “have dominated research on the community college, and that our understanding of community colleges needs to progress past the sweeping portraits that have been drawn of them thus far” (p.2). It is hoped that the research findings will assist community
college administrators and advocates in determining how the community college is perceived by college bound high school seniors. It is also hoped that an analysis of factors that influence participants’ perceptions might also allow college administrators, student counselors, and admissions counselors to formulate reasonable expectations concerning the ways in which specific factors might impact, positively or negatively, institutional image. While the findings of this study alone are not readily generalizable to other populations, this study may serve as precedent to similar (perhaps larger multi-site) case studies, which may in turn reveal similar or additional findings. Specific factors identified as having even moderately predictable influence might then be addressed by administrators and community college advocates as colleges attempt to manage their own institutional images.

Beyond assisting college administrators with gaining an understanding of the current image of their own institutions, research findings might be used by high school guidance counselors in assisting students with formulating plans for continuing study. A clear understanding of why certain factors sway students toward or away from the community college may help counselors and students alike achieve the “best fit” for postsecondary study.

Another potentially significant result of the study may be an increased awareness on the part of participating high school students concerning how they have formulated their own plans for the future. This awareness may lead to the re-evaluation and perhaps a better informed and more careful consideration of all available options for further education.
Definition of Terms

Community college – a public two-year postsecondary educational institution awarding the associate’s degree, offering college transfer, vocational-technical, remedial-development, and continuing education.

External critic or proponent – a person (who is neither a student or employee of a community college and has no vested interest in the success or failure of the institution) expressing an opinion on the community college.

Rural vs. Urban county – As defined by the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center (Beacham, 2003), a rural county in the state has a population density of less than 200 residents per square mile, while an urban county has a population density of 200 residents or more per square mile.

Summary

The community college has much at stake and stands to benefit by developing a greater understanding of the dynamics of its current image as it works to ensure public and legislative support in the future. There are a number of different and often contradictory opinions, both internal and external, concerning both the impact and image of the community college. Many sources suggests that the community college has a poor image (Raisman, 2000; Savage, 1989; Sims, 1997; Garmon, 1999), yet even a cursory examination of popular press or recent institutional image surveys reveals numerous cases where the community college seems to possess a strong positive image (Schrof, 1995; Goldstein, 2001; Welsh, 2002; Rasmussen & Silverman, 2001; Conklin, 1999).

This study uses a qualitative research approach to create a forum in which 27 college bound North Carolina high school students drive open-ended dialogue concerning
plans for their own postsecondary education. From this dialogue and subsequent semi-structured interviews, participant perceptions and factors influencing participant perceptions (both individual and collective) of the community college will be determined.

A review of potential historical, media-related, and mission-related influences on the image of the community college, along with critical assertions both positive and negative with respect to the societal impact of the community college, will be conducted via an examination of relevant literature. Additionally, a review of similar studies and their findings will be included in the literature review. A focused qualitative investigation of the perceptions of a select group of high school seniors, subsequent analysis of research findings, and suggestions for application and further study follow.
Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of the community college from the perspective of a select group of high school seniors, a review of the literature on the community college gives a broader insight concerning the origins and pervasiveness of the problem being studied. The first task involves gleaning from the literature on the community college a number of opinions, both negative and positive, which address or potentially influence public perceptions of the institution. The perceptions of critics and advocates alike will be examined. The second approach to the literature review involves exploring the ways in which institutional history may have helped shape the current image of the community college. Third, the impact of the evolving community college mission on public perceptions will be examined. Finally, the media’s impact on public perceptions of the community college will be explored.

Critics of the Community College

A good place to start examining the prevailing image of the community college is with a review of critical opinions found in contemporary higher education literature. In conducting such a review it is clear that many of the criticisms revolve around the social impact of the community college in American society (Vaughan, 1980), the comprehensive mission of the contemporary community college, and the perceived failure of the institution to meet the traditional standards of the American university.

For a number of critics, “the community college with its open-door philosophy and comprehensive curricula are held to be merely symbolic gestures to equal opportunity” (Templin & Shearon, 1980, p.85). Over forty years ago Clark (1960) first
introduced his concept of the community college as a “cooling-out” agent in American higher education. Moore (as cited in Clark, 1980) summarizes the concept.

The process as described by Clark entails a student’s following a structured sequence of guidance efforts involving mandatory courses in career planning and self-evaluation, which results in “re-orientation” of the student rather than dismissal. The process begins with pre-entrance testing, which identifies low-achieving students and assigns them to remedial classes. The process is completed when the over-aspiring student is re-channeled out of a transfer program and into a terminal curriculum. Throughout the process the student is kept in contact with guidance personnel, who keep careful track of the student’s progress. (p.17)

In retrospect, Clark (1980) suggests that he should have carried the “cooling-out” concept even one step further to include the fact that “after students move from transfer to terminal programs, or while they are being asked to do so, they often quickly move from college to a job or some other form of withdrawal” (p.29). While Clark maintains that “cooling-out” is simply a necessary means of compromise with respect to educational pursuits of the masses in a democratic society and is not part of any organized plan of the elite class to suppress the masses, other critics reason somewhat differently.

Karabel (1986) suggests that the overall impact of the community college has been to reinforce rather than to reduce existing patterns of social and class inequality. Karabel’s elitist position is that the “vocationalization” of the community college has occurred as a result of a deliberate and “peculiar alliance” with the corporate sector, government, and established elite higher education associations. This assessment holds that vocational education is the bottom tier of a class-based educational system in which
the community college acts as a safety valve, preventing the masses of the working classes from entering the ranks of the privileged (Vaughan, 1980).

Wilson (1986) adds that the open-door community college offers less access to upward mobility and economic status for minorities than its advocates might suggest. Gittell (1986) agrees.

In the area of curriculum, community colleges do their greatest damage to women. Community college emphasis on job-oriented vocational programs… has very negative results, especially for women. The reality is that although community colleges are forced to accept their roles as open-access institutions, they do little to retain students, broaden their educational experiences, encourage and prepare them for transfer to four-year programs, or prepare them for more upwardly mobile careers. (p.74)

Zwerling (1976) offers a similar opinion of the role of the community college as a tool of the elite class.

Not only is maintaining the social hierarchy a primary function of the community college, but the community college is also remarkably effective at the job. It takes students whose parents are characterized primarily by low income and educational achievement and slots them into the lower ranks of the industrial and commercial hierarchy. The community college is in fact a social defense mechanism that resists changes in the social structure. (p. xix)

Other criticisms revolve around the role of the community college as compared to the role of the traditional four-year university. Even though the average enrollment of two-year colleges is now greater than the average enrollment of universities in the United
States, the community college clearly remains an ill-defined institution to many while the university conjures up fixed images for most (Hankin, 1989). Smith and Beck (1984) suggest that the image of the community college is not as clearly formulated in the minds of the public as the image of the university because the community college does not yet have the stability in terms of form and function. Vaughan (1992) offers the following assessment of public sentiment:

Certainly, the belief that four years of college are better than two still haunts community colleges and shapes their image. Many members of society and some community college faculty members believe that a real college should not offer remedial studies, a potpourri of continuing education courses that often lead nowhere, and vocational programs nor should they work with business and industry in ways that clearly constitute training rather than education in the more traditional sense of the term. (p.24)

Barry and Barry (1992) offer a view of the community college from within the ranks of the university professoriate.

University faculty contend that many community college courses, though seemingly comparable based on catalogue descriptions, lack the breadth and depth of subject matter taught in the first two years of a baccalaureate institution. In addition, they claim that because community colleges have open-admission policies and substantial remediation programs, the courses at the associate degree level are watered down to accommodate limited academic abilities. (p.39)

Other critics argue that the community college exists to protect the integrity of the university. “For the higher education system to function properly, two-year students must
somehow be diverted from the four-year schools. The scarcity of the bachelor’s degree must be protected” (Nasaw, 1979, p.228). Brint and Karabel (1989) suggest that while “the community college is the lowest track in America’s highly stratified structure of higher education”(p. 222), their saving grace lies in the fact that the transfer function still connects the community college to the system’s most prestigious institutions. Thus Brint and Karabel credit the university with bestowing value on the community college. LaPaglia (1995) makes the case that while the community college claims almost half of all students and faculty in higher education in America, it is in many ways an “invisible” institution in our culture, lost in the shadows of the American university.

   Community colleges are deemed the least glamorous segment of higher education, and no one wants to hear about them. The elitist myth that regards the typical college student as a male attending school full time, living on campus, and experiencing the process of late adolescent development, hangs on long after cultural and enrollment patterns have changed. (p.35)

Another damaging and pervasive perception of the community college to develop within our society is the notion that community colleges are second chance colleges (Grubb, 1999; Raisman, 2000) or institutions of last resort (Zoglin, 1982; Cain, 1999) for those who have endured previous failure with respect to academic and economic pursuits. Raisman (2000) places the blame for the perception of the community college as the place “where dumb kids go to work in factories” (p.4) squarely on the community college itself for assuming the marketplace knows the value of the institution.
Advocates of the Community College

Surely the phenomenal growth of the community college in the last century would never have occurred without determined supporters of the institution Clark Kerr once deemed “the great innovation of twentieth-century American higher education” (as cited in Brint & Karabel, 1989, p.v). The American Association of Community Colleges (founded in 1920 as the American Association of Junior Colleges) has moved front and center as chief advocate in the effort to foster support and greater awareness of the value of the community college on the national level (America’s Community Colleges, 2001). A number of state community college systems such as California (“California Community College,” 2002), Louisiana (Dyer, 2002), and Virginia (Dubois, 2001), are placing a high priority on the images of their community colleges.

There are other indicators that the community college is making great strides in terms of credibility and educational value in the United States. While referring to the community college as America’s “economic cornerstone,” the Clinton administration made more visits to community colleges than any administration in history (Jamilah, 1998). While discussing the rapidly changing nature of the American economy during a visit to Midlands Technical College in Columbia, South Carolina, Vice President Gore “stressed the vital role that community colleges will play in preparing Americans for the changes to come” (Jamilah, 1998, p.13). Lane (2001) suggests that the Clinton administration’s emphasis on workforce development and the need for students to master math and science is helping to change the perception of vocational and technical education. Kevin Drumm, vice president for enrollment management at Springfield Technical Community College, credits Clinton and former Secretary of Education
Richard Riley with “making it known that you must have hands and a head to study at a technical college” (as cited in Lane, 2001, p.6).

Jamilah, Brainard and Southwick (2001) suggest that increased lobbying efforts by community college advocates in such states as California, Florida, and Pennsylvania have recently paid off in significant budget increases even in difficult budget years for the respective states. Other recent community college success stories include North Carolina community colleges winning a “mammoth” bond issue and Missouri’s large (double-digit) budget increases in recent years (Jamilah et al).

On the cyber-front, with the U.S. Department of Commerce’s turning over of management responsibilities for the “.edu” Internet domain to Educause, the community college recently won a long battle for access to the familiar domain once reserved for four-year colleges and universities (Young, 2001a). Community college leaders, according to Young (2001b), felt insulted by being barred from using “.edu” in their Web addresses and worried that students would have a difficult time remembering their longer addresses which included “.cc” followed by codes for state and country.

Another indicator of the growing popularity of the community college is the rapid growth in the number of foreign students attending the schools. According to Woodward (2000), international recognition of the high-quality education and affordable price of the American community college resulted in a 46 percent enrollment growth for foreign students at the community college between 1993 and 2000, compared with a growth rate of just above 15 percent for all institutions during the same period. “Community college administrators say many of their foreign students come to their institutions on the
recommendation of friends or family who either attended the institution or live near it” (Woodard, 2000, p.A77).

Community colleges have also received high praise in the popular press. U.S. News and World Report ran an article by Schrof (1995) highlighting the findings of a collaborative study conducted by the University of Illinois at Chicago and Pennsylvania State University. The study examined the cognitive gains of 800 first-year students at two-year and four-year colleges with the findings indicating that the cognitive impact of the two-year colleges was indistinguishable from that of the four-year colleges. The article touted the two-year college as a “cost-effective means to obtain the first two years of college without sacrificing job market competitiveness” (p.88).

Time magazine recently highlighted Seattle Central Community College with an article by Andrew Goldstein (2001) recognizing the college as one of four institutions committed to ensuring the success of first-year students. USA Today has recently printed a number of articles heaping praise on the community college. Marklein’s article titled 2-year colleges excel at technology (April 5, 2000) claimed that community colleges offer the best hope of leveling the playing field in technical education. Briggs and DeBarros authored an article (April 10, 2000) which highlighted the All-USA Academic Team for Community and Junior Colleges. Most recently Welsh’s USA Today article titled Why not a community college? (May 1, 2002) attempted to debunk the perception that a low-cost education at a community college means a low-quality education.
Impact of Community College History on Image

A brief review of institutional history may prove to be valuable in determining how critical perceptions of the community college have developed over time. “Since inception,” state Kintzer and Bryant (1998), “the perception of the community college has vacillated between location in secondary and post-secondary (higher education) systems” (p.35). Ratcliff (1994) locates the comprehensive community college “between secondary and higher education, between adult and higher education, between industrial training and formal technical education” (p.4). There are numerous, and often contradictory, theories to explain the creation and evolution of the community college in the United States, and its uncertain location in the overall scheme of American higher education.

Dougherty (1994) identifies three distinct lines of reasoning concerning the original impetus for the creation of the community college. The functional advocates of the community college claim that the institution was created by a broad coalition of students, parents, business leaders, educators, and government officials to meet the fundamental needs of American society. Marxist critics identify business, in search of subsidized training and a competent labor class, as the central driving force behind the creation of the community college. Finally, the institutionalists attribute the creation of the institution to “the dynamics of a higher education system in which institutions compete for exclusive clientele” (p.124). The institutionalist viewpoint holds that prominent universities fostered the development of the new two-year institutions as a means of self-preservation. Dougherty goes on to suggest that all three positions have
some merit as the birth and evolution of the community college have originated and proceeded in a somewhat contradictory manner.

Ratcliff (1994) attributes the evolution of the community college to seven “streams of educational innovation” in our nation. Local community boosterism and the rise of the research university date back to the last half of the 19th century. The restructuring and expansion of the public educational system, the professionalization of teacher education, and the vocational education movement are products of the Progressive Era. Finally, the rise of adult, continuing, and community education and open access to higher education can be traced to the earliest junior colleges, but did not become prominent until the years following World War II. Each of these seven educational innovations occurred within, and as a result of, the changing social contexts of distinct periods in our national history.

Deegan and Tillery (1985) identify four distinct developmental periods (generations) of the American two-year college in the 20th century that help frame many issues in the development of the institution. The first period covers the thirty years between 1900 and 1930. During this period a number of high schools in California, Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois began offering a considerable number of postgraduate classes on high school campuses in response to the growing demand for higher education. These early colleges were typically recognized (physically and intellectually) as extensions of the high schools and were under the control of the same boards as the secondary schools, a fact that “compounded their problems in gaining legitimacy as bona fide institutions of higher education” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p.205).
While only a handful of junior colleges came into existence in the years between 1900 and 1910, by 1940 over 600 junior colleges, both public and private, were in existence. Cohen and Brawer (1996) point out at least three reasons behind the rapid expansion of the junior college in the early years. First, there was a rapid growth in the high school population in the first half of the 20th century, creating a greater demand for additional schooling. Second, businesses began to support the new colleges as a means of insuring a competent local workforce. Finally, “community leaders saw the formation of a college as an avenue to community prestige” (p.9). A fourth reason for the emergence may have been that several prominent university presidents, including William Rainey Harper (University of Chicago), pushed for the creation of the junior college (Deegan and Tillery, 1985). Cohen and Brawer (1996) note that as early as the mid-1800s a number of university leaders began expressing the opinion that “junior colleges should relieve the university of the burden of providing general education” (p.6).

The period between the years 1930 and 1950, following the Great Depression, saw a reduction in government funding for the new institutions of higher learning. Few new junior colleges opened during this period. Relations with high schools became strained as the new colleges developed their own identities and moved toward independence. Relations with universities, however, improved during this period as junior colleges worked to create a smoother process for transfer students. During this period, many junior colleges began to recognize the need for business, technical, and vocational training within their communities.

The years between 1950 and 1970 marked the development of the community college as we know it today. Following a brief stagnation in the opening of two-year
colleges in the 1950s, the 1960s began a second dramatic expansion. Concerning the
1960s, Harper (1977) offers the following:

> Perhaps it was mere coincidence; perhaps it was by grand design. Whatever the
reason, the community college blossomed in the sixties. It was an open-door
institution. Since education traditionally has been tied to employment and
professional success, the opening of college doors to all was a giant step forward
in the battle for equality. Whether merely a fortuitous happenstance or a well-
planned maneuver, the community college came into its own at a time when
nothing could have been more advantageous to a country seething with turmoil
and trouble. It was good for the country. (p.5)

Vaughan (1980) attributes the popularity of the community colleges in the 1960s to the
fact that “community colleges promised much of what students and society were
demanding: relevance, open admissions policy, special courses for ill-prepared
minorities, low-cost education, night courses for homemakers and many other
advantages” (p.vii). Deegan and Tillery (1985) identify this period as the high point of
relations between the community college and universities, the high point of government
support for the community college, and the period of government mandated separation of
high schools and community colleges through the creation of statewide community
college systems. With public support of higher education running high, extensive funding
of public higher education led to the opening of community colleges at a rate of nearly
one a week (Townsend, 1989).

The fourth period of community college development, the period of the
comprehensive community college, began with the 1970s and ran through the mid-1980s.
While the 1970s brought about continued improvement concerning the image of the community college (Smith & Beck, 1984), by the 1980s problems began to confront the institution. With over 1,000 two-year colleges in operation, rising costs, public questions concerning the economic value of a college degree, and a sharp decline in the number of eighteen-year-olds became problematic (Nagel, 1981). The number of community colleges in existence has stabilized since the mid-1970s, yet the central mission of the community college underwent a dramatic transformation of its own. Vocationalism replaced liberal education as the primary focus of the community college. By the later third of the 20th century, “college going was for job getting, job certifying, job training” (Cohen and Brawer, 1996, p.28). The community college had become, in theory (if not in reality) a vehicle for upward economic mobility for the masses. Deegan and Tillery (1985) suggest that the community college, at this point, entered an unnamed fifth generation marked by neglect for the preparation of transfer students, and the performing of “things that should be left to other social agencies” (p.21).

Shearon and Tollefson (1991) have taken the liberty of naming Deegan and Tillery’s fifth generation as “The Search for a New Focus”(p.318). This generation is characterized by the growing numbers of nontraditional age students flocking to the community college for a wide variety of reasons. “The emerging profiles of these adults as learners portray them as more likely to be women with families, older, employed, and taking credit or noncredit programs on a part-time basis either to advance in their jobs or to get a better job” (p.328).
Impact of Community College Mission on Image

Even a cursory examination of the history of the mission of the community college makes it easy to understand how the community college has come under fire from critics. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make definitive statements concerning a unified national mission with respect to the community college. Cavan (1995) traces the origins of the controversy over community college mission back to the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862. “For decades,” states Cowles (1991), “community colleges have developed in multiple, often competing directions” (p.21). In the words of Garms, “There is consensus neither on what the community colleges are, nor on what they should be doing” (as cited in Pedersen, 1997, p.499). Rhoads and Valadez (1996) suggest that “because their goals are widely dispersed, community colleges strain to establish a clear sense of organizational identity” (p.191). What is clear and generally accepted is that the mission of the community college has evolved in our nation, reacting as societal and political influences have shifted over time. What is not so clear, at this point, is whether the current and somewhat muddled comprehensive version of institutional mission will be a viable option in the future.

In 1922 the American Association of Community Colleges defined the mission of the junior college as “offering two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade” (Thorton, 1972, as cited in Bogart, 1994, p.60). This purely academic mission clearly reflects the junior college’s early commitment to the transfer function. Preparing students for transfer to a four-year institution is still considered to be the most prestigious and most widely understood mission of the community college (Shearon & Tollefson, 1991; Grubb, 1999). Yet this function alone represents only one of many responsibilities the
contemporary community college has taken on. Levine (as cited in Bogart, 1994) gives a much broader statement of a mission that evolved following the 1947 report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education:

Whatever form the community college takes, its purpose is educational service to the entire community, and this purpose requires of it a variety of functions and programs. It will provide college education for the youth of the community certainly, so as to remove geographic and economic barriers to educational opportunity and to discover and develop individual talents at low cost and easy access. But in addition, the community college will serve as an active center of adult education. It will attempt to meet the total post-high school needs of its community. (p.62)

By the 1980’s, according to Eaton (1994), vocational education (also termed career, occupational, and technical education) had replaced the transfer function as the dominant function of the community college. Eaton makes the case that this shift in institutional focus tarnished the community college image and trivialized the very access it claimed to offer all segments of society.

The shift in the importance of the transfer function diminished the scope of access in the community college and the country, and it weakened the perception of the community college as a collegiate institution within the family of higher education institutions. According to some critics, it also contributed to limiting the social and economic mobility of students. The transfer function holding a secondary status has reduced the extent to which the community college is an effective access institution. If the value of access is in part determined by how
much education can be obtained, the dominant status of the vocational function and the secondary status of transfer have meant access is less valuable - it is access to less education. (p.31)

The contemporary community college has come under attack for its apparent commitment to being all things educational for all people (Shearon & Tollefson, 1991). Academic preparation, vocational programs, economic and workforce development, community service, English literacy, and remedial education all fall within the advertised mission of most community colleges (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001). Virtually all community colleges have open-access admission policies, and claim to provide all citizens (and non-citizens) a place to start their own journey toward a better future.

The same comprehensiveness brings its own difficulties with respect to internal affairs. “When an institution’s purposes are many and varied, poorly integrated, and incompletely understood, conflict arises among those it charges with carrying out these purposes” (Pedersen, 1997, p.499). In the words of McGrath and Spear (1991), “The community colleges have not often appreciated the complexity of their own origins, and the deep tensions in their mission” (p.15). Perhaps the greatest internal tension with respect to mission is the debate over whether severely under-prepared or learning-disabled students even belong in the community college. This tension was in great part created by the dramatic popularization of the open-access philosophy in the 1960’s. Almeida (1991) points out that for some faculty and students alike, “dark attitudes” of opposition to remedial education as a valid function of the community college are as strong as ever.
While the open-access admission philosophy remains central to the mission of virtually all community colleges, the policy brings with it negative perceptions in the minds of many. “Because the community college is known for its open-admissions policy, the institution is often perceived to be of poor quality – that is, not a real college” (Savage, 1989, p.3). For better or worse, the open-access policy has been, at least in theory if not in reality, one of the chief distinguishing factors of the community college. The willingness of the community college to welcome and even recruit nontraditional students and others not normally expected to attend college was a novel idea in the 1960s and early 1970s. Yet very soon the willingness to reach out to traditionally underrepresented populations may not be as distinctive a mission as it once was. Virtually all institutions of higher education now actively “extend themselves” to numerous traditionally underrepresented groups (Townshend, 1989). Ironically, the implications of this trend may be negative for the community college – the original champion of educational opportunity for all. The community college perhaps stands to retain the stigma associated with the remedial function, yet lose the distinction of being the sole champion of opportunity for the disadvantaged.

It is not the mission of the university (the creation and dissemination of knowledge) but the creation of economic opportunities for all citizens that seems to drive the contemporary community college. Whether students enter the transfer program, a vocational program, or take continuing education classes designed to meet specific needs, virtually all programs at the community college are geared toward creating career advancement opportunities (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). The criticism concerning this benevolent and comprehensive mission, as we have already seen, is that while
community colleges have provided access, the continued social stratification of our nation would seem to indicate that the colleges have been unsuccessful in delivering real opportunities for the masses (Karabel, 1986). Cohen and Brawer have responded to this criticism by suggesting that no form of education can “break down class distinctions ... or move entire ethnic groups from one social stratum to another” (as cited in McGrath & Spear, 1991, p.48). A recent absence of criticism focusing on the negative socioeconomic impact of the community college may be an indication that Cohen and Brawer’s defense has been well received. It may be the case that it is now generally accepted, by the critics and public alike, that the community college alone cannot be held responsible for shaping or reshaping our nation’s class structure.

Even the discrediting of notions of the community college as an agent of the elite class with a subversive mission does little to help the general public achieve a manageable impression of what the community college is about. “With so many competing views,” says Cain (1999), “it is difficult to nail down what the institution truly is” (p.1). Cain goes on to discuss the chameleon-like nature of the mission of the contemporary community college.

Although the community colleges have had the largest impact of any institution of higher education in this century, they remain misunderstood. The literature is rich with both descriptions and prescriptions; each interested party has his own view of exactly what the institution is and what it should be. Each loudly declares what direction the colleges should take in the future. Looking at a community college is like looking in a slightly askew mirror; the viewer sees a reflection of his own needs, desires and ideology. (p.1)
Levin (2000) suggests that the mission of the community college took a new direction in the 1990s. Replacing the old traditional vocationalism at the heart of the mission is now a “new” higher-level analytical vocationalism geared toward the new higher-paying technologies. Levin proposes that *economizing*, defined as “letting financial rationales take precedence over others” (p.21), became a central component of the community college mission in the 1990s. For perhaps the first time, the acquisition of resources is being recognized in practice, if not in theory, as a fundamental mission of community colleges across the nation. Students and their learning outcomes are now viewed in economic terms. It stands to reason that the community college of the 21st century, according to Levin (2000), “will function more on a model compatible with business norms” (p.21).

**Impact of Media on Image**

Cavan (1996) argues that the community colleges have only themselves to blame for the general unfamiliarity with their missions and successes, and must devote resources (both financial and human) to telling their stories and publicizing their successes.

Community colleges, on both a national level and a local level, have done a very poor job of getting the message out to the people, to local entities, and to state and nationally elected representatives. Community colleges have been the most innovative entity in education in the 20th century. Unfortunately the general community and political leaders do not fully comprehend the mission, the variety of services provided, and the tremendous success of the community college. Community college leaders have no one to blame but themselves. We have done a
poor job in marketing our product. We need to get much better at articulating our mission, our accomplishments, and our plans. (p.14)

With 45% of all undergraduates in our nation now enrolled in two-year institutions (Daniel & Hastings, 2000), it is somewhat difficult to understand how community college visibility remains so low. Johnson (as cited in Hastings, 2000) identifies a lack of college initiative to get college news to the media, poor writing skills, submission of articles with no real news value, and an overall lack of credibility on the part of community colleges with keeping the institutions out of the headlines.

“There has perhaps never been a time in the history of the community college when a competent public relations department was more important” (Harris, 1997, p.22). Hastings (2000) suggests that with continuing rises in taxation and shifting public priorities, community colleges will have no options other than “to plan accordingly to ensure public awareness of their beneficial role in society” (p.10). The good news for community colleges may be that traditional as well as new and emerging media present more opportunities than ever before to relate the unique community college story to the masses. Traditional media outlets include newspapers, radio, television, and direct mail, while the newer media include cable television and the Internet. Each outlet presents its own challenges and opportunities.

Newspapers, radio, and television have been popular marketing tools for community colleges with little or no marketing budget. Traditionally, these outlets have offered a limited number of free marketing opportunities as a public service to the local community. While “free space” is sure to become a thing of the past, creative partnerships can still make these outlets cost-effective choices.
Wallace (2000) gives an example of an effective use of the newspaper in the creative advertising partnership between Pasadena City College and the Pasadena Star News in publicizing the college’s 75th anniversary during the 1999-2000 academic year. The newspaper agreed to publish a special eight-page tabloid to be inserted in the daily newspaper. The college was required to purchase a $1,200 ad in the tabloid and assist the newspaper with locating other potential advertisers for the special interest tabloid. The result of the partnership was a distribution of forty thousand copies of the anniversary insert featuring congratulatory comments by all of the additional tabloid advertisers. Later that same year the newspaper ran a front-page story when the college announced its top 75 alumni.

While the Federal Communications Commission no longer requires radio and television stations to run public service announcements, many still do. While many organizations compete for a limited number of opportunities, there are strategies for increasing coverage for the community college. One of these strategies is to participate in program underwriting with public radio and television stations, an option much less expensive than commercial advertising. Wallace (2000) suggests that colleges with entertainment venues (performing arts and sports in particular) offer tickets as giveaways over the airways to increase public awareness of upcoming events.

Even traditional commercial television advertising can make sound economic sense in certain situations. Wallace (2000) tells the success story of five Fresno area community college districts sharing the $15,000 cost of a regional television advertising campaign in 1984. A single 30-second ad ran a total of 68 times on three local stations, with 27 of those spots in prime time. One spot even ran during the opening ceremonies of
the Los Angeles Olympics on the local ABC affiliate. The result was that while the state was suffering from an overall decline in community college enrollments, all five districts that had participated in the advertising campaign maintained or increased enrollments.

Virtually all community colleges now have websites that provide a wealth of information ranging from institutional history and mission to current class schedules. “There is real evidence” states Daniel (2000), “that a presence on the Web is a great way to get the word out about a college” (p. 74). As Director of Public Relations at Harry S. Truman College in Chicago, Daniel shares that Truman has had great success in reaching not only potential local students through the college website, but has also received hits from around the nation and the world. Beyond the website, the Internet provides other tools for marketing the community college. E-mail has become the media’s preferred method of receiving press releases from colleges (Daniel, 2000). Databases of student e-mails also reduce the cost, time, and effort required in contacting current and potential students. On-line college publications (class and event schedules, endowment reports, alumni newsletters) can be transmitted instantly, thus reducing printing and postage costs.

With a recent explosion in the number of channels available to cable customers, cable television is a marketing option growing in popularity. Community access channels are ready-made hosts for community college marketing productions. Opportunities exist for regularly scheduled classes, campus event coverage, and promotional productions on local educational access channels. Mark Wallace, Director of Public Relations at Pasadena City College, explains an ongoing marketing initiative delivered via cable television.
Pasadena City College is in its second season of offering a magazine format show. Six thirty-minute shows are produced each year and sent out to the cable systems in the region. The college president and a professional news broadcaster are the hosts. Segments are shot around campus and the community and are combined with in-studio interviews. Scheduling is becoming more consistent and the shows have been aired at various times throughout each month. (Wallace, 2000, p.48)

Whichever outlets and strategies a college chooses to utilize, forming and maintaining close working relationships with local media representatives is a must in gaining positive coverage for the community college. Marquez (2000) advocates a few common sense rules. Public relations personnel should establish direct lines of communication with local media, become acquainted with their local beat reporters, become acquainted with education editors in the local media, and be proactive in providing the media with well-written press releases concerning current events of interest to the respective target audiences.

Previous Perception Studies

A review of previous studies reveals no universal consensus on the image of the community college. Studies have been conducted to determine general opinions of the community college from the varying perspectives. Research populations have ranged from All-USA Academic First Team community college students (Briggs & DeBarros, 2000) hailing the community college to be equal or better than four-year institutions, to business and industry leaders (Kent, 1996) wary of identifying the community college as an institution of quality, to a nationally representative sample of un-enrolled adults (Gallup Study, 1981) unwilling to recognize a community college education as both high
quality and reasonably priced. These studies have primarily used written survey
instruments and interview techniques restricting participants to the selection of “most
appropriate” categorical responses within predetermined subjects of relevance. Lines of
inquiry have typically included questions about cost and educational value, quality of
education and instruction, and comparisons to 4-year institutions. A comparison of
findings reveals that perceptions, even within the previously mentioned categories, vary
significantly from population to population.

Nagel (1981) surveyed 744 community college presidents across the country to
determine what factors influenced the community college’s local image. This quantitative
study produced nearly a fifty-percent response rate involving presidents of community
colleges in forty-three states and showed that community college student performance
was the key to local external image. Among other items on the questionnaire, presidents
were asked to choose from a list of thirty-nine items the three items that best helped
create a positive image for the college. Items related to student performance were by far
the most frequently selected items. Student “word-of-mouth” was selected by over half of
participating presidents, with a mean of 4.69 on a scale of 1 (no importance) to 5
(extremely important). Faculty relationships with students rated as the second most
important factor in shaping external image, followed by student performance after
graduation. The highest ranking media influence was local newspaper coverage, ranking
seventh on the list of most influential items. Student performance after graduation at a
four-year university was ranked eighth in terms of influence on the image of the
community college.
In one of very few studies I was able to locate involving high school students, Cowles (1991) reports on a preliminary study conducted by university marketing students under the supervision of a marketing professor. The study focused on a convenience sample of 172 high school juniors and seniors at several high schools in the service region of two local community colleges. The mean age of participants was 17.2, with 88.2 percent of research respondents indicating plans to attend college following graduation. This quantitative study asked respondents to “judge the similarity/dissimilarity of all possible pairs of nine colleges” (p.23) based on several different dimensions including perceived cost, academic offerings, extracurricular offerings, and likelihood of receiving personal attention. Colleges included seven area universities as well as the two local community colleges. All comparisons were based on students first two years of college, a stipulation included to allow for the inclusion and comparison of both two-year and four-year institutions. Findings of the study were that the two community colleges were perceived to be very different from the universities in the study, and that the two community colleges were viewed generically (no significant difference in how they were viewed by participants) even though “significant differences” existed between the two schools, “both with respect to programs and with respect to types of students served” (p.24). An obvious limitation of this study is the fact that it examined only similarities and differences in perceptions of institutions, and not whether or not perceptions were positive or negative.

A number of studies have been conducted recently by community colleges attempting to determine the perceptions of populations within their own service areas. Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, conducted a survey
of various groups in its service area in the summer and fall of 2001 (Community Needs Assessment). Three hundred seventy-seven respondents to an on-line and hard-copy survey were made up of individuals within business and industry, civic groups, CPCC students, and other members of the general population attending community events. All questions allowed only categorical responses. 79.4% of respondents indicated their overall perception of CPCC to be positive or very positive. 9.5% indicated a neutral or no opinion, while 3.3% indicated their overall perception of the college was poor. The typical respondent was a White female between the ages of 26 and 40 earning between $20,000 and $40,000 annually. The pursuit of personal interest or enrichment was the most frequently selected potential educational goal (52%) while the lack of available personal time was the most frequently cited barrier to enrollment at the college (48%). Parking was the college service respondents most often indicated as important in making the decision to attend (94.6%). The majority of respondents (54.6%) indicated that the best way to receive information about the college was via the CPCC catalog and schedule of classes.

Also in 2001, California’s Mt. San Antonio College conducted a public perception survey of 160 community leaders in the college’s service area (Rasmussen & Silverman, 2001). The survey called for categorical responses to a written questionnaire. The questions focused on knowledge of college programs, college reputation, areas for program improvements, and support for a bond measure. Findings included 67% of respondents indicating the college had an excellent reputation, and 61% suggesting the college should improve technology training.
Johnson County Community College in Kansas recently conducted an environmental scan by interviewing 1,005 county residents (Conklin, 1999). Questions called for categorical responses related to interest in programs, preferred methods of delivery, factors influencing enrollment decisions, plans for future enrollment, and methods of receiving information about the college. The vast majority (88%) of those surveyed indicated that JCCC was a good place to enroll their children. Level of interest (90%) or need (83%) for a class were recognized most often as factors influencing enrollment, followed by time of day (80%), location (76%), and cost (71%). Direct mailings was the method by which most participants received information about the college.

Maryland’s Frederick Community College conducted an image survey in 1997 (Frederick County Community Perception Survey). This telephone survey had a random sample of 466 Frederick County residents. The survey yielded 348 respondents between the ages of 18 and 59. The college’s reputation was rated as good or very good by 85% of respondents. Significant findings included 45% of respondents indicating the college’s offerings were not relevant to the world of work.

Smith and Beck (1984) examined the perceptions of change in the image of the community college over the decade of the 1970s. The sample population included a random sample of public two-year college presidents, a purposeful sample of public school superintendents, state administrators of two-year colleges in all fifty states, chief state public school officers in all fifty states, and various members of AACJC including staff and members of the Board of Directors. For the purposes of this study, “image was defined as the value ascribed to, and the total impression created by the college as a result
of its policies, programs, and procedures” (p.235). A large majority (85.8%) of the 499 respondents indicated that there had been a significant change in the image of the institution over the decade. Two-year college presidents were most likely to report a significant change in the image of the two-year college, while public school superintendents were least likely. While overall findings clearly suggested a perceived improvement in the image of the community college, only one group of subjects, community college presidents (51%), perceived an increase in the quality of instruction at community colleges over the decade.

Maxwell (1992) examined differences in community college image by studying “the reasons students give for migrating from a city community college district to suburban district community colleges” (p.239). Maxwell paid particular attention to the concept of “White flight” in this study, reviewing the questionnaire surveys of city-district students who had elected to commute to one of three suburban campuses. Surveys focused on factors potentially driving student decisions to attend their colleges, including proximity, social relations, personal safety, and other academic related issues. Findings revealed that while there was some evidence that White students were migrating to suburban campuses in slightly greater numbers than other races, all races were migrating to suburban campuses at some level. The leading reasons given for the migration were tied to academic interests, a finding consistent across all ethnic groups. The “availability of desired programs and courses” (p.247) was the most important factor influencing students decision to enroll at their respective suburban campuses.
Summary of Literature Review

A summary of the literature on public perceptions of the community college reveals that perceptions vary widely, sometimes even within similar social and professional circles. The literature also reveals that many factors (including media, institutional history, and institutional mission) are potential influences on the perception of the community college. It appears that most of the data collected in the past concerning the image of the community college is quantitative or categorical, and that very few qualitative studies have been conducted.
Chapter Three

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

As previously stated as an assumption of this study, individual perceptions and opinions of the community college do not exist arbitrarily. Perceptions evolve over the course of our lives. Gibson (2002) states:

From the complex to the commonplace, the decisions that people make or find forced upon them involve a multitude of factors that shape perceptions, which in turn shape subsequent decisions. Perceptions obviously affect our lives in both deep and subtle ways. Our perceptions are influenced by personal and societal beliefs in science and religion, by private imagination and hopes, and by external social and natural forces, both known and unknown. (p.1)

Perceptions are, in essence, learned. The purpose of this study is to determine factors that have been instrumental in how a select group of high school seniors have learned to perceive the community college. Therefore, it is essential to examine the theoretical paradigms within which the study is framed.

Case Study

I chose to conduct this investigation as a case study because it allowed me to conduct an in-depth investigation of student perceptions within the environment that likely played a significant role in creating those perceptions. As defined by Yin (1994), case study research is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p.13).
Stake (2000) identifies three generic approaches to case study research. I chose to conduct this research as an intrinsic case study, defined by Stake (2000) as an investigation of a single case in great detail, as opposed to the collective case approach which focuses on a number of cases, and a third generic approach where researchers examine several instances of a process in a number of different cases. As noted by Stake (2000), “case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (p.435). Findings from this study are not generalizable to larger populations. There is no implication that theories derived from research findings involving one class of college bound seniors at Mayfair High School will be applicable to other student populations elsewhere. The focus of this research centers entirely on selected participants and the dynamics in play at the selected research site. The focus is, in other words, solely on one case. As Stake states (1995), “we do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case” (p.4). Yet I have conducted this study with the hopes that it might contribute to a larger body of research on perceptions of the community college. In this sense, I have conducted this case study as “an exploration leading up to generalization-producing studies, or as an occasional step in theory building” (Stake, 2000, p.439). It is my hope that this study makes a valuable contribution in the sense that it provides at least one building block for future studies, one in-depth qualitative examination of not only high school student perceptions of the community college, but also an in-depth examination of the genesis and evolution of those perceptions.
Constructivism

This study is conducted from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism, as defined by Stake (1995), is the “belief that knowledge is made up largely of social interpretations rather than awareness of an external reality” (p.170). Schwandt (2000) summarizes the constructivist’s position in general terms:

In a fairly unremarkable sense, we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge. Most of us would agree that knowing is not passive – a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind – but active; that is, mind does something with these impressions, at the very least forming abstractions or concepts. In this sense constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it.

(p.197)

Schwandt (2000) goes on to incorporate the concept of multiple sociocultural influences. “Furthermore, there is an inevitable and sociocultural dimension to this construction. We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (p.197).

As a qualitative researcher, I subscribe to the position that “scientific inquiry must focus on the study of multiple social realities, that is, the different realities created by different individuals as they interact in a social environment” (Gall, 1996, p.19). Constructivism, heavily influenced by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, holds that knowledge “is not simply subjective meaning; it is personal meaning that has been constructed and adapted to one’s experiences” (Green, 1989, p.245). Green (1989) comments on the significance of Piaget’s paradigm.
Philosophers ask ‘what is knowledge, and what are its origins?’ Developmental psychologists ask ‘what do people know at different points in their life, and how do they acquire that knowledge?’ Piaget asks both questions because he believes that an understanding of what children know and how they come to know can assist philosophers in answering their questions about what constitutes knowledge and how true knowledge is obtained. (161-162).

Constructivist researchers often have very different views about the nature of reality than do advocates for the quantitative paradigm, and “often emphasize the roles of culture, sex, context, and other factors” (Reeves, 1996, p.2) in their research methodologies.

I have included race as one of a number of distinguishing background characteristics (along with gender, household income level, and family educational background). This has not been done to suggest that race, or income level, or gender, or any other broad categorization can provide a license for reckless generalization in terms of how different individuals or communities perceive the community college. General background characteristics, in this case, are used only as a starting point for identifying trends in perceptions among participants. Charmaz (2000) states, “Researchers’ attention to detail in the constructivist approach sensitizes them to multiple realities and multiple viewpoints within them; it does not represent a quest to capture a single reality” (p.523). In fact, I have selected a qualitative and constructivist approach to this study in an attempt to avoid limiting findings to preconceived, therefore inherently biased, “objective” categories, whether they are sociocultural in nature or otherwise.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state, “By learning the perspectives of the participants, qualitative research illuminates the inner dynamics of situations, dynamics that are often
invisible to the outsider” (p.32). Rather than relying on stereotypical assumptions concerning how different externally “visible” classifications of students might perceive the community college (and which factors might be behind these assumptions), this study attempted first to locate and assess individual internal perceptions (and the forces behind these internal perceptions), then, wherever relevant, link findings back to broader and more readily identifiable socioeconomic characteristics.

If we can assume that perceptions are either inherent in acquired knowledge, or at least a factor of acquired knowledge, we can logically extend the constructivist position to reaffirm the significance of this study. It is not the intent of this study to definitively assign the impact of each and every variable on every research participant’s perceptions of the community college. According to Stake (1995), adhering to “a constructivist view of knowledge does not require the researcher to avoid delivering generalizations” (102).

Bloom and Gardner as Influences

This study also borrows from Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, which can be described as “a classification of levels of intellectual behavior important in learning… including three overlapping domains; the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective” (Distance Learning Resource Network). While Paul (1985) notes that “the categories of the taxonomy can be used as a framework for viewing the educational process and analyzing its workings” (p.36), I extend the principles of the taxonomy to the informal realm of external (non-curricular) experiences in the sense that high school students are continually formulating values and opinions even outside of school. While the three integrated learning domains have since been widely recognized, the affective domain has traditionally been excluded as a primary focus of human
learning while the cognitive and psychomotor domains have received more attention (Adkins, 2004). Within this study, interview questions are divided into two of Bloom’s classifications – cognitive and affective. The reasoning behind this division is that perceptions of the community college may have evolved (and continue to evolve) as a result of cognitive influences (intellectual skills such as organizing, analyzing, and synthesizing data), affective influences (attitudes, personal and group values, emotions), or a combination of cognitive and affective influences. An examination of responses along both lines of inquiry may give us not only a clearer idea of how high school seniors perceive the community college, but also an idea of whether significant influences are more closely linked with the presence of (or exposure to) quantifiable elements, or the presence of (or exposure to) intangible elements.

Furthermore, the work of Howard Gardner (1993) regarding his theory of multiple intelligences has influenced this study. According to Shearer (2004), “Very few theories in the history of education have had the impact of multiple intelligences (MI) first articulated in 1983 by Howard Gardner in his seminal book Frames of Mind” (p.2). Gardner redefines cognition:

In my view, if we are to encompass adequately the realm of human cognition, it is necessary to include a far wider and universal set of competences than we have ordinarily considered. And it is necessary to remain open to the possibility that many – if not most – of these competences do not lend themselves to measurement by standard verbal methods, which rely heavily on a blend of logical and linguistic abilities. (p.x)
Gardner proposes that there are different learning styles, all of them valid as ways of formulating meaning in individual lives made up of unique combinations of personal experiences. “Multiple intelligences (MI) theory has become widely recognized as a useful framework for teachers making sense of their observations that different students have different strengths and learn in different ways” (Noble, 2004, p.193).

Just as this study is influenced by both Bloom and Gardner, other work has been done to marry Bloom’s taxonomy with Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. Noble (2004) has integrated the two typologies “in a classification system that orders the MI on the horizontal dimension and the different levels of cognitive processes on the taxonomy on the vertical dimension” (p.194). These two theories inform this study in the sense that I consider equally valid cognitive-based and affective-based student perceptions of the community college, as well as cognitive-based and affective-based explanations of the origins of these perceptions. Students “know” the community college in different ways, and have formulated their understanding through a combination of different preferred learning styles. Therefore, to the fullest possible extent, this approach also validates the varied experiences and opinions of a diverse group of research participants from the perspective of the participants.

Research Design

While fully acknowledging that qualitative research is to a large extent an inductive process typically entered into without fully formulated hypotheses (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), I approached this project from a qualitative perspective as a result of being influenced by a number of theoretical assumptions. Gall et al. (1996) states, “qualitative researchers assume that social reality is constructed by the participants in it” and “that
A qualitative approach seems particularly appropriate for the investigation of public perceptions of the community college because qualitative data, as noted by Miles and Huberman (1994), may prove to be especially valuable with respect to previously misunderstood phenomena by leading to new conclusions previously excluded by quantitative studies with preconceived categories and frameworks.

I began designing this study as a result of having large macro-level questions concerning the nature and origins of cultural perceptions of the community college as a national institution. For the purposes of this study, I did not need to engage in a comprehensive national study. I instead chose to investigate a select group of high school seniors at a single institution.

By design, this study allowed research participants a significant role in determining the parameters of a single investigation by sharing general perceptions of the community college without the distilling effect of being restricted to expression through pre-determined lines of inquiry. While this study did solicit participant response in a number of predetermined categories, thereby presupposing that a number of specific factors were likely to be closely linked to perceptions of the community college, it also contained a number of opportunities for participants to drive discussion in any direction they chose. Data collection, specifically research interviews, adhered to a semi-structured process. Semi-structured interviews are “widely used in flexible designs, either as a sole method or in combination with others. Interviewers have their shopping list of topics and want to get responses to them, but they have considerable freedom in the sequencing of questions, in their exact wording, and in the amount of time and attention given to
different topics” (Robson, 2002, p.278). Put another way, semi-structured interviews “may be more suitable for obtaining in-depth information where the interviewer does not want to be restricted by a prescribed question order but would like the advantage of having asked the same questions of all respondents” (Sommer & Sommer, 1997, p.109). For example, within the course of conducting interviews within this study, a number of students answered questions I had yet to ask (but planned to ask later) while they were giving answers to other questions. The semi-structured interview format allowed me the flexibility to pursue these student perceptions as they came up in conversation, no matter the order in which they surfaced.

My reasoning for choosing a semi-structured approach was that participant freedom from researcher imposed associations might allow for a more reflective and accurate assessment of both the participant’s existing perceptions, and the factors that influence these perceptions of the community college. In other words, this qualitative study was designed to allow participants to provide the researcher with both unique and common factors that influence individual perceptions (whether positive, negative, or neutral) with respect to the community college. This type of research design allowed for the possibility that while I certainly had defined research questions, the answers to these questions might ultimately evolve from student experiences and associations I could not have predicted. Ultimately, my assumption was that an increased awareness of the dynamics involved in formulating individual perceptions of the community college would prove to be a key tool in shaping and/or reshaping public opinion of the institutions.
Grounded Theory

The rationale for allowing participants great latitude in responding to open-ended questions is to ensure theories formulated to explain student perceptions would be grounded in the data, thereby producing richer explanations of the dynamics under investigation (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). “Grounded theorists want to understand people’s experiences in as rigorous and detailed a manner as possible. They want to identify categories and concepts that emerge from text and link these concepts into substantive and formal theories” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p.782). In this study, categories of data emerged from student responses to open-ended questions. According to Gall et al (1996), this type of category development follows the principles of grounded theory. “Case study researchers who use these principles derive their categories directly from their data rather than from theories developed by other researchers” (Gall et al, 1996, p.564).

Grounded theory also incorporates social and cultural considerations in the research design and data analysis stages. Grounded theory researchers are primarily concerned with single cases which are taken as wholes, in which multiple variables interact in complex ways to produce results unique to the specific situation and context (Borgatti, 2005). Thus I have fashioned a research design and research questions which do not seek to uncover universal understanding, attitudes, or opinions, but instead seek to uncover unique and individual perceptions formulated by individuals who are informed by a multitude of factors in their own lives. Patterns among individual perceptions may emerge, but can be trusted only as long as individual perceptions are firmly rooted (grounded) in the experiences of individual participants.
Population and Sample

A purposeful sampling technique was implemented in this study because it is a useful technique, often utilized within qualitative studies, for selecting a case that is information-rich (Gall et al, 1996). The rationale for selecting high school seniors for the research population is the fact that in 2000 approximately 25% of all students attending colleges in the United States were either 18 or 19 years of age (Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2002, p.168), making this age group the largest two-year age demographic enrolled in college. Because graduating high school seniors are typically within or about to enter this age demographic, and because impending high school graduation traditionally expedites decisions about where to attend college, this study had a select group of college bound high school seniors as its target population. All students in one class of college Honors English were recruited for participation. Of the 33 students enrolled in the selected class, 27 chose to participate in the study. Three levels of instruction in English are offered at the high school serving as the research site. Both Advanced Placement English and Honors English are classified by the school’s administration as college preparatory. An Honors English class was selected based on the fact that students voluntarily enroll in these more academically rigorous courses, an indication that they are probably at least considering enrollment in college following graduation. An Advanced Placement class was not selected because although it includes students preparing for entrance into college, advanced placement courses are designed for students who excel in specific topics. A research population of students advanced in language and literary skills might be less representative of an entire class of high school seniors who likely excel in a wide variety of academic areas.
Site Selection

While recognizing that findings of qualitative case studies are typically not generalizable to other cases, I intentionally selected a high school that is many ways representative of an average high school (in terms of student and teacher demographics and performance) in North Carolina. In doing so I have attempted to establish a research base upon which replication studies at a large number of other schools might build. The primary characteristics sought were average high school enrollment size, average overall academic performance (including typical student performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test), typical percentage of seniors indicating plans to attend college, and sufficient diversity among the student body to allow for comparison of findings among students with differing socioeconomic characteristics. Beyond these considerations, it was also necessary to select a site to which I could gain access. Additionally, the high school needed to be in the service region of a comprehensive community college, ensuring that participant perceptions of the community college were not distorted by the absence of such a college – or the presence of a community college with an excessive number of dissimilar offerings from other community colleges in the state.

The high school selected is located in a small city (approximate population of 25,000) in a rural county in the piedmont area of North Carolina. For the purposes of this study, and ensuring the anonymity of research participants, the high school serving as the research site is referred to as Research High School, and the city in which it is located will be referred to as Centerville. Four of the nine adjacent counties are classified as urban, thus providing the influence of several major population centers within a 45-minute drive. The high school is also located within a 45-minute drive of a large public
university, two historically black universities, several private colleges and universities, ten public community colleges, and a number of private for-profit technical/vocational educational institutions.

A review of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website, 2001-2002 North Carolina School Report Card (available at www.ncpublicschools.org), and information provided directly to the researcher from Research High School) revealed a number of ways in which the chosen school is a typical high school within the state:

- The enrollment of the school was 1,077, compared with an average high school enrollment of 1,024 in the state for the same year.
- The school was classified as a School of Progress, the most common designation (shared by 50% of all high schools within the state).
- 77% of the school’s teachers were fully licensed, compared to 81% for the state.
- 17.6% of the school’s teachers were racial/ethnic minorities (2002-2003 data reported by high school) compared to 17.2% for the state.
- The school’s teacher turnover rate was 19%, compared to 20% for the state.
- 80.4% of seniors stated they intended to attend college following graduation, compared with 82% for the state.
- 27% of seniors stated intentions of enrolling at a community college following graduation, compared to 31% for the state.
- Of the ten courses selected to monitor school performance with end-of-grade tests, the selected high school scored higher than the state average in six courses and lower than the state average in four courses.
• 21% of teachers held advanced degrees, compared to 26% statewide.

Additional information obtained via the National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov) revealed:

• The 2000-2001 student to faculty ratio was 14.7/1, compared to 15.6/1 statewide.

• The average 2000-2001 SAT was 1021, compared to 998 statewide.

The selected high school student body for 2000-2001 was almost evenly divided in terms of gender (51% female and 49% male). Research High School also presented a racially diverse student body. The 2000-2001 student body was 48% White, 43% black, 5% Asian, and 4% Hispanic.

Research High School is located within two miles of a comprehensive community college with a one-county service area. Again, for the purposes of maintaining anonymity, this community college will be referred to by the fictitious name Mayfair Community College. Enrollment information obtained from the North Carolina Community College System website indicated curriculum enrollment (unduplicated headcount) for 2000-2001 was 2,664, ranking 36th out of 58 colleges within the North Carolina Community College System. The college offers a wide variety of curriculum programs including certificate, diploma, and associate degree programs in a number of vocational and technical programs, as well as a number of associate of applied science tracks and a college transfer track awarding the associate of arts. Mayfair Community College has a traditional main campus and five satellite centers within the county.
Access

A letter/consent form (Appendix A) describing the proposed research project, along with a student letter/consent form (Appendix B) was delivered to the principle of the high school for consideration. A follow-up visit with the principal provided the opportunity to discuss the proposed project in detail, and resulted in the principal giving written and verbal consent to the study and suggesting that I meet with a specific senior-level English teacher. A short meeting with the recommended teacher resulted in her offering verbal consent to involving one of her classes in the study.

Prior to the study actually taking place at Research High, the principal of the school retired. This necessitated that I resubmit the letter/consent form to the newly appointed principal for approval. Once approval was granted, I learned that the assigned English teacher was no longer teaching any sessions of Honors English. At her request, I asked the department chair for assistance with identifying a class for the study. The chair then volunteered her own section of Honors English. The class consisted of 33 seniors.

While high school staff members were informed of my affiliation (via employment as director of a continuing education program) with the local community college, students were not informed of my affiliation with the institution. This affiliation was not disclosed to students because I felt it might have influenced student responses during data collection.

I addressed the class the first week of fall semester, explaining the study and inviting all students, college bound or otherwise, to participate. The invitation to participate in the study was extended to all students, even those not planning to enroll in
college, in an attempt to prevent students from claiming they had enrollment plans just to receive monetary reciprocity.

Reciprocity

Compensation in the amount of $25 was offered to each student completing the written questionnaire and interview. The financial consideration was offered not only as an incentive for participation, but also as compensation for each participant’s time outside of school hours, an act consistent with the “anthropological principle of reciprocity” which “involves an obligation by the fieldworker to those studied” (Cassell, 1982, pp.27-28). While many researchers (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Glazer, 1998) relate reciprocity to the “ethical quality of the relationship” (Wax, 1982, p.46) between the researcher and the research subjects, and the researcher’s task of creating a relationship based on mutual respect and trust, a number of researchers also recognize financial remuneration and other tangible forms of compensation as legitimate forms of reciprocity (Kelman, 1982; Bogdan and Bilken, 1998). “In some kinds of research,” states Glesne (1999), “reciprocity is assumed to be a matter of monetarily rewarding research subjects for their time” (p.126). Compensation was distributed immediately upon the conclusion of student interviews. Students completing in-person interviews received cash following the completion of interviews, while those completing telephone interviews were mailed a personal check. It is my opinion that the level of reciprocity ($25 per participant) was sufficiently low enough so as not to have influenced participant responses in an undesirable fashion.
Anonymity

Anonymity was ensured for the high school, the staff at the high school, and the students participating in the study. Neither the name of the high school, nor the names of the city and county in which it is located, appears in this dissertation. The names of school personnel do not appear in this dissertation. Participating students were to asked print and sign their names on the research consent form only. Student names do not appear on written questionnaires. Student names were then paired with assigned numbers located only on a password protected computer file, which remained in the possession of the researcher alone. For the purpose of reporting direct quotations of students in this text while still maintaining anonymity, all students participating in the study were assigned fictitious names. No actual name of any research participant is used in this manuscript. High school teachers and staff members, as well as community college instructors and staff members, are identified by title only. Any specific (unique) reference to student or staff member names, along with any other specific information that would reveal the identity of research participants, was either altered in a fashion that would preserve anonymity, or simply not included in this text. All documentation of student responses, including written questionnaires, audio-taped interviews, and transcriptions of interviews are identified by number alone. Research consent forms, written questionnaires, and transcriptions of interviews remained in a locked file cabinet at the residence of the researcher.

Data Collection

Multiple methods of data collection were implemented in this study. The collection of data by multiple techniques and instruments creates converging lines of
inquiry, thus affording findings of qualitative studies a higher level of credibility (Yin, 1994). This process, known as *triangulation*, is helpful in eliminating potential biases inherent in any one data-collection method (Gall, 1996), and useful in ensuring the collection of rich data informed by a variety of different perspectives. Methods of data collection used included document review, compilation of fieldnotes, written questionnaires, and interviews (both face-to-face and telephone). The option for participants to be interviewed via telephone allowed for the participation of those students with transportation issues or after-school obligations which prohibited a face-to-face meeting. While I stated to each student my preference for a face-to-face interview, the final decision was left up to the student. Seven of twenty-seven participants chose to be interviewed by telephone. Follow-up inquiries were made of local community college personnel via telephone and e-mail after all student interviews had been completed.

**Document Review**

Data concerning student, faculty, and performance demographics of the high school serving as the research site is readily available on the Internet at various state and federal agency web-sites, and was reviewed in the process of selecting an appropriate research site. Hard-copy documentation concerning senior class demographics and post-graduation intentions was provided by the senior class counselor at Research High. A written report detailing the race and gender breakdown of teaching personnel at the research site was provided by the administrative office of the local school system.

**Fieldnotes**

As defined by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), fieldnotes are “the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and
reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (p.108). The value of fieldnotes, besides the fact that they help the researcher recreate the research environment by capturing descriptions of research participants, conversations, and physical surroundings, is that they provide researchers an opportunity to record their own reactions towards all of these things, be they ideas on strategy, personal hunches, or just personal feelings with respect to observations (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Fieldnotes might also serve as a valuable resource for interpreting verbatim transcripts which do not record unique or revealing body language and voice inflections.

In the case of this study, fieldnotes consisted primarily of documenting the physical characteristics of the research site and the appearance, observable mannerisms (including tone and rate of speech), and readily apparent personality traits of research participants. These fieldnotes were incorporated along with participant responses to convey as nearly as possible for the reader the natural setting, participant characteristics, and original spirit of participant interviews in subsequent discussions of research findings.

Written Questionnaire

Additional document review took place as participating seniors completed and submitted written questionnaires (see Appendix C). All thirty-three students in the class comprising the research population were presented written questionnaires at the time they were invited to participate in the study. At that time, students were given approximately thirty minutes of class time which they could use to voluntarily complete the questionnaires. Students were given the additional options of not completing the questionnaire at all, or completing it at a time and location of the student’s choosing.
Twenty-six students returned completed questionnaires along with signed consent forms to a designated collection box in the classroom prior to the announced deadline (two weeks after the distribution of questionnaires and consent forms). One participant mailed the consent form and written questionnaire to my residence prior to the deadline.

Questionnaires consisted of six items, including three open-ended essay items and three student demographic questions. The open-ended essays were intended to determine post-graduation intentions and gauge individual participant perceptions of the community college as compared with four-year colleges and universities. The demographic items were cross-referenced with emerging participant response patterns in order to correlate perceptions with socioeconomic characteristics. The written questionnaire also served the purpose of having students gain experience with formulating verbal expression of their thoughts on post-secondary education prior to participating in research interviews.

Responses to written questionnaires were converted into electronic files using Microsoft Word software for ease of analysis and for the purpose of including printed copies along with transcriptions returned to research participants for review.

Interview Procedures for Student Participants

Following completion and submission of the written questionnaire and signed consent form, twenty-six students were contacted via telephone and scheduled to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. Because one student’s telephone number was not active, I met the participant at the high school in order to set an interview appointment. Again, for the purposes of this study, semi-structured interview is defined as a qualitative research interview process where all respondents are asked the same questions, but the order of questions, the manner and exact wording of the
questions, and the amount of time dedicated to each question may vary with each participant. The researcher also has the flexibility to present unique follow-up questions and prompts as each interview progresses. (Robson, 2002; Sommer & Sommer, 1997).

Participants had the choice of interviewing on the high school campus or via telephone. Over a four-month period, twenty students were interviewed in various unoccupied classrooms at the high school, while seven students chose to be interviewed via telephone. Interviews ranged from between 32 minutes and 56 minutes, averaging 41 minutes in duration. All interviews were tape-recorded with the student’s permission granted prior to each interview. All participants responded to three main areas of inquiry as indicated on an interview guide developed by the researcher (see Appendix D).

Interview items included twelve items directly related to the first research question guiding this study (How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?). The remaining twenty-four items are related to the second research question (How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?) and third research question (What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?) guiding this study. The thirty-six interview questions were also divided into the categories of general opinion questions, student background questions, cognitive questions, affective questions, and enrollment intention questions. Questions were aimed at determining: what students think about the community college in general; student background characteristics; what students know (or don’t know) in terms of specifics about the community college; how students feel about the community college; and actual student enrollment plans. Cognitive questions ask, “What do you know?” or
“How do you know this?” Affective questions ask, “How do you feel?” or “What has caused you to feel that way?”

Interview questions were designed to collect data in two other distinct classifications: Is the data related to existing participant perceptions, or is the data explaining the root cause of existing perceptions. In other words, all interview questions can be classified by whether they are inquiring about specific knowledge, intentions, and feelings, or whether they are inquiring as to the origins of specific knowledge, intentions and feelings.

All questions are coded on the interview guide (Appendix D). Figure E.1 (Appendix E) displays a model that may assist with visualization of the interview question structure in relation to the first three stated research questions. Figure E.2 displays the distribution of questions by whether the question seeks to determine a current perspective, or seeks to determine the origins of a current perspective.

All responses to interviews were converted into electronic files using Microsoft Word software for ease of analysis. Each transcribed interview document was then returned to the student via postal service for optional review and correction. Participants were given the option of making corrections directly on the text and returning it in a postage-paid pre-addressed envelope, or making corrections via a telephone conversation with the researcher. Only one of the twenty-seven participants requested transcript corrections, and she used the phone to request the appropriate changes. These corrections were minor, dealing with names of friends and educational background of extended family members.
Additional Supporting Data from Mayfair Staff

Upon completion of research interviews, a telephone inquiry was made of the Mayfair Community College Director of Admissions and Records for the purposes of determining how many student recruiting visits were made to Research High School and what types of literature, if any, were distributed via postal service to students at Research High. An additional telephone inquiry was made of a Mayfair Community College admission counselor/recruiter for the same purposes. An e-mail inquiry was made of the Mayfair Dean of Student Services in an attempt to determine the high school academic achievement levels (specifically the grade point average) of Research High School students enrolling at Mayfair. Finally, a telephone discussion was held with the Mayfair Coordinator of College Communications to determine if Mayfair Community College had an image management strategy, and what the strategy might consist of.

Data Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) define qualitative data analysis as “consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing/verification” (p.10). Data reduction, as applied to this study, includes the simplification and transforming of data collected from written responses to questionnaires and transcriptions of interviews. Data display, again defined by Miles & Huberman (1994), is “an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action” (p.11). Conclusion drawing was an ongoing process throughout the data analysis process, informed by both data reduction and data display processes. It is critical to admit at this point that the very nature of qualitative research is that the researcher makes design decisions and data analysis interpretations which are informed
by his/her own personal experiences and research goals. Thus the researcher does not stand entirely apart from either the data collected or the responses of participants, but plays a role in both the formulation of data categories and interpretation of participant perspectives. While final conclusions will be detailed in subsequent chapters, data reduction and data display will be addressed in combined fashion, just as they occurred within the study itself.

Consistent with a practice identified by Ryan and Bernard (2000) as being common among grounded theorists, I initiated questionnaires and conducted participant interviews, produced transcripts and read through them line by line, analyzing small amounts of data at a time. After all questionnaires were collected and all interviews completed, a structural analysis of all data was conducted. Gall (1996) defines structural analysis as an examination of research data “for the purpose of identifying patterns inherent in discourse, text, events, or other phenomena” (p.568). Ryan & Bernard (2003) define structural analysis as an examination of “the properties that emerge from relations among things” (p.270). In the case of this study, structural analysis refers to the manner in which participant responses to both written and interview questions are analyzed, separated, and then repositioned in a fashion that allows for comparison against other participant responses. Data was analyzed in two distinct fashions, consistent with Stake’s (1995) assertion that, “Two strategic ways that researchers reach new meanings about cases are through direct interpretation of the individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class” (p.74). My approach to data analysis as illustrated in Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram involved both inductive and deductive components. While codes, categories, patterns and themes
emerged from data in aggregate fashion, the same data was being subjected to direct
interpretation. “Case study,” according to Stake (1995), “relies on both of these methods”
(p.74).

Coding

The primary method of data reduction in the case of my study was the use of
coding. First level coding, a device for early summarization of segments of data (Miles &
Huberman (1994), was implemented in an inductive fashion. All student responses to
each of the three open-ended items on the written questionnaires were physically
separated into individual data units identifiable only by research participant code. Each
data unit consisted of a complete written response to a single questionnaire item.

In the same fashion as with the written questionnaires, all interview transcripts
were physically separated into data units by literally cutting copies of transcripts with a
paper trimmer. A participant data unit was again defined as a single uninterrupted
response to an interview question or follow-up question. Again, all participant data units
were identified only by participant code. All participant data units, from both
questionnaires and interviews, were then combined into one pile without regard for the
questionnaire or interview questions from which they were derived. Participant data units
were then examined individually and sorted into different envelopes, each of which
represented a separate data category. Data units that, due to brevity or other reasons,
could not reasonably be assigned to any specific category were removed from
consideration. The inductive nature of this initial analysis allowed for the emergence of
themes grounded directly in the data without regard for possible researcher bias and
preconceptions. Seventy-one categories emerged in the first-level coding process (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 1A).

Next, a more deductive analysis of questionnaire and interview responses was conducted (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 1B). This involved the compilation of summary matrices containing abbreviated direct interpretations of responses for each question on the written questionnaire and interview. These matrices, created using Microsoft Excel software for ease of data manipulation (see example Appendix L: Questionnaire & Interview Question Summary Format), display summarized responses to each question for the purpose of discovering data categories as found within (and informed by) the original context of the line of inquiry.

With Step 1A and Step 1B informing each other via comparison of the inductive categories with the deductive content analysis, a second level of coding, pattern coding, reduced the data units into eight broad categories, each category having a number of sub-categories. Again, this data was recorded on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for ease of manipulation (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram; Step 2). Pattern coding is “a method of reducing summaries, such as those determined in first-level coding, into smaller numbers of sets, themes, or constructs” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.68). During pattern coding, “the researcher works with sets of variables that either put people into distinct families built around what they say or do, or cluster actions and perceptions across informants” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.68). My approach to pattern coding was to first concentrate on grouping participant perceptions (as revealed by participants on written questionnaires and during the interview process) into one of the eight broad categories, placing the perceptions into sub-categories as specificity allowed. For
example, the following data unit from a written questionnaire falls into multiple broad coding categories, and multiple sub-categories which are indicated within the text.

I am not considering attending a 2-year institution, because, generally the level and quality of education is not as good as that of a four-year institution (AFF-QUAL/VAL-ED). Also the athletics are not of the quality of a major four-year institution (ADD-SPORT). A better career is possible with a four-year degree than that of a two-year degree (AFF-QUAL/VAL-ED). Also I like the idea of a four-year institution being farther from home (ADD-LOC), and giving a student a chance to grow (ADD-SOC).

Within the single data unit the participant has touched on the quality and value of education at a community college, the importance of college athletics, the importance of college location and opportunities for social growth.

All questionnaire responses and interview responses were coded within the original context with the results being displayed in a series of Microsoft Excel matrices which indicate the presence or absence of responses falling within each of the eight categories of responses while simultaneously presenting participant names and select background data (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 3A). Appendix H illustrates responses with respect to five of the eight major categories of influences: family, friends, high school education professionals, community college education professionals, and additional potential influences. Appendix I illustrates responses related to affective influences. Appendix J illustrates responses related to cognitive influences. Appendix K illustrates the eighth and final broad category, responses illuminating potentially influential background factors.

Again, at this stage of data analysis, a deductive analysis of responses to all questionnaire and interview questions was conducted for the purposes of summarizing responses of participants (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 3B). This
analysis resulted in a summary display (Ex. Appendix M: Participant Questionnaire and Interview Summary) of responses to all questions per participant, which allowed for easy comparison against coding matrices.

Comparing and contrasting coding matrices with summary matrices resulted in the creation of coding category summary matrices for each of the eight major coding categories (Ex. Appendix N: Coding Category Summary Matrix: Family). These matrices are the product of combining both inductive and deductive data analysis techniques, and allow for the examination of inductively derived data categories in light of deductively assigned meaning informed by context.

Next, using the Coding Category Summary Matrices (and referral to questionnaires, transcriptions, matrices, and summaries), participant composites were formulated around the framework of the three research questions pursued by this study (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 5). These participant composites (Ex. Appendix O: Participant Composite) show participants’ general perceptions of the community college along with background factors, factors deemed to be significant in terms of interpersonal relationships, and additional factors. The composites also show the dimensions of affective and cognitive influence, along with distinctions for factors deemed greatest affective, cognitive, and overall influences. In addition, the composites reveal the direct interpretation, where applicable, of whether significant factors are positive or negative influences with respect to participant perceptions of the community college.

Comparing and contrasting participant composites (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 6) allowed for the identification of the significant patterns and
themes revealed and interpreted in subsequent chapters involving discussions of research findings.

The final step of the data analysis process (Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram: Step 7) involved returning to the participant questionnaires and interviews to tag text related to specific themes and patterns. These texts were then used, along with fieldnotes, to recreate experiences that illustrate significant findings with respect to research questions.

Validity and Reliability

While some researchers dismiss the concepts of validity and reliability in relation to qualitative research (Gall, 1996), others apply the concepts in modified terms.

Internal validity, defined as “a measure of how well the researcher has understood the phenomenon from the perspective of the research subject” (Toler, 1998) is certainly applicable to qualitative studies. Stake (1995) states that researchers undertaking case studies “have ethical obligations to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding” (p.109), and goes on to recommend triangulation of data and member checking as methods of validation. Merriam (1998) suggests that “internal validity is a definite strength of qualitative research” (p.203) when data triangulation and peer examination occur along with a collaborative research approach and full disclosure of researcher biases. All components mentioned by Stake and Merriam are present in this study. Triangulation of data occurs through the use of fieldnotes, document review, written questionnaires and interviews with research subjects, member checking (as students were supplied with copies of transcriptions for personal review and correction), and inquiry of community college staff. Peer examination occurred as dissertation committee members
reviewed and made suggestions for improving the study. Collaboration occurred throughout the study as dissertation committee members, high school staff, and community college staff each made significant contributions by providing expertise, research data, or helped facilitate logistical concerns of data collection (i.e. suggesting an appropriate class for the research sample, making classroom space available for student interviews, relaying forms and information to participants, etc.). Finally, researcher bias is addressed in the following section.

Reliability has been defined as “the extent to which other researchers would arrive at similar results if they studied the same case using exactly the same procedures as the first researcher” (Gall, 1996, p.572). Those engaged in qualitative research do not necessarily expect (or require) this to hold true (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Instead, qualitative researchers are more committed to ensuring that research findings are consistent with data than they are with ensuring replication (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). A number of techniques, including data triangulation and the use of an audiotape recorder for interviews and transcriptions, were implemented in this study to ensure the accuracy of data and hence the legitimacy of research findings.

Researcher Bias and Study Limitations
This study was limited to a select group of high school seniors in a single college preparatory (Honors) English class. Specifically, the research population and sample were students in a single senior Honors English class in a mid-size high school in a rural county in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. All members of the research sample resided in the service region of the same local community college. Given these limitations, the research findings of this study are only applicable to the research
participants, and I do not generalize findings to other populations or high school seniors beyond the research site. However, as Stake (1995) points out, “a constructivist view encourages providing readers with good raw material for their own generalizing” (102). Therefore, it is my hope in conducting the research at Research High School, a school which in many aspects is representative of a statistical composite of all high schools in North Carolina, that additional studies (both qualitative and quantitative) may be conducted, and that a growing base of research (including this study) may lead to generalizable findings concerning the nature of high school seniors’ perspectives of the community college. This study provides at least one building block upon which other qualitative investigations can build as community college insiders seek to gain a deeper understanding of the image of the community college from those outside the institution (and specifically high school seniors).

As an administrator at a community college, and as a passionate advocate for the community college, I admittedly hold certain biased perspectives concerning the institution. In the spirit of honest and objective scientific inquiry, I have made every effort to design and conduct the research in a way that would prevent these biases from entering the study. Yet from a constructivist perspective I must admit what Mills (2001) reveals as the inherent flaw with qualitative research interviews from a constructivist perspective – that the interviewer and the interviewee are necessarily both involved in the construction of the meaning. Therefore the data is at some level a partial creation of the researcher. That withstanding, I have made every effort to avoid influencing the stated and implied perspectives of the participants, and to make my own biases transparent as part of the research process.
Chapter Four

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of the community college, and the roots of those perceptions, from the perspective of a select group of high school seniors. The findings of this study are presented as answers to three primary research questions:

1. How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?
2. How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?
3. What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

What follows is a review of the demographics of research participants, a brief introduction to the research setting, and a review of findings as they related to the three primary research questions in this study.

Research Participant Demographics

An important consideration in the design of this study was to not only be able to gather information about students’ perceptions of the community college, but to also be able to look into the backgrounds of these students in search of common factors that may have been influential in shaping these perceptions. Primary background characteristics examined in this study include socioeconomic factors (gender, race, household income level), academic performance, family educational background, and the participants’ own career and college enrollment plans.
The research sample population consisted of twenty-seven students. Seventeen of these students were female, ten were male. The female participants consisted of seven White, seven Black, one Hispanic, one Asian, and one mixed-race student. The male participants consisted of seven White and three Black students. Overall, the research sample population closely mirrored the racial makeup of the high school, with fourteen White students and thirteen minority students (see Figure 4.1).

![Figure 4.1 Gender and Racial Makeup of Research Participants](image)

All twenty-seven participants indicated the income level of the households in which they resided at the time they completed the written questionnaire. No specific dollar amounts were given as ranges or markers between income levels. The students used their own discretion as to which level best represented their households. No students reported being in a household with an upper income level. Seven students (6 White, 1 Black)
reported being in households with upper-middle income levels. Ten students (5 White, 3 Black, 1 Asian, 1 mixed-race) reported living in households with middle income levels. Nine students (2 White, 6 Black, 1 Hispanic) reported that their household income levels were lower-middle. One Black student reported a lower income level household.

Sixteen participants revealed that they currently held part-time employment after school and/or on weekends. Twenty-two of twenty-seven participants said that they definitely planned to work after graduation while enrolled in college. Two students were unsure if they would work while enrolled in college, while two were certain they would not work while enrolled in college.

All but one research participant indicated at least two different sources when asked how they planned to pay college expenses. Five students did not indicate any specific means of financing their college education, instead indicating that they would pay for it through an unspecified combination of sources. Scholarship was the most often
mentioned method of payment (mentioned by 17 students), followed by parents (15), financial aid (12), and student employment (7).

Clear differences emerged between the methods community college bound students planned on utilizing for paying for college and the methods university bound students planned on employing (see Figure 4.3). Student employment was mentioned as a method of paying for college by 75% (3 of 4) community college students, but only 19% (4 of 21) university bound students. No community college bound students stated specifically that parents would help pay for college, while most (71%) of university bound students indicated parents would assist with paying for college. Finally, only one community college student planned on scholarships as a way to pay for college, while 16 university bound students (76%) were planning on scholarships being a source of payment.

Living arrangements of participants included students living with both natural parents, students living at home with one natural parent, students living with a natural
parent and a step-parent, and students living with neither natural parent but a related
guardian. Interviews revealed that four of the participants (3 Black females, 1 White
female) had at least one child living with them. One female participant was home-bound
and undergoing treatments for cancer during the course of this study.

Sixteen participants indicated that they held part-time jobs at the time of their
research interviews. Eleven participants were not employed at the time of their
interviews. Twenty-two participants stated that they believed they would continue or seek
part-time employment during their first year in college, while three participants did not
believe they would hold any type of employment during the first year of college. Two
participants had not made a decision concerning their desire to work during the first year
of college.

Participant Career and Enrollment Plans

Twenty-one participants stated that they were planning on attending a four-year
college or university either directly following high school graduation or directly
following an enlistment period in a branch of the armed services. Four participants (two
White females, one Black male, and one Black female) stated that they were planning on
attending Mayfair Community College either immediately after high school graduation or
directly following an enlistment period in a branch of the armed services. Two
participants (One White male and one White female) stated that while they did plan on
enrolling in college immediately following high school graduation, they had not yet
decided which type of college they wished to attend (see Figure 4.4).
Seventeen of twenty-seven participants, including thirteen of seventeen female participants (and all seven White female participants), indicated that they planned to pursue careers in a medical field. Seven participants stated that they hope to one day become medical doctors. Of the remaining participants, three plan on pursuing careers in engineering, two in either psychology or sociology, two in business, and one in pastoral ministries.

Academic Performance

Six of the twenty-seven participants classified themselves during interviews as A students. Eight participants identified themselves as A & B students while six participants identified themselves as B students. With the exception of two students who were undecided on where they plan to attend college, all students who indicated that they were A, B, or A/B students stated that they planned to attend a four-year college or university. Seven students identified themselves as either average students or C students. All four students planning on enrolling at a community college classified themselves as average.
students. All six participants who stated that they were currently enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses during high school indicated plans to attend a four-year college or university. All twenty-seven participants were enrolled in at least one honors level course. Five participants shared that they were participating in dual-enrollment college classes at Mayfair Community College, attending college credit classes on the Mayfair campus. Four of these dual-enrollment students said they planned to enroll at the university.

Family Educational Background

Two-thirds (18) of the students had at least one immediate family member who had earned at least an associate’s degree, while 17 students had at least one parent who had received at least an associates degree. While nearly three-fourths (71%) of students planning on attending a four-year college or university had an immediate family member who had graduated from college, only one of four students planning to attend community college had an immediate family member who had graduated from college. Other response patterns were identified along income and racial distinctions. Only two out of ten students indicating their family income levels to be either lower or lower-middle also indicated that they had at least one parent who had graduated from a four-year college. Half (5 of 10) of the students indicating their families to be middle income also reported having at least one parent who had graduated from a four-year university, while a majority (5 of 7) of students indicating upper-middle family incomes also reported having at least one parent who was a graduate of a four-year college (see Figure 4.5).
There appeared to be significant differences in terms of family educational background among Black students and students of other races (see Figures 4.6 and 4.7). Three of ten Black participants stated that they had at least one family member (in this case all mothers) who had graduated from college. No Black participants indicated having any immediate family members who had graduated from a four-year college. Among non-Black research participants, nearly all students (15 of 17) reported that an immediate family member had graduated from college, with twelve reporting an immediate family member having graduated from a four-year university.
Figure 4.6  Percentage of Students Reporting at Least One Immediate Family Member Graduated From College (by race)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>% Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.7  Percentage of Students Reporting at Least One Immediate Family Member Graduated From a 4-year College or University (by race)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>% Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction to Research Setting

Situated on a two lane city street about a half-mile outside of downtown Centerville is Mayfair High School, surrounded by what appears to be an older low-rent apartment complex, a side street of smaller older duplex-style apartment buildings, and a fairly impressive football stadium capable of seating several thousand fans. The school, originally constructed in the late 1940’s with several additions since, is an eclectic architectural combination of traditional fortress-style three-story main building flanked on one side with a newer long and boxy classroom wing. Sprinkled around the rest of the campus are newer still plain white mobile classroom additions.

One step into the main building on the second day of a new school year immediately took me back to my days in junior high school when I attended school in a building almost identical to Mayfair. The smell of fresh paint and newly refinished hardwood hallways combined with the metallic smell of hallway student lockers to recreate that familiar scent of secondary education fixed in my mind many years ago. Yet I quickly learned that this was not the school environment of my youth. As the bell rang and students began to fill the hallways, I began to observe an educational environment I found unfamiliar and, admittedly, somewhat frightening. The noise level in the hallway grew to a volume never attained in the schools of my memory. The student body was a diverse combination of many races, not the large majority of students who were just like me – White – in my days of secondary education. There was no order to the flow of hallway traffic, and I learned that staying to the right side of the hallway no longer made for easy travel. Teachers did not take posts outside their doorways to monitor the transition to the next class period as I had remembered. Later I would learn
that bells to signal the beginning of the next class period did not expedite the emptying of hallways as students lingered and continued conversations, never hurrying or lowering their voices. Things had changed since my day, and I immediately began to worry that perhaps all of the insecurities of my youth would come sprinting back towards me and overwhelm me just as I was to present my request for participation to the designated class of students. Would this new breed of student be the least bit interested in my study? Would they sneer at me, roll their eyes, even laugh at me and count me and my project as silly and insignificant to their post-modern lives?

What I found, as I presented my request for their participation in this study, was a group of young adults that were in fact very interested, even eager, to participate in my study. They did not laugh, rather asked questions about the terms for participation in the study, almost as if they didn’t quite believe they would be eligible to participate. I found a group of high school seniors who quickly and correctly, along with their parents, completed the few tasks required for participation without having to be reminded once. I found a group of students who, with only one exception, showed up on time for their scheduled interview ready to give me their full attention. The students were pleasant and respectful to the point that I felt a bit of shame at having so quickly collectively sized them up before in such an unflattering manner.

These were not high school students as I had remembered them. As a group, they appeared to be more self-assured, more outspoken, and less intimidated by authority (yet not disrespectful) than I remembered my classmates to be. In a word, they seemed more mature than my classmates of old. For the purposes of my study, I believe this group of research students was exactly what I asked them to be; honest, open, and serious about
contributing their feelings and insights on the community college. I even began to develop a sense of camaraderie with these participants as the study progressed and students began to acknowledge my presence each day by speaking or waving. Without participants ever knowing, or even asking, my employment affiliation, I was welcomed as a part of their high school educational experience.

Likewise, I was fortunate to find an administrative staff, a teacher, and two principals who not only acknowledged the value of my research by allowing me access to students, but also helped make the practical arrangements for meeting space and contacting students as the need arose. The staff members, like the students, were more than just willing to assist – they were genuinely eager to assist.

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?

This study was designed to examine participants’ general perceptions of the community college from a number of different perspectives. Specifically, questions included inquiries about quality of education, knowledge of community college programs, comparisons to four-year colleges, the mission of the community college, and personal feelings about attending a community college. As might be expected, responses to these inquiries revealed a wide range of participant understanding of, and feelings about, the community college. Much like the literature on the topic of community college image, much of the data from this study centering around research question one is vague, a combination of assorted affective and cognitive perceptions which are often difficult to
interpret and even at times contradictory within the framework of a single participant’s responses. Yet patterns did emerge, and it is those patterns which will be introduced here first by dividing participants into three distinct classifications: the four-year college bound student with a poor opinion of the community college; the four-year college bound student with community college as plan B; and the undecided or community college bound student. After reviewing the themes as they emerged within the parameters of individual interviews, a practice which allows for capturing a sense of participant character and individual interview context, a summary of major themes will follow.

The Four-year College Bound Student With A Poor Opinion of the Community College

A small number of participants, all of whom indicated plans to attend a four-year college after graduation, clearly expressed an all-around poor opinion of the community college. Tahne, a slender girl of Asian descent with aspirations of becoming a cardiologist, was very critical of the community college. As she sat across the table from me in the library after school I found Tahne’s demeanor to be an odd combination of bubbly energy and unapologetic directness with respect to her criticisms of the community college. An admitted overachiever and straight “A” student her entire life, Tahne set the stage for our conversation even before our interview with a response from her written questionnaire.

I feel that a community college limits my options and opportunities. A university will allow me to grow socially as well as mentally by introducing me to new people and social patterns, but a community college usually consists of local people. In smaller cities, such as Centerville, good job opportunities are limited during and after attending a community college.

(Item 3/#512/A/F/M/U)
Not long into our face-to-face interview, Tahne took the opportunity to reaffirm her feelings about the community college and its limitations, comparing it again to the university. Her voice is clear, bordering on shrill, and her perfect English carries no hint of an accent.

Personally, I don’t care too much for community college. I just think that you don’t really have too many options. My whole thing is I’ve always thought…I don’t know if this is true or not, but I’ve just always thought it was basically you get general stuff. And I feel like if you go to like a 4-year college and university you’ll be going toward something more specific than just something general.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

Tahne continued her comparison of the community college with the university by discussing her opinions on quality of education.

I personally don’t think it’s…the quality’s very good. Because I’m talking about comparing it to a university. I feel like at a university the professors seem to be more educated than the ones at a community college.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

It came as no surprise that when asked to express the feelings she might have if she were to personally enroll at a community college following high school graduation Tahne had no pleasant feelings to share.

If I was to even consider it…which I’m not…I would just feel like I wasn’t really kind of going for my potential, because I feel like I can do a lot better than a community college…definitely disappointed…I’m sure I would regret that. But I would kind of be disappointed in myself just for the fact that I could do better than that and I didn’t. I would be really upset. I would not be very happy.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

Tahne goes on to share her image of what a typical community college student would be like, exempting those students enrolled in the community college nursing program from her assessment. In doing so, she illustrates two themes that run common throughout this study. First, there is a general perception on the part of most participants that students
who enroll at the community college are either academic underachievers or academically inferior to students enrolling in four-year colleges and universities. Second, an awareness of, and respect for, nursing programs at the community college permeates the participant responses throughout this study.

I know it’s not very nice to say…and I don’t want to say they’re dumb because I know they’re not…but most…the people that I know that go to community college’s, they’re not as dedicated, I guess you could say, to their schoolwork and trying to really get somewhere. Like in general, they’re not really that dedicated. But unless you’re doing like nursing or something. I guess you could go to like Mayfair here and get your nursing thing.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

Sandra was another student with no apparent positive perceptions of the community college. Like Tahne, Sandra planned to attend a university to pursue a career in the health field, though her specific major had yet to be determined. Unlike Tahne, Sandra made a point of stating that she was an average student, not an overachiever.

Sandra sums up her academic mindset.

Yes. I could try harder but I don’t.

(#055/W/F/M/U)

A tall pale young lady with dark hair and dark eyes, Sandra rotated between leaning inward to prop her elbows, supporting her chin with her palms, and slumping backwards in her chair, extending her legs out as balance under the table. As I interviewed her in a large empty room used sparingly for the study of home economics, our voices competed intermittently with a large air-conditioning unit in the room as the unit kicked on and back off several times. Because the interview was conducted during the final hour of school during Sandra’s study hall hour, we were forced to pause a number of times for bells and intercom announcements. Sandra’s demeanor, like her
posture, was relaxed. Her responses, for the most part, were delivered quickly, were brief, and went straight to the point as evidenced by her quick assessment of Mayfair.

I don’t really think about it too much. I wouldn’t go to Mayfair.

(#055/W/F/M/U)

Sandra mirrors Tahne’s assessment of the typical community college student.

I think when people look at people that went to a community college they just think like… assume they had bad grades and they just got in to wherever they could go. And they’re not going to really be anything when they graduate or whatever. Grades…probably barely passed.

(#055/W/F/M/U)

Sandra draws a parallel of the previous statement to her own friends.

Just people that I know that have gone to Mayfair, I mean they are nothing. They’re just still around in Centerville, and haven’t done anything with their lives.

(#055/W/F/M/U)

Finally, Sandra dismisses her friends’ apparent contentment with the community college experience.

055: Yes, I have friends at the community college.  
I: Why do you think they went to Mayfair?  
055: Bad grades. They didn’t really…they don’t really care.  
I: Are your friends that go there, are they satisfied with it, or are they telling you don’t go there?  
055: I mean yes, they are satisfied because they had nothing…nowhere else to go pretty much.

Another research participant with plans to attend a four-year college or university, Eric held almost exclusively negative perceptions of the community college. Perhaps the most difficult of all participants to track down for the purposes of interviewing, I finally contacted Eric at his cell phone number after failing to reach him at home on numerous occasions. His parents, showing a great deal of patience, had explained to me on more than one occasion that it would be difficult to reach their very busy son unless I called his
cell phone. Once connected, we lost the cell signal numerous times during the interview before Eric reluctantly gave in and called me from his home phone, a land-line.

It became evident early in our discussions that Eric was seriously pursuing a scholarship, and maybe even a career, in baseball. Eric admitted in his written questionnaire that athletics played a central role in his enrollment plans.

I am not considering attending a 2-year institution, because, generally the level and quality of education is not as good as that of a four-year institution. Also the athletics are not of the quality of a major four-year institution. A better career is possible with a four-year degree than that of a two-year degree. Also I like the idea of a four-year institution being farther from home, and giving a student a chance to grow.

(Item 3/#733/W/M/UM/U)

Eric spoke quickly and with a southern accent after briefly deliberating the questions I posed. Eric, like Tahne and Sandra, expressed a poor opinion of the level of student typically found at the community college while making an exception for nursing students.

Well, I know that most community colleges …I mean community colleges obviously provide a good enough education to get you somewhere, but like a lot of people think of Mayfair as a place that a lot of kids go because their grades aren’t good enough or something like that… I mean some just…some of the kids that go to community college and are the ones that their parents are going to support them forever. And some of them are just the ones that partied it up in high school and didn’t have good grades to go to a 4-year institution…I mean I know Mayfair has a pretty decent nursing program, but for the most part they go there two years so they can get their grades up enough to get into a four-year college.

(#733/W/M/UM/U)

Asked to reflect on his own personal feelings should he end up attending a community college, Eric again ties in his desire to continue playing baseball after high school, as well as expresses a common sentiment among participants in this study that a four-year degree is preferable to a two-year degree.
Well, I’d probably be pretty disappointed myself, because if I was going to Mayfair, I wouldn’t be playing baseball anywhere. So I’d be disappointed on that end. And I…I’d prefer to have a 4-year degree rather than a two-year.

(#733/W/M/UM/U)

It is important to note that the three participants identified in this classification are not unique in the sense that they identify unique themes with respect to perceptions of the community college. The distinction here is that these three participants revealed almost exclusively negative personal perceptions of the community college.

The Four-year College Bound Student with Community College as Plan B

This category of participants consists of eighteen students who clearly indicated that they are planning to attend a four-year college or university. While they presented many different opinions concerning many different aspects of the community college, they also continued to elaborate on themes introduced by the first classification of participant, along with revealing a number of additional themes. Common to students in this category is the idea that while for numerous reasons their first choice would not be to attend a community college, the community college has its strong points and doing so would not be a horrible thing.

Kristi, a surprisingly diminutive girl in blue-jeans and flip-flops, plans to pursue a four-year degree in an area related to health care. Her extremely youthful appearance belies her status as a high school senior. Her voice is soft and does not project well. We are fortunate that the air conditioner does not run during the interview process.

A lot of times I do think it gets like a poor reputation. I think people think it’s not as good of a school and that people that can’t get into a 4-year college have to choose to go there…I just think that students don’t think it’s a good quality education…There are some people that don’t like the
community college. It’s made me think that maybe there’s something bad… made me wonder was it not as good or whatever.

(#044/W/F/UM/U)

Sally, rushing in from flag team practice, literally interviews with perspiration on her face. A part-time dance teacher and editor of the school newspaper, she plans, like so many other participants, to pursue a career in the health field. She reluctantly admits that while she would like to continue dance in college, it likely will not be her livelihood. Sally reveals how being dual-enrolled for a psychology course at Mayfair has given her a different opinion of community college than that held by others at the high school.

Well now that I’ve been there I think it’s positive. But I think through this school, I don’t think it holds a very good reputation. Because, I don’t know, around here you just, I don’t know. They kind of have that impression that Mayfair College… you just go there because you decided not to go, you’re being lazy. But it’s good I think.

(#992/W/F/M/U)

Planning to attend a private university affiliated with the Church of God denomination, Rex, who plans to become a pastor, acknowledges then refutes the reputation of the community college.

I think it’s… I think the reputation is not… I think it has a bad reputation for what it really is. More people… a lot of people associate college with getting out of town. They kind of slight the community college even though it is a good organization.

(#712/W/M/M/U)

Finally, Sheri, a Black student planning to enroll at a university immediately after a stint in the Air Force, conveyed via telephone the notion that Mayfair is known by other acronyms at her high school.

Our community college doesn’t have a good reputation. I’m not going to say nobody wants to go there, but we kind of call it B.Y.U… Back Yard University… I don’t know the reason why. I guess because Centerville is so boring. Everyone is just like – Mayfair is in the back yard.

(#825/B/F/M/U)
Another theme emerged around students’ perceptions that the community college is a “last chance” or “second chance” institution – in essence, a “Plan B” for people who have either underachieved academically and cannot qualify for admission to a four-year college or university, or have financial or other personal limitations that prevent them from going off to a four-year institution. And while opinions vary greatly among this group as to the quality of education offered at the community college and the role of the community college in the community, running parallel to the “Plan B” perception is the clear and prevalent theme that the primary goal of attending a community college is to ultimately transfer from the community college to a four-year university. To the total exclusion of all non-transfer track programs, with the exception of allied health programs, participants saw the community college as an alternate pathway to the greater goal of university admission – a way back to “Plan A.”

Phyllis, a pleasant girl of African-American heritage planning on becoming a physical therapist, writes at length of the importance of education to her future.

Education is something that cannot be taken away from a person. Being educated shows that a person won’t spend their whole life working at a fast food restaurant but as I might sat that’s only if you use your education to its highest potential. I feel being educated guarantees you a successful career that’s why I’m considering to attend a 4-year university. My goals are too high for me not to achieve and I know that I have the potential to do so and that continuing my education will be the only logical way to achieve my goals. On the other hand by not going to a 4-year college or university does not mean that you’re a failure in life. Everyone is entitled to their own choices in life. I know that there are people that are just not made for school or should I say school is just not made for them, but they have also become successful in life.

(Item 2/#222/B/F/LM/U)

She then speaks in a her matter-of-fact manner often cocking her head to the side and nearly closing her eyes as she shares her opinion of the community college.
Personally I don’t feel that there is anything wrong with attending a community college if you’re planning on being a RN, C.N.A., or any type of nurse…I mean I don’t see nothing wrong with it. I just want to go to a 4-year college. Maybe because I haven’t really, you know, looked into a two-year college… I guess I’d be excited because I mean it’s a college. And I know, you know, it’s getting me ready for the next level and it’s something new…I mean they’re good for like…really a person that, you know, don’t feel like they’re ready for a four-year college, and that a community college would be best for them. I mean I don’t go against them. You never know… I mean if it, you know, was something I might have to go to and then transfer, I’d be willing to do that.

Phyllis moves on to question Mayfair’s apparent low profile in the community.

I think it plays a positive role, but it’s a little role, because you don’t really hear too much about Mayfair. You know, it’s right up the street. You’d think you’d hear a lot about it, but…maybe because they don’t really have nothing…I don’t know. They don’t really have activities or things going on.

Rex stares past me as he thinks. He is all business, speaking slowly as thoughts come to him. With his short straight-cut reddish hair, straight posture, and button-collar shirt he already he has the serious and almost somber air of a seasoned minister.

Typical community college student in my opinion would be either someone who goofed around in high school and could not get into a 4-year university. Or maybe someone who’s in night school and they have to work…like maybe they’re a single parent or something like that…somebody trying to get an affordable education… A lot of people go to community colleges that couldn’t get into 4-year colleges, and that’s kind of put that bad stereotype in my head. That it’s like the second resort…the last resort for college maybe – in my personal opinion.

Rex continues with his assessment of the community college, citing its drawbacks from his personal perspective, yet acknowledging its significance within the community.

I think community colleges are great…I…the reason I have not chosen to take the community college route is because I’m…one, I’m not that impressed with their facility. I mean their facility is nice, but their resources and their facilities are not as great as that of a 4-year university…I think it’s…it’s a center for education in the community. It
brings a higher learning…I think it increases the education level of the community because it can bring higher learning to the people in the community without having to leave the community to get education. I think it’s great for high school students that are able to do dual enrollment and get a head start on their college…I’ve only seen positive affects from the community college as far as the community.

(#712/W/M/M/U)

Unlike most other students in the study, Rex makes an attempt at assessing an employers point of view with respect to community college graduates, recognizing that the assessment might be tied more to employer perceptions of the community college than actual fact.

I…I think you’re still learning the same things, but when you’re looked upon from an employer’s perspective, or from the business world, or any employer from business or commercial to private, a 4-year university’s education is always going to look…even if you were technically smarter or learn more at the community college for different courses, your 4-year university degree or education is going to look higher than the community college. That’s just my opinion…I think it’s… I think there’s going to be more quality to the…I think the quality’s going to be a little lower for a community college education.

(#712/W/M/M/U)

Randall was a large, physically imposing Black student with a deep booming voice. His sensible spectacles enhanced the image of an intellectual I had formulated in my mind earlier with respect to this student. Evidently modest in nature, Randall only admitted when asked that he was an honor student. He never brought up the fact that his name was on a plaque in the hallway where all students scoring above 1200 on the SAT were recognized. Randall’s written questionnaire contained references to “keeping up consistent responsibilities in your life so that you don’t get too relaxed.” Randall shares the root of his ambition in response to the written questionnaire.

I am continuing my education because these days a high school diploma just isn’t enough if you want success. There is always a need to continue your knowledge and a college provides this. If I want to support myself
and a future family a job at a fast food joint or grocery store won’t allow me to live as comfortably as I would like. I want financial comfort in my life because I have lived my full seventeen years seeing how my mother struggles to support my sister and I. I don’t want to have that kind of stress the rest of my life. A higher education gives me options so that one day I can support my son or daughter or contribute meaningfully back to the community.

(Item 2/#747/B/M/LM/U)

Evidently prone to drawing analogies, Randall set himself apart from other research participants with responses such as the following:

If college were cars I would say a community college is a Honda Civic and a four-year college is a BMW. A Honda Civic is good economy-wise, and long-term and four-year colleges…best bang for the buck I guess you’d say.

(#747/B/M/LM/U)

When asked to comment on his reason for not considering the community college, Randall again drew on his wit and reversed another common analogy.

Why go for the milk when you can have the cow? I would go to a community college if I had no other choice but I would rather go for the full college experience so that I can prepare for medical school.

(Item 3/#747/B/M/LM/U)

Throughout the course of his interview, I often found myself feeling a bit awkward at Randall’s prolonged silences after I posed each question. A few times I attempted to repeat questions, only to have Randall assure me that he heard and understood the question and was just concentrating on formulating his answer. When he did speak, Randall often reinforced a number of emerging themes with respect to the transfer function, “Plan B” option, and “second-chance” institution.

I think the community college is seen as a second chance… I would say… Basically I think of a community college as something for somebody who has…probably can’t pay for a 4-year college right away and they just need to save their money up…and basically kind of ease into a college atmosphere so that they’re going to take that for two years and then two years at a 4-year college… I would say someone that, they didn’t really
think about their choices in high school, and like maybe down the road they figured they should do something with their life so they decided to go to a community college and, basically, get a good start. I’d probably say a low income person…I would say it’s a place…to give maybe someone that’s, like not as intelligent…they didn’t do as well in high school…or someone that didn’t have a chance because of pregnancy or something, and that they’re just a place to give everyone a second chance.

(747/B/M/LM/U)

Like so many of the students in this category, Randall makes it clear his desire is to attend a university, yet admits that should he not be able to do so he might be disappointed but would be grateful for the opportunity to study at the community college.

I’m not considering the community college because I think you should go for the highest thing you can. Like I would say a 4-year college is better than the community college simply for the fact that you have more of a variety of education and a variety of people that you can meet. And a 4-year college is just…I mean I’d rather try for that first than try for a community college first… I’d probably feel disappointed that I was going to the community college instead of a 4-year college, but I would also be thankful that I at least had a chance.

(747/B/M/LM/U)

Several other participants, while not as witty as Randall, shared many of the same basic sentiments concerning attending a community college.

I’m not putting myself beyond going to a community college but it’s not my first choice. I mean, it’s good for some people, but for me, instead of going to a community college and transferring, I just want to go to a 4-year college and get it all over with without transferring… For me transferring is a hassle... Sometimes that can be a problem.

(825/B/F/M/U)

I mean, I mean it’s not bad to go to. Like if that’s the only choice I have to go to, I will go to a community college. There’s nothing wrong with it. But my first choice was going to a 4-year university…To me…I don’t know. It’s not for me. I’ll go, but I just don’t feel right I guess going to a community college….I think it’s good. I think it’s very good quality like for some people with not enough money to go to a 4-year, and it would be a good thing for them.

(299/B/F/M/U)

I think it’s a positive role, and I think it plays a big role…To me I think…I think it’s a good thing. It’s like community college, but if I know I can get
to that better one, then that’s the one I want to try to get…I don’t want to like just settle if I can get into Mayfair. I don’t want to just settle for Mayfair. I want to try to get into a university. But community college… if I had to…I will go to a community college…I really don’t know. I just want to be at a university. I don’t want to just settle for community college.

(#865/B/F/LM/U)

The community college in my city is great but I don’t have plans of staying here. However I have made plans to go to the college if things don’t go exactly how I plan them to. I would like to get into a 4-year, but if, you know, if I have to (inaudible) the cost and have to go to a community college, which I don’t have a problem with, I’ll go to a community college and try to transfer…something like that. I’m actually considering attending it because as far as a financial basis, like I told you, there’s ways you can get around it if you want to, but you know just in case something happens, I’m prepared to go to community college, as far as my financial thing. And I’d be able to stay here because I have a single mother. So if something happens, you know, I can be here and tend to her.

(Item 3/#588/B/M/LM/U)

There is nothing wrong with community college but I do not want to attend one… I just think it has a good reputation. At least kids are going to college. Even if it’s a community college at least they’re going, so they can learn more. At least they’re going back and not staying out after high school.

(#066/H/F/LM/U)

I don’t plan to attend a community college. I don’t see anything wrong with it. I heard it was not a bad idea, so if push comes to shove, I would attend a community college. I just would not enjoy doing all of the transfer papers.

(Item 3/#111/B/F/LM/U)

Community college is not out of the question. If I don’t get accepted into any of the 4-year universities that I wish to attend, then I am not against going to a community college for one or two years and then transferring to a university of my choice…I don’t see anything wrong with them. I mean yes, it’s not your 4-year college. You don’t really get the life of living off, you know, going to college and stuff like that. I mean I don’t see anything wrong with it. You don’t do your job…what you’re going to be doing in your job until your last two years anyway… I’ve heard just… I’ve heard it’s the way to go if you don’t want to spend a lot of money your first two years or something.

(Item 3/#309/W/M/M/U)
Sally, who revealed how her dual-enrollment changed her opinion of the community college for the better in spite of the fact that she believed Mayfair continued to hold a poor reputation at Research High School, began her praise for the community college while simultaneously indicating her commitment to attend a four-year university in her response to the written questionnaire.

Right now as a high school student, I am attending a community college for one class a day for both semesters. By being a high school student taking college courses, the state will pay for it (called dual-enrollment). I think it is great going to Mayfair Community College. My views about community college has definitely changed. I used to think they were for people who just really didn’t care much about school, but now I realize they are cheaper in price, but very good in quality as far as classes go compared to a four-year university. I am, however, going to attend a four-year university beginning in fall 2004, because I need the experience of living on my own and managing my own money. I don’t feel this can be achieved as well by attending a community college.

(Sally 3/#992/W/F/M/U)

Sally can easily see the scenario whereby she might find herself exercising “Plan B” and attending the community college. Like the others in this category, Sally sees both pros and cons, yet feels certain she would adjust and benefit from attending the community college.

I’d probably say if I ended up having to go there if something fell through and I couldn’t go to Wilkington then I’d probably be a little sad at first just because I want to get out and get to another town and see other things. In the long run I wouldn’t have any problem with going. It wouldn’t bother me at all…I definitely think that’s a good decision. I feel like it would save money. That’s the place to go. I don’t think Mayfair is any worse than say Wilkington as far as like academics go. I think they’re both about the same…I don’t think Mayfair is any worse just because it’s a community college. I wouldn’t have any problem going to a community college after high school.

(#992/W/F/M/U)

Besides recognizing that Mayfair may prove to be a valuable tool in her own educational pursuits, Sally also assigns the school a significant role within the local community.
I think it plays a pretty big role for people my age here… or maybe a little older. Just as much as… if we didn’t have Mayfair here there’d be a lot of… there’d be a lot of people in Centerville that probably wouldn’t go anywhere. Because it’s convenient and it’s probably how a lot of people in Centerville get their higher education. If we didn’t have Mayfair they probably wouldn’t go anywhere.

(#992/W/F/M/U)

I interviewed Meghan, a straight “A” student, by telephone. I learned from a local newspaper article that Meghan, an athletic looking blonde-haired young lady with a dark tan who frequently wore her hair back in a pony-tail, had recently received the honor of being selected to the all-county soccer team. Meghan had a few positive things say about the community college, but held the perception that it wasn’t quite up to par with a university.

The community college here is really good. Like they get – a lot of students from our school go there. The teachers there are pretty well prepared… It’s a pretty good quality. It doesn’t give you the same education as you would get from a university I think. But you still get the knowledge that you need… I think it would be kind of… like I’m just going to the 13th grade. I think it’s mainly just to help people that like aren’t really ready to like go off on their own and jump into the real college, like get hard core into college. I think the community college is more of like a pre-college…Pretty much anybody can get into a community college I think.

(#333/W/F/M/U)

Meghan makes a point of clarifying that her own negative feelings about the possibility of personally attending a community college are not an indictment of the institution, rather a statement about her own personal educational goals.

Personally I’d be disappointed because that’s not really what I want to do… I just have really high expectations for myself and for some reason I just don’t think a community college is as high as I can go with my education. That’s just mainly it. It’s my own personal goals that I’m trying to set for myself that I want to achieve. It’s nothing really against the school, I have to say.

(#333/W/F/M/U)
Fueling the transfer focus of participant perceptions is an apparently profound lack of cognitive understanding of community college programs. This study uncovered little anecdotal evidence that students are aware that the community college offers options other than the transfer program. Again with the exception of allied health programs, primarily nursing, the only other program mentioned with any consistency was the cosmetology program, likely due to the fact that a few participants were enrolled in the program as a dual-enrollment option. There was, however, evidence within this category of participants that a number of students held factually incorrect (or at least questionable) perceptions of the transfer function, community college programs, admission requirements, and cost of attending the community college. The following quotes are examples of each.

“I’ve also heard like some of the classes don’t transfer to a bigger…to a university or something, or…and I don’t know if it’s true or not…like the grades or whatever…I’ve heard that they drop the, just – no matter what you make in community college, when they transfer they transfer as a C.”
(#309/W/M/M/U)

“Your can major being a math teacher up until 8th grade or something like that at a community college.”
(#865/B/F/LM/U)

“I guess you have to have like a 3.0 average, or a 3.5 average, I’m not sure. And good grades and a lot of things that you do in the community, and stuff like that.”
(#111/B/F/LM/U)

“Well, the tuition level is not like a university. The most I’ve seen for tuition at a community college, like around in our area, I’ve seen them at least $5,000.”
(#865/B/F/LM/U)

The Undecided or Community College Bound Participant

Even within this category of participants containing only six students, two undecided and four planning to attend the community college, perceptions are diverse. A
number of the previously discussed common themes, however, continue to show up in
participant responses among this group. Transferring to a four-year college or university
still seems to be a given among this group.

    Well I figure by going to the community college you would get…you
    would just learn like how college life would be had you entered a state
    university or private school or whatnot. And you’ll just get the basics. You
    know, you’ll learn some basic classes and they’ll give you like some
    typical examples of how a university would be before you know your time
    was up there. And then you would transfer.

(#569/B/M/L/CC)

The community college still appears to be considered a “second-chance” institution for
those who have not excelled in high school, simply cannot afford to attend school away
from home, or have other responsibilities that prevent them from going to a four-year
college or university. It is important to note that of the four students indicating definite
plans to attend community college, one student admitted that he was financially
responsible for his own well-being and had a very tight budget, one student had cancer
and was undergoing an extensive series of treatments, and the remaining two students
were single parents.

    Perhaps the most gregarious participant in this study, Jeff walked with me down
the hallway from his English class to the empty computer lab where his interview was to
take place. The final bell of the day had sounded and the hallways were full of students.
We stopped at least four or five times as other students came up to Jeff to discuss one
matter or another. Jeff’s written questionnaire had indicated he wanted to major in
psychology and sociology, and that he loved helping people who might be having a
difficult time coping. It also indicated that lower community college tuition would help
him a great deal. It was clear other students were drawn to Jeff. As we started our
interview it was easy to see why. A tall Black student who played on the school basketball team, Jeff frequently broke into a large bright smile and gave short chuckles. He wore modern loose fitting athletic-wear and continually used his hands when he spoke as if hand gestures helped him get his points across. While reinforcing some common themes, Jeff made it clear that community college was the place for him.

Well, I think it’s a good thing for people like me. I think it’s a good thing…sort of like maybe a second chance for people who maybe had to drop out of school due to whatever circumstances that they may have had to take on in life. And for people like me who just don’t feel comfortable, you know, entering a big university, you know, with the teacher-student ratio. You know, just give everybody a chance to understand the basics. And then people older than me that, you know, have families, you know. If they want to advance in education they can also go back to school and do that.

(#569/B/M/L/CC)

Bev was another student planning on attending the community college. Like others in this category, Bev had significant outside obligations to consider. In her case she was a single parent on a very limited income. Bev’s hair was long and dark while her facial features were rounded and soft. While she had plenty to say, the tone of her voice was as soft as her appearance, and she spoke with a heavy southern accent. There was no chance I could hear her over the intercom, and we were forced to move as far away from the air-conditioning unit as the home economics room would permit. Bev shared her reasons for planning to attend Mayfair.

The main reason is that I will not leave my son for anything. I also don’t have the money to go to a four-year college or university. I can learn to be what I want to be at Mayfair Community College...To attend a community college for me would be more convenient. I definitely can’t do any moving or tuition for a university. I will learn my career at a community college and go straight to it... For me it would be easier because I have a son and he...going off to college... that kind of ruled it out. I can’t go off. I can’t...my money is real limited. I’m basically put to working.
Bev was one of very few participants who credited the community college with having a broad-based curriculum tied to opportunities for immediate employment.

Ninety percent of the jobs out there I guess…I’m guessing you can go to the community college and get enough ability. I’m not saying you can get your degree in it, but they’re pretty broad based.

Participants likely to attend to community college also believe that in general the institution has a poor reputation, although they do not personally buy into the negativity associated with this reputation. Bev shared her perceptions on the reputation of Mayfair.

When I was younger it kind of had a bad reputation because everybody wants to go to a big school. But when you grow up you learn that it’s made for people that can’t go to a big university.

Anthony was undecided as to which type of college he would attend following graduation. A White student heavily involved in ROTC and depending on getting a ROTC scholarship to have a chance to attend a four-year college, Anthony reveals in two quotes the difference in the general perception of the community college on the part of his classmates from his own perception.

Well, we have a joke in ROTC that if you don’t, you know, graduate high school and all that…or if you do graduate high school and you don’t get…your last chance to go to like college will be like MIT…Mayfair-in-town.

Financially it’s cheaper and that’s better in certain cases. If I don’t get a scholarship it would be much better for me to go there then to go to a 4-year college where it costs ten grand a year.

Michelle was a Black female with a child planning on attending the community college right after an enlistment period in the Army. Michelle admitted that she was once an
honor role student, but that her grades were slipping lately.

Some people think community college is dirty, little, you know, dirty places that many people don’t want to go to because you know everybody wants to be away from home and so they try to use the excuse that they’re dirty and little and you know, that they’re not better than big colleges…that they don’t really have money and stuff.  
(#010/B/F/M/CC)

Participants in this category also seem to think the community college is less rigorous in terms of academics, which is often apparently a characteristic they welcome.

Alicia, a White home-bound student receiving chemotherapy and radiation treatments for cancer, was kind enough to allow me to interview her by telephone. Alicia encouraged me to get to know her by reading her personal webpage, which I subsequently did. We conversed several times via phone prior to her passing not long after high school graduation. Understandably, Alicia had a weak voice and was obviously tired during our interview, yet she remained pleasant and even laughed often during the process. Alicia commented on her comparison of academic rigor at the community college as compared with the university.

Well I don’t know much about Mayfair, but it seems like it’s an okay school. I mean so many people go there. I don’t think it’s quite as hard. It’s less pressure and you can…you can fit it more to your schedule than you can a 4-year university or whatever.  
(#444/W/F/LM/CC)

Bev agreed that perhaps the community college might be a little less academically demanding, thus a better fit for her.

My attention span is not very…it’s short. So after I graduate I’d probably want to go to Mayfair or a community college because, you know, big time studying at like a university isn’t my thing.  
(#876/W/F/LM/CC)
Perhaps the most difficult perceptions to analyze for the purposes of this study were revealed by Kim, a White female student undecided on her college plans, yet very interested in staying close to home in order to remain employed at her mother’s home health care business. As the photographer for the school newspaper and yearbook, I had frequently noticed Kim walking the hallways with her camera during my visits to the high school. A very pretty young lady with blonde hair back in a ponytail and wearing blue-jeans, flip-flops, and a simple white T-shirt, Kim made a habit of rolling her eyes slightly and laughing as I asked questions. Kim was an oddity in the sense that while she had only negative things to say about the local community college, Mayfair, she had only positive perceptions of another community college in the same state. Kim’s data fit into most categories with a neutral net effect on the study, yet her statements were some of the most critical in the study with respect to Mayfair. A number of her quotes illustrate the duality of her perceptions.

I would consider attending a community college for my freshman and sophomore year of college because I think that professors at smaller colleges care more about their students rather than professors at universities. I think that it would be helpful to attend a community college right after high school so that it isn’t so drastic of a change and you can adjust to college better.

(Item 3/#612/W/F/UM/?)

I mean… I don’t know. Community colleges… when I think of community college I think of Mayfair. And I would never go to Mayfair. Mayfair just seems like, I don’t know, a waste of time. It really does. But then there’s community colleges like Cape Hope, which I would definitely go to. It’s just too far… It depends on which one you’re talking about. Because I have different thoughts of like, I take Mayfair and I don’t… I mean… I don’t have higher thoughts about them. And I look at Cape Hope and I would go there… so.

(#612/W/F/UM/?)
I don’t think Mayfair plays a very big role at all in Centerville, with, you know, anything.

(#612/W/F/UM/?)

I don’t know. I mean I think, you know, a student who would go to community college would probably do just as well as one who went to a university. But…I guess I just…since I’ve lived in Centerville my whole life…Mayfair’s the only one I’ve really seen. And the people that go there just don’t look like they’re going to do much with their lives. Like, I’ve been on that campus.

(#612/W/F/UM/?)

Summary of General Perceptions

After a thorough analysis of all research data, four common themes stood out as significant in terms of participants general perceptions of the community college. These themes cut across all three of the categories of participants just described.

1) Students who enroll at the community college are perceived as either academic underachievers or academically inferior to students enrolling in four-year colleges and universities.

2) The community college is perceived as a “second chance” or “Plan B” institution for those not able to attend a four-year college.

3) Deserved or not, the community college struggles with a poor reputation.

4) There is an awareness of and respect for the transfer function and nursing programs at the community college, and minimal awareness of other programs.

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?
This study revealed one significant finding with respect to research question two.

5) Based on student perceptions, there are inconsistencies along racial lines in how high school staff members advise students with respect to the community college and four-year colleges and universities.

Simply put, an analysis of the data collected in this study suggests that, based on student perceptions, the high school staff at Research High School advises Black students in a different fashion than they advise students of other races when it comes to the community college. A close examination of coded data in the categories of HSST-CNSL, HSST-TCH, and HSST shows specific instances of this from student perspectives.

Examining what Black students share in terms of what high school staff tell them about the community college reveals a very different picture than what students of other races share about their advice from high school staff. The following are statements from seven different Black participants concerning the influence of members of their high school staff.

The community college? They just – they just put it to you like the place is not that bad. That’s what they – you know, talking from person to person (inaudible) the place is not that bad. You know it’s pretty good. It’s right uptown and the cost isn’t bad. It’s nothing but positive as far as going to the community college if you’re talking to a staff member.

(#588/B/M/LM/U)

No, she just, she let me make up the decision myself, but she tell me the good things about it and the bad things about both of them. But, I think she’s more like me with a community college. She thinks I should go to a community college first. She don’t let me know that she’s trying to make me do that.

(#010/B/F/M/CC)

Mr. Mortenson. He’s the one that got us in the program. He makes it seem like a very good place…He’s a counselor… The way he talked about it, it’s a very good college, a community college.

(#658/B/F/UM/U)
Basically last year she brought all the rising juniors into the office and sat down with each one of us and gave us the pros and cons of each choice that we could make. We have three different career pathways that we can go through, which is college prep, career tech prep, or there’s one more. There’s one more and it’s for community college – two-year college. She didn’t give specifics. She was just basically telling us about certain colleges because we’re closely affiliated with certain colleges. And they send her information and she just relays it to us… I knew I wasn’t going to go to a community college, but she tried to give me the extra push anyway.

(#825/B/F/M/U)

I feel more positive about it. They tell me the good quality and how it’s affordable.

(#865/B/F/LM/U)

And like the teachers, like Mr. Mortenson… he was telling me about… was I going to go to Mayfair and stuff like that when I was first signing up for it… and telling me it would be a good thing for me.

(#299/B/F/M/U)

Some teachers – I think one of my football coaches may have. Well he didn’t really give me any information, he just basically told me that if I was feeling like, “If I attend community college people will call me dumb.” Because maybe my grades may be a little better, you know, then attend community college. He just basically gave me support on letting me know there was nothing wrong with attending community college then transferring, because it’s what’s best for you.

(#569/B/M/L/CC)

These statements stand in stark contrast to the following statements made by participants of other races. High school staff members (teachers and counselors) have clearly influenced these students in a different manner.

They’ve kind of made me think to myself that I can – they kind of, I guess you could – this kind of sounds bad, but they kind of devalued it (community college) in my personal perspective for me, because they know that I should probably pursue a 4-year university.

(#712/W/M/M/U)

They haven’t… in my head everybody’s kind of put that the community college isn’t as big as you should go. It’s kind of like… how do you say it… it’s just like a lower level. I think it’s pretty good, but for like the higher class ranked people they think it’s kind of not where you need to be.

(#333/W/F/M/U)
The counselors have helped us out by giving us books to look at, but I don’t think they never gave me a community college book.

(#066/H/F/LM/U)

I…more of my teachers kind of push the 4-year college. I don’t really know why but they just push that more than the community college.

(#044/W/F/UM/U)

Rex (#712/W/M/M/U) admits that community college and the option of transferring from a community college to a university were never topics of conversation with high school counselors.

712: I guess the guidance counselors through announcements – not personally talking to me about it. They’ve never talked to me personally about the community college. They probably actually more encouraged me toward the area of 4-year college…4-year university for my academic path and standards or whatever.

I: So no one’s ever talked to you about the possibility of transferring and doing two years?

712: Not personally.

Even with respect to dual enrollment options at Mayfair, high school staff seem to be giving the exact opposite advise to Black students that they are giving to students of other races. Sadie is a Black student dual enrolled at Mayfair. She expresses the high school staff’s advice to her.

They’ve been positive. They haven’t been negative. They’ve been positive and telling me it’s a good thing that I’m doing that because I’m in high school and taking classes at Mayfair. And it’ll be good on like…the college I want to go to …West Salem State… that it’ll be a good thing on my application.

(#299/B/F/M/U)

The advice is that dual enrollment courses are a good option because they will look good on her transcript when she applies for admission at a historically Black university. Now
examine the advice given to students of other races by high school staff when they considered the dual enrollment option at Mayfair.

I thought about it...until my guidance counselor told me that the colleges would rather look at the high school than college...to see... take more honors or AP classes.

(#066/H/F/LM/U)

I just – I tried to sign up for them this year. They were like, “No, you have to go ahead and sign up for everything at Research High.” That’s what my counselor told me. So I’m like – alright...For some reason the guidance system here is a little bit awkward. They like to – they tend to confuse most of the students here... Seriously.

(#999/W/M/LM/?)

My guidance counselor, Miss…I don’t know her name. I couldn’t tell you. But she...when I was thinking, I was thinking about taking a course at the community college my senior...this year...but she kind of told me, not really in fact, but she was just like you’re better off staying here if we...if they provided the course here she told me, “you may as well take it here.”

(#612/W/F/UM/?)

Well, like I said, my teachers always say that it’s better not to take a class at a community college, but that’s – That’s really the only thing that really stuck in my head, when they told me that.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

Black participants in this study paint a very different picture concerning what high school staff members are telling them, intentionally or unintentionally, about attendance at the community college.

While not specifically related to race, there is also evidence that high school staff members simply don’t give students nearly as much advice on the community college as they do on four-year colleges and universities. Tahne (#512/A/F/M/U) shares her assessment of how the high school staff talks about university admission requirements with her and others taking AP classes, yet ignores those not taking advanced courses.

512: Well, they never really talk about community college, they just always – I guess it's just because I take AP courses and they never talk
about community college. I guess they all assume that we just – every single one of us is going to go to a university – so they always tell us about the requirements at like Chapel Hill – to get in. They talk about universities. They don’t really mention anything about community colleges.

I: You think they assume that for all students? That all students here are going to go to a university?

512: I think pretty…just like for the ones that are taking AP classes, and possibly some that are in honors courses. But I’m sure they don’t tell that to people that are in academic. I don’t think they’d tell them about universities. Which, I mean, I’m sure they can get into one, but…

I: Do you know what they are telling them?

512: I have no idea. But I’m thinking they’re not really telling them anything. I think they are really just focused on the ones that are taking AP courses. And I think they’re just trying to steer us toward a university.

Coming at the issue from a different perspective, Eric gives insight to a more subtle form of influence on the part of high school staff, again promoting university enrollment, although in an indirect fashion.

They’re – I mean they’re always happy if you’re going to college anywhere, but it seems like they’re always more proud of the people that go to the 4-year institutions. It seems like it. I mean they try not to brag on their past students because most teachers don’t want to show favorites like that. But it seems like if they ever talk about kids who are in college, it’s always the ones who are in the 4-year colleges.

(#733/W/M/UM/U)

John simply states what Eric’s statement implies.

Most of the high school staff want to see the kids going to 4-year universities… I’ve heard them say that before you know. I’m sure they think it (community college) is a good thing, you know. It’s a good value. But I just think they…they like to see the kids go to a 4-year university.

(#355/W/M/UM/U)
Additional Notes About Interpersonal Influences

Another theme related to interpersonal relationships as influences on participants’ perceptions of the community college appeared to have emerging around the influence of friends. Individuals or groups of individuals identified by participants as friends who have attended the community college were often mentioned as a positive influence on participants’ perceptions of the community college, while rarely did participant mention that a friend who was a past or current student at the community college either shared negative opinions, disappointment, or regret at having attended the community college.

Anthony expresses that his friends currently attending the community college are more than simply satisfied with the experience.

My friend who goes there told me about it. Told me that she likes her classes there…that it’s really fun. I have other friends. I’ve got about five friends who are going…who all tell me that they love the classes there. My friends, they just tell me how much they love it. So far my friends who go to a community college say they love it.

(#999/W/M/LM?)

Even though Rex had definite plans to attend a private university, he still admitted that his friends had a positive effect on how he viewed the community college.

I think…I know through personal friends experience that it is a great… it’s like a great organization… the community college organization…but that it’s kind of slighted like a hometown type thing… Like I said earlier. I’ve had a numerous number of friends and acquaintances that are taking advantage of the community colleges, and either getting associates degrees, or either using the transfer program to affordably attend a 4-year school… they actually brought the good points to it…to my opinion, they brighten it up a little bit I guess you could say…most of them seem pretty happy with it.

(#712/W/M/M/U)
Even Eric, who otherwise has nothing positive to say about the community college, confesses that his friends that attend Mayfair are happy with the education they are receiving and that there will be practical benefits for their efforts.

I’ve got some friends that are taking classes up there, so they’ve told me. And it’s getting them prepared for things they want to do and stuff like that…They’re happy that they’re getting the education they need. That they’ll be able to get out on their own and start making money.

(#733/W/M/UM/U)

Bruce’s friends have been to both the university and community college, providing Bruce with an informed perspective on how the community college stacks up.

Like I’ve had friends that have went to a community college and then transferred somewhere …went to a college and then came back to a community college…just different things. And they say, you know, it’s about the same. I mean just my friends talking about it, they say it’s not that bad or anything.

(#309/W/M/M/U)

Finally, Jeff explains how his friends’ success as a result of attending the community college has inspired him to believe he can be just as successful by following in the same path.

I guess by them being successful, you know, and I was like, “well these guys pretty much have the learning ability just like me,” so you know, I was like – I can give it a shot if they can give it a shot and be successful. Well I’m pretty sure I have a fairly good work ethic. I believe I could be successful too.

(#569/B/M/L/CC)

Ultimately, however, I could not in good faith make a clear enough distinction concerning who was being identified as a friend, an acquaintance, or just someone met in passing. The levels of personal intimacy associated with the various distinctions were also very hard, if not impossible, to determine. Because there were instances in which acquaintances or various other non-descript “people”
were described as negative influences, I assert no finding related to participants friends as a positive influence. Instead, it will suffice to state that there were notable patterns regarding those individuals specifically identified by participants as personal friends.

By far the most difficult category of data to walk away from without claiming to have found a significant finding would be data related to the influence of family. While a review of coding matrices (Appendix H-J) would reveal that family was mentioned as an influential factor more often than any other factor, no generalizations arose that could actually be supported with adequate anecdotal evidence. In other words, while family was often mentioned, there was little elaboration on the part of most participants as to the specific instances or nature of the influence. Whether this was an inability on the part of the participants to verbalize the impact of family members, or whether it was my own inability as a researcher to tease out the details, a consistent pattern never emerged. For the most part, anecdotal evidence that did appear focused on the role of family members, both immediate and extended, in encouraging participants to continue their education, wherever that may be. Anecdotal evidence directly related to participants’ perceptions of the community college, the focus of this study, was minimal and mixed in nature.

Three female participants provided specific examples of instances where parents were clearly negative influences on their perceptions of the community college.

My dad, “You’re not going to Mayfair.” He wants me to get out of this town. Pretty much. He’s all about the big colleges and he really doesn’t want me to go to community colleges at all…my dad is like, “Don’t go.” He just doesn’t want me to go to Mayfair. He really doesn’t want me to go to a community college.

(#055/W/F/M/U)
It’s not very good like from around here. I don’t know about other community colleges, but around here people always joke about – if you don’t – like my parents always say, “if you don’t work and all this stuff, you’re going to end up at Mayfair.” And they – people say it like it’s a bad thing…my parents always just talk about it like it’s a big joke to go to Mayfair…Basically Mayfair’s like a big joke to some people around here. It’s really just what people – I mean I can’t (inaudible) – it’s not really an actual college. They call it MIT for Mayfair-in-Town. They say stuff like that. My parents say that too.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

I don’t know because I even remember being little – we used to joke around in our house actually like, “If you don’t buckle down you’re going to go to Mayfair.” Because even like my younger sister who’s a freshman here – when she first found out I was going there she was like, “What are you doing?”…I think my mom. And I know she didn’t mean to do this. But I do think when she joked around when we were little when we would not want to do our homework or something – she’d joke about, “You’ll have to go to Mayfair when you graduate.” That kind of put that idea in my head that, “Oh gosh, I don’t want to go there.”

(#992/W/F/M/U)

These three examples being provided by university bound females enticed me to search for more with respect to an emerging theme which ultimately did not evolve. Yet these three examples were so revealing that I felt they must be included in a discussion of interpersonal influences on perceptions of the community college.

Another category of data that seemed promising in terms of producing a consistent theme was the category focusing on the impact of community college staff on participant perceptions of the community college. While coding matrices again seem to suggest that community college staff (both faculty and other staff) play a significant role in establishing perceptions, a close examination of transcripts revealed that most instances of community college staff influencing research participants can be traced to one occasion, a “college night” event at the high school. And while there are no instances where students suggest community college staff have a negative influence on them, the influential nature of the encounters can often be equally assigned to the literature handed
out by the community college employee at the function. This being the case, rather than suggest a major pattern existed with respect to participants’ interaction with community college staff, it seems more appropriate to simply note that “college night” was an effective means for community college staff at Mayfair to relay information to prospective students.

RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

During the analysis of research data three themes turned up again and again as significant factors with respect to additional influences on participants’ perceptions of the community college.

6) Its location in Centerville was a deterrent to enrollment at Mayfair.

7) The perception that greater social opportunities were available at four-year colleges and universities was a significant factor in enrollment decisions.

8) The availability of athletics at four-year institutions was a significant factor in enrollment decisions for many participants.

The desire to get away from the town of Centerville was repeatedly mentioned as an important factor in participants’ enrollment decisions, especially among students indicating plans to attend a four-year institution. It was a theme that cut across genders, races, and economic status. Implications were that Centerville is a small town which offers very limited opportunities for high school and college age students.
While Tahne, Sandra and Kim had nothing good to say about Mayfair, the fact that it was in Centerville only compounded the negativity associated with the community college.

My main reason is just not really a very good reason, but I just need a change, and just don’t want to be in Centerville too much longer.  
(#512/A/F/M/U)

Mayfair (laughter)... I don’t really think about it too much. I wouldn’t go to Mayfair. It’s in Centerville... I want to get out of this town.  
(#055/W/F/M/U)

And I mean again it all just depends on which one. If I was even thinking about Mayfair it would be very depressing. Just the fact that it’s in Centerville. I want to stay close to home, but I do not want to go to a college in Centerville.  
(#612/W/F/UM/?)

While going out of their way to insist that the thought of attending Mayfair isn’t personally offensive, and that there is “nothing wrong” with the local community college, Shelton, Cheryl, and Mary voice the same opinion that the location of Mayfair is not an asset for the college.

I think they’re good. I mean I would go to one, but I don’t think I would want to go to Mayfair.. like one away. I don’t think I would like to stay in Centerville for much longer than I have to.  
(#111/B/F/LM/U)

Well, I know – I can’t say about every community college, but the one here – it just seems that it really doesn’t offer much. Just thinking about going, I don’t get down about it. But I don’t want to be here in Centerville because Centerville doesn’t offer much.  
(#865/B/F/LM/U)

I don’t see that there’s nothing wrong with it. If I had that in my mind, I would go there. But it’s just not for me I don’t think, because I would still have to be in Centerville at home.  
(Item 3/#066/H/F/LM/U)
Finally, Calvin suggests that even though they may return at some point, students need at least a temporary change from life in Centerville.

I guess that it’s this area. It’s kind of small, you know. We want to get out a little bit. And then you know, maybe in a few years we’ll come back. You know…just get away for a little bit.

(#588/B/M/LM/U)

The perception that greater social opportunities were available at a four-year college or university than at a community college was another prevalent theme that cut across gender, race, and economic status. Living on a college campus, an option not available at Mayfair Community College, was frequently associated directly with greater social opportunities. Many participants also clearly felt that living on a college campus would enable them to live outside of their parents’ supervision and truly begin a life of their own, which was clearly viewed as a desirable situation.

Haley, a female of African-American and Native American descent, wrote about looking forward to a college experience that involves relinquishing a “sheltered” life in favor of gaining new perspectives of the world on her own.

I am not considering a community college because as a senior who’s been sheltered my whole life, a university just seems to have more to offer; not only education but a new look on life. Community colleges are okay for those who don’t think it necessary to go to a university but for me it’s not the best thing. It doesn’t really allow you to get out and see the world differently, unlike a university where you can meet more people and are pretty much “out” on your own and not being taken care of by your parents.

(Item 3/#191/BNA/F/M/U)

During a telephone interview, Haley reiterated her written comments.

Like I said on the paper, like I don’t know, I just didn’t think it’s for me. Because I’ve said like I’m graduating or whatever and I’m pretty much going to be out in the world. And I figure if I’m going to a community
college or something I will probably like be living here with my mom and like not out alone? So I figure like at a university I’ll get the chance to be actually out on my own in a sense… And have some responsibility and like stuff because my mom’s like been doing everything for me.

(#191/BNA/F/M/U)

Bruce, Meghan, and Eric respectively expressed a similar view that being on one’s own away from home is a desirable component of the socialization process associated with living on campus.

Just, I kind of want to go out on my own and experience, you know, the college life, and see what it’s like to be on your own. And just, I don’t know, if I could get into a, you know, school for four years I’d like to stay there. Just kind of get the feel of it more. I don’t know. Just the life of it more – more or less. Just, you know, being on campus and being away from home.

(#309/W/M/M/U)

I am not considering attending a community college because I personally feel I do better when I’m away from my parents and doing things on my own.

(Item 3/#333/W/F/M/U)

I don’t like the idea of staying at home and going to college…I think that while college is for education, it’s also part of growing up and getting away from living at home with mom and dad.

(#733/W/M/UM/U)

Tahne simply associated living in university housing with being able to meet more people, contrasting it with the commuter atmosphere of the community college.

Well, community colleges don’t really have housing, so socially you’d kind of, if you stayed in like housing at a university you would be able to meet more people that way…Because a lot of people that would go to a community college, they would just go to class and go home. You know, there’s not really anything, social events really, that go on.

(#512/A/F/M/U)

Ben was another student aspiring to become a physician. A dark haired, dark tanned young man, he seemed so relaxed with the interview process that I found myself wondering how he had developed such poise at an early age. Ben was another student on
the SAT “wall of fame.” He was attentive to the questions I posed, and articulate in his answers.

I am not considering a community college because I want to live on campus away from my home. I want to have the chance to live with other people and experience life at a four-year university. I think that universities have more to offer, not just in academics, but extracurricular opportunities, than community colleges. I think that the experiences that I will get from a four-year university will better prepare me for life than a community college…I want to get exposed to the college life, exposed to different people, different cultures, and I think it will help me further in life.

(#036/W/M/UM/U)

Ben also introduces the third finding with respect to additional factors that influence participants’ enrollment decisions, access to athletic events and activities.

And I want to get the full…like I said, I want to be in band and I want to be in sports and I want to be involved in the kinds of activities that community colleges might not offer.

(Item 3/#036/W/M/UM/U)

Whether wanting to participate directly in athletics, relying on athletic scholarships, or simply wanting to observe and be associated with the social atmosphere around major college athletic events, several students, including six out of seven White males, indicated that athletics played a role, and sometimes the decisive role, in deciding where to attend college. This is significant for community colleges because they do not typically have large athletic programs.

Meghan and Eric are essentially limiting their college searches to schools that have athletic programs through which they can not only participate, but also possibly receive financial assistance for their participation. This makes athletics the primary consideration for selecting a college, or in their cases, having a college select them.
During college I hope to receive a soccer scholarship and be able to play on the varsity women’s soccer team.

(Item 1/#333/W/F/M/U)

I am going to a four-year college or university to pursue two things. They are education and athletics…and hopefully play baseball at the Division One level I’ll get my education to fall back on and hopefully play professionally.

(#733/W/M/UM/U)

Other students, like John and Harold, simply find access as a spectator an important consideration in selecting a college.

If they have sports teams and stuff. I like to go watch the games and stuff…pretty much just to watch. That’s pretty much it.

(#355/W/M/UM/U)

I think they (community colleges) are good for some people. I personally…I mean just because of my situation, I wouldn’t go. I mean I would if I was in like a money situation, but I’d rather go to a major university that has some major sport events and stuff.

(#807/W/M/UM/U)

Calvin was a large animated member of the Research High football team who wore what appeared to be his football practice jersey while we interviewed in an empty computer lab. He spoke at length during his interview, with an air of someone who had considered the matter deeply in the past, about athletics being tied to public perception of large four-year colleges and universities, and how this might affect perceptions of the community college.

I don’t know why people would make it seem like community colleges just don’t live up to the standards of the big college, when actually probably some of them are better than a big college. I don’t see why one would be more important than the other, besides sports or something like that. I think that’s what it really comes down to…If you’ve got a big sports program, you know, I think that’s what people look at…I guess if you could count just the fact that I, you know, like major university sports like football and basketball and stuff – and the fact that, you know, I mean I know that most, some, well – just the fact that they have the major sports going on and community colleges don’t… cause you know they’re always
Summary of Research Findings

This study reveals eight significant research findings concerning participants’ perceptions of the community college. Findings are broken down by relevance to the three research questions posed by this study.

Research Question One: How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?

1) Students who enroll at the community college are perceived as either academic or academically inferior to students enrolling in four-year colleges and universities.

2) The community college is perceived as a “second chance” or “Plan B” institution for those not able to attend a four-year college.

3) Deserved or not, the community college struggles with a poor reputation.

4) There is an awareness of and respect for the transfer function and nursing programs at the community college, and minimal awareness of other programs.

Research Question Two: How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

5) Based on student perceptions, there are inconsistencies along racial lines in how high school staff members advise students with respect to the community college and four-year colleges and universities.

Research Question Three: What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?
6) Its location in Centerville was a deterrent to enrollment at Mayfair.

7) The perception that greater social opportunities were available at four-year colleges and universities was a significant factor in enrollment decisions.

8) The availability of athletics at four-year institutions was a significant factor in enrollment decisions for many participants.

Conclusions and implications regarding these research findings will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter Five

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was designed and conducted for the previously stated purpose of answering three primary research questions.

1. How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?
2. How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?
3. What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

Findings related to each question have been formulated based on document review, analysis of field notes, written questionnaires and interviews with research participants, and additional telephone inquiries with community college staff. Conclusions and implications will be discussed in this chapter within the parameters of each research question, and will then be followed by recommendations for further research and a summary of the study.

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

How do college bound high school seniors perceive the community college?

Individual perceptions among the diverse group of students that participated in this study included a wide range of opinions, thoughts, and feelings. Much data was collected, analyzed, and re-analyzed, yielding results that often seemed convoluted, inconclusive, and occasionally contradictory, yet four themes were prevalent enough to
consider significant research findings with respect to participants’ current perceptions of the community college.

1) Students who enroll at the community college are perceived as either academic underachievers or academically inferior to students enrolling in four-year colleges and universities.

2) The community college is perceived as a “second chance” or “Plan B” institution for those not able to attend a four-year college.

3) Deserved or not, the community college struggles with a poor reputation.

4) There is an awareness of and respect for the transfer function and nursing programs at the community college, and minimal awareness of other programs.

Implications of Findings for Research Question One

For the practicing community college professional and community college advocate, these findings constitute bad, but probably not unexpected, news. These findings indicate that much of the literature claiming that the community college suffers from an image crisis is in fact true with respect to students’ perceptions of Mayfair Community College. Claims made by Grubb (1999) and Raisman (2000) that community colleges are perceived as second chance colleges seem somewhat validated by the results of this study. This study reveals that many participant perceptions of Mayfair mirror the assertions made by Zoglin (1982) and Cain (1999) that the popular image of the community college is as an institution of last resort for those who have endured previous failure with respect to academic and economic pursuits.
The fact that nearly all research participants understood the transfer function of
the community college, yet mentioned very few technical degree, diploma, or certificate
programs, lends credence to Brint and Karabel’s (1989) position that the saving grace of
the community college is fact that the transfer function still connects the community
college to the system’s most prestigious institutions.

The words of Savage (1989), “Because the community college is known for its
open-admissions policy, the institution is often perceived to be of poor quality – that is,
not a real college” (p.3), carry more weight in light of statements from participants in this
study.

I think it would be kind of… like I’m just going to the 13th grade. I think
it’s mainly just to help people that like aren’t really ready to like go off on
their own and jump into the real college, like get hard core into college. I
think the community college is more of like a pre-college
(#333/W/F/M/U)

Implications for programmatic decision-making are serious. If 80% of college bound high
school seniors are planning to attend institutions other than the community college, two-
thirds of college bound high school seniors are going to pursue healthcare related
programs, and those students who do attend the community college plan to pursue a
general education based transfer curriculum, community colleges might realistically
expect to have serious difficulties growing, or even sustaining, other non-health related
technical programs in the future.

And if the typical community college student continues to be perceived as less
capable by peers, academic credentials from a community college will mean little in
terms of helping graduates translate their education into gainful employment as peers
become employers. If those who are employed by or attend and graduate from the
community college cannot turn the tide of perceptions in a more favorable direction, we certainly cannot expect those unfamiliar with the institution to do so. The earnings differential between community college graduates and university graduates may in fact shift even further in favor of four-year college graduates.

Finally, a thorough investigation into student perceptions, and even employer perceptions, of community college nursing programs may likely provide the institutions with insight concerning how to construct other highly respected degree or credential programs. Whether it is a rigorous curriculum, ample opportunities for employment with attractive wages upon graduation, or simply a widespread respect for the profession, nursing programs at community colleges seem to stand above other programs in terms of social acceptance and respectability. There is surely value in determining how this program model might be applied across other college programs.

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

How do interpersonal relationships influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

Data was collected and analyzed for a number of likely interpersonal influences on participant perceptions of the community college, including family members (both immediate and extended), friends and acquaintances, high school staff members (counselors and teachers), and community college staff members (faculty and other).

While the number of references made to family members with respect to both affective and cognitive influences clearly indicated that family is certainly a major
influence on student perspectives on an individual basis, no clear patterns or constant themes emerged with respect to how family influenced research participants. In other words, there was little to be found in terms of predictive indicators with respect to family.

While community college staff members are mentioned less frequently as influences, they have one constant in that they are never mentioned as a negative influence on student perceptions of the community college. However, because several students’ only real interaction with community college staff members took place in abbreviated fashion at a single event while other students had no prior interaction with community college staff whatsoever, no significant findings emerged from this category.

There were also notable patterns regarding those individuals specifically identified by participants as personal friends. While those identified by the term “friend” were largely credited by participants with influencing participant perceptions of the community college in a positive manner, problems arose in terms of determining a clear distinction between “friends” and “acquaintances” and other non-descript “people”. Because I felt this called into question the validity of assertions related to “friends”, I have not classified this as a significant finding. Therefore, significant findings to the second research question related to the influences of high school staff and friends are limited to a single finding:

5) Based on student perceptions, there are inconsistencies along racial lines in how high school staff members advise students with respect to the community college and four-year colleges and universities.
Implications of Findings for Research Question Two

Research findings related to the apparent “tracking” of Black students into the community college while simultaneously encouraging students of other races to strive for admission to a university seem closely related to Clark’s (1960) “cooling-out” theory whereby guidance counselors channel certain categories of students into a technical curriculum and away from academic programs. While the parallel isn’t exact, and deals with high-school students being channeled, not college students, the principle and likely end result dovetail nicely into Karabel’s (1986) assertion that the overall impact of the community college has been to reinforce rather than to reduce existing patterns of social and class inequality.

An obvious implication for community colleges is that tracking of Black students into the community college while encouraging other races to attend the university, if done on a large scale, would result in a significant change in the demographics of the student body attending community colleges. A review of enrollment demographics available at Mayfair Community College indicates a shift may in fact be underway. During the 1999-2000 academic year, Black students made up 15.5% of Mayfair’s student body in curriculum programs. By the 2003-2004 academic year this percentage had increased to 19.5%. An increase in percentages of Black students, or students of any other race, enrolled in the community college is not problematic. Dual and contradictory messages about the value of the community college from educational professionals to students exercised according to students’ race is, however, an ethically unsound practice.

There are also significant implications for community college counselors to consider as they work with high school staff to relay information and opportunities to
high school students, the primary consideration being that in Mayfair’s case, there may be a disconnect in the process. Because this study revealed that minimal though it might have been, direct contact between community college staff and high school students only improved (and never damaged) students’ perceptions of the community college, a logical suggestion might be for community college staff to make a concerted effort to have more direct contact with high school students of all races to ensure a consistent message is being delivered. Furthermore, as informed professionals with an obligation to promote their own institutions, community college counselors and admissions staff might insist that the local high school staff is well informed concerning the value of the community college to the entire high school population. And while the cost may seem prohibitive, perhaps the community college might work to ensure that college counselors are as available to high school students, especially seniors, as high school counselors are. This might ensure that college professionals are at least as central to the college selection process as are their high school counterparts.

It is critical to stress that this study was not designed to capture, and did not capture, the intent of high school staff in their advising of research participants of any race, nor do stated research findings imply any intent on the part of high school staff members. With respect to all interpersonal relationships, the study focused on students individual perceptions of how they had been influenced concerning the community college. Furthermore, this study did not examine or attempt to account for the race or ethnicity of high school teachers or staff.
RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

What additional factors influence college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college?

By using a quantitative research method for this study and an inductive approach to collecting and analyzing data, nine additional non-human factors on high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college emerged for consideration. These factors were: location of the college; social aspects; size of college; diversity issues; media; campus; literature; sports. During the analysis of research data three themes turned up again and again as significant factors with respect to additional influences on participants’ perceptions of the community college:

6) Its location in Centerville was a deterrent to enrollment at Mayfair.

7) The perception that greater social opportunities were available at four-year colleges and universities was a significant factor in enrollment decisions.

8) The availability of athletics at four-year institutions was a significant factor in enrollment decisions for many participants.

Implications of Findings for Research Question Three

There is clearly little Mayfair Community College can do about being located in Centerville. The apparent fact that so many high school students have such strong desires to leave town cannot be changed by Mayfair alone. The issue is broader, a community issue, perhaps a regional issue, and certainly a late adolescence developmental issue. As a developmental issue, "Psychodynamic theory proposes that separation-individuation is a
principle developmental task of the adolescent period. According to this view, adolescents must be able to separate psychologically from their parents and gain a sense of identity as separate individuals” (Haemmerlie et al., 1994, p.644). Moving away from home to attend college simply presents a widely accepted opportunity for students to achieve this independence. In this respect, all colleges, community colleges and universities alike, face many of the same reservations from a number of students living within close proximity to campus. The fact that most community colleges are strictly commuter colleges, while many universities do provide on-campus housing options, likely puts the community college at a disadvantage in terms of attracting local students looking to get “out on their own”.

Should Mayfair consider adding on-campus or near-campus housing options for students, they might be addressing the issue of housing non-service-area students, and the issue related to students desire for more opportunities for social interaction – an issue that clearly has many students seeking admission at four-year colleges and universities. More resources being devoted to the creation of additional social opportunities, be it a student services driven initiative or a student government initiative, might go a long way to change the perceptions high school students have with respect to social life at community college campuses – typically commuter campuses. Contracting with mainstream vendors and businesses to provide products and services on campus (i.e., restaurants and media-print related product vendors, coffee shops, etc.) may increase daily retention of students on campus.

While on the surface the location issue seems to be a clear obstacle to overcome with many local high school students, perhaps it hints at an opportunity worthy of
consideration. If students perceive, as was the case with Kim (#612/W/F/M/?), that other community colleges around the state are enticing enough to warrant relocating to enroll, then perhaps Mayfair might consider recruiting students from outside of its own service region. With tuition based on state residency, not county or service area residency, financial disincentives are minimal for students enrolling in colleges of other service areas.

While not the focus of this study, older or non-traditional students may consider the close proximity of the community college as vitally important. As the percentages of older students returning to college grows, proximity to the community college will likely become even more important to a larger part of the student body. It is important therefore that, overall, location is not considered to be a deterrent to enrollment at a community college. Within this study, however, it is a deterrent among research participants.

Certainly a fresh examination of the place of intercollegiate athletics on the community college campus would reveal new possibilities for both recruiting and social activities. With a large number of community colleges in existence around the state, readymade rivalries are already in place for Mayfair Community College. High School student athletes all around the state looking to continue participating in their respective sports would likely welcome greater opportunities to do so, especially if community colleges were to offer scholarships for student athletes.

With respect to all three additional factors influencing college bound high school seniors’ perceptions of the community college, the best prescription may be to simply duplicate what already works for universities.
Suggestions for Further Study

This study did not reinforce findings from previous community college image studies mentioned in the review of literature (Conklin, 1999; Rasmussen & Silverman, 2001) where community college image was rated as good or excellent by a large majority of study participants. Admittedly, other studies may not reinforce findings from this study. Additional qualitative studies, perhaps on a larger scale utilizing multiple sites, might be used to support or refute the validity of the findings of this study. Quantitative studies might be used to predict statistically the significance of each factor that emerged as significant in this study. Future studies might be directed at determining not only the factors in play for high school seniors as they weigh their options for postsecondary study, but also factors considered by the burgeoning numbers of adults returning to higher education. Additional image studies might be preceded by examining the impact of recent enrollment increases and overcrowding on community college marketing and recruitment strategies.

Maxwell (1992) suggests, “there are no well developed theories of the effect of a college’s ethnic image or the different college choices of various ethnic groups” (p.241). Findings from this study suggest that a larger investigation, or series of investigations, on perceptions of the community college along racial distinctions might prove to be a valuable endeavor. Specifically, an investigation into the perceptions of Black students with respect to counseling practices at the high school level might reveal significant differences from the perceptions of community colleges by other races. Regarding gender and economic classifications, this study did not produce adequate findings to suggest any defined lines of inquiry for future studies.
Admittedly, the findings of this study are not readily generalizable to other populations, and admittedly “making generalizations about the community college sector as a whole is perhaps misguided” (Shaw et. al, 1999, p.1). Community colleges are diverse institutions serving diverse populations in diverse service areas with often unique multicultural and economic considerations. We might be better served to move away from “sweeping portraits” of the community college (Shaw et. al, 1999) and truly begin to examine the institutions within the context and population they serve, a task perhaps best undertaken through additional qualitative studies which lend themselves to a more multifaceted view of the community college, and a better understanding of the impact of gender, race, and other socioeconomic factors on the image of the institutions (LaPaglia, 1995). Recognizable patterns may emerge in terms of how community colleges are perceived by various segments of the public, high school students included. Ensuring that any new generalizations that emerge are grounded in unbiased inquiry driven by a diverse population of research subjects will likely reveal clearer images of the community college from a variety of perspectives.

Summary

In an attempt to determine the frequency of recruiting visits by Mayfair Community College representatives to Research High School, three telephone calls and one e-mail inquiry were made to Mayfair staff members following completion of student interviews in this study. The Director of Student Services was uncertain of the frequency of visits made to Research High, but stated, “In the past few years, due to enrollment increases, there hasn’t been a real push to recruit.” A second phone conversation with a Mayfair admissions counselor/recruiter revealed that visits to Research High School were
down to once a year because, as she phrased it, “We have been instructed that we don’t need to do heavy recruiting because we’re bursting at the seams with displaced workers.” Finally, the Mayfair Coordinator of College Communications shared that, to the best of her knowledge, Mayfair had no formal image management strategy and was having no discussions on developing one in the future.

These statements are not an indictment of the staff, practices, or policies in place at Mayfair Community College. They likely resemble the staff, practices, and policies at countless other community colleges. Yet as evidenced by this study, one thing seems fairly clear. Mayfair, perhaps like many other – if not most – community colleges, does not possess an image conducive to carrying its title as bestowed by Kerr as “the great innovation of twentieth-century American higher education” into the new millennium.

As evidenced by this study, college bound high school seniors take a multitude of factors into consideration as they formulate their opinions of the community college. Many factors have dissimilar effects on student perceptions based on individual life circumstances. In other words, what one student considers a strength of the community college, another student may consider a weakness. Likewise, it appears that at least some interpersonal influences are inconsistent in how they influence students, influencing some students in one manner and other students in another manner. It becomes apparent that there is no clear and simple formula for gauging either student perceptions, or the effects of individual influential factors, as we examine the image of the community college. Yet as a qualitative case study this research has identified at least a handful of significant patterns of perceptions and influences related to perceptions of one community college.
This study suggests that Mayfair Community College faces a multitude of challenges related to institutional image. An in-depth investigation of perceptions of all Mayfair stakeholders and all potential student populations would likely be unfeasible in terms of fiscal and human resource requirements needed to complete such a study. Yet the college must begin to seek solutions to its image crisis. While Mayfair and other community colleges may have practical reasons for not addressing the image issue, the price of failing to do so, at least with respect to the perceptions of high school students, likely has enormous consequences for the future of the community college.

Additional research on the image of the community college is needed, not so much to determine a universal solution to the image problem. There likely is no universal solution that could be effective in light of the fact that community colleges have unique cultures and programs which have been intricately aligned with local conditions and populations. Additional research is needed because every contribution will build upon a body of knowledge which might assist community colleges, regardless of where they are located, in learning to ask the right questions about their own images.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Letter to Principal/Consent Form

Dear Principal __________, April 8, 2003

I am a student at North Carolina State University working on my doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration under the guidance of Dr. George B. Vaughan (Ph: 919-515-6294). As a community college graduate and Director of Industry Training at Mayfair Community College I am especially interested in determining the factors that influence high school students’ perceptions of the community college. My dissertation aims to focus on how students form their opinions of the community college. I suspect that a number of factors come into play – such as exposure to the opinions and experiences of friends and family members, information provided by guidance counselors and teachers, advertising, and exposure to media’s portrayal of the community college.

There is much quantitative research on high school seniors and the community college. We know how many students go to which college, how many complete degree programs, and even how much money these graduates can typically expect to earn. There is, however, very little qualitative research being done to determine what high school seniors actually think or feel about the community college, and how these thoughts and feelings evolve. My study will add to the qualitative research base in this area.

I sincerely hope you will consider allowing me to conduct the proposed research as a case study at __________ High School by allowing me to invite a small number of your 2003-2004 seniors to participate in a brief writing assignment (2 pages) and short (45-60 minute) interviews in the upcoming school year. Confidentiality will be assured in that the names of students, teachers, administrators, staff, etc. will not appear in the dissertation, nor will __________ High School or the __________ School System be identified by name in the study. I will be the only person with access to each participant’s personal information. The specifics of the research activity would include the following:

1. I would like to distribute a letter/consent form briefly explaining the research project along with a brief writing assignment to seniors in college prep English classes at your school.

2. Students who would like to participate would then return the brief writing assignment and the letter/consent form signed by both the student and a parent or legal guardian. After receiving the consent form I will contact each student to schedule the interviews.

3. Interviews will be conducted on the campus of __________ High School according to an after-school schedule agreed upon by both the researcher and __________ High School. Students who choose not to (or are unable to) meet face-to-face may be interviewed via telephone at a time convenient for the student. With the student’s consent, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for later use only within the parameters of this research project. At the conclusion of each interview the participating student will receive compensation in the amount of $25 for his/her time.

The research component of the project directly involving students would terminate upon the completion of interviews with all students from whom I receive a signed consent form (sample attached) and writing assignment. Thank you for your time and consideration in reviewing this research request. Your signature on this letter/consent form indicates your permission to proceed with the above-mentioned research with the understanding that all research activities involving students on school property are subject to your ongoing review and approval.

Regards,

Vernon Lawter
324 Gaither Rd.
Belmont, NC 28012
704-878-3234

Signature of Principal: ________________________ Date: ______________

__________________________
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Dear High School Senior,

I am a doctoral student at N.C. State University working on my doctorate in Higher Education. I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation research (conducted under the guidance of Dr. George B. Vaughan) by completing the attached brief questionnaire (approximately 30 minutes) and allowing me to interview you after school hours for approximately one hour concerning high school seniors’ opinions of institutions of higher learning and your post-graduation plans. It is hoped that research findings will assist colleges in ensuring high school students are well informed about opportunities for higher education.

COMPENSATION: Following the interview, you will receive compensation in the amount of $25 for your participation. Participants will only receive compensation in the amount of $25 after completing both the written questionnaire and the interview.

Interviews will be conducted on the campus of __________ High School at a time agreeable to both the student and myself. Students unable to be interviewed at school may choose to be interviewed by phone. Interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed for use within this research project only. I will be the only person with access to the recordings and transcriptions with all documentation being secured at my residence. All information disclosed by participants will remain anonymous. Student and school staff names will not appear in the dissertation. Please read the consent statement below if you would like to participate in this important research. Your signature AND signature of your parent or legal guardian are required for participation. Return this form along with completed written questionnaire in the attached envelope. Consent forms and questionnaires must be received by September 1, 2003 to participate. After receiving your signed consent form and questionnaire, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

Regards,

Vernon L. Lawter, Jr.
704-825-0174

STUDENT

I indicate by my signature that I willingly consent to participate in research via written questionnaire and a face-to-face or telephone interview with Mr. Lawter who is conducting educational research at North Carolina State University on perceptions of institutions of higher learning. I understand that my participation is strictly voluntary and that there is no penalty for refusing to participate. I may terminate my participation at any time I desire. Should I withdraw before data collection is complete my data will be returned to me or destroyed at my request. I understand that I may contact N.C. State University at 919-515-4514 if I feel that my rights have been violated in any way.

_________________________  ___________________________  ___________________________
Print Student Name  Student Signature  Date

Student Telephone Number: ___________________

Best time to reach student: ___________________

Mailing Address (if no phone is available):___________________________________________________

PARENT/GUARDIAN

I indicate by signature that the above named student has my permission to participate in this research by completing the attached questionnaire and by being interviewed under the conditions outlined above.

_________________________  ___________________________  ___________________________
Print Parent or Guardian’s Name  Parent or Guardian’s Signature  Date
Appendix C: Research Questionnaire

Research Questionnaire: DO NOT PUT NAME ON FORM

PLEASE MAIL COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE & SIGNED CONSENT FORM TO:

Vernon Lawter, 324 Gaither Rd., Belmont, NC 28012

Please answer all items in as much detail as possible.

Item 1) Please discuss what you plan to do following high school graduation. You may include plans for continuing your education, employment and career plans and goals, military service, or any other plans you have. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Item 2) Please discuss the reasons that you are (or are not) considering attending a four-year college or university as you pursue educational, occupational, and other personal goals following high school. You may attach additional pages as needed.
Item 3) Please discuss the reasons that you are (or are not) considering attending a community college as you pursue educational, occupational, and other personal goals following high school. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Item 4) Ethnic/Racial Origin:  ___ African American/Black  ___ Asian/Pacific Islander
___ Caucasian/White  ___ Hispanic/Latino
___ Native American  ___ Other

Item 5) Gender:  ___ Male  ___ Female

Item 6) Household Income Level
___ Lower Income  ___ Lower/Middle  ___ Middle  ___ Upper/Middle  ___ Upper

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.
Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- Introductions
- Thank student for his/her participation and written questionnaire
- Explain purpose of the interview and student’s right to end the interview
- Assure student of confidentiality
- Secure permission to tape record the interview
- Begin recording – start by stating respondent number/date/time

Interview Questions

1. I’d like for you to spend just a minute or two telling me just a little bit about yourself, what type of student you are, and what your plans and goals are following graduation from high school. (Research Question 3 – Background)
2. What are the factors you are taking into consideration when trying to decide which college to attend? (What are you looking for in a college?) (Research Question 3 – Background)
3. What are your general impressions of the community college? (Research Question 1 – General Perception)
4. Can you describe what you would consider to be a typical community college student? (Research Question 1 – General Perception)
5. Are you enrolled in or considering enrolling in classes at the community college during your senior year of high school? (Research Question 1 – Enrollment Intentions)
6. Can you talk a little about the reason(s) you are considering attending, or not attending, the community college? (Research Questions 2 & 3 – Origins of Enrollment Intentions)
7. Have you ever had any experiences involving a community college or on a community college campus? If so, could you talk a little about that experience? (Research Question 3- Origins of General Perception)
8. How do you think the community college compares with 4-year colleges and universities? (Research Question 1 – General Perception)
9. Where do you think most of your friends will go to college? Why? (Research Question 2 – Origin of General Perception)
10. What do you think about the reputation of the community college? (Research Question 1 – General Perception)
11. Has anyone in your family ever been enrolled in college? If so, which members, and where were they enrolled? Did they earn a degree? (Research Question 2 – Background)
12. Are you employed now, and do you anticipate having to work while you are in college? (Research Question 3 – Background)
I’d like to move on by having you share a little of what you know about the community college. Just answer the questions to the best of your ability, taking as much time as you need.

13. Can you talk just a little about the cost of attending a community college? (Research Question 1 – Cognitive)
14. What can you tell me about admission requirements for attending a community college? (Research Question 1 – Cognitive)
15. To the best of your knowledge, in what subjects or fields can you earn a degree or other credential at the community college? (Research Question 1 – Cognitive)
16. What do you believe the purpose (or mission) of the community college is? (Research Question 1 – Cognitive)
17. Do you know how many community colleges there are in North Carolina and how they are organized or governed? (Research Question 1 – Cognitive)
18. Having shared what you know about the community college, can you talk about how you have acquired your knowledge of the community college? (Research Questions 2 & 3 – Origins of Cognitive)
19. Can you recall the first time and the last time you received information about the community college? (Research Questions 2 & 3 – Origins of Cognitive)
20. Which personal acquaintances (family members, friends, etc.), if any, have contributed to what you know about the community college? How so? (Research Question 2 – Origins of Cognitive)
21. Which members of your high school staff, if any, have contributed to your knowledge of the community college? How so? (Research Question 2 – Origins of Cognitive)
22. Which community college staff members and/or students, if any, have contributed to your knowledge of the community college? (Research Question 2 – Origins of Cognitive)
23. Are there any other sources of information (newspapers, radio, television, Internet sites – college website, college day events, etc.) that have contributed to your knowledge the community college? (Research Question 3 – Origins of Cognitive)
24. Of all the sources of information we have discussed so far, from which source have you learned the most about the community college? (Research Questions 2 & 3 – Origins of Cognitive)

Having discussed what you know about the community college, let’s now move on and discuss your personal feelings about the community college.

25. When you think about personally attending a community college, what types of feelings do find yourself experiencing? (Research Question 1 – Affective)
26. How do you feel about the quality and value of education at the community college? (Research Question 3 – Affective)

27. Can you talk about some of the things or experiences that have caused you to feel the way you do about the community college? (Research Questions 2 & 3 – Origins of Affective)

28. Which personal acquaintances (family members, friends, etc.), if any, have influenced the way you feel about the community college? How so? (Research Question 2 – Origins of Affective)

29. How do you think members of your high school staff have affected the way you feel about the community college? (Research Question 2 – Origins of Affective)

30. How have community college staff members and/or students contributed to your feelings about the community college? (Research Question 2 – Origins of Affective)

31. Have any other sources (newspapers, radio, television, Internet sites, college day events, etc.) influenced how you feel about the community college? In what way? (Research Question 3 – Origins of Affective)

32. Of all the sources of information we have discussed so far, which source would you say has had the greatest influence on how you feel about the community college? (Research Questions 2 & 3 – Origins of Affective)

33. What do you think of the role the community college plays in the community? (Research Question 1 – General Perception)

34. How do you anticipate paying for college? (parents, financial aid, job, etc.) (Research Question 3 – Background)

35. What (or whom) would you say has had the most influence on how you perceive the community college? (Research Question 2 & 3 – Origins of General Perceptions)

36. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your plans following graduation or your perceptions of different types of colleges and universities?

- Thank student – state time/end recording/render payment or get mailing address
Appendix E: Distribution of Interview Questions

Figure E.1: Interview Questions by Relation to Research Questions

Figure E.2: Interview Question Distribution by Intent to Determine Perception or Origins of Perceptions
Appendix F: Data Analysis Process Diagram

Step 1A
All data units removed from context and sorted by emerging topics. Results in 71 piles of data units representing 71 different topics.

Step 1B
Responses to questionnaire and interview questions reviewed in context and put into summary format by question (Ex. Appendix L)

Step 2
Comparison of 1A & 1B results in 71 topics being condensed to 8 coding categories, each with sub-codes (Ex. Appendix G)

Step 3A
All questionnaires and interviews coded within context. Coding displayed visually via coding analysis matrices (Ex. Appendix H, I, J, K)

Step 3B
Responses to questionnaire and interview questions reviewed in context and put into summary format by participant (Ex. Appendix M)

Step 4
Comparison of steps 3A & 3B results in coding summary matrices by major code (Ex. Appendix N)

Step 5
Prepare composite of each participant by merging coding summary responses and framing in terms of research questions - general perceptions, interpersonal influences, and additional factors (Ex. Appendix O)

Step 6
Comparison and cross-referencing of participant composites yields major patterns and themes.

Step 7
Tag specific text in support of major patterns and themes for purposes of illustrating significant findings.
Appendix G: Master Coding Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FAMILY</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FAM</td>
<td>Related to family in general terms. No particular family member identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM-PAR-INF</td>
<td>Related to parental influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM-PAR-BCK</td>
<td>Related to parental educational background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM-SIB-INF</td>
<td>Related to influence of sibling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM-SIB-BCK</td>
<td>Related to sibling educational background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM-EXT-INF</td>
<td>Related to influence of extended family member (aunt, uncle, cousin, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM-EXT-BCK</td>
<td>Related to educational background of extended family member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FR&amp;AQ</td>
<td>Related to friends and/or acquaintances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR&amp;AQ-BCK</td>
<td>Related to educational background of friends and/or acquaintances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR&amp;AQ-COL-PLN</td>
<td>Related to college enrollment plans of friends and/or acquaintances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR&amp;AQ-CHRCH</td>
<td>Related to friends and/or acquaintances associated with church</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGH SCHOOL STAFF</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HSST</td>
<td>Related to high school staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSST-TCH</td>
<td>Related to high school teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSST-CNSL</td>
<td>Related to high school teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY COLLEGE STAFF</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSST</td>
<td>Related to community college staff in general (specific role not identified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSST-FAC</td>
<td>Related to community college faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSST-OTH</td>
<td>Related to non-faculty community college staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADDITIONAL FACTORS</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADD-LOC</td>
<td>Related to location of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-SOC</td>
<td>Related to social life at college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-SIZE</td>
<td>Related to size of college in terms of enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-DVRS</td>
<td>Related to diversity issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-MILT</td>
<td>Related to military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-MEDIA</td>
<td>Related to media (TV, radio, newspapers, websites, misc. advertisements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-CAMPUS</td>
<td>Related to physical college campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-LIT</td>
<td>Related to college produced literature (schedules, catalogs, brochures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD-SPORT</td>
<td>Related to college athletics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
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<th>COGNITIVE FACTORS</th>
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<td>Related to community college programs (curriculum and continuing education)</td>
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<td>Relates to personal/social responsibilities of participant (ex. Participant has a child)</td>
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## Appendix H: Coding Analysis

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# = participant number  
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R = race  
IL = income level  
P = college preference  
W = White  
B = Black  
A = Asian  
NA = Native American  
H = Hispanic  
F = female  
M = male  
L = lower income  
LM = lower middle income  
M = middle income  
UM = upper middle income  
U = 4-year college or university  
CC = community college  
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# = participant number  G = gender  R = race  IL = income level  P = college preference
W = White  B = Black  A = Asian  NA = Native American  H = Hispanic
F = female  M = male
L = lower income  LM = lower middle income  M = middle income  UM = upper middle income
U = 4-year college or university  CC = community college  ? = undecided  X = greatest affective influence

Appendix I: Coding
Analysis of Affective Influences
### Appendix J: Coding Analysis of Cognitive Perceptions

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<td>733</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>U M</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>● ● ● ●</td>
<td>● ●</td>
<td>● ●</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>● ●</td>
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# = participant number  
G = gender  
R = race  
IL = income level  
P = college preference  
W = White  
B = Black  
A = Asian  
NA = Native American  
H = Hispanic  
F = female  
M = male  
L = lower income  
LM = lower middle income  
M = middle income  
UM = upper middle income  
U = 4-year college or university  
CC = community college  
? = undecided  
X = Greatest Cognitive Influence
## Appendix K: Coding Analysis of Background Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
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<tr>
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<td>U</td>
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<tr>
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<td>W</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>992</td>
<td>Sally</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>612</td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>U M</td>
<td>?</td>
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<td>U</td>
</tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>L M</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>309</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>712</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<tr>
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<td>John</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>U M</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>807</td>
<td>Harold</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>U M</td>
<td>U</td>
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<tr>
<td>733</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>U M</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>036</td>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>U M</td>
<td>U</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# = participant number  
G = gender  
R = race  
IL = income level  
P = college preference  
W = White  
B = Black  
A = Asian  
NA = Native American  
H = Hispanic  
F = female  
M = male  
L = lower income  
LM = lower middle income  
M = middle income  
UM = upper middle income  
U = 4-year college or university  
CC = community college  
? = undecided
### Appendix L: Questionnaire & Interview Question Summary Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>IL</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Interview Question 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>876</td>
<td>Bev</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Community college is close to home. Have a son. Cannot move. Money is limited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>444</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Community college is slower way to start out. Can go part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>055</td>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Social life at university is more appealing than at a CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>333</td>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Community college does not have a soccer team. CC Classes may not transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>992</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Don't want to transfer from CC to university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>612</td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Community college professors care more about students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>044</td>
<td>Kristi</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Looking forward to social life at a university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>222</td>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Don't want to transfer. Ready to be out on my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>865</td>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Just want to be at a university. University is better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Shelton</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Considered a CC to save money. Don't know what to major in yet. Will not go to Mayfair - want out of Centerville.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>299</td>
<td>Sadie</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Really want four-year s of college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>825</td>
<td>Sheri</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Thinking &quot;big&quot; campus. Will not attend CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>010</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Will attend CC to save money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>658</td>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want the social interaction found at a university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>191</td>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>BNA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want to go to a university to get out on my own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>512</td>
<td>Tahne</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Really want out of Centerville. Professors better at Univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>066</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Can meet more people at a university. Four-year experience is better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>569</td>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Going to CC to get feel of college life. Preparing for four-year college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>588</td>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>CC cost is less and school is close to home and single mom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>747</td>
<td>Randall</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Honor</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>University provides a better education. Better social life at a university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>999</td>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Might attend a community college if I don't get a scholarship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>309</td>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want to be on my own and experience the social life of a university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>712</td>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Just always wanted to go to a university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>355</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want to enter a four-year university right away instead of transferring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>807</td>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want to experience a major university atmosphere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>733</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want to play Division I baseball and get away from home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>036</td>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Want to live on campus and enjoy university social life. Want to participate in band and sports not available at CC.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

# = participant number   G = gender   R = race   IL = income level   P = college preference   G = grades
Appendix M: Participant Questionnaire & Interview Summary

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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Participant 512 / Tahne</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>Going to ECO or UNC to pursue doctorate in cardiology or radiology / Work as C.N.A. in college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>4-year degree will ensure excellent future for my family - fulfill life's dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>CC limits opportunity/options. CC grads have few job opportunities. Univ better social life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overachiever. Straight A student whole life. Lots of volunteer work. Want to be a doctor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Going to be a doctor - so don't want to go to CC. Money was factor, but no longer really.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Don't care much for CC. Can Only get general stuff at CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>People that go to CC are not as dedicated, unless they're doing nursing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Not dual. Told by teachers it's better to take AP than dual. Colleges look at AP more favorably.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Really want out of Centerville. Professors better at Univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>One HS club function on CC campus. Campus very small - made me wonder what is missing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>CC costs less than Univ. No housing at CC, so socially Univ is better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Most friends going to Univ because you get a better education there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>CC has poor reputation. Joke is &quot;if you don't work you'll end up at Mayfair.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mon Univ grad. Dad no college. Sister at ECU. Cousins all going to Univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Employed part-time now. May or may not work part-time in college.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>No idea of CC cost. Probably less than half of cost at Univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Don't know of any CC admission requirements. Always thought they'd take anyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>No idea about any CC programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mission of CC is for people who don't want as much education. Provide more opportunities than HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>No idea of how many CC's there are in NC or how they are governed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Go by what people say. Friends, and sister took on summer course at CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Get lots of mail from CC (tabloid or catalog), but don't really pay them much attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sister took CC class because of convenience. Friends take classes there. Neither contributed much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>HS teachers say better not to take class at CC. Don't talk to me about CC because I have Univ plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>No CC fac or staff have been influential in cognitive understanding of CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Just mail from CC, but not big influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>A.P History teacher say don't take CC classes. Greatest cognitive influence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Would feel disappointed if had to attend CC. Upset. Would not be very happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>CC education is not very good quality. Professors at Univ are more educated than those at CC.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>AP History teacher said don't take dual classes at CC. Really stuck in my head.</td>
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<td>Parents always talk about it like it's a big joke to go to Mayfair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>HS staff never talks about CC. They assume every single one of us is going to a Univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>CC staff members no influence on feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>No real media influences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Parents greatest affective influence. Negative influence in terms of CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>CC plays minor role in community. Not too significant. Only involvement with HS is dual enrollment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Will pay for college through combination of sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Parents main influence on perceptions of CC.</td>
</tr>
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<td>No additional comments.</td>
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Appendix N: Coding Category Summary Matrix (Family)

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<th>IL</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Influence of Family Members</th>
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<tr>
<td>444</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Mom wanted to go back to school at CC, but then cancer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>055</td>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Brother at Univ. Neither parent went to college. Dad doesn't want her to go to CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>333</td>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Bro went to CC now at Univ. Not CC grad. Greatest (+) aff &amp; overall. 2 sis univ grads. Mom 2-yr grad. Aunt CC grad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>992</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom (aff-) univ grad. Dad univ grad. HS sis aff (-) Fam aff (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>612</td>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Brother at another CC (aff+). Another bro former at CC (aff-) Mother CC grad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>044</td>
<td>Kristi</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Sister CC nursing grad after reverse trans. Other sis Univ grad. Mom CC grad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>222</td>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mother CC grad. Brother reverse tran and current CC and + influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>865</td>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Fam went to univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>Shelton</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom CC grad &amp; sings in CC choir. Wants to go to univ with twin sister. Aunt &amp; Uncle went to univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>299</td>
<td>Sadie</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom (+)went to CC then univ - not sure if grad from either. Aunt (+) went to CC/ great overall infl. Both say CC is good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>825</td>
<td>Sheri</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>God-sister 2 degrees in 2 years at CC - gtr aff(+) and overall. Mom went to univ. Sis enrolling at CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Mother went to CC and is neutral influence. Aunt is CC grad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>658</td>
<td>Dora</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom CC nursing grad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>191</td>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>BNA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Sister current at CC and greatest (+) affective, cognitive, &amp; overall influence. Brother Univ. Grad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>512</td>
<td>Tahne</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom univ grad. Dad no college. Parents don't want CC. Sis 1 class at CC. Par Great (-) aff &amp;overall. All cousins going univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>066</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom CC grad and greatest + infl. Cousin is CC guidance counselor. Uncle went to university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>569</td>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Dad went to CC (aff+) didn't finish. Cousins CC grads (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>588</td>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Might want to be near single mom. Cousin at CC (cog).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>999</td>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>LM</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Mom (cog) CC grad and univ grad. Dad to univ didn’t grad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>309</td>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mother CC grad - shares cog info but otherwise neutral infl. Mom now at univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>712</td>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Avg</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mod &amp; Dad univ grads. Brother at univ. Cousins got GED at CC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>807</td>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom &amp; Dad univ grads. Mom grt cog infl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>733</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Mom (aff+) univ grad went to CC for teacher con ed. 2 half-sisters univ grads - 1 went to CC summer (cog)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>036</td>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>UM</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>2 sibs went to Univ. One sib went to CC. Mom both CC &amp; Univ. Dad Univ.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# = participant number  
G = gender  
R = race  
IL = income level  
P = college preference  
G = grades
Appendix O: Participant Composite

(A) = Affective Influence
(A*) = Greatest Affective Influence
(C) = Cognitive Influence
(C*) = Greatest Cognitive Influence
(P) = Positive Influence OR Perception
(N) = Negative Influence OR Perception
Underline = Greatest Overall Influence

Participant 512

(A*) FAM-PAR-INF(N)
FAM-EXT-BCK
(A) FR&AQ
(A) HHST
(A) HHST-TCH (N)
(C*) HSST-TCH

A/ F / M / U
“A” STUDENT / NO DUAL ENR
MOM UNIV GRAD
DAD NO COLLEGE
SIB AT UNIV / ONE CC CLASS
CAREER = MEDICAL

ADD-LOC
ADD-CAMPUS
ADD-SOC
ADD-LIT

General Perceptions
Background Factors
Interpersonal Factors
Additional Factors