ABSTRACT

EVANS, JOHN JAMAL. Mismatched: A Case Study to Understand Why N.C. Students Choose to Enroll in Community Colleges After Being Admitted into Four-Year Institutions. (Under the direction of Dr. Chad Hoggan).

This study explored the college choice decisions for students who undermatched to a community college during their college choice process. Specifically, this project utilized a qualitative multi-site case study design to understand the college choice process for students who were admitted into a four-year institution but chose to enroll in a community college. The theoretical framework that guided this study was Perna's Conceptual Model of Student Choice (2006), and the research design incorporated a demographic survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis for fourteen students across six institutions. Inductive and deductive analyses were used to develop themes within the framework of Perna's Conceptual Model, and vignettes were captured to describe each participant's context. From the findings, four conclusions were drawn. First, education and career aspirations, as well as a guiding long-term vision were significant factors for students during their college choice process. Second, the participants in this study sought prolonged advising with a counselor, in addition to any assistance they received from other sources, to help review the vast amount of information. Third, cost was a significant factor for students and their families during the college choice process, and therefore they made a pragmatic decision by enrolling in a community college instead of a four-year institution. Fourth, the participants made their college choice decision based on their perception of what their college choice experience would be like at a two-year and four-year institution. Findings from this research present a number of implications for practice with families, secondary personnel, higher education personnel, and policy makers.

Mismatched: A Case Study to Understand Why N.C. Students Choose to Enroll in Community Colleges After Being Admitted into Four-Year Institutions.

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my grandfather, who did not have the opportunity to receive a formal education beyond sixth grade, but taught me the importance of always learning, and to never stop pursing my dreams. Granddad, I hope I made you proud, and I promise to "Keep On Keeping On." This dissertation is also dedicated to my wife Paulette for your unwavering support, and for believing in me when I did not believe in myself.

BIOGRAPHY

John Jamal Wilson Evans is a native of Camden, SC where he a graduated from Camden High School in 1996. He began his post-secondary education at Clemson University, and he graduated in 2001 with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education. He continued his educational pursuits at Clemson University and graduated in 2003 with a Master of Education with a concentration in Student Affairs.

In 2003, John began working at Queens University of Charlotte as an Assistant Director of Residence Life. In 2005, he transitioned to Stetson University to serve as the Assistant Director of Residential Life & Fraternity & Sorority Affairs. In 2008, he began working at Alamance Community College as an Academic Support Specialist. After a few years, John began his doctoral studies at NC State University in 2012.

John currently works at the NC Community College System Office as the Associate Director of Student Life. Outside of professional interests, he is avid jazz enthusiast, sports fanatic, and enjoys living in the Triad area with his wife, Paulette, and his dog Domino.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Established at the beginning of the twentieth century, Joliet Junior College opened its doors for six students as the nation's first public junior college formed with the idea to offer a two-year liberal arts curriculum designed as a link between secondary schools and institutions of higher learning (Joliet Junior College, 2014). Today, it is estimated that over 45% of all first-year U.S. undergraduates choose to begin their studies at a community college (AACC, 2015). Though prospective college students have many choices for their post-secondary education including public, private, non-profit, and for-profit institutions offering two-year, four-year, and graduate courses of study, community colleges have been thrust into the national spotlight by government officials, journalists, and state legislatures calling for free community college / K-14 education for all. For many individuals, community colleges are viewed as a way to democratize higher education with the promise of "taking people from where they are and carrying them as far as they want to go" (GTCC, 2016, p. 1). Since their inception, community colleges have fundamentally transformed higher education by offering a unique curricular mission and creating new ladders of ascent into the traditional hierarchy of education (Brint and Karabel, 1989). Though the original mission of the community college was to offer a liberal arts curriculum for students seeking the first two years of a baccalaureate program, community colleges perform many (sometimes contradictory) curricular functions, including general, vocational, developmental, and continuing education (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Dougherty 1994; Dougherty, 2006).

Despite the expansion of curricular functions, the collegiate transfer function of community colleges remains central to the community college mission (Bragg, 2001; Cohen

& Brawer, 2008). In 2014, the nation's 1,108 community colleges educated more than seven million credit-seeking students, and it is estimated that nearly 80% of all first-year students entering community colleges want to obtain a bachelor's degree (AACC, 2015; Altstadt, Schmidt, & Couturier, 2014). As more and more students utilize community colleges as their entry point into higher education and ultimately a bachelor's degree, community colleges will have to continue to evolve.

In recent years, many growing populations of students have attended community colleges, including first generation students, nontraditional learners, and aid-dependent students (AACC, 2015; Morest, 2013). In the fall of 2013, over 36% of community college students were the first in their family to attend a post-secondary institution. Additionally, the profile on the current representation at community colleges shows that the national average age of students is 28, with 57% of students between the ages of 22-39 (AACC, 2015). Moreover, 72% of students apply for financial aid, with more than 58% receiving some type financial assistance (AACC, 2015). On a national scale, women outnumber men 57% to 43%, and in the attendance patterns, part-time students outnumber full-time students 60% to 40% (AACC, 2015). Along the lines of gender, race, and the socio-economic status of students, community colleges are essential for the diversity and expansion of opportunity for underrepresented groups and their access to higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Morest, 2013; Thornton, 1972).

Statement of the Problem

Within the current body of research, a growing population of students have been garnering increased attention. This population is described as high-achieving, high school graduates whose academic credentials do not properly "match" them to the institution in

which they enroll (Fosnacht, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Navigating the college process is about finding a college match and an appropriate fit for a student's educational and social needs and finding an environment that will nurture, support, and challenge their intellectual and social development (Roderick et al., 2008). However, as students go through this process, many factors influence how they determine their institutional match, including: (a) net costs, (b) major availability, (c) distance from home (d) campus environment, (e) parental involvement, and (f) institutional characteristics (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013).

According to Bastedo and Flaster (2014), "undermatching occurs when a high school graduate either does not attend college or attends a college that is less selective than his/her academic achievement indicates" (p. 93). The current literature describes undermatching as "pervasive, especially among low-income students, minorities, and first-generation college goers" (Smith et al., 2003, p. 247). Many of these disadvantaged populations are highly represented among the nation's community college student body (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In the seminal studies regarding undermatching, Roderick et al. (2008) found that in Chicago Public Schools, over two-thirds of graduating students undermatched, and Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) found that 40% of students in North Carolina qualified to attend a more selective college yet chose to enroll in a less selective institution, community college, or no college at all. Using a nationally representative sample, Smith et al. (2013) found that 41% of students undermatched, and they more commonly come from low-socioeconomic families, live in rural areas, and are often first-generation college students (Smith et al., 2003).

In one of the most comprehensive studies of undermatching, Hoxby and Avery (2012) analyzed data on the entire population of the 2008 high school graduating class who took the ACT or SAT 1 and discovered that high-achieving, low-income students have different enrollment behaviors than their high-achieving, high-income counterparts (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). The authors frame students within two unique groups: (1) high-achieving low-income students whose enrollment behaviors match those of their high-income counterparts, "achievement-typical", and (2) those high-achieving low-income students whose enrollment behaviors more closely matches their income, "income-typical." (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). It has been determined that undermatched students are less likely to graduate, have lower levels of educational attainment, lower wages, higher unemployment rates, and less satisfaction with their jobs upon graduation (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). Due to undermatching, these students enroll in less selective or nonselective institutions or no college at all (Baum et al., 2010; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Thomas & Perna, 2004).

Until now, most research on undermatching has focused on the decision to enroll based on institutional selectivity, often examining a student's college choice decision between highly selective institutions, their less selective peers, or no college at all (Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Roderick et al., 2008, 2011; Smith et al., 2013). Though studies on undermatching have become more prevalent in the literature, most of these studies examine undermatching from a quantitative perspective and do not uncover the lived experiences of students making enrollment choices within this phenomenon (Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Roderick et al., 2008, 2011; Smith et al., 2013). Furthermore, few studies specifically examine the undermatching phenomenon from the perspective of

students making enrollment decisions between attending a four-year institution and a community college (Smith et al., 2013). Due to the unique influence that community colleges have in the college choice decisions and aspirations of students, this study contributes to the existing literature of undermatching by addressing the gaps in research on community colleges and further expands the understanding of undermatching by providing insight into why students make unique enrollment decisions.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the college choice process for community college students who were admitted into a four-year institution but chose instead to begin their studies at a community college. The study was exploratory in nature to discover the factors that influenced the decision-making process for college students who undermatched. For this study, the concept of undermatching was narrowed to describe recent high school graduates enrolled in a community college Associate of Arts / Associate of Science (AA / AS) program seeking to transfer to a four-year institution when their academic achievement allows them to be admitted into a selective four-year institution directly after graduation. The results of this study identified and analyzed influential contextual factors during the college choice process for undermatched community college transfer students to offer insight and help guide future research on the undermatching phenomenon and this understudied population of students. Finally, this study provided the opportunity for these students to tell their stories and share how they navigated the college choice process.

Research Question

This study contributes to the existing literature on the college choice process for community college students, specifically those seeking to obtain an AA / AS to transfer,

although they were admitted into a four-year institution. Furthermore, this study expands the existing literature on undermatching by using multiple case studies from three research sites to answer the primary research question and sub-questions:

- What are the factors that influence college choice decisions for students who are admitted into a four-year institution but choose to enroll into a community college as a transfer student seeking an AA / AS degree?

To answer this question, this study also asked the following sub-questions:

i. How does an individual's habitus influence their college choice decision?
ii. How does an individual's school and community context influence their college choice decision?
iii. How does the higher education context influence a student's college choice decision?
iv. How does the social, economic, and political context influence a student's college choice decision?

This research question focused on the participants' experience as students, their perception of influential factors, and the aspects of college choice that align with the study's conceptual framework. A qualitative approach was well-suited to explore and probe college choice to gain insight, find meaning, and understand the student's decision to attend a college less selective than their academic abilities indicate (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). According to Schramm (1971), "the essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result" (as cited in Yin, 2009, p. 82). The bounded context of this study was students from three purposefully selected institutions

throughout the NC community college system that were admitted into a selective four-year university but enrolled instead in a community college as a transfer student within the last academic year. As past research has found, during their college choice process, students often consider distance from home and proximity of their local community college because they often have concerns about moving too far away from home during (Morciglio, 2010). Therefore, for this inquiry, the researcher sought students from an urban, rural, and suburban community college to discern any differences in their decision-making process.

Rationale and Significance

According to Roderick et al. (2008), undermatches from four-year colleges to two-year colleges are, in fact, common and troubling due to students: "(1) opting to attend a two-year college or vocational school instead of a four-year college, (2) hoping to attend a four-year college, but not applying, and (3) applying and being admitted to a four-year college, but not enrolling" (p. 2). Furthermore, as Bowen et al. (2009) state, "it would be highly desirable to carry out a comprehensive analysis that includes all of these students…and provide a rigorous assessment of undermatching in this state [NC]" (Bowen et al., 2009, p. 108). In North Carolina, it is estimated that more than 40% of students choose to attend a less selective institution, though their academic credentials would have allowed them to attend one of the more selective four-year public universities within the University of North Carolina system directly after graduation (Bowen et al., 2009). However, what portion of students are choosing community colleges instead of four-year intuitions for their post-secondary education is unkown.

According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2011), "students who intend to complete a bachelor's degree but enroll in a community college as

their first institution are about 15 percent less likely to complete their degree, even after background characteristics are taken into account" (p. 1). In addition, community college students tend to fare far worse in graduation and persistence rates towards receiving a credential than their peers at four-year institutions, as 57% of four-year students leave with a degree after six years, but only 28% of students enrolled in a two-year institution receive a certificate or degree after 150% of normal time (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009; Schudde and Goldrick-Rab, 2014). Smith et. al, 2013). These findings are important because as Smith et. al (2009) state, "students with higher levels of educational attainment are observed to have higher wages, lower unemployment rates, better health insurance and pensions, greater satisfaction with their jobs, healthier lifestyles, and those who attend relatively selective colleges are more likely to graduate and to succeed in the labor market" (Baum et al., 2010; Bowen et al., 2009; Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999; Horn & Carroll, 2006; Hoxby, 1998; Long, 2008). In addition, time-to-degree has increased for students at both two-year and four-year schools. Students transferring to four-year institutions as juniors are lagging behind native juniors in degree attainment rates (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). Research shows that students choose to enroll in community colleges over four-year institutions for the following reasons: (1) lower tuition cost; (2) proximity to home; (3) goal attainment; (4) availability of the Pell grant/scholarships; (5) the need/desire to work while in school, (5) comfort, (6) teaching-centered faculty, (8) small class size, and (9) influence from parents, teachers, peers, and counselors (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2003; Eaton, 1994; Goldrick-Rab, Harris & Trostel, 2009; Townsend, 2007; Vaughn, 1983).

North Carolina is recognized nationally as having a model community college system with a strong articulation agreement that facilitates the matriculation of students between

two-year and four-year institutions. Over the past five years, the UNC System has received an increase of more than 35% (Fall 2008 - 6, 353 / Fall 2013 – 8383) in community college students seeking to transfer to one of its sixteen public four-year institutions (UNC-GA, 2014). Over the same period, the subpopulation of students seeking an Associate of Arts (AA) or Associate of Science (AS) degree has grown over 59% (UNC-GA, 2014). Additionally, research on the success of transfer students has found that students who begin their education at NC community colleges and complete an AA / AS graduate at a much lower rate than native juniors, 74% compared to 84% (UNC-GA, 2014). If a student does not receive a credential before transferring, they are even less likely to graduate within four years. Transfer students who complete 30+ transferable hours have a 64% graduation rate, and those who are enrolled in a non-articulated transfer program have a 54% graduation rate (UNC-GA, 2014).

As a natural extension of these findings, this study sought to understand the unique college choice decisions students make related to the phenomenon of undermatching. An extensive literature review on college choice and undermatching revealed few studies focused on how students make enrollment decisions, specifically between four-year institutions and community colleges. Additionally, this study addressed the current higher education and political context in North Carolina by discussing the effects of policies such as transfer articulation, increasing tuition costs, and barriers to college access. This study was designed to explore the influence of a student's sociological and economic context in their enrollment decisions (Perna, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

A study's conceptual frame is the system of concepts, assumption, expectations, beliefs and theories that support, inform, and guide the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in economic and human capital investment models and sociological perspectives and sociological concepts of habitus, cultural and social capital, and organizational context (Perna, 2006). Perna's conceptual model of college choice suggests that students' college choice decisions are shaped by four contextual layers:

- Layer 1: The Habitus reflects an individual's demographic characteristics, particularly gender, race/ethnicity, and SES, and cultural and social capital. This layer includes the students' system of outlooks, experiences, and beliefs about the social world;
- Layer 2: The school and community context recognize the ways that school and community structural supports and barriers facilitate or impede college choice;
- Layer 3: The higher education context is utilized to explain how college choice is influenced by higher education institutions through mechanisms like location, recruitment, marketing, and relationships with high schools; and
- Layer 4: The broader social, economic, and policy context recognizes that college choice is also influenced, directly and indirectly, through other contextual layers, by changes in social forces (e.g., demographic changes), economic conditions (e.g., unemployment rate), and public policies (e.g., establishment of a new need-based grant program). (Perna, 2006, p.117-119)

Understanding that a student's behavior is shaped by context, qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the student's college choice, while also

allowing the researcher to probe further into each contextual layer (Perna, 2006). The proposed conceptual model (Figure 1) allowed the researcher to target each contextual layer and identify factors that directly and indirectly influence students' decisions (Perna, 2006). By focusing on the contextual layers, this study also allowed the researcher to discern differences and similarities across cases.

This framework was chosen for this study because of its comprehensive nature, which gave the researcher the flexibility to account for the many contextual factors found in the literature on college choice and to develop a theoretical understanding of the college choice process for individuals (Perna, 2006). The embedded nature of the model allowed the inquiry to be narrowed to one contextual layer or widened to develop a holistic understanding of a student's college choice (Perna, 2006). The conceptual model helped the researcher establish and refine research goals, establish realistic and relevant research questions, and select appropriate methods. The model also provided a lens for interpretation and analysis. Perna's model was used to test and confirm theoretical positions, develop a theoretical understanding of student college choice, and provide an in-depth contextual understanding of the phenomenon of undermatching (Perna, 2006).

Description of Terms

The following definitions provide clarification of the terms used in this study:

AA. Associate of Arts. A degree granted for planned programs of study consisting of a minimum of 60 semester hours and a maximum of 61 semester hours of college transfer courses. (NCCCS Website, Curriculum Procedures Reference Manual)

AS. Associate of Science. A degree granted for planned programs of study consisting of a

minimum of 60 semester hour credits and a maximum of 61 semester hour credits of college transfer courses with emphasis on the natural sciences. (NCCCS Website, Curriculum Procedures Reference Manual)

College Choice. "The process through which students decide whether and where to go to college" (Bergerson, 2009, p. 2).

Co*llege Match.* Occurs when a college or university is likely to admit [a person] because [their] grades, standardized test scores, and holistic measures are similar to those of typical students at the school (Grove, 2017).

Community College. A public two-year college that offers Associate Degrees.

*Comprehensive Articulation Agreement. "*The North Carolina Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) is a statewide agreement governing the transfer of credits between NC community colleges and NC public universities and has as it objective the smooth transfer of students" (NCCCS, 2015, p. 1).

Cultural Capital. The system of traits and attributes learned and/or gained from a person's parents or other close family members that help define an individual's class status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Perna 2006).

Four-year institution. Selective institutions offering four-year baccalaureate degrees or greater.

Habitus. A system of embodied dispositions and tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it.

Socioeconomic status. Composite of the economic status of families or persons on the basis of occupation, educational attainment, income, and wealth (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009).

North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). A statewide network of 58 public

community colleges. The System enrolls over 780,000 students annually and is the third largest community college system in the nation.

Post-secondary / Higher Education. Interchangeable terms used to describe formal education obtained after the completion of high school.

Social Capital. The type of connections and networks students make that accrue resources, actual or potential, to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

Transfer education. College-level competence and cognitive ability developed within the first two years of a community college curriculum designed and based on academic standards and cultural norms of a traditional liberal arts four-year university model (Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994).

Transfer Student. A student enrolled in a community college seeking to complete their first two years of general education coursework to transfer to a four-year university to complete their degree.

Undermatching. "Undermatching occurs when a high school graduate either does not attend college or attends a college that is less selective than his/her academic achievement indicates" (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014, p. 93).

UNC System. A multi-campus public university system composed of all 16 of North Carolina's public universities and the NC School of Science and Mathematics, the nation's first public residential high school for gifted students.

Organization of the Study

This study is reported in five chapters. The first chapter provides the context and significance of this study, details the research questions and conceptual framework guiding the inquiry, and highlights concepts and terms that help the reader develop a common understanding. Chapter Two reviews the theoretical approaches and conceptual models used to study college choice. It provides a brief history of community colleges, an overview of the prominent college choice models, a discussion on the forms of capital, an overview of the current NC context, and concludes with the current literature on undermatching. Chapter Three focuses on the study's methodology and discusses research design, data sources, and analytic approaches. Chapter Four provides an introduction and description of the case study participants and presents study themes and findings. Chapter Five provides conclusions and recommendations and discusses the implications for policy and practice, the study's limitations, and opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the college choice decisions for transfer students who undermatch to a community college after being accepted to a four-year institution. This literature review opens with a discussion of the contextual definition of undermatching and selectivity as it relates to this study. Next, the literature review discusses the historical mission of the community college and includes theoretical foundations of the community college as it relates to access and the transfer function. Additionally, the review examines the existing models of the college choice process, followed by the conceptual model used to guide this study. This chapter also synthesizes the literature on undermatching by examining prior research, information gaps, and critiques. Lastly, this section will conclude with a current overview of the higher education context for North Carolina and discuss how undermatching is situated within the context of community colleges.

Context of Community Colleges

Since their inception, community colleges have played a significant role within the higher education context due to their unique positionality and the populations they serve. Community colleges often serve contradictory institutional missions and must balance democratic access to post-secondary education while also situating themselves within a highly stratified educational system (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Vaughn, 1983). These intertwined curricular functions include collegiate, vocational, developmental, and continuing education (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Founded in 1920, the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) defined junior colleges as "an institution offering two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade" (p. 52). However, the AAJC would soon expand its mission by stating:

> The junior college is an institution offering two years of strictly collegiate grade. This curriculum may include courses usually offered in the first two year of the four-year college, in which case these courses must be identical, in the scope and thoroughness, with corresponding course of the standard four-year college. The junior college may, and is likely to, develop a different type of curriculum suited to the large and ever-changing civics, social, religious, and vocational needs of the entire community in which the college is located. (Thornton, 1972, p. 53).

During the 1940s, junior colleges expanded significantly due to the GI Bill of 1944 and the Truman Commission Report's call for "free and universal access to education, in terms of the interest, ability, and need of the student, must be a major goal of education." (U.S. President's Commission on Higher Education, 1948, p. 36). During the 1950s and 60s, access increased for veterans, non-traditional students, women, and minorities, and as a result, there were almost 1,000 community colleges operating in all 50 states, serving a vast educational population (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Thornton, 1972; Witt, Wattenbarger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1994).

During the 1970s, the mission of community colleges became even more amorphous as the Carnegie Commission of Higher Education recommended that all community colleges offer (a) vocational training, (b) transfer education, (c) general education, (d) cultural education, (e) noncredit community service and occupational education courses, (f) social services, as well as, (g) developmental and remedial education (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1970; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Eaton, 1994; Thornton, 1972; Witt et al.1994). These changes occurred because of legislation such as: (a) The Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963, which allocated over $150 million in funding for construction projects

at junior colleges nationwide; (b) The Vocational Education Act of 1963, later amended in 1968 & 1972, which provided over $450 million in funding to extend and improve vocational education; (c) The Higher Education Act, which guaranteed federal funding for two-year colleges, and (d) The National Defense Student Loan Insurance Act and the National Vocational Student Loan Insurance Act, which provided funding for academic and vocational students, enrollment quadrupled to more than 2 million students nationwide from 1963 - 1969, and junior colleges further expanded their access to students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Eaton, 1994; Thornton, 1972; Witt et al.1994).

New legislation in the 1980s meant that community and part-time students matriculating at community colleges would be allowed the use of Pell Grants, and enrollment growth continued well into the 1990s as the nearly 6 million community college students comprised approximately 45% of all students in higher education institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Eaton, 1994; Witt et al.1994).

As two-year colleges continued to mature, many university systems began to develop two-year branch campuses to expand their reach, often into the most rural areas of states (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). This growth continued well into the turn of the century, and community colleges soon became revered for educating a broader cross section of the population than any other higher education institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). However, community colleges were not without detractors. In fact, their earliest official critique came in 1904 when a president of a small liberal arts college expressed:

> …your proposed change is likely to deprive many men of the two best years of the college course, and greatly to limit, if not destroy, the most excellent work of the American college, and so in short to do more harm than good (Witt et al.,1994 p. 22).

Throughout the course of their history, community colleges have had to deal with the challenges of providing a broad range of access to a diverse set of learners with individualized needs, all while maintaining a low-cost operation (Eaton, 1994). Historical and contemporary critiques have suggested community colleges (a) perpetuate social inequality, (b) do not adequately prepare students for a four-year university setting, (c) divert and "cool out" students under a veil of social mobility, and (d) struggle with retention, graduation, and transfer rates (Clark, 1960; Clark, 1980; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Dougherty, 1988; Eaton, 1994; Karabel, 1972). Conversely, community colleges have been praised for democratizing post-secondary education by providing ladders of social mobility and access (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994). For many students, community colleges offer those who would not have considered a post-secondary education a chance to obtain a degree, regardless of prior barriers (e.g. poor academic preparation, financial hardships, or limited English proficiency). Furthermore, community colleges are integral parts of their local community because they serve students from their immediate geographic area, partner with local business and employers for services, and foster local economic development (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994).

Today's 1,132 community colleges serve more than 13 million students annually and play a critical role in providing access for and meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners (AACC, 2017; Bragg, 2001; Joliet Junior College, 2014). Without community colleges, many of the nation's students would not have access to higher education nor an alternative way to obtain a four-year degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Because of their unique curricular mission, community colleges play a preeminent role in American Higher

Education, and they are an integral component in literature and research on college choice, college access, and undermatching.

The Collegiate / Transfer Function of Community Colleges

Founded on the principles of providing access to a liberal arts education, the community college transfer function has provided students an entry point into the higher education system and an opportunity for advanced degrees (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994). Though the transfer function has always been part of the community college mission, the number of students seeking to transfer has fluctuated as the purpose of colleges has expanded. In their earliest years, nearly all students attending junior colleges were in a liberal arts curriculum, but as colleges began to focus on the vocational and occupational education functions, these numbers began to dwindle (Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994).

The 2010 survey of Community College Student Engagement states, "84% indicated that obtaining an associate degree was a goal, with 75% seeking to transfer to a four-year college or university" (21st Century Commission, 2013). As more and more students complete their first two years of an undergraduate degree at a community college, it is important to have a clear definition of transferring. For this study, transfer education is defined as college-level competence and cognitive ability developed within the first two years of a community college curriculum designed and based on academic standards and cultural norms of a traditional liberal arts four-year university model (Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994). Courses within this curriculum are designed to be "equivalent" or "university-parallel." They prepare and guide students toward more advanced coursework at

four-year institutions and culminate with an Associate of Arts (A.A.) or an Associate of Science (A.S.) degree (Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994; Thornton, 1972).

Theories of College Choice

This section provides a general overview of the literature on college choice and the historical theoretical foundations (sociological, psychological, and economic) that have framed research on college choice (Paulsen, 1990). Next, this section highlights the conceptual model that guides this study and discusses its relevancy to community colleges. Lastly, this section explains how this study fills a gap in the literature and contributes to the body of knowledge about why students enroll in community colleges.

College Choice History

Throughout the last 50 years, gaps in college choice research have been addressed in research, policy, and practice. Throughout this chapter, "college choice" refers to the longitudinal process of matriculation that begins with a student's initial exposure to post-secondary aspirations and continues through enrollment in an institution. In one of the most widely known studies on college choice, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) postulated that there were three stages to the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice.

The first stage of Hossler and Gallagher's model (1987), predisposition, addresses the factors that influence a student's aspirations, expectations, and motivation to seek post-secondary education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). These expectations are often influenced by factors such as family, socioeconomic status (Manski & Wise, 1983), student academic preparation (Jackson, 1982), friends (Jackson, 1982), parental involvement (Hossler & Stage,1988), and teachers and counselors (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; Perna and Titus, 2004). As a result, students are influenced by individual,

familial, and contextual factors that shape the predisposition phase throughout adolescence (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006).

The second phase of Hossler and Gallagher's model (1987) is search, where students learn more about themselves, institutions, and the institutional characteristics they feel are the most important for making their post-secondary choice (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). During this phase, students take college entrance exams, receive recruiting materials from institutions, take campus visits, and complete applications for admission, scholarships, and financial aid (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Central to this phase is information gathering as students seek information from conversations with current and former students, campus visits, and discussions with family, teachers, and counselors (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Paulsen, 1990). As students near graduation, they move into the final phase where the information they have collected results in a choice.

During the choice phase of Hossler and Gallagher's model, students utilize the information from the prior stages to make a post-secondary choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). As this decision becomes more paramount, students begin to compare and contrast the costs, financial aid awards, and enrollment investment decisions as they make their final decision (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2000, 2006).

Although Hossler and Gallagher's model is widely used, it has been critiqued for not being applicable toward underrepresented populations and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations who do not have access to the same resources (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). In recent literature, the college choice process students utilize has

been framed by three perspectives: sociological, psychological, and economic (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990).

Sociological

The sociological perspective of college choice emphasizes the ways in which a student's socioeconomic characteristics influence their college choice decisions (Paulsen, 1990). Research in this area focuses on the complex interwoven factors that affect students, including: (a) race, (b) gender, (c) family income, (d) parental educational, (e) occupational attainment, (f) academic preparation, and (g) the social and academic environment (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006; Tereznizi, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). A core assumption in this perspective is that "individuals with higher levels of academic preparation and achievement receive greater encouragement from 'significant others,' including parents, teachers, counselors, and peers" (Perna, 2006, p. 111). As a result, students who receive this additional encouragement have a greater predisposition toward seek post-secondary education (Bergerson, 2009).

In addition to the background characteristics that directly influence a student's institutional choice, recent trends in research focus on the way a student's cultural and social capital impacts their post-secondary decisions (Perna, 2006). Cultural capital often refers to the system of attributes or traits, such as cultural knowledge, language skills, and mannerisms that define an individual's class status (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006). Students who lack the required cultural capital may lower their educational aspirations or choose not to enroll in higher education at all and, as a result, receive fewer rewards for their educational investment (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006).

Social capital focuses on the types of social networks students make and the way these connections are sustained (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is acquired and sustained through the individual's network, and those with access to certain networks gain advantage over those who are not given the same opportunity (Bourdieu, 1986). The greater an individual's network becomes, the greater the opportunity they to increase their economic, social, and cultural capital, and, as a result, expand their network. However, students do not make decisions in a vacuum; therefore, to fully understand the social context where action occurs, we must understand their habitus. According to Perna (2006), "habitus is an individual's internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment" (p.113). Thus, when trying to understand a student's choice, one must understand how their decision is sensible and reasonable according to their habitus (Perna, 2006).

Psychological

Psychological studies of college choice have examined the effects of characteristics, such as academic programs, cost, location and the psychological environment, or "climate" of higher education institutions, to determine student perceptions and views on institutional fit and whether they feel they belong (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990). Bergerson (2009) states, "The psychological dimension of the decision is driven by the interaction between student and institutional characteristics" (p. 4). These characteristics often include size, cost of tuition, room and board, location, curriculum, campus race and gender make up, and financial aid availability (Manski & Wise, 1983).

Economic Model

In the economic perspective, the college choice process is viewed as a rational choice in which students weigh the costs and benefits associated with their decision to pursue post-secondary education and the students' perceptions of their return on investment (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006). This theory hypothesizes that students realize the long-term benefits of their investment in higher education, and as a result, are willing to forego immediate earnings to receive higher lifetime earnings and other benefits like better health, lower probability of unemployment, and willingness to further invest in higher education (Becker, 1962; Perna, 2006; Paulsen, 1990). According to Paulsen (1990):

> Sociologists view college choice from the perspective of status attainment process, while economists view it as a form of investment decision-making behavior. Psychologists examine college choice from the perspective of the impact of college experiences and environments on student and optimal student-institutional fit (p. 7).

To address the complexity of the college choice literature, a conceptual model that encapsulates the differing perspectives was selected.

Perna's Conceptual Model

Using economic and sociological perspectives on college choice as foundation, Perna's conceptual model (2006) assumes that college choice decisions are shaped by four layers: "(1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context" (Perna, 2006, p. 116).

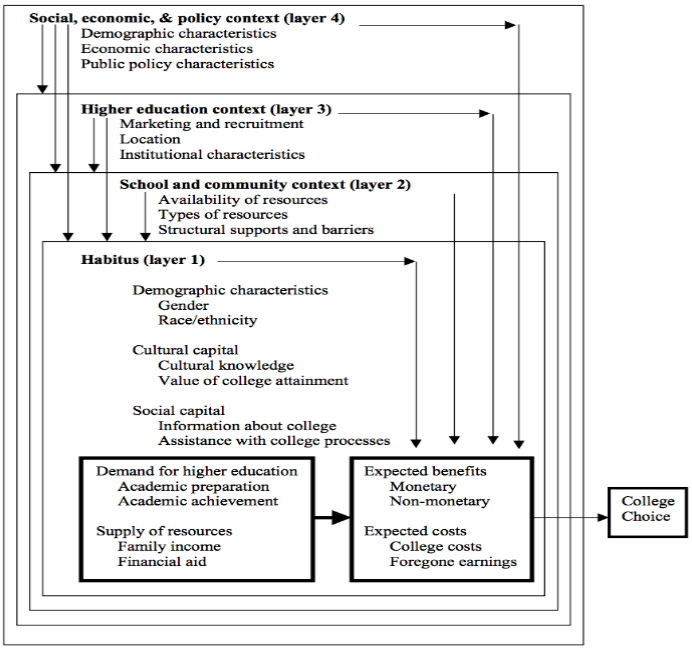

Figure 1. Perna's Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

Within the first layer, Perna (2006) includes a student's demographic characteristics such as race, gender, family background, and socio-economic status. Additionally, a student's social and cultural capital is included to reflect the knowledge and values students gain from their context (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). The second layer of the model looks within the school and community context to describe the factors that aid or inhibit enrollment. This layer addresses the college-going rates of the school district and individual high schools and the resources that students have access to, such as high school curriculum, collegiate access and exposure programs, school resources, and the role of teachers, counselors, and mentors (Perna, 2006).

The third layer addresses the higher education context and how institutions affect student choice (Perna, 2006). This layer focuses on the geographic spread of institutions, the marketing and recruiting strategies they employ, and the institutional characteristics that

attract students (Chapman, 1981; Paulsen, 1990). North Carolina has a diverse higher education context, as students have more than 110 institutional choices. In North Carolina, there are 58 community colleges, 16 colleges and universities within the UNC System, 36 private colleges and universities, and several technical institutes and for-profit institutions. Furthermore, within these systems, North Carolina has three women's colleges and 10 historically black colleges and universities. As students consider factors toward their college choice, many consider geographic location, size, competitiveness, and cost before making their final decision (Perna, 2006). Given the variety of educational institutions in North Carolina, there should be an institution to meet the needs of every learner.

The fourth and final layer considers the direct and indirect social, economic, and policy contexts that affect a student's enrollment choice (Perna, 2006). For example, in North Carolina, there have been recent discussions regarding recent state tuition increases, decreases in state appropriations, as well as revisions to the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement. Each of these policies has a significant impact on a student's choice and, as a result, must be considered to understand an individual's context. Perna's (2006) model assumes:

> Although college choice is ultimately based on a comparison of the benefits and costs of enrolling, assessments of the benefits and costs are shaped not only by the demand for higher education and supply of resources to pay the costs, but also by an individual's habitus and, directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context (p. 119).

Using this model, this study will identify factors that influence a student's choices and

provide a comprehensive frame for understanding the student's individual context (Perna, 2006).

Capital

The concept of capital can be defined as set of usable resources and powers that is often inherited and passed down through family (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Capital is typically categorized into four areas: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. According to Thomson (2014):

> Bourdieu nominated four forms of capital: economic (money and assets); cultural (e.g. forms of knowledge; taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences; language, narrative and voice); social (e.g. affiliations and networks; family, religious and cultural heritage) and symbolic (things which stand for all of the other forms of capital and can be "exchanged" in other fields, e.g. credentials) (p. 69).

To understand the concept of capital, Bourdieu explains that the concepts of field and habitus are also intertwined (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). To explain this phenomenon, prior research utilizes the metaphor of a football field. The social space is often referred to as a field, and it is defined as a space shaped by social structures, rules, and history. In the social world, fields are not level, and as such, some players benefit from the advantages (Thomson, 2014). Individuals may begin with a particular form of capital, and as a result, receive advantages at the outset because the field depends on and produces additional capital (Thomson, 2014). Therefore, those with greater amounts of capital seem to be advantaged over those who do not have the same access to resources. Though capital can be gained over time, how one accumulates capital depends on how they are positioned within the social world.

Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions that focus on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking, and being (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Maton, 2014). This ongoing process shapes our vision of the range of options within someone's current context, and as a result, shapes their understanding of themselves and their world (Maton, 2014). To tie all of these concepts together, Bourdieu (1984) provides the formula [(Habitus x Capitals) + Fields] = Practices / Strategies. When relating these concepts to college choice, the social strategies / practice they employ result from a student's dispositions and lived experiences and by the amount of capital they have accumulated. In this competitive social field, students and families strategize how to maintain and improve their position by amassing entry into selective colleges and universities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Thomson, 2014). Simply stated, a student's college choice is influenced by their outlook toward higher education, the amount of resources they have, and other factors specific to their context.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital has been defined as a resource that is inherited and transmitted between generations and helps someone build authority, knowledge, or norms (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Perna, 2006). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three forms: the embodied, the objective, and institutionalized state. In the embodied state, capital refers to the manifestation of dispositions and beliefs. In the objectified state, capital is described as physical objects that can be bought and sold such as pictures, books, etc. In the institutionalized state, cultural capital references academic credentials and educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Within the research on college choice, cultural capital is viewed as the system of factors that influences a student's cultural knowledge, activities, and attitudes toward higher

education derived from parents and family (Bourdieu, 1986; Edgerton and Roberts, 2014; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006, Perna & Titus, 2004). Cultural capital is relevant to understanding college enrollment decisions because it allows researchers to focus on factors such as the parents' level of education, the values regarding college that they pass on to their children, and educational aspirations of students in the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006).

Social Capital

Prior research defines social capital as culmination of useful resources that are linked to possession of social networks, relationships, and social structures (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2006). Coleman (1988) states:

> Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors…within the structure (p. 99).

Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital also focuses on an individual's social networks and relationships but diverges from Coleman (1988) in that social capital includes the "transmission of power and privileges" which may benefit an individual or social class. As such, those with advantages use their capital as a structural barrier to maintain their advantage (Bourdieu, 1986; Dika and Singh, 2002; Perna, 2006).

Prior research on college choice utilized factors such as family background and history, parent's education level and expectations, parental support and involvement, and the family's socioeconomic status as proxies to assess a student's social capital (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Hossler & Stage, 1988; Jackson, 1982; McDonough,1997;

Perna; 2006). Additionally, social capital can be accumulated outside of the home through school and community networks of peers, high school teachers and counselors, and college access programs (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). Students with higher levels of social capital are more likely to apply and enroll in post-secondary educational institutions (Baum & Payea, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). For example, students who come from high socio-economic backgrounds tend to have more access and assistance to resources which helps them during the college choice process (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Yet, it is not clear how these concepts relate to undermatching and the process of students deciding between a four-year university and a community college.

Current Higher Education Context for NC Community Colleges

In 1957, North Carolina formed seven Industrial Education Centers designed to provide training to adults and students seeking to enter the workforce (NCCS, 2008; Wiggs, 1989). Today, the 58 institutions within the North Carolina Community College system educate more than 710,000 students and are charged with providing open access to learners seeking opportunities through education, training, and retraining (NCCCS, 2016). For students seeking baccalaureate, graduate, and professional programs, North Carolina is home to 16 public universities and 36 independent colleges and universities. To facilitate the movement of students between community colleges and four-year institutions throughout the state, the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) was created.

Enacted in 1997, the CAA was created to ease the process of students seeking to transfer to a four-year university. The act simplified the transfer of credit between NC institutions of higher education by (a) developing a plan for the transfer of credits between UNC and NCCCS, and (b) implementing a common course numbering system (House Bill

739, 1995). Additionally, the CAA created the appropriate criteria and standards to regulate transfer programs throughout the state and regulated that community colleges have an articulation agreement with at least one four-year institution (House Bill 739, 1995). Though private schools were not initially included in the legislation, the CAA was revisited in 2006, and the creation of the Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement was enacted to form a smoother transition from the community college system to an independent college or university (ICAA, 2015).

On February 21, 2014, the State Board of Community Colleges and the UNC Board of Governors approved the 2014 revisions to the CAA, which included four key policy changes:

- Universities have agreed to a list of Universal General Education Transfer Courses that are guaranteed to transfer for general education equivalency credit to each of the 16 constituent institutions.
- Universities will publish four-year degree plans and outline lower division courses with the NC Community College System Combined Course Library to provide pathways leading to completion of the associate degree, admission to the major, and completion of the baccalaureate degree.
- NC Community College System college transfer students will select a transfer major and preferred transfer university before completing 30 semester hours of credit. Additional general education, pre-major and elective courses will be selected based on a student's intended major and transfer institution.

- Completion of the college transfer degree guarantees completion of undergraduate general education and pre-major courses and transfer of 60 semester hours of college credit if the student is admitted into the transfer institution and major (CAA, 2014).

As a result of these core policy changes, the CAA reduces the "gray" area surrounding what courses transfer and how they will be evaluated, provides a clear roadmap of an academic pathway that will lead to a degree, and guarantees entry as junior with full transfer credit for students who complete an AA / AS degree. Though articulation agreements are a vital component of community college transfer, statewide policies only exist in 36 states (Bers, 2013; Education Commission of the States, 2010). However, in lieu of statewide policy, 46 states offer cooperative agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions to facilitate the transfer process and prevent loss of credit (Bers, 2013; Education Commission of the States, 2010).

North Carolina is often recognized for its affordable and accessible 58-member community college system, the 16 campus University of North Carolina System (which includes the first public university in the nation), and an acclaimed private university system. Home to one of the lowest tuition rates for community colleges in the southeast and an updated comprehensive articulation agreement, the NCCCS will continue to serve students seeking an alternative method to a bachelor's degree. However, due to the recent economic downturn and recovery, state funding cuts have prompted tuition increases at the two-year and four-year level. Conducting an analysis within the current climate should result in dynamic findings that will provide unique insight into the student's college choice decision and the overarching higher education and policy context.

Undermatching

Over the past few years, there has been a growing body of literature investigating the phenomenon of students' ability to "academically match" themselves to post-secondary institutions (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Roderick et al., 2008). In the study *Crossing the Finish Line*, the authors coin the term "undermatching" and define it as the decision to choose and attend a less selective post-secondary institution than their academic credentials would allow (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009). This study is framed to analyze students' decisions to undermatch to a community college as a transfer student enrolled in an AA / AS program rather than attending one of the 16 public four-year selective institutions after being admitted. This study seeks to fill this research gap and further contribute to the undermatching literature related to post-secondary choices between two-year and four-year institutions.

When a student attends a college or university that is less selective than their academic achievement signals, an "undermatch" has occurred. The two landmark studies that have thrust the undermatching phenomenon into the national spotlight are the Chicago Consortium studies and the *Crossing the Finish Line* study of North Carolina (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2011). The Chicago Consortium studies returned five key findings:

1. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students who aspire to complete a four-year degree do not effectively participate in the college application process. In essence, these students did not take the necessary steps in their senior year to apply to and enroll in a four-year institution.
2. Attending a high school with a strong college-going culture shapes students'

participation in the college application process.

3. Filing a FAFSA and applying to multiple colleges increases students' likelihood of being accepted to and enrolling in a four-year college.
4. Only about one-third of CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year degree enroll in a college that matches their qualifications.
5. Among the most highly qualified students, having discussions on post-secondary planning and having strong connections to teachers are particularly important in increasing the likelihood of enrolling a match school (Roderick et al., 2008).

Though undermatching affects students with a range of academic credentials, the study found that students from underrepresented groups (e.g. low income, first generation, minorities) often enroll in colleges less selective to their academic qualifications or forgo attending a post-secondary institution (Bowen et al., 2009; Long, 2008; Roderick et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2012). Additionally, these students were found to have higher rates of undermatching than their counterparts. These findings directly mimic the economic, sociological, and psychological issues that students face during the college choice process.

The findings from the *Crossing the Finish Line* report stated:

> The extent of undermatching (over 40%) is especially troubling in the light of the evidence of the difference in educational outcomes -- lower graduation rate and longer time to degree -- associated with failing to take full advantage of the educational opportunities for which students were presumptively qualified (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009, p. 110).

Furthermore, this study found that 16% of students undermatched into a college that was two selectivity levels below the level they could have attended (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson,

2009). This finding is especially troubling given the rich history and quality of the public and private higher education system in North Carolina. This study addresses this enrollment decision. For many students, the NCCCS serves as a gateway into higher education through institutions that provide open access, low cost, and a comprehensive curriculum. Community colleges also enroll many students from underrepresented populations; however, community colleges often struggle with time-to-degree attainment, retention, and degree completion (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 1987, 2008; Eaton, 1994; Schudde and Goldrick-Rab, 2014; Thornton, 1972). Jenkins and Fink (2016) found that only 14% of the entire 2007 cohort of entering community college students earned a baccalearate degree within six year of enrollment (Jenkins and Fink, 2016). If a student undermatches into a community college, how can we ensure their educational outcomes are the same as a native freshman beginning their enrollment at a selective four-year institution? The implications for undermatching can be far reaching because students who attend more selective institutions often earn higher wages, experience lower unemployment rates, and are more like to graduate and receive the added benefits of a college degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). To understand this phenomenon from a national perspective, Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013) utilized a national data sample from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002) and found that:

- Undermatching is pervasive, as more than 40 percent of students undermatch.
- Sometimes students go to colleges just below what their academic credentials would predict, but quite often students enroll in colleges that are substantially below their measured academic achievements.
- Even among the most academically credentialed students, academic undermatching

exists.

- Academic undermatching is more common among students from rural areas and low-SES families with relatively less-educated parents.
- Finally, we find that undermatching has decreased between 1992 and 2004, in part because of changing student decisions, especially the decision to enroll in nonselective and two-year colleges, and in part because of changing college selectivity over this time period (p. 260).

Additionally, the National Center for Public Public Policy and Higher Education (2011) found that, "44 percent of low-income students (those with family incomes of less than $25,000 per year) attend community colleges as their first college after high school. In contrast, only 15 percent of high-income students go to community colleges initially" (p.2). Each of these findings suggests that significant disparity exists in educational attainment between students who come from low-income backgrounds versus high-income backgrounds (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). These findings indicate that community colleges are a factor in students' enrollment decisions, and the availability of a post-secondary institution in a rural area can have an impact on where students choose to enroll (Chapman, 1981; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Manski & Wise, 1983).

Though the findings are similar, methodological problems arise for researchers who conduct studies with this unique population of students. There is no singular way to estimate "matching" and predict successful admission to selective institutions given the complexity and variety of admissions processes (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Furthermore, an academic "match" does not always equate to an institutional "fit," as a host of factors come into play, including: (a) net costs, (b) major availability, (c) distance from

home, and (d) campus environment (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). Additionally, academic achievement is often measured utilizing different standards: (a) SAT & ACT scores, (b) GPA, (c) college selectivity, and (d) high school level (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014). Moreover, there is no standard method for categorizing and stratifying colleges that encompass the array of educational choices students have. Some studies have utilized Barron's Profiles of American Colleges, and others have used a re-categorized hierarchy or one of their own (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). Bastedo and Flaster (2014) state, "More emphasis should be placed on the 2-year/4-year college margin" (p. 97).

Thus, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining the undermatching phenomenon of students making enrollment decisions between community colleges and selective four-year public institutions in North Carolina.

Undermatching is clearly a phenomenon that deserves greater attention and exploration through research. This research will frame undermatching from a qualitative perspective to allow for a greater contextual understanding of a student's college choice decision. Perna (2006) states, "Qualitative approaches are especially useful for discovering theoretical propositions to explain student-college-choice processes, developing in-depth understandings of student-college-choice processes for particular students, and understanding the influence of the context or setting on student college choice" (p. 123). By using Perna's conceptual model as a guide, this study will further hone the complexity of the overlapping layers that influence undermatched students engaged in the college choice process. This study contributes to the existing literature of college choice for community college, furthers the understanding for undermatching for a unique subset of the population, provides insight

into the lived experience of students within their college choice process, and provides an opportunity to give voice to the experience of this unique population.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

This chapter begins with a discussion of the research design for this study. Next, it outlines and describes the sampling procedures used to select the study sites and participants. Additionally, the data sources and procedures for data collection and analysis are discussed, along with the validity, credibility, and reliability of the findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of the researcher, including a statement of positionality and a reflection on the ethical issues associated with this study.

This research study sought to address the following questions:

i. How does an individual's habitus influence their college choice decision?
ii. How does an individual's school and community context influence their college choice decision?
iii. How does the higher education context influence a student's college choice decision?
iv. How does the social, economic, and political context influence a student's college choice decision?

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the phenomenon of undermatching and examine students' college choice decisions and the factors that influenced them. A qualitative approach was used because as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state, qualitative research "seeks to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (as cited in Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 32) Qualitative research allows researchers to act as instruments within the inquiry process and employ a variety of methodological approaches to explain the

complexity of the problem being studied (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). Thus far studies of undermatching have been quantitative in nature and do not examine the complexity of a student's individual college choice decision (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Roderick et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2013). Using Perna's conceptual model provided an effective approach for understanding the perspectives of undermatched students and provide greater insight to the barriers and factors in college choice decisions (Perna, 2006). Moreover, using a qualitative approach helped to define and detect instances of complex constructs, such as cultural and social capital, which are often difficult to measure (Perna, 2006).

This exploratory study utilized Yin's (2009) case study methodology to guide the construction of the study's design, including: "(a) the study's questions, (b) propositions, (c) unit of analysis, (d) the logic linking the data to propositions, and (e) the criteria for interpreting the findings" (Yin, 2009, p. 110). Yin (1989) suggests that the case study method is appropriate to determine the "how and why" of phenomena and contributes to the understanding of the phenomena in a holistic and real-life context. The nature of this study best fit a multiple-case design since the central phenomenon of undermatching was examined through multiple perspectives (Yin, 2009). Central to this study was the proposition that students within North Carolina have significant access to higher education. Nearly every resident of North Carolina has access to one of its 58 community colleges either at their main campus or through a branch location. Access is also expanded due to the strong articulation agreements between the NCCCS and the public and private university systems that allow students to transfer to four-year institutions throughout the state. The central unit of analysis for this study was the participant's college choice decision to enroll in a community college

though they were admitted into a four-year institution. In this study, multiple cases of undermatching were examined through multiple institutional settings (Yin, 2011). Distance from home is known to influence college choice (Palmer et al., 2004); therefore, the study's design included three distinct community college settings in North Carolina. In North Carolina, 99% percent of the states' population live within a 30-mile commute of a member institution within the NCCCS (ThriveNC, 2015). Therefore, the study sought multiple cases from community colleges in a rural, suburban, and urban setting. The rationale for choosing multiple institutional settings was to examine the consistency in findings throughout the sites, enhance the confidence in the study's findings, and highlight instances where data from one site supports and/or contrasts data from another site through the development of cross-case conclusions.

To outline how this study achieved cross-case conclusions, this study followed Yin's Replication Logic Design Model (see Figure 2). At each field site, the researcher conducted a case study and created the individual case reports before drawing conclusions across cases. Furthermore, the researcher waited until all of fieldwork was completed before drawing conclusions across the sites and writing the final cross case report.

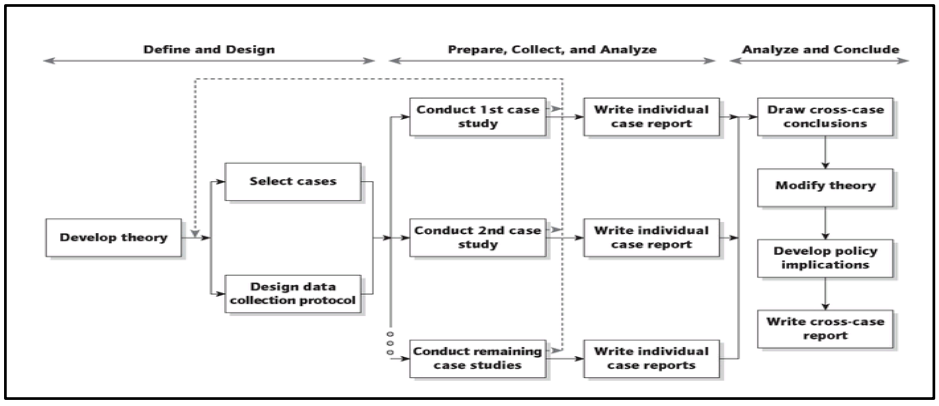

Figure 2. Yin's Replication Design Model

Site Selection

To select the field research sites for this study, colleges were categorized following a two-step process. First, the 100 counties in North Carolina were categorized into urban, suburban, and rural subgroups. Afterward, the researcher utilized information from the N.C, Community College System website to classify the 58 community colleges into their corresponding categories. According to the N.C. Rural Center (2015), the 100 counties in North Carolina are broken down as follows:

- Rural – 80 counties with population density of 250 people or less per square mile
- Suburban – 14 counties with a population density between 250 and 750 people per square mile
- Urban – 6 counties with a population density between 750 and 1,933 people per square mile (North Carolina Rural Center, 2015).

Using this classification structure, a listing of the categorized counties and colleges can be found in Appendix A, and a visual representation can be found below.

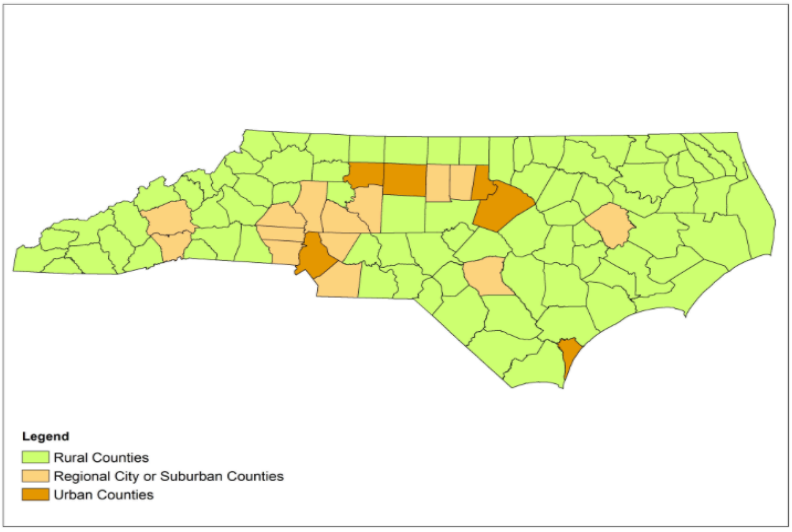

Figure 3. NC Rural Center County Classification

From the categorized list, the researcher selected primary and secondary colleges in each category using purposeful selection. Using the colleges from the initial selection, the researcher submitted the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application through NC State University. Once the NCSU IRB process was completed, the researcher contacted the Institutional Research Office of each field site and applied for authorization to conduct the study. In order to find additional participants for the study, the researcher contacted the secondary institutions to determine a purposeful sample of colleges that would meet the study's criteria. Using the classification structure, the researcher selected additional institutions that met distance and institutional setting needs of the study. Additionally, for convenience, the researcher selected institutions within a 2.5 hour radius of the researchers home. As a result, participants from this study were selected from 6 of the 58 campuses of the NC Community College System.

Table 1

IRB Approval & Campus Locations

College Name	IRB	Location	Size	Campuses	Participants
Urban Campus 1	Approved	Central	Urban	6	7
Suburban Campus 1	Approved	Central	Suburban	2	2
Suburban Campus 2	Approved	Central	Suburban	2	1
Rural Campus 1	Approved	Central	Rural	2	2
Rural Campus 2	Approved	Eastern	Rural	1	1
Rural Campus	Approved	Eastern	Rural	2	N/A
Rural Campus 3	Approved	Central	Rural	3	1
Rural Campus	Denied	Western	Rural	1	N/A
Rural Campus	Approved	Eastern	Rural	1	N/A
Rural Campus	Approved	Eastern	Rural	1	N/A

Urban Campus One

This institution operates six campuses and two education centers throughout the region and serves over 66,000 curriculum and continuing education students per year. The

ethnic breakdown for the institution during Fall 2015 was 51% Caucasian, 27% African American, 10% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian American, with 6% of students classified as other. The average age for female curriculum students was 29, and the average age for male curriculum students was 27. Additionally, in the Fall of 2015, the Associate of Arts and the Associate of Science were the two most popular academic curricula as the AA received 4,199 budget FTE, and the AS received 2,185 budget FTE out of the institution's 13,632 total FTE. In the fall 2015, this institution had the second highest number of transfer students with 969.

Suburban Campus One

This institution operates two campuses and three regional education centers, serving approximately 16,000 students. The curriculum student body consists of 63% female and 37% male students. The average age of students attending this institution is 34, and approximately 62% of students self-identify themselves as being employed either full-time or part-time. According to IPEDS (2017), in the fall of 2015, the ethnic breakdown for the institution was 71% Caucasian, 16% African American, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian American, with the remaining 5% identifying as Multiracial, American Indian, and unknown. In fall 2015, 182 students transferred and enrolled in one of the 16 UNC System institutions.

Suburban Campus Two

This institution operates two campuses and serves nearly 5,000 students with over 30 curriculum programs. According to the institutional research fact book, in the fall of 2015, the ethnic breakdown for the institution was 60% Caucasian, 22% African American, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian American, with the remaining 5% identifying as Multiracial, American Indian, and unknown. Additionally, the curriculum student body consists of 65%

female and 35% male students. In fall 2015, 209 students transferred and enrolled in one of the 16 UNC System institutions.

Rural Campus One

This institution offers 3 college transfer programs, 23 Associate in Applied Science Degrees, 9 Diploma programs, and 39 certificate programs. In fall 2015, it enrolled 1,873 curriculum students, with approximately 28% enrolled in a college transfer pathway. The average age is 24, and the current enrollment is approximately 38% full-time students and 62% part-time students.

Rural Campus Two

This institution includes the main campus and four branch locations. It has a curriculum enrollment of over 5,000 students and offers over 40 academic courses of study. The curriculum student body composition consists of 63% female and 37% male students with an average age of 25. According to the institutional IPEDs report, in the fall of 2015, the ethnic breakdown for the institution was 63% Caucasian, 12% African American, 12% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Asian American, with the remaining 11% identifying as Multiracial, American Indian, and unknown. The current enrollment is approximately 43% full-time students and 57% part-time students with over 25% of the campus population seeking to transfer. In fall 2015, 130 students transferred and enrolled in one of the 16 UNC System institutions.

Rural Campus Three

This institution currently serves a curriculum enrollment of approximately 4,900 students in over 40 academic courses of study. According to the institutional IPEDs report, in the fall of 2015, the ethnic breakdown for the institution was 58% Caucasian, 15% African

American, 12% Hispanic/Latino, 1% Asian American, with the remaining 6% identifying as Multiracial, American Indian, and unknown. The current enrollment is approximately 41% full-time students and 59% part-time students with a 63% female to 37% male gender ratio. In fall 2015, 151 students transferred and enrolled in one of the 16 UNC System institutions.

Selection of Participants

Once the NC State IRB process was completed, the researcher worked with each community college's institutional research office to gain access to participants. The specific characteristics of participants for this study were: (1) first-time community college students who had not previously attended a post-secondary institution; (2) community college students enrolled in an Associates of Arts / Sciences (AA / AS) degree program; and (3) community college students who applied to one or more four-year institutions and were admitted into at least one. To create the participant pool, the researcher requested access to contact each institution's population of current first-year students that were enrolled in the Associates of Arts / Sciences (AA / AS) degree program, allowing the researcher to find a sample of students who had recently completed their college choice decision. At one of the research sites, the researcher was given direct access to the student contact list. However, at the remaining sites, the researcher had to submit all the related research documents to the institutional research office for dissemination. Following this process, the institutions sent the Student Recruitment Email (Appendix B) outlining the goals and purpose of the research study and calling for interested participants to respond. After receiving a response from interested participants, the researcher then sent the Research Consent Form (Appendix C) and the Demographic Survey (Appendix E). If the researcher was given permission to display flyers around campus, the research recruitment flyer was utilized (Appendix D).

To remain consistent with qualitative research principles and yield relevant and plentiful data, the sample for this case study was chosen in a purposeful manner (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). Stake (2006) calls researchers to consider three criteria for selecting cases:

- Is the case relevant?
- Does the case provide diversity across contexts?
- Does the case provide a good opportunity to learn about the complexity of the contexts? (Stake, 2006, p. 23).

Given the nature of this multi-site study, the researcher selected participants using maximum variation sampling and a two-step process with the following criteria. The researcher: (1) only considered students that had undermatched within the past academic year, and (2) utilized characteristics found within Perna's Conceptual model to narrow the participant pool. Research has shown that parents and other key influencers can have a significant impact throughout the college choice process for students (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2003; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). Therefore, the researcher looked for participants who had provided contact information for the person who had been the most influential while making this decision (Question 25/26 Appendix E). To determine the final sample at each institution, the researcher considered the following characteristics from Perna's model: gender, ethnicity, family background, academic history and level of selectivity of their post-secondary options (Creswell, 2012; Perna, 2006; Yin, 2009). Participant responses to the Demographic Survey (Appendix E) were entered into a matrix, and the researcher used purposeful sampling to narrow down the final participant pool. To obtain a broad range of perspectives and uncover and test rival explanations, the researcher selected 5-8 cases at each of the three research sites (Yin, 2009, 2011). To protect

the confidentiality of the research sites and its participants, the researcher: (a) assigned pseudonyms, (b) required participants to complete consent forms, and (c) ensured all the data was collected and stored in a secure manner. All data collected was housed in a password-protected laptop within a private and secure file structure.

Data Collection

Drawing from Yin's (2009) principles for data collection, this study sought to provide: (1) multiple sources of data, (2) a case study database, and (3) a clear chain of evidence among the questions asked, the data collected, and conclusions drawn. For each case, the primary source of data for this study was one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants. Other sources of data included: (1) documents and archival records, (2) demographic survey, (3) a research activity, (4) a pilot study, and (5) a research journal. The researcher was responsible for all data collection and worked to ensure all of the information was handled and stored in an ethical manner. The following section outlines the data collection process.

Interviews

One of the most important sources for data in qualitative case study research is the interview (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009, 2011). Interviews provide a way to: (1) probe and listen with the intent of getting closer to the meaning of the participants' experiences, (2) engage participants in the process, and (3) establish a dialogue between the participant and researcher (Leavy, 2014). As a result, interviews help build rapport, allow participants to tell their stories from their perspective, and allow subjects to be an active participant in the research process (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leavy, 2014; Yin, 2012).

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended interview

questions, which allowed participants to share detailed and nuanced qualitative information specific to their context (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol (Appendix F/G) was developed using key concepts from the four overlapping layers of Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice and was designed to elicit responses from participants that provide an in-depth understanding and description of their context (Creswell, 2012). As a result, the researcher gained further insight about the influential factors that impacted participants' college choice decision.

Interviews were scheduled at a time and location convenient to the participants, and the researcher sought to interview participants face-to-face before seeking alternative options. Interviews that were not conducted in person took place via video conferencing service or by phone. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes long with 10 minutes for introductory activities, 40 minutes of questioning, and 10 minutes of closure activities. Before the start of the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form, and participants were asked to initial the form confirming their consent. With consent from the participants, individual interviews were digitally recorded, which allowed the researcher to probe and remain attentive to verbal and nonverbal cues (Creswell, 2012; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). To ensure privacy and create a comfortable environment, interviews were conducted one-on-one in a location that allowed the participant to speak freely. All of the interview recordings were stored on the researcher's laptop until they were submitted to REV.com for transcription. Before submitting any of the recordings for transcription, a non-disclosure agreement was acquired from the agency, and the document can be found in Appendix U. For the fourteen interviews conducted during this study, 11 were conducted in a private conference room / classroom, and 3 were conducted by phone.

The interview protocol for students was developed keeping the key elements of Perna's Conceptual Model at the forefront. It was designed to understand the context of (1) the individual's habitus; (2) the student's school and community context; (3) their higher education context; and (4) their broader social, economic, and policy context. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix F, and the interview protocol for key influencers can be found in Appendix G. As each interview concluded, the researcher asked the participant to complete the research activity, discussed the next step in the research process, and answered any last-minute questions before departing. After each interview, the researcher added some reflective notes to ensure all significant details were captured.

Documents and Archival Records

In addition to interviews, documents and archival records were gathered to corroborate and enhance the findings of this study. These included personal documents, high school and college profiles, and higher education and public policy information pertinent to the study (Yin, 2011). Personal documents were requested prior to the interview, and the researcher asked participants to explain what they brought during the interview. Examples of the documents included participants' SAT / ACT scores, high school transcript, scholarship / financial aid information, samples of college admission letters, and essays. To capture highly sensitive information from primary documents that participants may not feel comfortable sharing with the researcher, participants had the opportunity to share self-reported information through the demographic survey, which included prompts for SAT, ACT, and GPA. These documents were key because they provide insight into the participant's habitus (Layer 1) and allowed the researcher to better understand the participant's academic preparation and achievement.

Additionally, the researcher gathered data profiles of each participant's county, local school system and high school, current community college, and the four-year institutions where they were accepted. Information included school report card grades, population and census data (e.g. high school graduation rates, levels of educational attainment, and local economic estimates), institutional profiles for both the two-year and four-year institutions. This information was used to understand the School and Community context (Layer 2) and Higher Education context (Layer 3) for each participant. Lastly, the researcher compiled national and state public policy information (Layer 4) such as admissions and transfer rates, articulation agreements, and economic characteristics during the participant's college choice process. The information gathered helped to further describe the participants' context and allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved (Merriam, 1998).

Research Activity

To generate another form of primary evidence, research participants were asked to conduct a research ranking activity (Appendix H). This research activity was crucial to understand the individual context of the student's college choice decision and provided unique insights across cases. During the interview, participants were provided a listing of factors found in research that are known for influencing the college choice decisions of students and were asked to rate their significance (Namey & Trotter, 1993).

For the activity, each participant was given a list of statements, and they had to rank each item on a scale from 1(not important) – 10 (very important). For statements that were not a factor during their college choice process, students were asked to use an X or 0. During the analysis phase, the researcher compared the findings between participants across cases

and between institutions (Namey & Trotter, 1993). This activity allowed the researcher to gain additional insight into the perspective and experiences from each of the participants and provided a method of comparing experiences across cases. The matrix of responses can be found on Appendix P.

Demographic Survey

For this research project, the demographic survey served as a method for gaining deeper insights about the participants, narrowing and focusing the participant pool, and drawing comparisons across cases and contexts. The surveys were distributed electronically in conjunction with the research consent form, and as responses were returned, the information was entered into the participation matrix (Table 1). Once the information was entered, the original documents were stored in a secure location. The survey allowed the researcher to systematically organize data and served as a tool to understand the diversity of the study's sample. The survey also provided a method of reporting the findings for the individual and collective cases.

Pilot Study

Following Yin's (2009, 2011) criteria for case study research, this study included a pilot case study designed to refine fieldwork procedures, data collection instruments, and methods of analysis. To conduct a timely and efficient pilot test, two students were invited to participate in the study and provide feedback. The participants were both females from two different community colleges. After interviewing the participants, the researcher requested feedback on the interview protocol, pace of the interview, scaffolding of the interview process, the research activity, and the overall feel of the interaction. The pilot was integral in experimenting with the logistics of field inquiry like selecting appropriate interview

locations, determining the structure of the interview process, testing out the digital recording equipment, and creating an efficient and effective method of communication with participants before, during, and following the interview (Yin, 2009). After the interviews were completed, the researcher amended the wording and order of the research questions, changed the introductory and closing procedures, and created an online process for submitting responses to the research activity and demographic survey. The pilot study was also utilized to refine the data collection plans and provided an opportunity to test the procedures for scheduling an interview with the participant, reserving interview meeting spaces, and developing communication templates for future participants. Lastly, the pilot study was used to enhance the quality and validity of the findings presented in the study. Specifically, the pilot helped the researcher practice the interview process, refine the wording of the questions and the order in which the questions were asked, and practice and modify data collection methods in the field.

Research Journal

In addition to the other data collection procedures, the researcher maintained a journal for the entirety of the research process. The journal served as a tool for the researcher to record thoughts, observations, and reflections throughout the study (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the journal provided the researcher an opportunity to record observations at the field sites, notes during the interview process, and reflections regarding each case (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, the journal contained notes during the data collection and data analysis process that allowed the researcher to outline an audit trail through the research process, provide evidence to enhance credibility, and allowed the researcher to feel confident about the observations, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the study (Creswell, 2012;

Eisner, 1991).

Case Study Database

To establish a chain of evidence throughout the data collection process, the researcher utilized clear procedures to organize and document the data collected into a case study database (Yin, 2014). This database contained all of the documents, data, and other evidence gathered during the data collection phase. The data included: (1) interview transcripts and notes, (2) relevant documents, (3) responses from the research activity, and (4) notes from the researcher. The case study database served as an audit trail through the research process and demonstrated a clear chain of evidence, which linked the original research questions to the analysis and final conclusions presented in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009, 2012). As a result, the database was used to help enhance the reliability of the study and provide a method of reproducing confirmatory evidence from the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is an ongoing complex process that involves making sense out of bits of data and concepts to find meaning (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting information throughout the study to begin uncovering themes, which allows the researcher to come to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This process requires systematically "organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them" (Creswell, 2012, p. 179). Creswell (2012) describes this process as a data analysis spiral that involves "(1) Data management, (2) Reading and memoing, (3) Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting data into codes and themes, and (4) Representing and visualizing the data" (p.

179).

Data Management

Within the first phase of data analysis, the researcher compiled and organized data in a consistent manner (Yin, 2001). From the onset, the researcher used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to store, access, and organize the wealth of information generated from the pilot study, interviews, archival documents, research activity, and research journal. For this study, this software was used to import and manage all data including documents, images, PDFs, audio, video, transcripts, spreadsheets, and web pages. Notes and files were organized by the participant's pseudonym, and handwritten notes were typed or scanned. To efficiently and effectively transcribe the wealth of interview data, REV.com transcription service was used to transcribe recordings verbatim. Before transcripts were submitted to the vendor, a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) was acquired to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' responses. Files were uploaded and downloaded using a secure server, and no one else was given access to the primary research files. Once the transcripts were returned, the researcher reviewed them for accuracy and emailed a copy of the transcript to the participants for member checking (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009, 2011). This was done to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the interviews, further engage the participant in the research process, and maintain an ongoing dialogue with participants throughout the analysis phase (Creswell, 2012, 2014).

Reading and Memoing

After the data was organized, the next step was to gain a sense of the entire wealth of data before continuing analysis (Creswell, 2012). Before proceeding, it was imperative to develop an analytic strategy to (1) guide the analysis process, (2) treat the data consistently

and fairly, (3) produce compelling analytic findings, and (4) gain intimate familiarity with what had been collected (Leavy, 2014; Yin 2009). During this phase, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts, re-listened to recordings, and reread the research journal and notes from the interviews (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the researcher wrote thoughts and notes during this process to begin shaping general ideas and concepts (Creswell, 2012). Using Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice as a template, the researcher began to organize data into categories using the contextual layers from the model. Yin (2011) suggests that researchers ask questions such as:

- What are the distinctive features of the study?
- How might the collected data relate to the original research questions? or
- Are there potentially new insights that have emerged? (Yin, 2012, p. 183).

During this iterative process, the researcher reflected and noted the initial thoughts of how to disassemble the data and begin the coding process (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2012).

Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting Data into Codes and Themes

The next step in the data analysis process was to form codes / categories from the data to build detailed descriptions of the context, develop themes across cases, and move toward a higher conceptual interpretation (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2012). As Creswell (2012) states, "the process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in the study, then assigning a label to code" (Creswell, 2012, P. 179). To analyze the data, the researcher used multiple coding strategies. These strategies were: (1) Attribute Coding, (2) Deductive / Provisional Coding, and (3) Holistic Coding (Saldana, 2009).

Attribute coding. In qualitative research, attribute coding is used to organize and harmonize the information collected throughout the study. It is particularly useful for consistent data management and helps organize studies with multiple participants and research sites (Saldana, 2009). Saldana (2009) recommends using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to capture descriptive information such as:

> The fieldwork setting (e.g., school name, city, country), participant characteristics or demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, health), data format (e.g., interview transcript, field note, document), time frame (e.g., 2007, May 2005, 8:00–10:00 a.m.), and other variables of interest for qualitative and some applications of quantitative analysis (p. 55).

For this study, participant attribute codes came from the participant matrix, and codes were generated from the fieldwork sites to note the date, setting, and format. The researcher has presented a summary matrix as a part of the case study database.

Deductive / provisional / a priori coding. In qualitative research, deductive / provisional coding begins with a predetermined list of codes developed through a review of the literature, the study's conceptual framework, feedback from a pilot study, or the researcher's prior knowledge (Creswell, 2012; Saldana, 2009). For this study, the prefigured provisional codes came from the components within the four layers of Perna's Model of College Choice. The researcher reviewed each piece of data and directly assigned codes where appropriate. To code data deductively, the coding scheme below (Table 2) was created using the components from Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice and relates directly to the study's research questions. The researcher read through the transcripts and assigned the data a layer, sublayer and code (e.g. 1.a.ii = Habitus.Demographics.gender, 3.b.ii=

HigherEdContext.Location.Distance). Additionally, as codes were assigned, a preliminary frequency count was conducted to measure the number of occurrences within an individual case and across case comparisons (Creswell, 2012).

To code data that does not fit into the coding scheme, the researcher was open to additional codes emerging during analysis (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2012). Once an initial round of coding was complete, the researcher used inductive coding to allow additional codes to emerge. The codes were consolidated into themes, and themes that were identified repeatedly were included in the final case analysis. After each individual case was coded and themes were identified, the researcher created a case report, including a detailed description of the individual case, a summary of the cases from each research site, and a comprehensive description across all cases and sites included in the study.

Holistic coding. Holistic coding is a strategy in qualitative research that allows a wealth of data to be clustered into basic themes or issues (Saldana, 2009). It is a time-saving process that helps reduce massive amounts of data into broad topic areas for analysis and generalizability (Saldana, 2009). This study sought to interview 15-20 primary participants and to also interview individuals who were significant influencers to the participant's college choice decision. Due to the amount of data, holistic coding was utilized to organize data into broad topic areas for cross-case comparisons (Creswell, 2012).

During analysis, the researcher considered how codes fell into one of three categories: (1) codes that were expected after a review of the literature or prior knowledge, (2) codes that were surprising and unanticipated, and (3) codes that were unusual or conceptually interesting (Creswell, 2012, 2014). The next step in the data analysis process was to move beyond codes to describe the setting, people, or context (Creswell, 2014). By developing

more complex categories and themes, the coding process allowed the researcher to generate a description of the participants' context, institutional context, and finally a cross-case description (Creswell, 2012, 2014; Yin, 2009).

Interpreting the Data

In qualitative research, interpretation involves moving beyond codes and themes to find a greater meaning and complexity within the data (Creswell, 2012). In a case study, themes are analyzed for each individual case and across cases to form complex connections and overarching themes. During this phase of the research process, Yin (2009) calls for the use of multiple analytic techniques including: theoretical replication and cross-case analysis. These techniques provide a systematic way to determine how the data is analyzed and strategies to help increase the study's validity and reliability.

Theoretical Replication

This case study was exploratory and, therefore, was designed to uncover cases that produced contrasting conclusions. The participants for this study were selected intentionally because they provide different institutional settings, life experiences, and contexts. Though these students share a common phenomenon, the researcher expected to find different factors relating to their college choice process. In this approach, analysis was used to identify the contrasting differences between cases and develop theoretically significant explanation for the varying outcomes (Yin, 2009). For this research, each case consisted of a "whole" study, in which conclusions were drawn individually before considering replication and seeking comparisons across cases (Yin, 2009; Yin, 2012). Additionally, the researcher looked for rival explanations and ways in which cases differed between one another and the context of the institutional setting.

Cross-Case Analysis

In qualitative studies with multiple cases, the use of cross-case analysis allows the researcher to synthesize and aggregate the findings from individual cases into an overall summary report (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). Generalizations about the college choice process for all participants are presented, and across-case conclusions have been made. Similarities and differences are described using a clear chain of evidence, which can be followed from the study's propositions to its conclusions (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). Because this study was conducted at six unique research sites throughout North Carolina, cross case synthesis took place within each institutional setting and as part of the full case report. Figure 4 illustrates that cross-case analysis took place between the individual cases, at the different institutional settings, and across all of the cases investigated in the study.

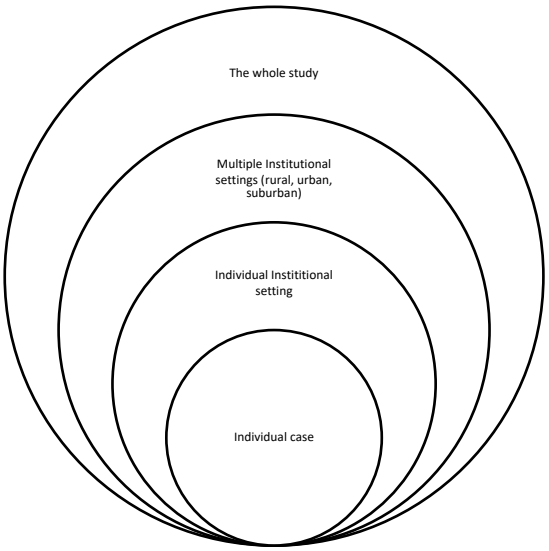

Figure 4: Model of Cross Case Analysis

The goal of using the three types of institutional settings is to highlight the impact of distance on a student's college choice and discern how students from rural, urban, and suburban

regions throughout the state make their enrollment decisions. This method allowed the researcher to display multiple perspectives from individuals embedded within these institutions. It also yielded an accurate description of the undermatching phenomenon, which is supported by evidence that addresses trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the study (Creswell, 2012).

Representing and Visualizing the Data

In the final phase of the analysis process, the researcher sought to present the data in a manner that illustrates methodological rigor, clear and consistent logic, and provides scaffolding so the reader can retrace the researcher's thought process (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009, 2011). The conclusions from this study are presented in several ways, including narrative case study reports, tables / matrices, and graphs / images.

Case Study Report

The case study report for this research contains multiple narratives with analysis and generalizations across institutions and individual contexts (Yin, 2009). Within these individualized narratives, Creswell (2014) suggests the use of direct quotes and dialogue that reflects the culture of participants, the use of first person, and the use of metaphors and analogies (p. 579). To aid the reader, case studies are often told as stories to vividly describe an individual or group, explore the context, or describe the phenomenon itself (Creswell, 2012). Stake (1995) suggests the following strategies:

- Open with a vignette so that the reader can develop a vicarious experience to get a feel for the time and place of the study.

- Identify the issue, the purpose, and the method of the study so that the reader learns about how the study came to be, the background of the writer, and the issues surrounding the case.
- Provide an extensive description of the case and its context— a body of relatively uncontested data— a description the reader might make if he or she had been there.
- Present key issues, so that the reader can understand the complexity of the case. Then, probe several of the issues further in order to bring forth both confirming and disconfirming evidence.
- Present a summary of what the writer understands about the case and whether the initial naturalistic generalizations, conclusions arrived at through personal experience or offered as vicarious experiences for the reader, have been changed conceptually or challenged.
- Finally, the writer ends with a closing vignette, an experiential note, reminding the reader that this report is one person's encounter with a complex case. (As cited in Creswell, 2012).

This format was appealing because it allowed the researcher to provide a rich description of the cases, explain the assertions and interpretations, and tell a complex and interwoven narrative. Additionally, this format allowed the researcher to be mindful of the embedded structure of this inquiry by explaining how the college choice of one individual is layered within the individual's habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and the broader social, economic, and policy context (Creswell, 2012; Perna, 2006; Yin, 2009). The narratives in the case study report were first written at the individual level to present the

participants' individualized context before exploring the similarities and differences within and between the research sites. To conclude the findings, a summary narrative is provided to capture the overarching themes and provide broad overview of participants' college choice decisions.

Tables and Matrices

Another strategy for visually representing the data is organizing data into a table or matrix (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). Tables and matrices are powerful tools that allow researchers to quickly, efficiently, and effectively identify patterns, break up large amounts of data, and organize information into meaningful chunks. This study uses tables and matrices in several ways, including: (1) describe the study's sample, (2) display coding themes, categories, and frequency counts, and (3) help demonstrate and maintain a clear chain of evidence (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009).

Graphs and Images

The final method for displaying and representing data is the use of graphs and diagrams. These tools allow the researcher to display complex relationships and concepts in a structured manner and, as a result, provide the reader additional clarity in the study's findings. In this study, diagrams allowed the researcher to illustrate concepts, themes, and their relationships (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As stated previously, these graphs and images were utilized to highlight the college choice process for individuals, institutional settings, and the cause-effect relationships across all of the cases included in the study (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). As a result, interpretations from this study provide a description of the undermatching phenomenon among the participants and offers cross-case explanations for how and why participants made their college choice decision (Yin, 2011).

Validity, Credibility, & Trustworthiness

To assess the quality of qualitative case study research, Yin (2011) suggests that researchers consider four criteria: (1) construct validity, (2) internal validity, (3) external validity, and (4) reliability (Yin, 2009). Within construct validity, Yin (2009) calls for the use of multiple sources of evidence, establishment of a clear chain of evidence, and consultation with key informants during the composition of the study. This study addresses each of these points by utilizing a wide variety of data collection methods, establishing a clear chain of evidence though the use of multiple methods, and seeking the opinion of expert researchers during the planning and implementation of the study.

To promote internal validity, the researcher utilized pattern matching, explanation building, and uncovering rival explanations (Yin, 2009, 2011). The research activity incorporated within this study lends itself to pattern matching and explanation-building between cases and across institutional settings. The researcher addressed the issue of rival explanations during the data collection phase and the data analysis phase. In addressing whether the study's findings are generalizable beyond each individual case, this study addresses external validity by testing theories to replicate findings and producing strong support for the theory in each of the cases (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011). Additionally, the researcher identified practical generalizations to help practitioners interact with undermatched students.

Lastly, reliability was addressed by providing a clear and concise research protocol while also utilizing a case study database during the design, implementation, and analysis stages (Yin, 2009, 2011). Furthermore, this study sought to strengthen the creditability of the findings through primary sources such as member checking, seeking multiple sources of data,

and the inclusion of the research activity (Creswell, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

This study was designed to ensure participant confidentiality and transparency throughout the research process. From the onset, participants in the research settings were assigned a pseudonym, and their identity was protected. Furthermore, the researcher went through a full IRB review with North Carolina State University and the individual community college research sites. To ensure integrity within the field sites, the researcher was the sole collector of data, and all identifiable information was stored securely where only the researcher had access. All of the files and recordings were stored on a password-protected laptop within a secured folder. A third-party transcription service was used to transcribe interview recordings, and all files were transferred through a secure server. Additionally, to further ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, the researcher required a non-disclosure agreement from the transcription vendor. Once the faculty sponsor of the research project confirms the data is no longer needed, all videos, transcripts, recordings, and other identifiable information will be permanently destroyed. To offer an incentive to participants and compensate them for their time, a $20 Amazon gift card was emailed to each participant upon completion of the interview. Due to the nature of the research approach, the participants' experiences and perceptions throughout this study are shared using direct quotes and were not altered in any way.

Limitations

While this study offers insight into the college choice decisions of students, several possible limitations are worth noting, including: (1) access to sites and participants, (2) sample size, (3) limited time in the field, (4) availability and reliability of data, (5) missteps

in data collection and data analysis, and (6) personal bias. Before the researcher could begin fieldwork, he had to receive IRB approval from NCSU. The sample size may be limited due to the requirements and timeline of the research study. Additionally, participants may have been embarrassed to admit they were admitted to a number of four-year institutions yet chose to enroll in a community college. To assist with recruitment, the researcher offered a small monetary incentive. Also, the participants from this study are from six community colleges in a Southeastern state in the U.S., which cannot account for the experiences of college students who attend college in another region of the United States or in another country. Furthermore, only six of the 58 community colleges throughout North Carolina are represented, which does not make the study's findings widely generalizable. Lastly, depending on the outcome of the site selection, the colleges may fall within the same geographic region. Regarding time in the field, the researcher made every effort to talk with participants face-to-face and follow up when clarification was needed. Travel time and distance constraints limited additional time face-to-face with each of the research participants. The study was also limited by time constraints and deadlines, and prolonged fieldwork was not possible.

Qualitative studies are only as good as the data collected and researcher analysis. The college choice process is a complex phenomenon that required the researcher to understand the individualized context of each participant. As a result, the researcher had to understand a wide variety of influencers in the student's life (e.g., guardians, teachers, counselors, or other influential people). Additionally, the researcher had to find evidence of the factors identified in Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice. The researcher ensured that data was reliable, meaningful, and addressed any gaps or missing data identified throughout the

research process. The researcher also assured there were no missteps in data collection and analysis. Backup files were created and stored in a secure location to ensure that data was not lost or tampered with. Additionally, the researcher made sure that data collection and analysis were done in a consistent manner. Lastly, the researcher addressed bias in the study by offering the statement of positionality below and by being consciously aware of the ways in which personal bias, opinions, beliefs, values, and experiences affect the research process (Creswell, 2012). Future studies should explore undermatching utilizing different theoretical frameworks in order to describe the unique transition students are making from high school through community college to a four-year institution and ultimately to graduation. Nevertheless, the findings of this study provide a foundation for better understanding the undermatching phenomenon and college choice decisions of community college students in higher education.

Positionality

I am an African American male who is invested in the lives of students in secondary and post-secondary education of North Carolina. In my professional capacity, I serve as the Associate Director of Student Life for the North Carolina Community College System and have the opportunity to interact with students from across the state. Before April 2016, I served as an Academic Support Specialist for a mid-sized, suburban community college, and I interacted with many transfer students. Although I have worked with community college students in many capacities, I do not have the lived experience of being a transfer student. As someone who used to work with and assist these students on a daily basis, this research has allowed me to not only understand the college choice decision process students go through, but it has also helped me utilize the insights gained from this study in my

interactions with current and future students. Given my relationship with many of the transfer students on multiple campuses, I acknowledge my personal perspectives and beliefs, and I am aware of how they might influence the outcome of this study.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

Chapter Four presents the research findings and the data analysis for this study. Data analysis identified common themes that emerged from the participants' interviews, research activity, and demographic surveys. In this chapter, the researcher uses the words and stories of 14 students who recently experienced a college choice process. This chapter is organized into two sections. The first section introduces the participants through annotative biographical narratives and reviews their individual college choices. Section two presents the research findings using Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice to organize and highlight the themes that emerged from analysis. This model creates an effective way to report data for this study and provides a framework to include students' voices to describe factors that influenced their college choice process.

Participant Narratives

To protect the students' confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for each participant's name and community college. The narratives and research activity results are included to further understand the college choice process and allow the participant's decision to be viewed within the context of their experiences. The researcher has included all narratives; the first also includes the research activity (Table 2) as an exemplar. The other research activity responses appear beginning in Appendix I.

Paula Baker

Paula Baker is a Caucasian female student attending Urban Campus One enrolled in the Associate of Arts degree program. After completing her associate degree, she intends to transfer and pursue a Bachelor of Arts in a Communication Science and Disorders program. After she graduates, she will consider graduate school or look for employment in the field of

Speech Therapy or teaching ESL. She became interested in speech therapy because her sister has a speech disorder. To fully immerse herself in the career field, she currently works part-time in a speech therapy office and volunteers in a program for ESL students at her community college.

During her college choice process, Paula's top institutions were Appalachian State University and Western Carolina University. During her senior year, she toured both institutions and enjoyed the "outdoorsy" atmosphere of both places. Paula was an academically gifted student in high school, graduating with a 4.0 GPA, 29 ACT score, and 1800 on the SAT. She also completed 10 AP courses, accumulating over 40 hours of college credit. When asked about her decision to enroll at the community college instead of the four-year institutions, she replied:

> I started just looking at the money and just seeing how much money you could actually save by coming to community college. That was really the big drawing card for me. I can just come here and get all my Gen Ed stuff out of the way for a lot cheaper and they'll give me a lot more credit for the APs that I took in high school. I figured I'll just do that and transfer….I guess a lot of people were surprised that I ended up coming here instead of going somewhere else. There was definitely a lot of, "Oh, community college, alright." I don't know…. To me, I'm not really going to be concerned with what other people think. I think this was the best opportunity for me so that's what I did.

Paula's parents both have bachelor's degrees, and they have talked to her about going to college since elementary school. Her mother currently works as an administrative assistant, and her father is a Heart Catheterization Equipment installer. When asked who in her life has influenced her college choice decisions, she referenced her parents and a High School Spanish teacher who served as a mentor.

Once she ultimately made her decision to enroll in the community college, Paula mentioned that several of her teachers and classmates were surprised by her decision. She

explains, “I guess a lot of people were surprised that I ended up coming here instead of going somewhere else. There was definitely a lot of, ‘Oh, community college, all right.’" Ultimately, she is happy with her decision and knows her parents would have supported her if she had chosen to enroll in a four-year institution instead. In the end, from a convenience and financial standpoint, matriculating to Urban Campus One “just made more sense.” She lives less than 10 minutes away from her campus, the institution accepted all AP credit, and she is saving the family money.

Paula’s highest responses to the ranking activity indicate that cost, avoiding loans and debt, and still being able to complete her educational aspirations through the transfer process were significant factors for her.

Table 2

Paula’s Research Activity Rankings
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Paula Baker
I did not have to take out any student loans	10
Cost of four-year institution	9
Cost of two-year institution	9
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	9
I did not want to take out student loans	9
Transferring would save my family money	8
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	7
I was encouraged by my family	7
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	6
I wanted smaller class sizes	4
Distance from home	3
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	3
I was encouraged by my peers	3
I wanted to be close to my peers	3
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	1
I was unsure of my major	0

Table 2 *continued*

I received more scholarship money at my community college	0
I did not want to live on campus	0
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0

Daniel Fernandez

Daniel Fernandez is an Hispanic male student attending Rural Campus One enrolled in the Associate of Arts program. After completing his associate degree and transferring to a senior institution, he intends to complete a Bachelor of Science in Finance to pursue a career of a Financial Advisor or Accountant. Daniel is a first-generation college student; both of his parents have less than a high school education. As the flag bearer of the family, Daniel feels that he must set an example for his nine-year-old sister.

During his college choice process, Daniel applied and was admitted to three four-year institutions: Western Carolina University, Campbell University, and Wingate University. He was also admitted to a neighboring urban community college but chose the more intimate setting of Rural Campus one. Daniel describes this decision: "the big thing with me is I wanted a college or university that was more of a rural setting."

Daniel graduated from his high school with a 3.7 GPA, a 27 ACT score, and a 1690 on the SAT. He completed several AP and honors credits, but in addition to academic success, Daniel was a starter on the football team. He discusses the difficulty of making his college choice decision during March of his Senior year:

> I think it's a lot more convenient for me to just go ahead and go to community college. Before then, I had really had a tough time deciding between Western Carolina University and community college because I really wanted to go to Western, but at the end of the day, I didn't want to put that financial burden on my parents, so I

said, well, I'll go ahead and go to community college first, and then transfer. Because he took AP English, Daniel was able to visit several four-year institutions during his college choice process. He also had university visits associated with being on the football team. As a result, he explored UNC Chapel Hill, Duke University, Campbell University, and Western Carolina University. Daniel stated that the counselor from Carolina Advising Corps helped him weigh all of his options. Ultimately, his college choice decision was guided by his desire to save his family money, attend a college in a smaller setting, and stay closer to his family. He explains, “Finances was one of my main concerns, and another concern was it’s a long ways away”.

The feedback on Daniel’s research activity aligns with his desire to save his family money; all of the items related to cost and loans received the highest score. When asked how he ultimately made his decision, he states, “I tried to be objective, and not tried to spend more time on one university instead of another. I tried to look at them all equally and truly consider every single one”. As he moves into his second year, he is excited about exploring new transfer institutions and continuing to pursue his education.

Annalise Grant

Annalise Grant is an Hispanic female student attending Rural Campus Two enrolled in the Associates of Sciences program. After completing her associate degree, she intends to transfer to UNC Wilmington to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. As a backup plan, she will also apply for the Associate Degree in Nursing program at her community college, to complete an RN to BSN program at a four-year university.

During her college choice process, Annalise applied and was admitted into three four-year institutions: East Carolina University, UNC Charlotte, and North Carolina Central University. When asked why she chose to enroll in a community college, she stated:

> After getting accepted to so many colleges and touring them, they're really pretty and stuff, but like financial wise it just seemed more convenient to go to a community college and then just transfer to a university to save money. I felt like I had more options in case like I could if I didn't want to do the transfer program I could get an associate's degree. I wanted to be a nurse. I can get an associate's degree in nursing and then if I wanted to go back to school I could do like an RN to like a BSN program. If I didn't get into a nursing program I would just transfer to university. I felt like I would have more options; whereas, if I go to university, it's just you go to university.

Annalise is a first-generation college student; her mother has less than a high school education. Her mother currently works in a factory position, and to support the family, Annalise works while being enrolled full-time. When discussing the relationship with her mother and the financial situation of the family, she shared:

> My mom doesn't make a lot of money, so she told me straight ahead like if you do go to university I'm going to support you, but I'm not going to be able to help you. Pretty much I was on my own if I went to a university.

Due to the financial aid she receives at her community college, Annalise has been able to pursue her goals and have all educational expenses covered. As a result, she is able to save the money she earns from work for her future educational experiences. When asked who influenced her college choice process, she quickly highlighted the support from her mother and the lack of support from her school counselor. She reiterates, "I think what would've helped me the most was if I would've sat down with like a counselor I guess one on one and literally evaluate each option that you had if that makes sense." Though she did not find the necessary assistance at her school, she leaned on the experience of friends and distance

relatives to make her decision. Her responses on the research activity illustrate the urge to save her family money and avoid taking out student loans.

Jamie Hollins

Jamie Hollins is a Caucasian female student attending Urban Campus One enrolled in the Associate of Science program. After completing her associate degree, she intends to transfer to NC State University to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Physics and a minor in astronomy. After she graduates, she will consider graduate school or look for employment in an aerospace tech company specializing in manufacturing and design.

During her college choice process, Jamie applied to 2 four-year universities. She was admitted into UNC Asheville but took some time off to work before enrolling in school. During this time, she was involved in an unhealthy relationship:

> I had this one boyfriend that I dated for two years, and he was set on keeping me down here, and not up here, because he was down here, and I was somewhere above, you know? He wanted to keep me down to his level, so that I never would leave him or anything like that. He would definitely discourage me from working. He made me quit multiple jobs. He didn't want me to work at all, and if I did get a job, it had to be a place where there was just mostly females. He was very controlling. He was a horrible boyfriend, horrible dude…. Yeah, so that was one thing, one of the reasons why for two years straight I wasn't even considering college, because he would put these images. Not images, but ideas in my head that I didn't need to go to college, and that he would provide, or that he just didn't want me to do anything.

Reflecting on the decision to seek higher education, she feels she is taking it much more seriously than she would have a few years ago and is glad that she can focus on herself. To pay for school, she has been working full-time in addition to her full-time academic course load.

Jamie's parents both have bachelor's degrees, and she comes from a middle-income household. Her mother is a retired Art Teacher, and her father is a Software Engineer. She also has an older sister who also went to Urban Campus One, but she ended up on academic

probation and never reenrolled. However, Jamie credits her sister as an influence in her decision to enroll:

> I just didn't know what to do, and then since my sister had been through college, she was really the one that guided me through the whole process. Helping me register for classes, FAFSA, and just all of the stuff. She actually recommended professors that I signed up for classes with, and I'm with two of the professors that she recommended, and they're great. I'm really grateful that she had the insight to recommend all this stuff to me, but she needs to go back to college herself, if she can.

Now that she focused on her education, Jamie has been able to maintain a 4.0 GPA. While completing the research activity, she described her 17-year-old self as "unmotivated and uncertain of what she was going to do." Now, she has a plan, the motivation, and is not weighed down by negativity.

Conway Matthews

Conway Matthews is a Caucasian male attending Rural Campus One enrolled in the Associates of Sciences degree program. After transferring to a four-year institution, he is pursuing his degree in biology with the goal of becoming a Biological Scientist. During his college choice process, Conway applied to four institutions: NC State, UNC Chapel Hill, UNC Charlotte, and Western Carolina University. After being rejected from his top choice (NC State), he decided to attend Rural Campus One even though he was admitted into UNC Charlotte and Western Carolina University. During his interview, he reminisces about this decision:

> After I got rejected from a top school in high school after applying, well I thought to myself, would I really want to go to one of my second-choice schools or can I take this opportunity, go to community college, do well and then transfer it to the school I want to go to?

Ultimately, Conway decided to attend his local community college, and since he lived less than 5 minutes away, the transition has been convenient. Additionally, both of his parents

attended the local community college; therefore, he was very familiar with the campus and environment. His mother received her Associate of Nursing degree, and his father received an Associate Degree in Electrical Systems Technology. Conway also has a brother who attends Western Carolina University, which is why he considered attending, but ultimately enrolled at the community college. When asked about the top three reasons for choosing his current plan, he responded:

> I knew the school that I wanted to go to and I knew that if I wanted to transfer or if I went to a school that wasn't that school, I knew I would have wanted to transfer. Why waste the money was my first reason, right?... Even if I hadn't applied to any other schools, it's just a lot cheaper to go to a community college and then transfer to a four-year university….I guess my third option would be I know community colleges in North Carolina are held up to the same standards as ... at least, I believe, their professors are supposed to be held up to the same academic standards as regular universities throughout the state that are state-based.

Conway's response to the research activity mirrored the sentiments he shared during the interview. His highest responses focused on saving his family money as a transfer student and the encouragement he received from his parents.

Alice Meheridth

Alice Meheridth is a Caucasian female attending Urban Campus One and enrolled in the Associate of Science program. After transferring to a senior institution, she intends to pursue a bachelor's degree in Nursing to become a Neonatal Nurse or Nurse Practitioner. She has been interested in the medical field since middle school and attributes her interest in nursing to her grandmother and other members of her family. As an early high school graduate, she began her senior year taking college courses through the Career and College Promise Program (CCP). In North Carolina, the Career and College Promise Program allows qualified students to take courses tuition-free along three educational pathways which earn

dual credit in one of three formats: college transfer, career and technical education, or attend a cooperative innovative high school. Due to her participation, she has accumulated over 20 hours' worth of college credit that will all transfer to a senior institution.

During her college choice process, Alice was accepted into four four-year institutions: East Carolina University, UNC Greensboro, Winston Salem State University, and Wingate University. When asked why she chose to enroll at the community college first, she responded:

> I had decided that I was going to graduate early, and I chose to go to a community college before I went to a university because of financial needs and the classes ... I could get about four classes that were cheaper instead of paying for them at the university. I did it to get ahead, before I go in the fall.

Instead of completing the full associate degree, she intends to enroll in East Carolina University in Fall 2017.

Alice's parents both have bachelor's degrees. Her mother works as a Project Specialist, and her father works as a General Contractor. She has two older brothers that both attended community colleges, so Alice will be the first sibling to "have the experience of moving into the dorms and all that." When asked who influenced her decisions, she referenced her grandmother:

> My family has many people in the medical field, primarily nurses. My grandmother, whom I lived part time with my mom, she's a nurse, so she's been highly involved in my life and kind of influencing my decisions and what I want to be. I kind of grew up going to where she worked and seeing it and just kind of learning to love what she did.

The responses on her research activity show the need to save her family money but also follow her dreams. She ranked all of the statements associated with cost with the high scores and also stressed the influence of siblings and family.

Camia Ormond

Camia Ormond is a Caucasian female attending Urban Campus One enrolled in the Associate of Arts program. After transferring to a senior institution, she intends to transfer to East Carolina University to pursue a bachelor's degree in Special Education with a minor in Sign Language. Her career goal is to return to her county to teach students with Down Syndrome, Autism, and other behavioral issues.

During her college choice process, Camia applied to three institutions: East Carolina University, Methodist University, and NC State University, but was only admitted into Methodist University. When reflecting on her college choice experience, she references the cost of attending a four-year university:

> So I had looked into MU to see if they had the Special Ed program, and they did. And then, I found out I had got accepted and I got a scholarship that seemed quite big, but I found out I could only use a certain amount a year. I was like, I don't have the money to pay for MU for the rest of the year because in my household we don't have a lot of money. We live on a very, very limited to low income because I live with my mom and she's trying to get her disability. And my stepdad is a retired, disabled Navy seal and he has his disabilities. So, we basically live off of his check.

Camia comes from a low-income household, and her parents are divorced. Her mother has a bachelor's degree in Psychology, but she is currently unemployed and receiving Medicaid. Her biological father dropped out of college and currently works in construction. To support herself and the family, she works approximately 20 hours a week while enrolled as a full-time student. When asked why she did not attend the rural community college in her county, she said, "I did not want to go at all, because to me it looks like a prison." A significant influence in her life has been her grandfather. She recalls, "I can always remember telling my mom when I was in elementary school, 'Mom, I want to go to NC State when I'm older. Mom, I want to be like grandpa and go to NC State.'" Though she is not at NC State, she

feels that enrolling at her community college "is no doubt in my mind, one of the best decisions I've ever made." When discussing the responses on her survey, Camia expressed the need to avoid student loan debt and save money for her four-year university experience.

Ariel Patrick

Ariel Patrick is an Hispanic female attending Urban Campus One enrolled in the Associate of Science program. After transferring to a senior institution, she intends to complete a Bachelor of Science in Animal Science with the goal of applying to veterinary school. Ariel is a first-generation college student, and both of her parents speak limited English. When recounting her college choice experience, she shared:

> It was hard at first. I felt since my family ... I'm the first one to go to college, essentially, so everything that I had to learn about it, I had to do on my own because my parents don't really speak English as well, so they weren't much of a help. I had to look everything up, and fill everything up myself so it was stressful at first.

Ariel is the oldest sibling in the household. She has a sister who is 12 and a brother who is 8. In her interview, she also voiced the pressure of being the flagbearer for her family: "It was all on me that I had to make my own decision and figure out by myself. I'm also the oldest, so I also didn't have an older sibling to guide me that was older." Neither of Ariel's parents completed a high school degree. Her mother is currently out of work, and her father works in construction. To support herself and the family, Ariel has a part-time job working approximately 30 hours and maintains full-time enrollment status.

Ariel attended a large public high school in Durham, NC. She graduated with a 3.6 GPA and took several AP and honors courses. During her college choice experience, she recounts feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information but not having anyone to help her determine the best path and decision. She was admitted to Meredith College, a women's liberal art college, but after visiting the campus and considering the financial obligations, she

didn't feel prepared to attend. Ariel said the apprehension of taking the next step and the support that came from her mother were significant factors in her college choice experience.

Ed Sheran

Ed Sheran is a Caucasian male student attending Suburban Campus Three enrolled in the Associate of Arts program. After completing his associate degree, he intends to transfer to UNC Wilmington or East Carolina University to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. During his college choice process, Ed applied and was admitted to UNC Greensboro. Additionally, he has considered pursuing a degree in physical therapy after he finishes his four-year degree. He has also considered acquiring his EMT license to gain hands-on work experience and earn money toward his future educational expenses.

Ed went to a high school ranked in the top ten of Best High Schools in NC according to the US News and World Report rankings. He graduated with a 3.7 GPA and earned a 27 on the ACT. In addition, Ed participated in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, and as a result, was enrolled in a rigorous pathway of honors and Advanced Placement courses each year. Ed began the program during his sophomore year of high school and developed a strong relationship with a teacher he would later consider a significant influence during his college choice process. In fact, Ed credits this teacher for encouraging him to apply for 35 scholarships during his senior year. His teacher also arranged campus visits to several four-year institutions and local community colleges.

Ed comes from a middle-income household, and both of his parents have master's degrees. His mother is currently a stay-at-home-mom, and his father currently works as a Mechanical Engineer. However, he chose to enroll in the community college first because of financial and comfort considerations:

> UNC-G just wasn't an option at the time because I wasn't ready to leave the household. My grades were good enough, but I just wasn't ready physically and I decided that I would rather stay at home a little bit longer and get some stuff out of the way and financially, it would be easier on my parents because my brother's going to Asheville this year and my sister's a senior. It's kind of crazy for my parents because they're all going to college, too, and my dad's stressing out.

During his interview, Ed disclosed that he and his family had to deal with several medical issues in high school. Late in his Junior year, he was bitten by a tick and developed Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. In addition, he had multiple oral surgeries as a result of improper healing for his wisdom teeth. His father suffered a severe heart attack his senior year, and Ed has suffered from Autism since being diagnosed in middle school. The results of his research ranking correlate to the major issues his family faced during his college choice decision. He was not ready to leave his family given the health concerns, and as a result, he sought to save his family money by attending a community college first.

Fisher Simmons

Fisher Simmons is a Caucasian male attending Suburban Campus One and is enrolled in the Associate of Arts program. His current plan is to transfer to UNC Charlotte after completing his associate degree, but he is still unsure of his major. Fisher reflected on his college choice experience and provided insight into this dilemma:

> After talking, touring colleges & universities, it just didn't feel right yet. It felt like it was a little too early. I was like, I think community college is a great next step. I don't know what I want to study. If I get accepted to a university, what am I even gonna be studying? So, I was looking at the programs here, and all that prior knowledge, and I was thinking this is a really good first step. Especially if I come here, change a major, change a degree, the cost first of all is a lot better.

Fisher graduated from high school with a 3.65 GPA. During his senior year, he applied to Coastal Carolina, UNC Charlotte, and Appalachian State and was admitted to UNC

Charlotte. Both of his parents have post-secondary degrees; his mother completed an associate degree, and his father completed a master's degree.

In addition, Fisher's brother attends his current community college, his mother is also a graduate from Suburban campus one, and his father works at a neighboring community college. Fisher's family has always supported his educational pursuits, and during his choice process, he recalls one of their conversations when his father stated, "Well, I work at a community college. A lot of the time when kids, like students, don't know what they want to do this is a good first step".

Fisher stated the most significant factors impacting his college decision were his uncertainty of his major and the support he received from his family to seek the transfer route to accomplish his goals. He credits his father for being the most influential person during his college choice process.

Katherine Smith

Katherine Smith is a Caucasian female student attending Suburban Campus One and is enrolled in the Associate of Arts program. After completing her associate degree, she intends to transfer to UNC Greensboro to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Speech Pathology and Audiology. After she graduates, she will consider graduate school or look for employment in the field of Speech Therapy.

During her college choice process, Katherine applied and visited several institutions, including: UNC Greensboro, Wingate, and her community college. She was admitted to all three institutions, and her first choice was UNC Greensboro. After weighing her options, she decided to enroll in the community college because of financial concerns:

> Well, I knew that if I went to UNCG and I stayed on campus, it would be around $15,000. If I didn't stay on campus, it would be around 10,000. Wingate, it would be

> $30,000 but I had a $15,000 scholarship so it'd still be around $15,000. At DCCC, I really didn't know exactly what a cost would be but I knew it would be a lot cheaper. I did get scholarships from (suburban campus one). It was 1000 dollars for two semesters, so split by 500. That has helped tremendously. This semester I had to pay around 100 dollars out of pocket.

Thanks to financial aid and scholarships, almost all of Katherine's educational expenses have been covered. She has always been a strong student. She graduated from her high school with a 3.9 GPA and took several honors courses. She intends to complete her associate degree before she transfers and is working to ensure her GPA remains above a 3.5.

Katherine comes from a middle-income family. Her mother dropped out of high school and attended her local community college to complete her GED, and her father is currently employed in a local technology company. Though her mother did not graduate from college, she considers her mother a significant influence to pursue her education. Her mother has always encouraged her to follow her heart and follow her dreams. This sentiment is reflected in her responses to the research activity; her highest rated items are to deal with the issue of debt avoidance.

Michelle Smith

Michelle Smith is an African-American female attending Urban Campus One and is enrolled in the Associate of Science program. After transferring to a senior institution, she intends to pursue a bachelor's degree in Nursing and ultimately pursue a master's degree to become a Nurse Practitioner. Michelle has had a passion for science and medicine since she was a child, and she attributes her career trajectory to her mother and father.

Michelle was a very good student in high school. She graduated with a 3.75 GPA and an ACT score of 25. During her senior year, she applied to East Carolina University and

UNC Charlotte and was accepted to both institutions. After consideration, East Carolina University became her first choice:

> I didn't have this long list of schools I wanted to go to because I lived in a small town. I didn't really want to go to these huge universities, so that was a huge factor because I didn't want to go to a very large campus school. I like smaller more tight knit community type colleges, so I picked East Carolina because Greenville reminded me of the town I grew up in.

During our interview, she referenced several individuals who impacted her college choice decision. Her mother and father served as positive influences, but she was also exposed to negative role models like her sister and her sister's friends. Her sister had to drop out of college and seeing the impact of that decision influenced Michelle to pursue her goal. Another example of a negative role model were her sister's friends:

> Another influence would be my sister's friends, a lot of them had babies in high school and they couldn't go to college and they had to drop out of high school for that, and I was like well that's what happens if you screw around in high school. I'd say those influences kept me in line, kept me on track, that was people I could visually see and people I knew that were close to my family that I could see the effects of what happens when you don't go to college. So, I'd say they were an influence, because I didn't necessarily want to end up like them.

When considering significant factors that impacted her college decision, Michelle referenced the cost of a four-year institution and avoiding student debt. This sentiment was reflected in her responses to the research activity; her highest rated items were cost and debt avoidance.

Candice Swanpole

Candice Swanpole is a Caucasian female student attending Rural Campus Two and is enrolled in the Associate of Science program. After completing her associate degree, she intends to transfer to NC State to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry. Candice attended high school and began her college search in Arizona. During her college search process, she applied and was accepted to University of Arizona, Arizona State University,

and Pima Community College. However, during the summer of last year, her family relocated to North Carolina because of an illness in the family, so she had to abandon her previous college search plans and begin anew.

After relocating to N.C., Candice researched Duke University, UNC Chapel Hill, and NC State to find the "best fit" for her environmentally and academically. After submitting the FAFSA for financial aid, she was notified that she was ineligible for the Pell Grant because her parents' income was too high. To pay for her education, she would have to rely on student loans and saving money from working. As a result, she chose to enroll in her local community college to complete her associate degree before transferring.

Candice was an excellent student in high school, graduating with a 3.89 GPA, 24 ACT score, and a 1674 on the SAT. Her motivation comes from her family. Her mother never really gave her an option of not going to college, and her grandmother and aunts were critical in helping to select her career path and providing support:

> My mom never really gave me the choice of not going to school. She would just kind of like, "you're going to be to going to school, you're going to finish your education, you're going to go into a career"… I guess do what she should of done is what she felt that was a better choice that she wish she would've made in the past because she didn't finish her college. I think that because she felt that way she kind of reflected that down on her kids because she wanted them to do better than she had.

Though her college choice process was disrupted by her grandmother's illness, Candice is thankful she was given the opportunity to relocate, experience the last few weeks of her grandmother's life, and seek her counsel. Her current plan is to complete her associate degree and transfer to NC State to pursue a degree in Pre-med to become an anesthesiologist.

Nancy Whitaker

Nancy Whitaker is a Caucasian female student attending Urban Campus One and is enrolled in the Associate of Science program. After completing her associate degree, she

intends to transfer to NC State to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Sciences. During her junior year of high school, she took AP Environmental Science and fell in love with the course, which is why she chose to pursue it as a major.

During her college choice process, Nancy applied and was admitted to several institutions including Appalachian State University, UNC Greensboro, Campbell University, Elon University, and Liberty University. After receiving the financial aid packages, she and her family weighed the options:

> I applied, and I got accepted to all of them, then I got my financial aid package back and I wasn't able to afford it. So, my last option was going to community college that I'm at now. That's pretty much how it happened. It was really last minute, how it came about.

Nancy comes from a middle-income household. Both of her parents have associate degrees from Urban Campus One, her mother's in nursing and her father's in Electrical Engineering Technology. Her mother currently works at a local hospital, and her father is a solar field manager and technician.

Nancy graduated from high school with a 4.0 GPA and scored a 25 on the ACT. She attended a high school that had a wealth of resources to aid in college choice decisions. During her college choice process, her advisors, teachers, and counselors pushed her toward four-year institutions and away from community colleges. However, since she has been at her institution, she has really enjoyed her experience:

> No. I think it's actually a lot better than I thought it was. I know a lot of my friends were complaining how they don't get their ... Their teachers don't grade their stuff on time or whatever, and mine will grade stuff right away. I think there's a lot more

benefits than I thought there were, especially financially and getting more one-on-one attention that I didn't think I would get. I feel like you're not really treated as just like a number in the system at a community college. You're given the actual specialized attention that you need.

Research Activity Rankings (1-10)*:

*Phone interview – After the interview, the researcher contact the student multiple times to complete the research activity. Ultimately, the student did not return the research activity.

Cross Case Analysis of Participant Experiences

The participant narratives provide an opportunity to understand the unique context of their college choice decisions and the factors that influenced them. The table below summarizes the most significant factors impacting participants' college choice decisions and highlights the influential individuals during their college choice process. For each participant, the researcher utilizes language and phrases from their interview to highlight the key factors in the college choice process.

Evaluation of the influential individuals during the student's college choice process illustrates that these decisions are made with the assistance of a wide variety of people. These included family and extended family, school teachers and counselors, and college access programs. The most prevalent influence was a student's immediate and extended family, as indicated by 12 out of the 14 participants. The second most prevalent influence came from school agents such as teachers and counselors. The most unexpected findings in Table 3 include the anti-role model and Carolina Advising Corp. Anti-role models are individuals that the student referenced as examples of people they did not want to emulate, such as being pregnant as a freshman or someone who parties a lot during their first year and

as a result drop out of school. The student saw the negative ramifications of the anti-role model behaviors and used those examples as motivation to stay on the right path. Additionally, the two students attending Rural Campus One identified the Carolina Advising Corp counselor associated with their high school as a significant influence on their college choice. The mission of the Carolina College Advising Corps is to aid low-income, first-generation students by placing counselors throughout N.C. in areas of high need. Both students attended a high school with a significant portion of their population coming from economically disadvantaged households and in need of additional counseling resources.

When discussing significant factors impacting their decision, 10 out of 14 participants referenced financial considerations in some manner. Of those 10 participants, 7 referenced the need to save their family money and avoid placing their family in debt. Other significant factors included a student being denied admission to their top choice institution, and as a result, Conway decided to attend the community college to save money instead of attending the second-tier choice when they knew that they "wouldn't be satisfied." Ed's decision was impacted by his hesitancy to become independent and concerns about his father's health. Jamie's decision was hindered by a negative relationship in which her significant other persuaded her to remain dependent on him and found ways to obstruct her from enrolling in school. Fisher was unsure of his major, Alice graduated early through Career and College Promise, and Annalise sought the highest number of options to complete her goals. Additionally, Candice's decision was most significantly impacted by her family's relocation during the college choice process, and as a result, she was forced to start over.

Each of the students viewed the community college as a viable pathway for achieving their goals and aspirations, and as such, the students did not perceive their enrollment at a

community college as a detriment to their long-term vision. These findings reinforce the benefits of community colleges as flexible institutions that provide students many options and a safety net for students to explore (Cohen and Brawer, 2008).

Table 3

Key Factors and Influential Individuals on Students' College Choice

First Name:	Last Name:	Influential Individuals:	Key Factors:	Campus
Paula	Baker	Parents	Transferring would save the family money	U1
Daniel	Fernandez	Carolina Advising Corps	Avoid financial burden on family, Distance	R1
Annalise	Grant	Mom, Cousins	More options to be a nurse, save family money	R2
Jamie	Hollins	Sister	Relationship keeping me down (Boyfriend)	U1
Conway	Matthews	Parents, Carolina Advising	Denied admission to top choice (NC State)	R1
Alice	Meheridth	Grandmother	Graduated early through CCP, Save money	U1
Camia	Ormond	Grandfather	Scholarship not enough at M.U., CC debt free	U1
Ariel	Patrick	Mom	I didn't want to burden my family financially	U1
Ed	Sheran	Teacher	Not ready to be independent, Family Illnesses	SU2
Fisher	Simmons	Father	Unsure of major	SU1
Katherine	Smith	Mom	CC much cheaper than 4-year univ. / scholarship	SU1
Michelle	Smith	Parents, Anti-Role Models	Awarded FAFSA late June / Didn't want loans	U1
Candice	Swanpole	Mom, Grandmother	Moved from AZ, Family makes too much for FAFSA	R3
Nancy	Whitaker	Advisors, Parents	Financial aid packages weren't enough	U1

Research Activity Summary

During the interview process, each of the participants completed a ranking activity to determine significant factors during their college choice process. This activity helped to understand the individual context of the student's college decisions and provided unique insights across all 14 cases. For the activity, each participant was given a list of statements to rank on a scale from 1 (not important) – 10 (very important). For statements that were not a factor during their college choice process, students were asked to use a X or 0. Appendix Q: Summary Rankings is a comprehensive listing of their responses ordered by significance. One participant did not return the activity worksheet; therefore, the highest comprehensive score for an item was 130 points, and the average for all of the scores was 73 points. After ranking and ordering the responses, the top factors above the average across all participants were:

- Transferring would save my family money. (116/ 130)
- The cost of the four-year institution. (115/ 130)
- Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals. (115/ 130)
- The cost of the two-year institution. (103/ 130)
- I was encouraged by my family. (094/ 130)
- I did not have to take out any student loans. (091/ 130)
- I need / wanted to work while going to school. (090/ 130)
- I did not want to take out any student loans. (083/ 130)

Analysis of these rankings show that students are cognizant of the cost savings by matriculating to community colleges and value North Carolina's transfer articulation agreement as an alternative route to complete their goal of a baccalaureate degree.

Additionally, as the cost of in-state tuition continues to increase in North Carolina, students are considering alternative means to complete a four-year degree to avoid significant student debt. Furthermore, rankings suggest that students and parents consider community colleges a good value, as the cost of 2-year institutions was ranked 4th, while encouragement from the family was ranked 5th. The remaining items above the average (73) dealt with the student's desire to avoid debt to continue their education and the need to work while enrolled at their community college. Each item illustrates that students are sensitive to the higher education marketplace and understand that though student loans may be commonplace, they would like to avoid them as long as possible. The next tier of responses highlights areas in which community colleges excel: proximity and convenience of location, smaller class sizes, and personable learning environments which welcome students from all ages (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Overall, the rankings highlight the factors students weigh during their college choice process and provide additional insight for counselors and administrators to consider when working with this population of students.

In this section, the lived experiences of students were described to understand the college decision-making process for students and their individual context. As a result, the analysis across institutional type (rural, urban, suburban) did not yield any significant findings. However, findings suggest that college choice decisions are impacted by many individuals, a variety of factors, and are made for different reasons.

Findings Related to Habitus

Findings related to the research questions will be explored and organized using the layers from Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice. The central unit of analysis for this study was the participant's college choice decision to enroll in a community college though they were admitted into a four-year institution. The researcher explored each

participant's enrollment decision based on their perspective and "situated context" (Paulson & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2006). The researcher addressed each layer within the conceptual model and imbedded additional themes that emerged during the data analysis process. Research question one asked "How does an individual's habitus influence their college choice decision?" Layer one of Perna's model assumes that a student's college-choice is shaped by their habitus, which focuses on a student's cultural capital, social capital, demand for higher education, the expected benefits of higher education, and the resources each student has at their disposal during this process (Perna, 2006). Table 4 links the corresponding layer with the themes that emerged from the corresponding categories. Additional cross-case examples are provided to allow for participants' voices to be at the forefront and aid in comparisons across contexts.

Table 4

Dissertation Research - Layer One

Perna's Layer	Research themes
Demand for higher Education	• Educational aspirations
Expected Cost / Benefits	• Expected cost of college • Expected benefits of college
Supply of Resources	• Family income • Financial Aid
Cultural Capital	• Cultural knowledge • Family History / Customs • Value of college
Social Capital	• Influential Individuals • Family Involvement & Support • Peer support & Influence
Information about college	• Internet

Educational Aspirations

A student's college choice can be classified into three stages: predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The predisposition stage illuminates how students are predisposed toward college and how educational and occupational goals and aspirations are developed. Throughout this study, participants discussed how their educational and occupational aspirations were formed and how they utilized the end goal of a four-year degree to motivate them along the alternative route of the community college. Educational aspirations are believed to be a prerequisite to post-secondary enrollment (Perna, 2006). Therefore, without the initial longing of a post-secondary education, the students would not be on their educational journey.

The most prevalent theme that emerged throughout the study was educational aspirations. Participants' aspirations for post-secondary education had a significant impact on their enrollment decisions. Throughout the study, each participant was able to articulate their path toward their educational and career goals and viewed the community college as an avenue to achieve success. The long-term vision of these students, (a) guided their reasoning for their educational pursuit, (b) described the urge to pursue the attainment of education beyond an associate degree, (c) and explained how their goals provide a pathway toward the potential career field they seek to enter. As a result, the participants about how their long-term goals affected their college choice decisions. As Jamie states, "I plan on transferring to NC State, or wherever they offer a major in physics...what would be ideal would be a major in physics and a minor in astronomy. I could potentially go for a master's or a doctorate." Similarly, Michelle explained how her aspirations tied into her decision to enroll at the community college:

> I'm young and people really aren't going to look at your first two years as you went to a community college. No, it's like you finish and oh she has a Master's. No one's really going to care that you went to a community college first, so that's how I looked at it. I got a lot of respect for choosing to go to a community college and being open about it, so people were like, when you put it like that I understand.

When discussing how he developed his educational aspirations, Fisher replied:

> Since I was like five years old, I was pushed to go above and beyond. You can do good, but you can always get better. For high school, it's good but you can always get better. Getting an education, a college education, is gonna give you a lot of opportunity.

Participants' educational and career aspirations impacted their choices along their educational journey. This long-term vision impacted their decision to undermatch because the participants were willing to pursue an alternative route to achieve their goals. Each participant needs at least a bachelor's degree to enter their intended career field, but seven of the students in the study intend to pursue an advanced professional degree. By beginning their career at the community college as a transfer student, the participants also had to adjust (a) their major at the community college, (b) the intended four-year transfer institution, and (c) their intended major at the four-year institution.

Table 5 presents additional participant responses across cases for the theme Educational Aspirations. Please note that not all participant responses relating to this theme were included, and the table only contains a demonstrative sample.

Table 5

Cross-case Examples for Educational Aspirations

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Katherine Smith	Well, as of right now, I want to keep going in school. I am only part time though but that is also because of my medical conditions. I want to get my bachelor's degree as soon as I can. Try to figure out a place where I can be hired onto. Go for some training there and then also keep going to get my master's degree.	SU1
Fisher Simmons	Motivating me is the idea of getting a degree, getting a good job, and just having some knowledge. I guess the idea of failure is motivating because I don't want to fail, I like to set goals and achieve them. I've already set the goal to complete this program, transfer, get my four-year degree, and anything less to me would be considered not what I set myself out to be. I have high expectations for myself, so I guess that's what's motivating me.	SU1
Ed Sheran	I have four branches. One branch is right after this college, after being at SU1, transferring UNC Wilmington or East Carolina University and getting my nursing degree there. The second option, which I've thought about for a while, is maybe going to physical therapy because my parents think that would be a better thing for me to do because I'm a stronger guy and I can help more people that need help in that way. Third branch is finishing my associates and then going to school for six months to get my EMT license and working as EMT for a couple years and getting hands on experience, which a lot of nurses do. I found out a lot of them just think it's a good idea and also makes you look more valuable in a hospital's eyes. The last thing to do would be to either transfer into the nursing program at UNC-G.	SU2
Nancy Whitaker	Because I knew that would be the best option in order to get the job and the career that I wanted to go into, especially because it requires a bachelor's. I want to study environmental science, so I knew I'd have to get my masters for that.	UC1

Expected Cost / Expected Benefits of College

Expected Cost of College

The expected cost of college and the student's perceptions of those costs are factors in the college decision making process. These include direct costs such as the cost of the tuition, books, and transportation, but also opportunity costs such as the loss of time, wages, or convenience. During the college choice process, each participant was sensitive to the direct cost of attending a four-year institution compared to their community college, and as a result, many chose an alternative route. During the research process,

participants were asked direct and indirect questions to determine the influences on their college choice decisions. A prevalent theme can be summarized under the label of "Expected Cost", though such a generalization would overlook the idiosyncrasies that existed between the participants. Each of the 14 students referenced financial considerations in some manner; however, the varied nuances included:

- Scholarships and financial aid would not cover four-year tuition and fees
- Student loan / debt avoidance – Avoid loans and significant debt by transferring
- Self-sacrifice – pressure to not place financial burden on the family
- Financial aid process – completion of the FAFSA process resulted in late or no aid
- Save money – seeking an alternative route towards a four-year degree saves the family money.

When discussing the potential costs of attending the private four-year university that she was accepted into, Camia stated:

> I found out I got accepted and I got a scholarship that seemed quite big. But I found out I could only use a certain amount per year. I was like, I don't have the money to pay for Methodist University for the rest of the year because in my household we don't have a lot of money.

Though all of the participants were admitted to four-year institutions, once the FAFSA process was completed, students faced tough financial decisions for them and their family. Even with the assistance of scholarships, grants, and loans, for many of the students, attending a four-year institution did not seem practical. Daniel reiterated, "I really wanted to go to Western, but at the end of the day, I didn't want to put that financial burden on my parents, so I said, I'll go ahead and go to community college first, and then transfer." Similarly, Annalise recalled a disheartening conversation with her mom, as she shared:

> My mom doesn't make a lot of money, so she told me straight ahead like if you do go

> to university I'm going to support you, but I'm not going to be able to help you. Pretty much I was on my own if I went to a university.

Regretfully, after completing the FAFSA, Candice's family was informed that her family's Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) was too high, and she was denied financial aid. She recalled,

> Both of my parents at that time were working. They were both managers so they both had at least 70,000 plus per year. Because they filed taxes together, I couldn't just claim one of them. I had to do joint for all my financial aid form. It came out that I was in the bracket where they made too much money for me to receive financial aid. Even though, none of the money that they were making per year was going towards my education, it looked as though they could have provided for me even though they weren't able to. It just appeared that they could have, so the financial aid wasn't awarded.

During this process, students also considered the benefits and stigmas of attending a community college. Michele considered going to the four-year institutions directly, but the community college just made more sense financially:

> I just put a pause on that, I was like I'll see you in 2 years ECU. Right now, with my financial situation, it was better to go to this school here instead of there…All my financial aid covered everything at UC1 including books and tuition and extra stuff. That's how I ended up here.

In addition, Katherine shared her experiences grappling with the financial decision:

> I got accepted into several universities, four-year universities. But because of financial issues, I decided to come to the community college. I knew that if I went to UNCG and I stayed on campus, it would be around 15,000. If I didn't stay on campus, it would be around 10,000. Wingate, it would be 30,000 but I had a 15,000 scholarship so it'd still be around 15,000. At SU1, I really didn't know exactly what a cost would be but I knew it would be a lot cheaper. I did get scholarships from SU1. It was 1000 dollars for two semesters, so split by 500. That has helped tremendously. This semester I had to pay around 100 dollars out of pocket.

Throughout the study, participants recounted the financial dilemmas they faced and discussed how the cost of community colleges allowed them to advance academically without accumulating significant debt. Though the students wanted a four-year experience, the practicality of saving money outweighed paying the higher tuition and living expenses.

Financial considerations were a significant concern for many participants, but that was just one factor within a complex interwoven decision.

Table 6 presents additional samples of participant responses for the theme Expected Costs of College.

Table 6

Cross-case Examples of Expected Cost of College

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Jamie Hollins	I don't have super wealthy parents, or grandparents, or family, or anyone that's going to pay for anything for me, so in a sense I'm very independent	UC1
Alice Meredith	I had decided that I was going to graduate early and I chose to go to a community college before I went to a university because of financial needs and the classes ... I could get about four classes that were cheaper instead of paying for them at the university. I did it to get ahead, before I go in the fall.	UC1
Nancy Whitaker	Mostly my parents, because they were the ones in charge of paying for it. We compared what we could afford based on what they offered us from schools, which wasn't very much. I would have to take out loans. They took out loans when they first went to college and they didn't want me to have to deal with that financial burden.	UC1

Expected Benefits of College

For participants, the two most prevalent benefits for attending college were attaining advanced degrees and long-lasting and fulfilling careers in their chosen field. As Michelle stated:

> I want to have the most experience as possible to finish my schooling early, so I can live the rest of my life working and traveling. That's what I want to do. That's why I want to get my schooling out of the way first, in these two-year increments, then I already have my highest-level degree, and I can just work and travel.

Of the 14 students in the study, 10 referenced the desire to obtain an advanced degree beyond their bachelors. Nancy remarked, “I want to study environmental science, so I know I'd have to get my masters for that.” Similarly, Katherine stated, “I want to get my bachelor's degree

as soon as I can. Try to figure out a place where I can be hired onto. Go for some training there, and then also keep going to get my master's degree."

Though, Fisher is still undecided, the remaining 13 participants could envision themselves being successful in their chosen career field. Conway advanced this notion: "I'm going to be a successful scientist one day and that I'm going to get recognition for some of the work that I've done in my field." In addition, Candice considered how her success affects:

> The possibility that I could change what my future's going to be like if I just stick it out through school. I can change what everything is going to be like for me in the future. I think that's like the biggest motivating factor for me.

As students begin their educational journey, it is often difficult to fully grasp the expected benefits of education beyond the promise of improved financial security and a stable, successful career. Each of the participants could have chosen to enroll in an Associate of Applied Science, but instead, they chose the transfer route because they sought to continue their pursuit of a four-year degree and the expected benefits. However, none participants in the study referenced other benefits such as enhanced health, longer life expectancy, and greater levels of civic engagement (Baum & Payea, 2013; Becker, 1993; Perna, 2006).

Table 7 presents additional samples of participant responses for the theme Expected Benefits of College.

Table 7

Cross-case Examples of Expected Benefits of College

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Jamie Hollins	I think, definitely, I have a mission mind set and I want to go and share the gospel with people. I think that's something that I had also evaluated when I was looking at careers as something I could do overseas as a vocation and support myself.	UC1
Alice Meredith	I want to go far in life and be able to travel, and to do that I need to have a degree where I am able to sustain myself and make a living.	UC1

Supply of Resources

Family Income

A student's socioeconomic status and family income have significant impact during the college choice process. During the study, the participants self-reported their family's socioeconomic status. Ten of the 14 students identified themselves as middle income, and the remaining four students reported they came from low-income households. Additionally, three of the students indicated they were first-generation college students. Camia explained her family context:

> We live on a very, very limited to low income because I live with my mom and she's trying to get her disability. And my stepdad is a retired disabled Navy Seal and he has his disabilities. So, we basically live off of his check.

During her interview, Ariel shared similar sentiments: "We always had financial problems and all that, so I just didn't want my family to have to pay for most of my college, so that was a biggie." Jamie also commented, "I don't have super wealthy parents, or grandparents, or family, or anyone that's going to pay for anything for me, so in a sense I'm very independent." Moreover, Conway described how he considered his family's circumstance:

> It's just a lot cheaper to go to a community college and then transfer to a four-year university. I knew the experience would be easier on my parents who are paying for my education and I've got two siblings, so I wouldn't want my mom to go horribly in debt to have to fund all our educations which she made a dedication to do earlier on because she didn't have somebody to do that for her when she was young. She had to work and pay for it at the same time.

Financial Aid

During the college choice process, the availability of financial aid can reduce financial barriers to enrollment and help families understand the costs and benefits of pursuing a postsecondary education (Perna, 2006). During the study, each participant described their experience with the financial aid process, which helped clarify the

socioeconomic context of the family. All participants completed the FAFSA application and considered other funding options including student loans, private scholarships, work-study, and working outside of school.

For many participants, though financial aid was available, it did not fully cover the cost of attendance at a four-year institution. As a result, students had to seek an alternative pathway to earn a bachelor's degree. Nancy described:

> Well, I didn't plan on it originally. I actually had applied to about four to five different four-year universities and it wasn't until like after I applied, and I got accepted to all of them that I got my financial aid package back and I wasn't able to afford it, so my last option was going to UC1, or the community college that I'm at now. That's pretty much how it happened. It was really last minute, how it came about.

Similarly, three participants indicated that they did not receive their FAFSA award until late in the summer, which impacted their decision-making process and caused their family added stress. Michelle shared:

> I didn't receive my FAFSA until I'd say June, right after I graduated, it was around that same time. Looking at the payment schedules they sent, they wanted to have you pay $1200-$1500/month for 5 months straight. My parents are divorced, so living in a single parent home is a little bit hard as far as financial things go, because your mom's just there to take care of you. I don't think many single parent families can make a $1500 payment for 5 months straight. That's more than people's mortgages sometimes.

Similarly, Annalise stated, "I had a whole bunch of problems with financial aid at first, so I was stressed out because it was the first day of class and I still hadn't got all that straight." Likewise, Daniel commented, "I understood how FAFSA worked, yeah. I didn't submit my last one until around the summertime." For each of these students, the timeline of the process resulted in a rushed decision without being able to take time and weigh all options. Conversely, one participant did not qualify for the Pell Grant due to their parent's income. Each participant expressed the importance of financial aid to their college choice process and

discussed the impact on the family's financial situation when deciding where to enroll.

Table 8 presents additional samples of participants' responses for the theme Supply of Resources.

Table 8

Cross-case Examples of Supply of Resources

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Paula Baker	Then, probably senior year, end of junior year I started just looking at the money and just seeing how much money you could actually save by coming to community college. That was really the big drawing card for me.	UC1
Daniel Fernandez	At the end of the day, I didn't want to put that financial burden on my parents, so I said, Well, I'll go ahead and go to community college first, and then transfer.	SU1
Camia Ormond	I had gotten through FAFSA all the grants and stuff I needed to go here without having to pay a penny out of my pocket, and that really helped.	UC1
Nancy Whitaker	We compared what we could afford based on what they offered us from schools, which wasn't very much. I would have to take out loans. They had to take out loans when they first went to college and they didn't want me to have to deal with that financial burden. They thought that like being able to pay outright for a community college was the best idea and I would have zero loans starting out as far as ... My first two years I wouldn't have loans to pay. I'm not so sure about my next two when I go to my four-year, but so far, they've been the biggest influence on financially where I decided to go.	UC1

Cultural Capital (Cultural Knowledge / Value of College Attainment)

Cultural capital is a system of traits like dialect abilities, cultural learning, and mannerisms, that is determined, to some degree, from one's parents and that characterizes a person's class status (Bourdieu, 1986; Perna, 2006). During this study, proxies were established to assess a student's cultural capital. For this study, the following themes were used for cultural capital: cultural knowledge, family history / customs, and value of college. To understand how participants navigated the college choice process, the researcher also sought to understand their predispositions and attitudes toward attending college.

Cultural Knowledge

During the study, the researcher tried to elicit examples of cultural knowledge derived from the participants' parents. During the interviews, participants referenced examples of the role their family members played to help them develop the attitudes and values they held toward post-secondary education. All of the students viewed college as the next step in their journey to reach their educational and career goals. Paula shared a story from elementary school:

> I remember, still in elementary school, my parents always told us, You gotta be good in school and get into a good school. I think it's always been something I've talked about; just an ongoing discussion with my parents and fully developed more seriously once I got into high school.

Similarly, Candice reflected on an example from her middle school years:

> I think the earliest time that we really talked about I guess what happens after high school in my household was I think it was when I graduated from eighth grade actually. I think that was when we first started talking about what's next. My mom never really gave me the choice of not going to school. She would just kind of like, you're going to be to going to school, you're going to finish your education, you're going to go into a career and you're going to...I guess do what she should of done is what she felt that was a better choice that she wish she would've made in the past because she didn't finish her college. I think that because she felt that way she kind of reflected that down on her kids because she wanted them to do better than she had.

To provide additional context, participants were asked to recall when they had their first conversation with someone regarding what comes after high school. Ed explained, "It was 8th grade year in Peers Club." Relatedly, Annalise shared:

> I think middle school. When I was in sixth grade I had a lot of C's. Then my teachers put me in this program where it's like college preparedness. In that class, my teacher focused on teaching us like the difference in schools and careers and everything. After being in that class I remember coming home and researching all these schools and what schools had which programs and everything.

In Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phases of college choice, the predisposition stage generally occurs between the 7th and 10th grade, and 11 of the 14 participants fell within this

timeframe. Three participants said elementary school, six indicated middle school, and the remaining five students referenced high school. Additionally, students were asked to recall who they had the conversation with, and 9 students said they had the conversation with their parents, 3 referenced teachers, and two referenced peers. Parents, friends, and school and family culture all influence social and cultural capital. For most participants, these messages began in the home, and were reinforced and supported by external entities such as teachers and peers. This information illustrates the value of family members in the college choice process and highlights an opportunity to ensure families have the resources they need to expose students to post-secondary options during the predisposition phase of the college process. In this study, participants each aspired to attend college and valued education. Their beliefs and expectations influenced the decision to undermatch because continuing their education regardless of selecting a two-year or four-year institution was the next logical step (McDonough, 1997).

Table 9 presents the breakdown of participant's responses regarding their first conversation about college.

Table 9

First Conversation about College

First Name:	Last Name:	When: Elementary (1-5 grade) Middle (6-8 grade) High (9-12 grade)	With whom:
Paula	Baker	Elementary School	Family - Parents
Daniel	Fernandez	High School	Family - Parents
Annalise	Grant	Middle School	Teachers - School program
Jamie	Hollins	High School	Peers - School
Conway	Matthews	High School	Family - Mom
Alice	Meheridth	Middle School	Peers - Church

Table 9 *continued*

Camia	Ormond	Elementary School	Family - Mom
Ariel	Patrick	High School	Teachers - School
Ed	Sheran	Middle School	Teachers - School Program
Fisher	Simmons	High School	Family - Father
Katherine	Smith	Middle school	Family - Mom
Michelle	Smith	Elementary School	Family - Parents
Candice	Swanpole	Middle School	Family - Parents
Nancy	Whitaker	Middle School	Family - Cousins

Family History / Customs

During this study, participants outlined their family history and customs related to the college experience. During the in-person interviews, participants shared their family background in education and began discussions about family values surrounding education. As referenced, three participants stated that they were first-generation college students: Daniel, Ariel, and Annalise. Moreover, each of those students identified as Hispanic. Annalise shared her family's educational history: "There's not a lot of people in my family that go to college. It's just my oldest cousin's the first one to go. She is in Appalachian State right now. She really loves it." Likewise, Katherine shared, "Ever since I was in middle school. I've always dreamed of going to college. A lot of people in my family didn't go to college. My mother did, but it was only a short amount of time." Michelle also stated:

> My parents never lived in dorms in college, they didn't go to college until later in life because I come from teen parents, so no one could really ever tell me. Very select few people in my family have ever gone to college straight out of high school, so I wanted to be the first one to actually go straight out and live in a dorm and live that college life.

After weighing all of her options, Michelle's goal of enrolling at a four -year institution directly after high school would be put on hold. In high school, she completely shot down the idea of attending a community college but chose UC1 to avoid placing a financial strain

on her family.

During the interviews, the students also reflected on how their achievement will affect the family's history and alter the course for their younger siblings. Ariel recalls the difficulty of serving as the flagbearer for her family: "I'm also the oldest, so I also didn't have an older sibling to guide me." Daniel echoed this sentiment by explaining the relationship with his younger sister:

> I try not to tell her too much because I don't want to freak her out, but I think it's one of those things that's understood. I think it's those things where you explain it as you go along, or farther along, when you're actually closer to it, because she won't know the importance of college until maybe when you're entering high school. For now, it's just get good grades. That's it.

Out of the remaining 10 students, four came from a family where the mother held a bachelor's degree, and three students indicated that their father held a bachelor's degree. Additionally, three of the students came from families where at least one parent completed a master's degree, and only one student came from a family were both parents had master's degrees (Appendix L). The participants pressure themselves to not let their family members down, which impacted their college choice decision to enroll in a community college instead of a four-year institution. The participants were forced to choose between possibly burdening the family with debt or seeking an alternative enrollment path by starting at the community college.

Value of College Attainment

During the interview process, participants provided key insight about their value of higher education. During the interviews, students were asked to explain why they are pursuing a post-secondary education. Katherine stated, "It's mainly about getting a better education, because I've always really liked school and furthering my knowledge." Camia shared a comparable statement: "I have been talking with my parents about college since I

was little, and I always knew I was destined to go to college." During the interview, Fisher described the conversations he had with his father:

> He's never accepted good enough. Going to college would be getting better, I guess you could say. He's always influenced me. "Okay, after high school, you need to go to college, so you can support a family", for example. He was always giving me reasons why to do it. Not just to do it. He's also giving me the choice, he said, "You can go to college if you want to, but here's why you should."

Daniel shared the support from his parents: "My parents said, if you have the options, you know, why not go ahead and do it? Further your education." Paula also described her parent's support:

> I remember, still in elementary school, my parents always told us, "You gotta be good in school to get into a good school." I think it's always been something I've talked about; just an ongoing discussion with my parents and fully more seriously once I got into high school.

Over the course of the study, findings illustrated that participants' parents were supportive throughout the process and reiterated the importance and significance of a post-secondary education (Hossler et al., 1999). This support reinforced participants' internal value for college attainment and helped propel them toward their goal. The valuation of education had an impact on their college choice decision because participants felt supported regardless of their decision as long as they valued continuing their education.

Table 10 presents additional samples of participants' responses for the theme Cultural Capital.

Table 10

Cross-case Examples of Cultural Capital

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Ariel Patrick	My parents don't really speak English as well so they weren't much of a help.	UC1
Fisher Simmons	I got very fortunate. My dad, working at a college. He knew about it, he's seen people come in and out of the program all the time. I said, I wanna go here get my essentials out of the way and then transfer once I'm ready. Because, being a high school kid, I wasn't accustomed to a college way of studying and learning.	SU1

Social Capital

A student's college choice decision is a complex process influenced by several social networks and relationships acquired through membership in different social structures (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Coleman (1988) suggests that social capital is derivative of two relationships: the relations between the student and their parents or extended family, and the relationship of the parents within the networks of the school and the community. In contrast, Bourdieu (1986) focuses on how individuals are advantaged because of their networks and how the size, strength, and structural barriers impact the network (Perna, 2006).

Within this study, the areas of social capital were identified through the themes of: family involvement and support, sibling influence, peer support and influence, and information about colleges and resources.

Influential Individuals

As students progress through the search phase of their college choice process, the influence of family members, peers, and counselors becomes more significant (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). During this study, each of the students identified an influential individual in their college choice process. These individuals included friends,

family members, school teachers, and counselors. Twelve of the 14 students referenced a family member offering advice, traveling to campus visits, or sharing their experience. Michelle stated, “My mom is really heavy into research, that's always been her thing, anything I want to do she researched the crap out of it to help me.” Candice also highlighted her mother’s involvement: “My mom never really gave me the choice of not going to school. She would just kind of like, you're going to go to school, you're going to finish your education, you're going to go into a career.” Alice described the impact of her grandmother: “My grandmother, whom I lived part time with my mom, she's a nurse, so she's been highly involved in my life and kind of influencing my decisions and what I want to be.”

When considering other resources, Katherine recalled, “I actually went to my high school counselor to see about some options and what schools would be the best. I also went online to research and ask some of my friends what they thought would be the best place to go.” Camia shared similar sentiments:

> Our counselors, they were the big ones that helped us figure them out. And if we had problems with any of our classes, or if we felt uncomfortable, or something happened, we would go talk to them and they were the ones that told us, and set up meetings for us, with colleges and stuff.

Additionally, Daniel and Conway highlighted the impact of the Carolina Advising Corps counselor. Daniel stated, “The college advisor helped me out a lot, because she guided me along the way, gave me helpful advice and info that I used to make my final decision, which was to come here in the first place.” Conway reiterated this point: “He probably actually provided more information than any of the faculty at school, honest to God. He was probably the biggest help. He referred me to a lot of different sites for scholarships and information like that.” During the college search process, the relationship of these influential individuals is integral to help students find resources, identify scholarship opportunities, and help narrow

the number of choices (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). They impact a student's decision to undermatch because the participants trusted their opinions and expertise and considered their opinions when making their final decision.

Family Involvement and Support

Throughout this study, participants provided specific examples of the vital role that family members play in the college choice process. These examples included discouraging and encouraging moments along their college choice process. Fisher described the benefit of his father's knowledge:

> I got very fortunate. My dad, working at a college. He knew about it, he's seen people come in and out of the [transfer] program all the time. I said, I wanna go here get my essentials out of the way and then transfer once I'm ready. Because, being a high school kid, I wasn't accustomed to a college way of studying and learning.

Paula shared similar sentiments when she commented on the support she received from her parents:

> My parents, they're pretty supportive of whatever I wanted to do. I think it was definitely my decision to come here. They would have supported me if I decided to go to a four-year school, but I think they definitely like this idea from the financial standpoint. At the end, they really left it up to me to decide.

Katherine discussed the support she received from her mother: "My mom has always told me that I can do good things but I have to follow my heart, follow my dreams. She's the reason why I am here because she helps me pay financially."

During the study, two of the participants mentioned that their parents were alumni of the community college they attended, and because of their parents' familiarity with the institutions, they encouraged the child to attend. Katherine stated, "My mom actually suggested that I go to SU1 because this is where she went when she went for a short amount of time." Similarly, Conway mentioned, "I know my mom went here to get her degree in

nursing and then my dad went here to get training and to be an electrician. I've been around the school before."

Conversely, Camia dealt with family member who did not support her choice to attend a community college. Though her family members wanted her to continue her education, they did not support her alternative route. During her interview, she recalled:

> I had some people in my family that told me, "Don't go to a community college. You need to go to a university. Um, you need to experience a full college life. Um, a community college wouldn't do you any good. You need to get out there and get away." And stuff like that. Mostly my father.

Though her father's comments were unsupportive, she relied on the support she received from other family members to ultimately make her choice.

Parental involvement and support also included helping the participants navigate milestones within the college choice process, including completing financial aid, offering advice and guidance, and attending campus visits and tours. Daniel shared the story of his entire family traveling to Western Carolina for open house:

> Western I actually visited on one of the open houses. That night we all went to open house, because I really wanted to go there. It was a three-and-a-half-hour drive, so if I wanted to go, I had to be serious about that. We even paid a hotel and all of that…My whole family went to Western.

Nancy recalled the financial discussions she had with her family:

> [My parents] thought that like being able to pay outright for a community college was the best idea and I would have zero loans starting out as far as ... My first two years I wouldn't have loans to pay. I'm not so sure about my next two when I go to my four-year, but so far, they've been the biggest influence on financially where I decided to go.

Throughout the study, participants also identified their siblings as key influences in their decision-making process. Michelle, Fisher, and Jamie each had an older sibling who attended their community college. Jamie commented on the significance of her sister:

> I just didn't know what to do, and then since my sister had been through college, she was really the one that guided me through the whole process. Helping me register for classes, FAFSA, and just all of the stuff. She actually recommended professors that I signed up for classes with, and I'm with two of the professors that she recommended, and they're great. I'm really grateful that she had the insight to recommend all this stuff to me.

Fisher also commented on his brother: "Actually, before coming here I already had some knowledge from my brother attending here and my dad works at a neighboring community college." Moreover, the participants also referenced siblings that attended four-year institutions. Conway shared, "My brother actually went to Western which is one of the reasons why I considered that school." Candice explained:

> I actually toured NC State with my little sister because she's going there. She's attending in the Fall. I attended one of the tours with her to kind of tour the dorms and the campus and talk to some of the advisors and people that work there. It just felt right. I just felt like I would fit there.

During the college choice process, students sought advice from family to help narrow their options. This impacted their decision to undermatch because family members often shared their own biases and perceptions of two-year versus four-year institutions. Along with family, a student's peer group can also impact a student's college choice.

Peer Support and Influence

Research has shown that peers can significantly impact the social capital for a student and a student's decision to enroll in an institution (Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006). The students in the study received both encouragement and discouragement from peers during the college choice process. Conway's friends encouraged him along the way: "They thought it was the smarter thing to do because if I was going to transfer regardless, then why not do that and save money at the same time." However, he explains that those relationships have changed over time, "I've grown distant with some of my friends. I haven't been able to see them as much and had I went to any of the schools they'd went to I would have definitely

been able to keep up those relationships." Ariel also explained how the relationships with her peers has changed: "My friends that have gone to a four-year college, I feel like we've gone separate ways because they have that experience and I'm still here."

Two participants discussed what it was like to enroll at a community college while their friends attended four-year institutions. Michelle explains:

> I got caught up in the what everybody else is doing. I'd say that was tough to get out of that, what my peers are doing mind frame, and following the crowd, versus doing my own thing, that was really tough. I had to really be mature, and say okay, I had to put all that other stuff aside, and I have to focus on the goal that I want. That was really hard, especially when you see all the kids you went to high school with and they're at parties, and they're at games, and they're in dorms. It was really hard to see that, but I had to get over it.

Paula recalled a similar experience regarding her friends from high school:

> I think most people ... You just grow up, especially from the school that I was at, a lot of those people care about prestige and your image. They think going to some more well-known school, the bigger school, they think that's a better idea or you're going to get a better job outcome, whatever it might be. I think that's probably where a lot of that comes from, at least from my friend group.

Based on the participants' statements, it was apparent that family and peers play a role in the college choice decision. In the case of Michelle and Paula, they had to confront their internal thoughts and mind frame. However, Ed had to decide whether to confront external forces. Ed had a negative experience with some of his high school classmates, and as a result, he chose not to enroll in one of the four-year institutions he was accepted into. Ed explained, "A lot of kids that weren't too friendly to me in high school went there and I knew some other things about that school which were not so great, and I just didn't really want to go there." Whether providing encouragement or negatively impacting their decision, peers influenced the participants' decision to undermatch.

Information about College

Participants used various informational resources to inform and guide their search process, including the Internet ("Googling"), influential individuals, and others. Though a vast amount of information can be found on the Internet, it is often difficult for students and families to discern the most significant information related to their context (Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Plank & Jordan, 2001). As a result, it is imperative for students to find clear and accurate information related to their college decision.

Internet

One of the most common ways for students to find information during the college choice process was through an internet search. To find information regarding their career interests, research institutions, ways to fund their education, students utilized this resource during the predisposition, search, and choice phases. Annalise captured this sentiment: "I would always search for schools even in freshman year. I would just Google search schools and everything. My junior year is when I actually started searching schools in my program and when I started touring campuses." Alice stated something similar: "I'd go online to the school website and I just look through there." Michelle's comments mimic how the search phase differs from the predisposition phase as students begin to narrow down and focus on one or two choices. She reflected on her senior year:

> My senior year, I did a lot of research on schools, especially when it came down to do I attend a 4 year, or I do I go to a community college. If I do a community college, what do they have to offer me in order for me to be successful? I did a lot of extensive research and late nights with this particular school and figuring out what program I wanted to do.

During interviews, each participant discussed looking information up on the internet concerning financial aid, scholarship opportunities, housing options, majors, career opportunities, and the transfer process.

Summary

In summary, research question number one sought to answer, "How does an individual's habitus influence their college choice decision?" The words and stories of participants paint a picture of their context and describe how these students navigated the college choice process. Within this layer, the participants shared their own unique stories, and collectively, the researcher was able to highlight the components of Perna's Conceptual Model by providing evidence of participants' cultural and social capital, demand for higher education, the expected costs and benefits of pursing post-secondary education, and the resources each student utilized during this process. The participants in this study were driven by their long-term vision to pursue their educational and career aspirations. As highlighted above, for 11 out of the 14 participants, these aspirations and values surrounding post-secondary education were developed between 7th and 10th grade. As the student progressed through high school, these aspirations were nurtured through a student's cultural and social networks. While trying to make the best decision for their family, participants relied on a variety of sources within their habitus. Participants discussed how their families, peers, and other influential individuals impacted how they navigated the college choice process. In this study, 12 of the 14 students indicated that immediate and extended family were prevalent influences.

Additionally, in this study, the expected costs and benefits of college were key considerations within the Habitus Layer. Ten out of 14 students referenced financial considerations as a significant factor. In the responses to the research activity, 3 of the top 5 factors were all related to the costs of post-secondary education. The students indicated that transferring would save their family money, because the the cost of the four-year institutions and the cost of two-year institutions were significant considerations as they weighed their

options. These findings were reinforced within the each of the participant's narratives as each student recounted their financial decisions. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted the nuances between the students experiences as some students did not have sufficient financial aid and scholarships to cover their tuition at the four-year institution, while others sought to avoid student loans and placing a financial burden on their family. Additionally, a few students highlighted the difficulties that their families had with the financial aid process and discussed how it impacted their college decision. Lastly, each student discussed how their decision to enroll in the community college would save their family money by having a viable alternative route to a four-year degree.

Within the Habitus layer, there are a number of direct and indirect influences which impact a student's college choice. Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice assisted the researcher to investigate the complex constructs of social and cultural capital to aid in a more comprehensive understanding of student's college choice decision.

Findings Related to School and Community Context

The second research question was "How does an individual's school and community context influence their college choice decision?" Layer two of Perna's model focuses on how school and community resources and structures inhibit or expedite the college choice process for students (Perna, 2006). The major categories under this heading are availability of resources and structural supports and barriers. Table 11 links the corresponding layer with the themes that arose from the corresponding categories. Cross-case examples are provided to allow for the participant's voice to be at the forefront and aid in comparisons across contexts.

Table 11

Dissertation Research – Layer Two

Perna's Layer	Research themes
Availability of resources	● Teachers ● Counselors ● Carolina Advising Corp
Structural Supports and Barriers	● Curriculum ● School relationships

Availability of Resources

During the college search process, high school agents, such as teachers, counselors, and career development coordinators, are vital to ensure students are knowledgeable about the curricular choices that increase the likelihood of being admitted to a four-year institution (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). During the research process, each of the participants were able to identify a school agent that impacted their college choice decision.

Teachers

During the college choice process, encouragement from teachers and counselors often promotes college going behaviors and higher educational aspirations (Perna, 2006). During the interview process, students referenced the significance of teachers on their decision to pursue higher education and decide between a two-year or four-year institution. Paula explained the impact of her teachers on her decision to choose a community college over a four-year university:

> I guess, for influences, a lot of our teachers, especially the ones that graduated more recently that are realizing they're coming out of school with so much debt, a lot of them were definitely pointing out when we'd have people from the community colleges come in like, "Hey guys, this might actually be something you should consider because I know I regret taking out all the student loans and trying to do all the stuff." It's really not worth it for a lot of them in retrospect. I think there was definitely a lot of our educators that were trying to point people in this direction, at least, as an option for us to evaluate.

Similarly, Daniel shared insights from the conversations with his teacher when considering a community college versus a four-year institution. As a first-generation college student and

one whose parents speak limited English, this conversation helped him solidify his decision to enroll at Rural Campus One.

> She said, "If you're deciding where to go, I would definitely advise you to go to community college first, because when you go to university...you're going to be shocked, because of everything. You're not going to have your parents, your support system, so you're going to have to go into a completely new setting, college, while trying to adjust with living on your own without your parents." I think that was a little too much for me.

Alice, she shared the impact of her teacher on her decision to enroll in college over enlisting in the military:

> My JROTC first sergeant, he was very helpful in just the overall decision of what I wanted to do...go to college. About a year ago, I debated on going into the military, but I was just kind of talking to him and getting his personal opinion. I just decided that college was probably the best thing that I wanted to do. He was kind of always there if I needed to talk about anything.

Lastly, the conversation with Makayla highlighted how teachers help students discover their academic interests, which ultimately leads to the selection of their college major and institution. During her interview, she shared:

> My biology teacher. She was brutal, but she was a good teacher. I felt like I really learned in that class... I told her I think it was when I got closer to graduating I told her about how she was the reason that I wanted to pursue a medical career, and she was really emotional about it. I think that was the first time that a teacher kind of made me think about what would I be good at, and make me feel like I was good enough to do it.

Counselors

As students and families navigate the college choice process, the school counselor is a key stakeholder to ensure that students meet significant deadlines, complete applications for admission and financial aid, take college placement exams such as the ACT & SAT, and receive assistance and guidance toward additional local and national resources (Cabrera & LaNasa; 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Kinzie et al., 2004). During interviews, participants discussed the variety of ways that counselors engaged with students. Participants also

provided insight into how much time they spent discussing their enrollment plans. In today's high schools, school counselors have increasing and evolving workloads that impact the amount of time they can spend individually counseling students. Due to the increased responsibilities, schools often host meetings with juniors and seniors to more effectively disseminate information. Camia summarized her experience:

> Well, they start the college process when you're a junior. When you're fixing to go into your senior high school. They have a meeting with the students and the parents. They pull them all into a room and they talk about FAFSA and other scholarship websites. Then in your senior year, they go over it over and over again. I can't tell you how many meetings we had. They send home papers and stuff. And your parents go to these meetings because they have meetings at night for this as well. And they give you information and they're like, "Here, you need to apply. This is how you apply for college." And they show you how to apply for college and stuff. And they show you how to apply for financial aid and if you have any questions or problems, the counselors are there every day until school closes because the employees don't leave until like 5 o'clock.

Another strategy that counselors use to reach students is to collaborate with teachers and share information during class periods. Ariel described how this happened at her high school: "Our college advisor came to talk to us as a class, so I went to talk to him and he told me all the things or requirement that I needed for college and all of that stuff". Similarly, Alice shared how her high school counselors aided her:

> My counselor helped me with the applications, and getting FAFSA, and everything like that. She was very helpful in that. My school actually held sessions for, primarily English classes for Seniors. They would bring us in ... The counselors would be there to help these kids get through the applications, so that was very helpful.

Although meeting in groups is an effective way to aid a large number of students and their families during the college decision-making process, sometimes students prefer additional one-on-one time to review all of their choices in depth. Annalise shared this regret:

> I think what would've helped me the most was if I would've sat down with like a counselor I guess one on one and literally evaluate each option that you had if that makes sense. You got accepted to these colleges cause everyone tells you to do it and evaluate each school, but sometimes it's more emotional. I wish someone was there to

> tell you more…...someone who has actually gone to college.... who will remain unbiased and walk you through, like kind of talk it out with you if that makes sense.

Conway shared a negative experience with his counselors:

> Our counselors were mostly absent. You're supposed to be meeting with your counselors pretty frequently or at least I feel. I maybe met with my counselor maybe two or three times that year and that was the maximum. That was the most I have met with my counselors in a year the whole time in high school. That was me trying to schedule things half the time, but not working out, and the other half ended up being short sessions that really didn't teach me anything, didn't help me out. Mostly for at least at my high school, I felt like the counselors were just there to help you schedule classes and that was about it. I mean other than … Yeah, I wish there was a little more that was provided for students but I guess, that's just how it went.

Similarly, Paula shared her feelings about how her counselors utilized group meetings instead of one-on-one counseling sessions:

> We had our senior meetings; you sit down with a group of ten people and a counselor, and they go over questions. If anyone brings it up, they'll talk about it. They give you the little presentation with facts and deadlines and that kind of stuff, but they don't really talk about it a whole lot, or at least in my school we didn't.

As illustrated, there is a significant difference in experiences across institutions regarding the format and amount of time counselors spend with students assisting them on their college choices. The levels of counselor involvement ranged greatly between the student experiences, but the common thread among all participants is that they wish they would have had greater levels of one-on-one interaction.

Carolina Advising Corps

Over the course of the interview process, two students highlighted the impact of the Carolina Advising Corps. The mission of the Carolina Advising Corps is to aid low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented students with the college choice process by assisting students and families with the admission and financial aid processes. Daniel and Conway both expressed their gratitude for their relations with the college advisor. Daniel shared, “The college advisor helped me out a lot, because she guided me along the way, gave me helpful

advice and info that I used to make my final decision, which was to come here." Similarly, Conway explained how the advisor was key for finding additional scholarship opportunities: "He probably actually provided more information than any of the faculty at school, honest to God. He was probably the biggest help. He referred me to a lot of different sites for scholarships and information like that."

Table 12 presents additional participant responses across cases for the theme School Agents. Please note that not all participant responses relating to this theme were included, and the table only contains a demonstrative sample.

Table 12

Cross-case Examples for School Agents

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Annalise Grant	I didn't meet with counselors one on one but counselors would go to our classes and talk to us about college. They helped a lot too it just wasn't one on one.	UC1
Nancy Whitaker	A lot of the advisors, they would make sure that they would conference with you and make sure they'd ask what major you were thinking about and what classes maybe supported that. They would ask us questions like that, like why we would want to do it? They would kind of help us, like guide us and say this college might help you with that or doing this might help, kind of like that.	UC1

Structural Supports and Barriers

During the study, many participants were unable to articulate the structural supports and barriers to students. Therefore, to describe the structural supports and barriers within the high school and community context, the researcher sought information regarding the resources that influenced a student's college choice (Perna, 2006). To understand the high school college preparedness context for each student, the researcher sought to identify proxies for the local high school's orientation toward college. As a result, the researcher

examined the curriculum and standardized test scores for each location. In addition, the researcher looked for examples of trusting relationships, which illustrated the extent to which the high school supported and encouraged students throughout the college going process.

Curriculum

Completing an advanced high school curriculum has been shown to aid in the likelihood of being admitted into selective institutions, serve as an indicator for post-secondary performance, and demonstrate college preparedness (Perna, 2004a). Research has found that students who undermatch attend institutions slightly below their academic ability or enroll at a two-year college or no college at all (Bowen et al., 2009; Handel, 2014). Throughout the study, participants referenced the level of rigor in their high schools by describing the types of classes they completed and the curriculum offerings in their high school, and by sharing their academic achievement. Nine of the 14 students completed at least one Advanced Placement course during their high school years.

To approximate the amount of academic resources available at each high school, the researcher utilized Advanced Placement (Appendix R), SAT (Appendix S), and ACT (Appendix T) participation and scores. In an environment where a rigorous high school curriculum enhances students' chances of success and access to higher education, these numbers provide an avenue to understand how educational opportunities vary between high schools. Additionally, these scores offer insight into opportunities students have to maximize a college preparatory curriculum, which along with grades and test scores, play a significant role in the admissions decisions of selective institutions (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). Furthermore, within the undermatching phenomenon, students make enrollment decisions on colleges they feel are a "match," "reach," or "safety" colleges based on class profiles, which often includes the average scores and participation rates as key indicators to

assess where students are in relation to prior classes. As such, a high school's curricular offerings could serve as either a structural barrier or support to post-secondary education.

Although these scores are not an exact avenue to compare curricula, they provide unique insights into the college preparatory environments of participants' high schools and highlight student participation levels. After analysis of these findings, three key points emerged: (1) differences exist between the opportunities for advanced courses for students at rural / suburban high schools in comparison to their urban peers; (2) higher participation in standardized entrance tests increases the likelihood of more students being qualified and admitted into selective institutions; and (3) differences exist in the outcomes for students on SAT & ACT by geographic region. For participants in this study, students attending a high school in an urban county received a curricular advantage.

School Relationships

Trusting relationships with high school teachers, counselors, and administrators aid students during the admissions process by ensuring students have access to pertinent information, push students throughout the college decision making process, and provide support and encouragement to the students and their families. During interviews, each participant recalled their relationships with high school teachers, counselors, or administrators and discussed how it may have impacted their college choice decision.

Ed shared the deep connection that he established with his high school AVID teacher, and how he pushed him during the college search process:

> My freshman year I had Mr. Jones, who was an amazing teacher. I had him as my history teacher in my freshman year. He made the biggest impact in my life and was probably one of the most impactful teachers... He advocated for students that were struggling. He was very influential. He pushed me to apply to 35 scholarships my senior year.

Similarly, Alice shared her experience regarding the relationships she established with her

counselor and JROTC teacher: “My counselor was very nice. I could always email if I needed to. And my ROTC teacher, he was one of my favorite people. I still email him to this day, even though I'm graduated.” Additionally, Katherine discussed the relationship she had with her teacher and how he ultimately influenced her to pursue her degree:

> I had an anatomy teacher. He was very laid back, but it helped me to understand more of the anatomy of the human body, and even in animals. By experiencing that, I was like, "This is very interesting." I've always been interested in the medical field, so that's when I knew what I wanted to pursue.

In addition, Michelle discussed how the teachers and administrators reacted once she announced her college choice, even though it was not where many of her acquaintances had anticipated. Their positive reaction to her news further reinforced her decision:

> I knew a lot of kids that chose to go to these high price tag colleges and universities and they were like, well I don't know how I'm going to pay for it and I guess I'll start taking out loans now. So, me coming out and saying, I can't afford this, this is why I'm choosing to go here, that hit home for a lot of people, so I don't think people would ridicule or insult that when they have that situation going on. It was probably more of a, she's strong for that. She's very mature for that. That's what I got from a lot of my administrators and my peers, it was like, I respect you for that. If anything, I got more respect.

Having a personal connection with someone who was invested in their college decision helped participants during this challenging time. Throughout the study, participants reflected on the relationships with their teachers and counselors but also shared insights regarding the advice they received from coaches, college access advisors, and staff at their high school. Ultimately, having a good relationship with a teacher or counselor positively impacts a student’s college choice decision.

Table 13 presents additional participant responses across cases for the theme School Relationships. Please note that not all participant responses relating to this theme were included, and the table only contains a demonstrative sample.

Table 13

Cross-case Examples for School Relationships

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Camia Ormond	Our counselors, they were the big ones that helped us figure them out. And if we had problems with any of our classes, or if we felt uncomfortable, or something happened, we would go talk to them and they were the ones that told us, and set up meetings for us, with colleges and stuff. They were the ones that planned the big college fair. And they were a big part of helping students at our high school choose their destiny really. If it wasn't for them, I don't know what some of the students would have done.	UC1
Nancy Whitaker	I think some of the advisors at like my high school, they were kind of influential and stuff like that, because they all have their own bias about what college to go to, because they all have their own different colleges that they attended. I think it was mostly my friends and family and my advisers from high school, and then a couple from the colleges I guess too.	UC1

Summary

In summary, research question number two sought to answer, "How does an individual's school and community context influence their college choice decision?" This section provided a description of participants' high school resources and structural supports and barriers by exploring the college-going atmosphere of their high schools and the relationship of participants with key stakeholders within their high school. Each participant provided their unique perspective, and the researcher highlighted the aspects of their experience by including participant voices.

During the research process, each participant identified a high school agent that impacted their college choice decision. Within this layer, teachers and school counselors were the most prevalent factor in helping students during their college choice process. The students recalled both positive and negative interactions with these school personnel, which highlighted some of the stark differences between the participant's experiences. As as a result, each of the participant's indicated that they desired prolonged interactions with a

school agent to help them discern the best option for their context. In two unique cases, participants shared their experiences with an advisor from the Carolina Advising Corps and indicated that the advisor helped fulfill the void left by their school counselor.

Within this layer, the researcher also discussed the structural barriers and supports within the high school and community context that influenced a student's college choice. This research highlighted the school's orientation to higher education through analyzing the opportunities and outcomes of an advanced curriculum and standardized assessments. For the participants in this study, students attending high schools in urban areas had more opportunities for an advanced curriculum, as well as higher success rates overall.

Lastly, within the school and community context, the researcher highlighted the relationships that participants had with school teachers, counselors, and administrators as a structural support for aiding their college choice. The students indicated that having a personal connection with a teacher, counselor, coach, or advisor is key in helping families make the best choice for their context. Therefore, it is imperative that students and their families establish a connection with someone within their network to discuss their aspirations and goals, and as a result, increase the social capital.

Findings Related to Higher Education Context

The third research question was "How does the higher education context influence a student's college choice decision?" Layer three of Perna's model focuses on characteristics of higher education that influence the choice process for students (Perna, 2006). Prior research has found that many factors potentially impact a student's decision when considering college choice. According to researcher, geographic location of the college and distance from the student's home town high school may have an impact on a student's decision to pursue high education (Griffith and Rothstein, 2009; Perna, 2000; Turley, 2009).

Other research posits that institutional marketing and recruitment efforts and institutional characteristics influence how a student navigates the vast amount of information to ultimately select their institution. This section presents themes that arose from the students' experiences and provides insights to how students formed their institutional decisions.

Table 14

Dissertation Research – Layer Three

Perna's Layer	Research themes
Marketing & Recruitment	• Emails/College Outreach • College Visit
Location/Distance	• Location/Distance
Institutional Characteristics	• Size • Community College Stigma • Community College Benefits

Marketing and Recruitment

During the college choice process, many four-year colleges and universities utilize marketing efforts to attract more students and achieve enrollment goals (Palmer et al. 2004; Perna, 2006). These efforts range from direct mail / email campaigns, billboards, commercials, to college access recruitment programs such as recruiting in high schools or inviting prospective students to campus to for an official visit (Palmer et al. 2004). During the interview process, the students reflected on the various forms of marketing and recruitment they experienced.

Emails / College Outreach

As students enter their junior and senior year, college outreach increases to encourage students to apply to their institution. During his interview, Daniel shared one of his

experiences: “Wingate was the first one, and I just thought, well I kept getting emails and what not. That was a huge thing. I was like, Yeah, why not apply? Might as well, the worst they can do is say no." Michelle also shared an example of how her four-year institution sought to influence her by sending follow up emails once she completed her application. She recalled:

> So now we're in March or so, so I'm about to finish my senior year, and they start sending out information. We're about to send out these payment plans so you can start paying on your tuition, books, and picking your dorm and stuff.

As participants continued their college search process, many engaged in the exchange of information with the institutions by attending a college access event or campus visit. This affected their decision to attend a community college over a four-year institution because many participants received outreach materials from their local community college.

College Visit

In the student recruitment process, campus visits often serve as one of the most significant interventions in advancing a student’s decision to enroll at their institution (Kinzie et al., 2004; Paulsen, 1990, Roderick et al., 2008). Throughout the college search process, every participant indicated that they went on at least one campus visit, with the majority of students visiting at least two or more postsecondary institutions. These opportunities arose from visits arranged by their classroom teachers, school counselors, college access advisors, direct invitations family and friends, or directly from the institution. One of the clearest indications of how campus visits help students crystalize their college choice decision came from Fisher’s experience:

> I visited UNC Charlotte twice. One time, officially. And the second time, I just went up there for a day, I met some friends, they showed me around the college. So, an unofficial visit. And then, I toured Appalachian State, and it was very nice. It just seemed too early. Like I was forcing something, and I don't like to force myself into things. I like to ease into it and then once I'm comfortable that's when I'll be the most

optimal.

Nicole also expressed her feelings of being overwhelmed after her four-year institution campus visit:

> I believe it was like the second or third college visit that I had gone on. I liked the campus, but it was way too big. I felt overwhelmed. There was like a lot of students there. It was a nice campus though.

During his interview, Conway detailed his visits to three four-year institutions and discussed how they impacted his decision:

> Yes, I went to visit Western. My brother actually went to Western which is one of the reasons why I considered that school. I had actually been to the campus. I didn't visit my senior year, but I visited when he was admitted. I had a pretty good idea as to what was at Western, and what was offered. I went down to UNC Charlotte. At the time, I don't remember much of the trip now, but that made a good impression on me. And, NC State was ultimately ... it seemed like the best fit.

After his visit, Conway was set on enrolling at NC State. Unfortunately, he would not have an opportunity to attend his first choice because he was denied admission. Instead of enrolling at his second or third choice of four-year institution, he chose to save money by enrolling in his local community college.

Going on a campus visit proved to be a very significant step in participants' decision to undermatch. By visiting a campus firsthand, students immersed themselves in the environment to determine if they felt comfortable. In addition, students were able to visit the neighboring community colleges to meet with counselors and faculty members. After visiting various campuses, students were able to narrow their choices for where they would like to attend in the future. Daniel explained:

> Some people seriously consider a university without ever visiting it, or they won't seriously consider a university without even visiting it. I think the campus plays part of it, as in how comfortable you feel or whatnot, if it feels like somewhere you'd like to be in the future.

For the participants in the study, the four-year university and community college campus visit had a significant impact on their college choice.

Location

Location / Distance

As students navigate the college choice process, distance and location of the postsecondary institution are two factors that impact a student's decision to apply and enroll (Chapman, 1981; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Hu, 2003; Paulen, 1990). In North Carolina, 110 post-secondary institutions span the state from the coast to the mountains, allowing 99% of all residents to be within a 30-minute radius of an institution. During interviews, students reflected on the impact of location on their decision to apply to the four-year institutions and discussed how the proximity of a community college impacted their enrollment decision.

Each participant discussed distance and location in some manner. Some referenced the geographic location of the institution as an influence on their decision to apply and potentially enroll; others focused on the convenience and location of their community college. During his interview, Daniel explained why he applied to Western Carolina:

> The big thing with me is I wanted a college or university that was more of a rural setting. The campus was also great, and I was like, well, you know, I could definitely consider this a real option for me... I guess because I live in the country, I think it feels like home when it's secluded.

Similarly, Paula explains why she applied to two of her top choices of four-year institution:

> I like the location of both of them. I'm definitely an outdoorsy kind of person. I like the atmosphere and the whole sense of community that's at Western and Appalachian. I think Western is a lot smaller of a school, so I liked that more intimate feeling from that school, but then Appalachian is larger so there's more opportunities to meet different people there. There's give and take with both of those. I think they both have really good communication sciences and disorders programs which is a big thing for me. I know Western just updated their facilities recently, so that's definitely a plus of that school.

When discussing the impact of distance in regard to the community college, many praise the convenience and benefit of having multiple campuses nearby. Jamie reiterated this point: "The reason why I chose Urban Campus One? Proximity to home. The fact that they have multiple campuses, that's great." Fisher also described the convenience of attending his local community college:

> It's pretty nice actually, not too bad. I get to sleep in my own bed every night. I'm not too far away from my friends who are coming here too. It's only about a 15-minute drive. It's nice. I'm not paying for a dorm, so that's taken off the expenses.

An analysis of the interview data shows that participants in the study applied to institutions within a 2.5-hour radius. Only two institutions were beyond 3.5 hours, and they are both located in Virginia. Additionally, each student indicated that they live within a 30-minute commute of their community college. That also includes students attending community colleges outside of their county of residence.

Table 15 presents additional participant responses across cases for the theme Distance / Location. Please note that not all participant responses relating to this theme were included, and the table only contains a demonstrative sample.

Table 15

Cross-case Examples for Distance / Location

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Daniel Fernandez	I decided to go here because of the setting, and because I knew more people that were going to go to this college instead of GTCC. For example, here it's more of a rural setting, and then at GTCC it's more urban. Also, here it's a little smaller.	RC1
Conway Matthews	I live like five minutes away from Rural Campus One.	RC1

Institutional Characteristics

As research has found, the composition of a state's post-secondary education system impacts the distribution of students at two-year and four-year, public, private, and non-profit institutions (Perna and Titus, 2004). In North Carolina, three systems govern 110 post-secondary institutions: the NC Independent Colleges and Universities, the NC Community College System, and the University System of North Carolina. During fall 2016, these three systems served over 88,000; 710,000; and 250,000 students respectively. As the conversation progressed with participants, many of the students described the institutional characteristics they considered during their college choice. Michelle described the process:

> Within the past year or so, my senior year, I did a lot of research on schools, especially when it came down to do I attend a 4 year, do I do a community college, if I do a community college what do they have to offer me, in order for me to be successful? I did a lot of extensive research and late nights with this particular school and figuring out what program do I want to do.

As participants navigated the college choice process, the institutional characteristics they referenced most frequently included the size of the campus, student enrollment, and what can be characterized as the benefits or stigma of community colleges.

Size

All participants referenced that a college's size was a factor when contemplating their institutional choice. The emphasis of size primarily focused on one of three factors: the physical size of the campus / community, the number of students enrolled at the college or university, and the classroom size / ratio.

While reflecting on her college choice, Michelle shared her thought process regarding the size and type of community she was seeking:

> I didn't have this long list of schools I wanted to go to because I had lived in a small town, so I didn't really want to go to these huge universities, so that was a huge factor because I didn't want to go to a very large campus school. I like smaller more tight-

> knit community type colleges, so I picked East Carolina because Greenville reminded me of the town I grew up in. Everything's everywhere, and people are just diverse, and I went to a diverse high school, so that's what I wanted to be in was a diverse area.

When asked to compare his experience at his community college versus what he hoped to have if he attended a four-year institution, Daniel shared:

> I think maybe the size had something to do with it. Universities tend to have a lot of people, obviously, so it's a broader experience. You get to see all kinds of people and interact with all kinds of people. Here it's a little more secluded. Everyone's kind of the same, because most people that come here are from around here. They don't come from states all across the country.

Sometimes it was easier for participants to indicate what they did not like. Nancy shared her feelings of apprehension after visiting Liberty University: "I believe it was like the second or third college visit that I had gone on. I liked the campus, but it was way too big. I felt overwhelmed. There were like a lot of students there." When asked about her feelings regarding class sizes, Camia stated:

> Especially if you're going to a university because the class sizes get much bigger and you don't have one-on-one with a teacher. So that's what I was looking for as well. So, when I heard that the student/teacher ratio at Urban Campus One was like a high school class size and the teacher, you can meet with the teacher and the teacher can help you, I fell in love with that. That was one big figure in helping me decide.

For participants in this study, the size of the institution impacted their decision to undermatch because students were able to assess the importance of physical size of the campus, the student/teacher ratio, and class sizes when comparing institutions.

Community College Stigma

As students weighed their enrollment decision, many participants openly spoke about their opinions regarding the benefits and stigma of community colleges and how their perception of those factors impacted their decision. The most common stigmas of community colleges shared by participants focused on student completion, lack of campus life, and

quality of education. Conversely, throughout the study, participants also shared why community colleges are highly regarded in NC. The students also shared the positive aspects of community colleges when they spoke about ease of access, affordability, and quality instruction.

When asked to identify stigmas associated with enrolling in community colleges and reasons students pursue alternatives, Michelle shared:

> I don't think a lot of kids make that decision because they don't want to separate themselves from their peers, especially if they have a tight knit group. That's one reason, I'd say another reason is that community college, especially this one, gets a bad stigma as people don't finish, or it ends up being a black hole, meaning once you go to community college you drop out and don't finish. But, I really think that depends on the person and their situation.

Nancy recalled the conversations she had with her counselors and others about their perception of community colleges. She discussed why more students do not chose a community college:

> I know my advisors from high school or whatever, they were like kind of pushing me to go to a four-year university. I knew that some people look down upon community colleges, because they don't have the full college experience that the typical four-year has. There's a very big age gap between a lot of the students. I think the average age around community colleges is like thirty-five or something. I think most people are turned away by the idea because maybe they don't want to live at home with their parents still and they want the college experience as opposed to just going to classes and getting a degree.

Camia also shared similar sentiments when she recalled the discouraging conversations that she had with her father about enrolling in community colleges:

> And so, when it was time for me to come to apply to colleges I had some people in my family that told me, don't go to a community college. You need to go to a university. You need to experience a full college life. A community college wouldn't do you any good. You need to get out there and get away.

Participants were clearly impacted by the negative portrayals of community colleges. Yet, during the interviews, participants were also able to articulate the many benefits of

community colleges. They did not let the negative depiction of community colleges deter them from applying and enrolling. In fact, each participant expressed excitement about the opportunity to continue their post-secondary education at a community college.

Table 16 presents additional participant responses across cases for the theme Community College Stigma. Please note that not all participant responses relating to this theme were included, and the table only contains a demonstrative sample.

Table 16

Cross-case Examples for Community College Stigma

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Paula Baker	I think you don't get quite as much of that community feel as you do at a four year school when people are living on campus so you're having that interaction with people more than just when you're in class. I think there is definitely is that college-y atmosphere.	UC1
Conway Matthews	I know there's this stigma about community colleges and even in academia today, there's still stigma for people that have attended community colleges. There're some schools that won't accept credits. I know it's quickly changing now but it used to be the case that if you wanted to go to grad school or even med school, for example, some of your credits will be outright rejected from the community college you went to if you tried to count those as prereqs.	RC1
Daniel Fernandez	People don't really have too much pride in their community colleges. People don't say, "RC1 pride." I can understand that. That's fine. I'm not trying to look down upon those people. I'm just saying, when people say, "Where'd you study?" Or, "What's your alma mater?" You say, "NC State pride," or, "UNC." It's a brand that you like to show off or whatnot.	RC1

Community College Benefits

Community colleges are often praised for being nimble institutions that provide high quality education and technical training at an affordable price. These institutions enroll a significant portion of students from a variety of socio-economic, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. During this study, participants echoed these sentiments and discussed the positive aspects of community colleges that reinforced their decision to enroll.

One of the positive aspects of community colleges that all participants highlighted cost and affordability. During her interview, Nancy reflected on how she discussed the benefits of attending a community college with her parents:

> I think there's a lot more benefits than I thought there were, especially financially and getting more one-on-one attention that I didn't think I would get. I feel like you're not really treated as just like a number in the system at a community college. You're given the actual specialized attention that you need...From my parents, my mom actually graduated from a community college, so she was in full support of me going to one and then transferring out, because she knew how beneficial it can be financially especially to graduate from one. I knew from my dad ... He went to a four-year but he graduated with an associate's, but he was in full support of it as well and saw the benefits.

Other participants sought the opinions of others for guidance in making their college choice. Before making her final decision, Katherine recalled:

> From other people, they said it was a really nice small community of people and that the instructors were really good, wanted to help you succeed. As I looked more into it, I could tell that's what they wanted to do...I really didn't know exactly what a cost would be, but I knew it would be a lot cheaper.

Likewise, Ed explained his various reasons for choosing his community college: "It's a good price to get a good education there. It's a great school. I like how it looks.... There's a lot of teachers there who actually want you to succeed and that will help you along the way." In addition, many participants expressed their appreciation for the benefits of community colleges, such as "convenience," "on-line courses," and "smaller classrooms." To illustrate this point, Michelle stated:

> I like that I can take classes either online or on campus which is what I have now, I have four classes, two are on campus and two are online. I like the online classes because it gives me an opportunity to really structure my time around those, because I also work.

Similarly, Nancy expressed her appreciation for the learning environment at the college she would ultimately choose: "Class sizes were actually smaller in comparison, and I like that a lot."

Table 17 presents additional participant responses across cases for the theme Community College Benefits. Please note that not all participant responses relating to this theme were included, and the table only contains a demonstrative sample.

Table 17

Community College Benefits

Name	Illustrative Examples	Campus
Conway Matthews	The professors are supposed to be held up to the same academic standards as regular universities throughout the state that are state-based. The work isn't necessarily harder, I feel. It's just that they're smaller class sizes and I knew that that would be a great help. Actually, I'm feeling like a student and not like a number that I would be able to better connect with my professor and in the end do better than just simply going and then leaving in a class full of a couple hundred people.	RC1
Fisher Simmons	I heard that it was affordable and it was a great program. So, I came here and checked it out myself. It all kind of added up. I heard that teachers were friendly, I heard that the way you do your assignments and stuff is clear, and there's good communication, and I heard there's friendly people here.	SU1

Summary

In summary, research question number three sought to answer, "How does the higher education context influence a student's college choice decision?" This section provided a description of the higher education context and explained how institutions shaped a student's college choice in several ways. Each participant provided perspective into their unique context, and the students' voices and stories offered insight into the aspects of their experience.

Each student went on multiple campus visits before making this final decision and indicated that the college visit is imperative during the college choice process. The visit helps the student and family to understand the size, location, and educational environment, as well as allows the family to compare a variety of institutional types. The college visit also serves to break or reinforce common misperceptions, and as a result, helps the family crystalize the

best course of action for their individual context.

The decision to enroll in a four-year institution versus a community college was central to this study. As a result, the researcher asked the participants questions to elicit their perceptions of the benefits and stigmas regarding enrolling in a community college. Some of the key benefits mentioned were cost and convenience, while some of the key stigmas were low student completion rates and lack of the traditional four-year experience. Although each student had their unique experience, the common findings focused on the impact of the four-year institution's marketing and recruitment efforts, location / size, and the stigma and benefits of matriculating to a community college.

Findings Related to Social, Economic, & Policy Context

The final research question was "How does the social, economic, and political context influence a student's college choice decision?" Layer four of Perna's model focuses on the social, economic, and political factors that directly and indirectly influence the college choice process for students. Prior research has identified these factors as demographic conditions, public policies, and economic conditions (Perna, 2006). During the study, only a few themes were presented from the participants' perspectives for this layer. Therefore, to answer this research question, this section presents the themes that emerged from participants' experiences and provides a high-level overview of the social, economic, and political higher education context in North Carolina.

According to Perna (2006), the social context of the model includes the demographic characteristics of the population. To further understand the higher education environment in North Carolina, the researcher conducted an analysis of post-secondary demographic data for the state's college-going population. This analysis includes data on enrollment trends, transfer patterns, and the forecasting of the educational pipeline for North Carolina.

Table 18

Dissertation Research – Layer Four

Perna's Layer	Research sub-themes
Demographics	● Enrollment Trends
Public Policies	● Comprehensive Articulation Agreement
State Appropriations & Financial Support to Higher Education	● State Appropriations ● Tuition Increases ● Economic Context

Demographics

Enrollment Trends

As the third largest community college system in the United States, North Carolina's 58 community colleges served over 710,000 students last year. However, these enrollment numbers pale in comparison to the enrollment numbers during the recession. Community colleges have a symbiotic relationship with state and national economy. During the time of high unemployment, community college enrollment increases, and during the time of economy stability, community college enrollment decreases. Figure 5 illustrates this phenomenon by showing the community college enrollment trends since 2001. Since 2009, enrollment has steadily declined from the peak levels during the recession, resulting in a decrease of over 21% (Tippett, 2017).

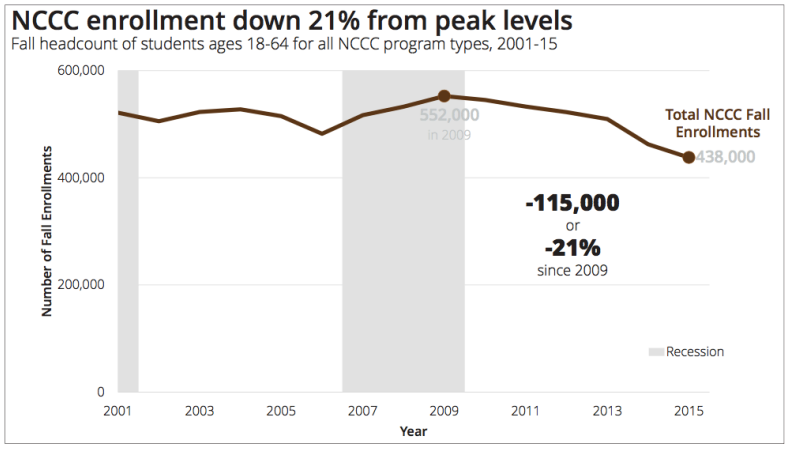

Figure 5. Community College Enrollment Trends

Further analysis shows that this decline spans all community college enrollment types, including curriculum, basic skills, and continuing education students. Figure 6 illustrates the enrollment trends by type. In each of the three curricular areas, community college enrollment has declined (Tippett, 2017).

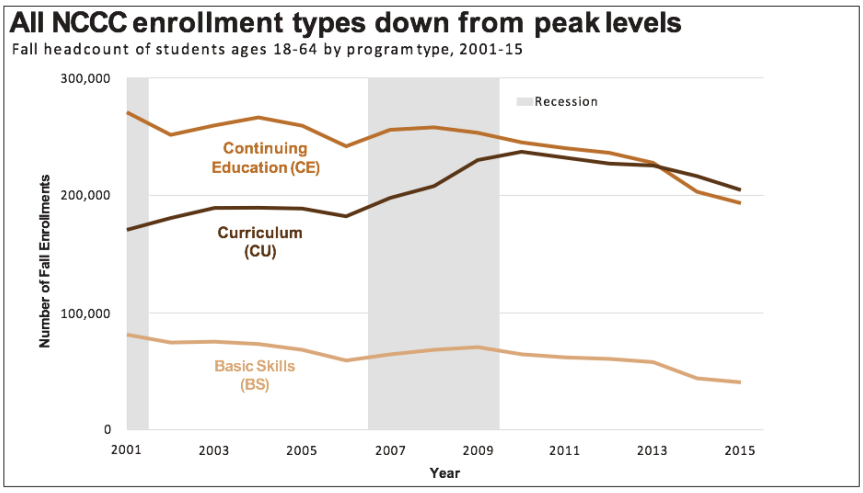

Figure 6. NC Community College Enrollment Trends

However, during that same period, enrollment in UNC System institutions has increased. Figure 7 shows the enrollment trends for four-year public institutions since 2001. In 2015, UNC had its highest enrollment since 2001, even though over the recent years enrollment growth has slowed (Tippett, 2017).

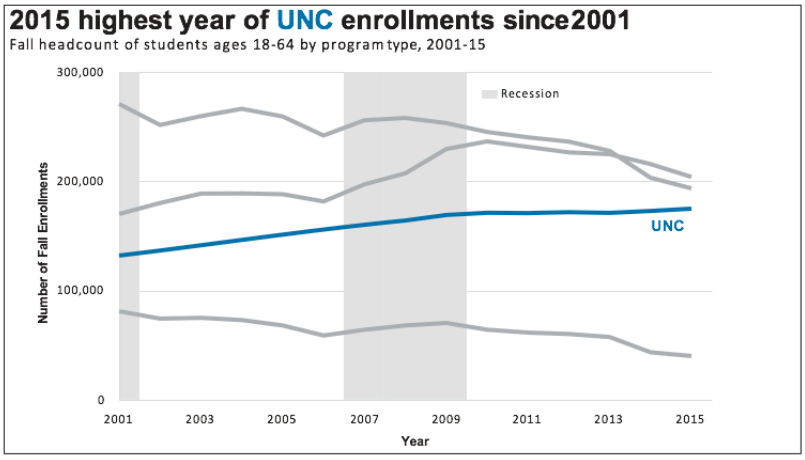

Figure 7. UNC System Enrollment Trends

Conversely, during the same time frame, the enrollment at North Carolina's 36 four-year private institutions declined from their peak levels in 2011 (Tippett, 2017). Figure 8 shows the change in enrollment growth within North Carolina's private institutions since 2001 compared to community college and public university partners.

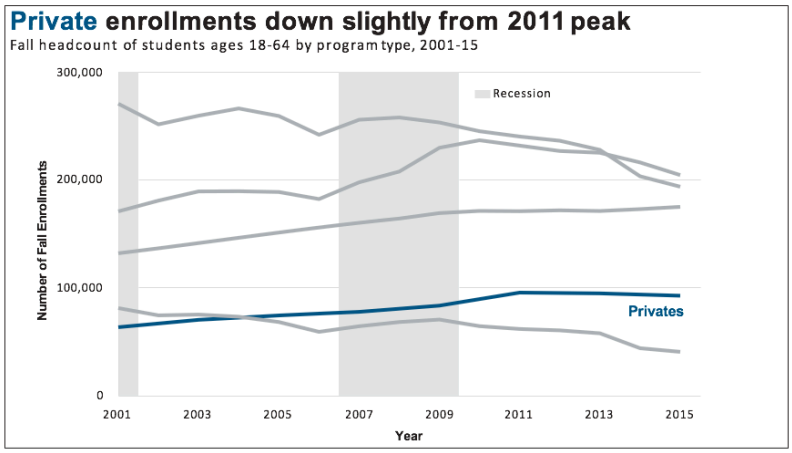

Figure 8. Private University Enrollment

These enrollment trends allow researchers and consumers to understand the pipeline of students seeking a post-secondary education in North Carolina using data in an historical perspective. To estimate future student enrollment patterns in North Carolina, all high school seniors are asked to complete a college interest survey in the spring of their senior year to provide post-secondary intentions. Figure 9 indicates the breakdown of graduate intentions by county reported in the Graduate Data Verification System (Tippett, 2017). For the participants in this study, the percentage of their county's students seeking to attend some type of post-secondary institution ranged from 75% to 88% or more.

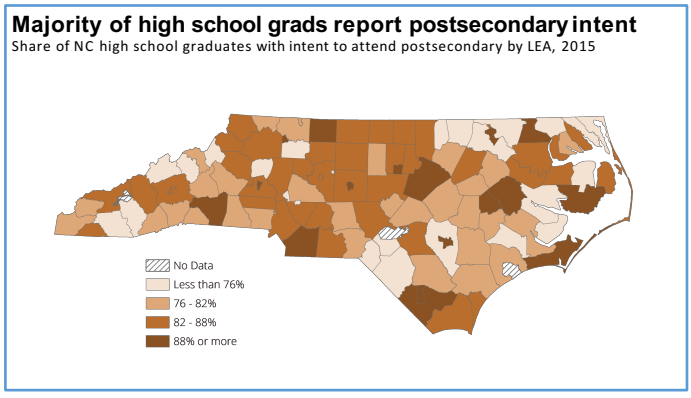

Figure 9. Post-Secondary Intent

Further analysis of the senior survey data shows high school seniors' intentions to enroll in a community college or technical school after graduation. Table Figure 10 shares students' intentions to enroll in a community or technical college after graduation, and the data is broken down by county.

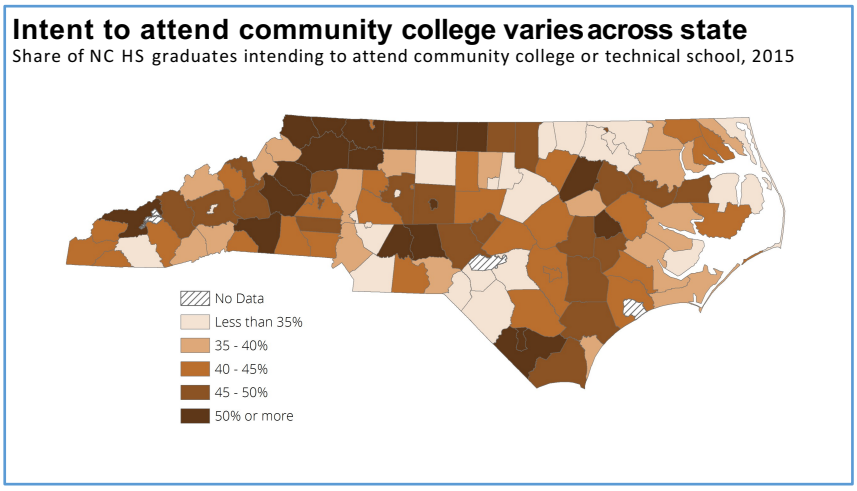

Figure 10. High School Graduate Intent to Enroll in a Community College

Though participants did not specifically articulate the impact of demographic trends on their decision to undermatch, these trends influence key components of the college choice process for institutions such as acceptance rates, first-year class sizes, and the availability of institutional aid. Though this demographic data is important to understand current and future trends, it does not tell the full story regarding post-secondary enrollment in two-year and four-year institutions in North Carolina. Other factors such as public policy, tuition costs, and the impact on the economy affect students and their families' college choice decisions directly and indirectly.

Public Policies

Prior research suggests that the public policies of financial aid and tuition affect a student's college choice decision. The proposed conceptual model permitted the researcher to investigate a wide range of public policy to comprehend their potential effects on students involved with this study (Perna, 2006). To narrow the focus of factors associated with public policies that may have impacted participants, the researcher focused on two key areas: the legislation governing the transfer process, and the recent state appropriations and financial support to higher education.

Comprehensive Articulation Agreement

During the interview process, the most prominent policy that participants referenced was the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA) and the transfer process. In North Carolina, the CAA is the governing document which oversees the process of how credits are articulated from the community colleges to the public and private four-year institutions. This document originated due to legislation in 1997 and was revised in 2014 to add additional clarity and consistency to the transfer process. Though each participant had varying levels of knowledge regarding the specifics of the policy, all 14 participants understood that there was a governing document guiding the process.

In the interview with Daniel, he described his familiarity with the transfer process and the articulation agreement:

> I learned a lot during my senior year. I learned that you could take your general education courses here and that your classes regarding your major don't start until your junior year. That's pretty much what I knew about transfer. That it's a lot more complicated than it seems, class-wise. There are a number of classes that you have to take. The UGETC's. It's a process.

Similarly, Paula recalled her knowledge of the transfer process and discussed why she chose the community college:

> I can just come here and get all my Gen Ed stuff out of the way for a lot cheaper, and they'll give me a lot more credit for the AP's that I took in high school. I figured I'll just do that and transfer.

However, seven of the 14 participants did not know specifically how the transfer process worked before enrolling at their community college. These students were aware that their classes transferred but were unable to articulate the specific rules, regulations, and intricacies that governed the process. It wasn't until after enrolling at their community college and taking the transfer course, ACA 122, that many of these students were introduced to the specifics of the articulation agreement. Nancy provided the perfect summation:

> I actually had no idea how it would work. I was seeing it like just applying all over again to the four universities and stuff like that, but after taking the college transfer class, we went over the college transfer agreement, the CAA. We went over how if you get your degree you're granted ... no matter what, you're able to be admitted into any four-year if you have a 2.0 GPA; at least one. Maybe not your choice, but you're allowed to get into one. I had no idea that that was a thing.

Additionally, Conway shared similar thoughts about ACA 122:

> I do like there's a course here that's offered called ACA 122…it really helps you hash out what it is you're going to be doing once you transfer. It's specifically geared towards people that are transferring. One credit class, supper easy. If you already know what you're doing, it just helps you fill the part. If you really don't know what you're doing, it helps you figure out. I like that community colleges in North Carolina do that.

To fully understand all of what the transfer process entails, students, families, and school officials must familiarize themselves with the intricacies of this policy to ensure a smooth transition. This level of understanding should begin during the search phase of the student's choice process to allow them to make a more informed decision regarding the pathways through a community college to obtain a four-year degree. A family's knowledge regarding the transfer process and the CAA at community colleges can directly affect their decision to undermatch. Waiting until after the student has made their enrollment decision is too late.

State Appropriations and Financial Support to Higher Education

State Appropriations

In North Carolina, over half of the state's $23 billion budget supports education at public schools, community colleges, and universities. For the 2017-19 biennium budget, education received over $13 billion in state appropriations. Funding to support the Department of Public Instruction totaled $9.5 billion, funding to support the state's 58 institutions within the Community College System totaled $1.1 billion, and funding to support 17 institutions within the UNC system totaled $2.9 billion. Though these numbers are significant, North Carolina has not recovered to the prerecession levels of per pupil expenditures at the K-12 and public university level (NCGA Fiscal Research, 2017).

Tuition Increases

North Carolina's public university tuition remains below the national average; however, the average tuition cost for UNC schools has increased from $2,490 in 2009-10 to $4,352 in 2017-18, a 74% increase in less than a decade (Debruyn, 2017). Figure 11 shows the trend for the average UNC Undergraduate Resident Tuition.

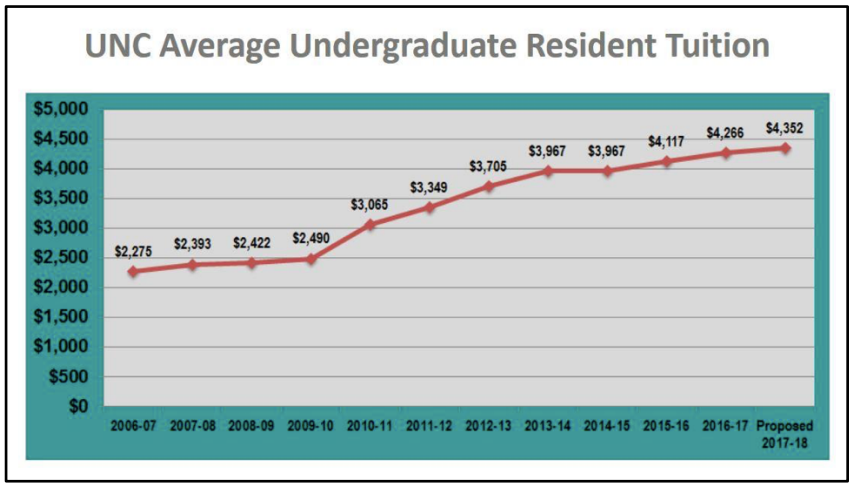

Figure 11. UNC Average Undergraduate Resident Tuition

Additionally, at the community college level, 2016 legislation increased tuition beginning in the Spring 2016 term, causing costs to increase from $72 per credit hour to $76 per credit hour (up to a maximum of 16 credit hours). Since 2009-10, community college tuition has increased from $46 to the current rate of $76, increasing the overall cost from $672 per semester to $1,216.

Because of current trends in the North Carolina economy and financial policies surrounding higher education, tuition prices outpace increases in family income and inflation. As a result, college affordability has declined, which impacts a family's ability to cover the cost of college and affects a student's college choice decisions. As the cost of tuition across two-year and four-year intuitions continues to rise, the rate of increase at a four-year college is greater; therefore, to save money, more and more students could potentially choose to undermatch.

Economic Context

According to Perna (2006), unemployment rates are typically used as proxies for the foregone earnings of an investment in higher education. According to the North Carolina Economic Fact Sheet (2006), analysis of the economic context in North Carolina has found that North Carolina has had one of the largest decreases in the unemployment rate in the country since January 2013. Additionally, the unemployment rate decreased from 8.8% in January 2013 to 4.6 % in August 2016, the 2nd largest decrease in the country over that period (p. 2). Lastly, North Carolina has become a desired state for relocation; it is now the 9th most populous state, gaining approximately 2 million new residents since 2000 (NC Department of Commerce, 2016). Perna (2016) states, "These analyses suggest that, because of the changes in the economic and social conditions of their community, many high school students are uncertain and anxious about their future lives, including work and college-

related outcomes" (p. 144).

Summary

In summary, research question number four sought to answer, "How does the social, economic, and political context influence a student's college choice decision?" This section provided a description of a sample of the social, political, and economic factors and explained how those shape a student's college choice. Although the participants provided perspective into the political context through comments about the articulation agreement, none of the other social and economic factors were referenced from the student's voices and stories. One can surmise that many of the factors within this layer are unnoticed aspects of the student's college choice decision. As such, students and their families were not able to articulate their direct impact in their decision.

However, since cost is a significant factor for participants seeking a post-secondary education, we can conclude that students and their families are affected by state appropriations to higher education, tuition increases, and the economic conditions of the state. Additionally, the state's enrollment patterns and transfer population will continue to evolve as the community college system and four-year institutions continue to create and revise articulation agreements. Since it is not possible to directly discern the impact of the effects of these factors on the student's college choice decision, one must rely on prior research findings and publicly available data sources. Through this lens, researchers are able to assess the current findings regarding college choice within this layer and situate participant's comments and thoughts within a context they are able to articulate.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusions

This chapter presents interpretations and conclusions based on the findings of this study. This chapter discusses potential implications for theory and practice and opportunities for future research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research, limitations of the study, and the researcher's reflections regarding the undermatching phenomenon and its impact on the college choice decisions for students.

This qualitative research study examined the college choice decisions for students who were admitted into a four-year institution but chose to enroll in a community college as a transfer student seeking an AA / AS degree. The semi-structured interviews and data analysis conducted with 14 participants allowed the researcher to answer the following research questions:

I. How does an individual's habitus influence their college choice decision?

II. How does an individual's school and community context influence their college choice decision?

III. How does the higher education context influence a student's college choice decision?

IV. How does the social, economic, and political context influence a student's college choice decision?

Perna's Conceptual Model provided a manageable framework that allowed the researcher to consider factors that may impact a student's college choice decision. It also allowed the researcher to focus on specific aspects of the college choice process that may otherwise be overlooked. Lastly, the conceptual model provided a structure to organize the research findings and conclusions.

Conclusions

For the participants in this study, four major conclusions can be drawn:

Conclusion 1: For the students in this study, education and career aspirations and a guiding long term vision were significant factors for students during their college choice process.

Conclusion 2: The participants in this study sought prolonged advising with a counselor, in addition to any assistance they received from other sources, to help review the vast amount of information.

Conclusion 3: Cost was a significant factor for students and families during the college choice process, and therefore they made a pragmatic decision by enrolling in a community college instead of a four-year institution.

Conclusion 4: The participants made their college choice decision based on their perception of what their college choice experience would be like at a two-year and four-year institution.

Conclusion 1: For the students in this study, education and career aspirations, as well as a guiding long-term vision were significant factors for students during their college choice process.

The findings of this study illustrate that each participant had career and post-secondary education aspirations, which were a significant driving force during their college choice process. In college choice research, a student's educational aspirations are said to derive from their attitudes, beliefs, and values about higher education, and as a result, impact a student's behavior (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; McDonough, 1997; Perna 2006). For most participants in the study, this long-term vision was developed during the Disposition Phase of the college choice process, which typically

begins in middle school. During this phase, students make a conscious decision to pursue a career or educational goal after high school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This conclusion was supported by evidence shared by participants during interviews, and many of the students were able to recall their early conversations with family and friends regarding their interests and goals beyond high school. These findings are consistent with prior research that suggests educational and career aspirations, socioeconomic status, ability, parental encouragement, and financial limitations are the factors that most influence students in their college-choice processes (Palmer et al., 2004).

Prior research indicates that 8-10 students who enter into the community college intend to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree, but only a quarter of those students actually transfer. As a result, approximately 14% of the entering cohort will earn a bachelor's degree within six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Despite these obstacles, the participants chose to undermatch at a community college because they viewed the transfer process as an alternative route towards their goals. The participants realized that the transfer process would not be easy. To successfully obtain a baccalaureate degree, the participants knew that they must strive academically at their community college, navigate the transfer process without a significant loss in academic credit or time, and maintain academic success at the four-year institution (Dougherty, 2006). Despite the varied reasoning, the participants in this study viewed the community college as a trajectory toward their educational and career goal.

In North Carolina, the Comprehensive Articulation Agreement guides the transfer process, which allows students to seamlessly apply for admission, transfer credit, and continue their path toward a baccalaureate degree. Though participants were not fully versed in the details of the policy, they all understood that completing courses at the community college would allow them to save money, receive individualized attention through smaller

classes, and remain on track toward their long-term goals (Cohen & Brawer, 2004; Kisker, Wagoner, and Cohen, 2012). For the participants in this study, this conclusion reinforces that aspirations were a significant determinant in the student's academic behavior and their college choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006).

Conclusion 2: The participants in this study sought prolonged advising with a counselor, in addition to any assistance they received from other sources, to help review the vast amount of information.

This study found that students sought information and assistance from a wide variety of sources to comprehend the vast amount of information about colleges, intended majors, and financial aid. Those sources included immediate and extended family, school agents (i.e. teachers, counselors, and advisors), friends / peers, and multiple websites. As the students neared 12th grade, they leaned on the knowledge and wisdom of their support network for assistance. The most prevalent influence on the choice decision for 12 out of the 14 participants was the student's immediate and extended family. As prior research suggests, parents and extended family are significant contributors to a student's college choice decision (Bers and Galowich, 2002; Hosseler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Perna and Titus, 2004). During interviews, participants recalled varying levels of parental involvement, including helping the student decide a major, taking the family on college visits, completing college and financial aid applications, having family discussions about what would be the best decision for the student, and offering encouragement and support throughout the process. Additionally, the first-generation college students within this study also felt supported and encouraged by their family members, even though they were not fully versed in the college choice process.

In addition to the encouragement and support from family members, participants also sought information from their friends and peers. They leaned on the wisdom of older students who had some college experience and discussed their college plans with their peer group. This finding aligns with prior research that suggests that students are more likely to plan and enroll in a college when their friends also have post-secondary aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999; Perna &Titus, 2004).

Participants in the study also sought information from school and community agents, such as high school guidance and college counselors, teachers, and college access programs. Participants recalled examples of how their teachers and counselors arranged college visits, assisted with the FAFSA, and tried their best to answer any questions throughout the college choice process. These examples reiterate prior research regarding the importance of the roles teachers and counselors play in students' post-secondary educational decisions (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). However, data also revealed that students need prolonged one-on-one support and that additional school and community resources are needed.

Throughout the interview process, it became clear that the participants yearned for additional time with teachers and counselors to help them wade through college information and assess the best decision for their family. Although school personnel assisted participants with the FAFSA and scholarship applications, many of the students wished there was someone to work with the family to understand their contextualized financial aid, student loans, and admissions information. Furthermore, once the students graduated from high school, they were left to rely on their own support networks because they no longer had access to high school counselors or teachers as resources. Though there is extensive research regarding the resources that students utilize during the college process, the research on who students turn to for assistance once they graduate from high school is limited.

As participants reflected on their college choice process, a few of the students indicated that they wanted additional interaction with counselors during their senior year. During interviews, participants revealed differences across high schools regarding the amount of time students spent with their counselor. In a few cases, the participants had no to minimal contact with their counselor during their senior year. Given the importance of counselors for a student's college choice (Chapman, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006), these findings illustrate the need for additional personnel to assist students during this process**.**

Conclusion 3: Cost was a significant factor for students and families during the college choice process, and therefore they made a pragmatic decision by enrolling in a community college instead of a four-year institution.

Due to decreasing state and federal support and rising tuition costs, the price of higher education continues to outpace the cost of inflation, placing a greater financial burden on students and their families. As a result, a student's college choice decision is significantly impacted by a family's ability to pay and/or their willingness to take on the burden of student loan debt. Numerous studies articulate the impact of financial aid and the costs of higher education on a student's college choice decision (Hossler, et al., 1989; Kinzie et al, 2004; Manski & Wise 1983; St. John, 1990; Paulsen,1990). As the students in this study progressed toward making their college choice, the cost of attendance, potential student loan debt, and the cost savings offered by the community college became more prominent. These decisions were impacted by the family's current financial status and income, the availability of scholarships and financial aid, and the student's employment. Although ten of the fourteen students indicated they came from middle income families, each of the students discussed how their families grappled with their ability to afford a four-year degree. This is a

surprising finding because prior research indicates that undermatched students often come from lower socioeconomic households (Smith et al. 2013).

As students compared the costs between the four-year institutions and their community college, many sought options to limit their out-of-pocket expenses. As a result, students chose to enroll at their community college instead of taking on the burden of additional financial debt for themselves and their families. Instead of accumulating debt by attending a four-year institution, the students chose to attend a community college for little or no cost. In addition, because of the comprehensive articulation agreement students can transfer between the community colleges and four-year institutions seamlessly. Due to the symbiotic nature of the community college system and the four-year university systems, participants viewed the community college and its transfer process as an alternative for realizing their dreams and aspirations of obtaining the educational goals.

Prior research has found that access to higher education is negatively impacted due to the ever-rising costs of tuition and the reduction in state appropriations (Berger & Kostal, 2002). Each year, college becomes more expensive as tuition continues to outpace inflation and increases in family income. Over the past five years, North Carolina has experienced tuition increases at two-year and four-year public and private university levels. Though only a few participants directly referenced the specific tuition increases, all participants in this study were affected by college affordability. As such, each participant sought options within their college choice to limit their college expenses and avoid being a financial burden on their families (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001).

Conclusion 4: The participants made their college choice decision based on their perception of what their college choice experience would be like at a two-year and four-year institution.

During the college choice process, participants weighed the positives and negatives of attending a two-year versus a four-year institution. During interviews, each of the participants described their need to find a campus environment that was the "perfect fit" for them. Although this definition of a perfect fit was different for everyone, as participants compared four-year institutions, they considered common factors such as reputation, campus size, student body composition, distance from home, campus setting, and student life. Similarly, participants used the same process to assess community colleges. As the students visited neighboring community colleges, they focused on factors like location, campus size, teacher to student ratio, and student life opportunities. Due to the lack of on-campus housing options, participants also considered the commute time and distance in their enrollment decision. With over 122 campus locations in North Carolina, the community college system offers students locations that are convenient and within a 30-mile commute for over 99% of the state's residents. Consistent with the literature, the students gave significant consideration to the location and size of the institutions (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Chapman, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). Additionally, each student visited multiple campuses and expressed the importance of seeing a campus firsthand. This finding is imperative because it reinforces prior research which suggests that students visit multiple campuses to discern the best environment before deciding to enroll . Additionally, it also reminds researchers that no decision is made without the impact of emotions and feelings. Over the course of the interviews, the participants shared factors which they considered to be benefits of attending a community college:

- Community colleges are more affordable, and in many instances, students can attend a community college for free with the assistance of financial aid and scholarships.
- Community colleges offer flexible course scheduling catering to part-time and working students.
- The community college transfer program allows students to complete courses that efficiently transfer to four-year institutions so that students can obtain a bachelor's degree.
- Community colleges offer a wide variety of course delivery options such as hybrid, online, 8-week, and 16-week courses.
- Community colleges offer smaller class sizes with more individualized instruction (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Conversely, participants also shared their opinions regarding the weaknesses of community colleges. During the interview process, the participants also highlighted the following stigmas of community colleges:

- Community colleges do not offer the "traditional" four-year college experience (e.g. on-campus housing, Greek life, sports, gyms, on-campus food options).
- Community colleges tend to have lower graduation rates and increased time to degree completion (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1992; Shapiro et al., 2013).
- Open enrollment institutions are not the same quality as select four-year institutions (Baum et al., 2010).

These findings reinforce the complexity of the college choice process and emphasize the need for additional student and family resources. Without proper guidance through this

process, the students in this study were left to navigate their perceptions about community colleges and four-year institutions on their own. Prior research assumes that students and their families consider the monetary and nonmonetary benefits when considering a postsecondary education but having inaccurate or incomplete information could impact their decision (Becker, 1993; DesJardins and Toukoushian, 2005; Perna, 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that students and their families visit institutions to experience the campuses, as well as talk with admissions counselors to ensure they are knowedlgeable about all of their available options.

Implications for Students and Families, High School and Post-Secondary personnel, and Policymakers.

Findings for this study have implications for policy and practice. Regarding theory and research, this study has illustrated how Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice can be utilized to understand the individual contexts of students. The implications have been grouped into four categories: students and families, secondary personnel, post-secondary personnel, and policymakers.

Implications for Students and Families

During this study, participants offered their suggestions and feedback for younger students and their families preparing for the college choice process. One of the most frequent recommendations was to begin the process early. During the predisposition stage, a student should begin identifying general interests and career aspirations. By the time a student begins ninth grade, they should have a tentative plan in place for what will happen after they graduate. This is also a good time for families to seek opportunities to expose their students to career fields and post-secondary institutions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once students begin high school, they should also take challenging courses and an advanced curriculum,

but make sure to maintain good grades. Additionally, students should seek out their counselors in the 9th grade to discuss their tentative plans and aspirations. As students enter the search phase, students should maintain their academic excellence, map out courses for their remaining high school years, and begin thinking about the post-gradation decision. At one of the participants' high school, this decision can be summarized under the Three Es: enrollment, enlistment, or employment. As the student walks across the stage for their graduation, they should know whether or not they will be enrolling in a two-year or four-year post-secondary institution, enlisting in a branch of the armed service, or seeking stable full-time employment. As the student nears the choice phase, typically during the junior and senior years of high school, they should begin solidifying their plans by taking action that advances them toward their goals. These actions should include selecting a major, taking an official campus visit, applying for the FAFSA, meeting with recruiters, completing college and scholarship applications, and fighting off senioritis.

During their senior year, students should remain in contact with their counselors to ensure they are up-to-date with the student's post-secondary plans. Additionally, students should not seriously consider a college or university without visiting the campus. As students are narrowing down their institutional choice, they should follow their heart and aspirations, but remain open minded to a wide variety of institutional options and paths. Lastly, as students are applying for acceptance, scholarships, and grants, they need to make sure they are seeking way to relax, take breaks, breathe, and just take it one step at a time.

Implications for Secondary Teachers, Counselors, and Other Personnel

Teachers, counselors, and other secondary personnel play a significant role in the college choice decision for students (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). All 14 participants expressed their longing for additional one-on-one time with secondary personnel to help

decipher the best course of action for their family. The amount of time and the method that each participant spent with school personnel varied significantly. In fact, two participants indicated that they did not receive any prolonged assistance from their counselor during their senior year. However, most participants met with their counselors for a one-on-one appointment during the senior year, and a few attended group advising sessions. To effectively assist students during this crucial time, there is a clear need for additional personnel to divide the caseload to serve and spend time with more students. Schools should continue to seek and establish partnerships with local, state, and national college access organizations. Programs such as College Advising Corps, GEARUP, and TRIO provide additional school and community resources, increase the amount of time families spend with a professional planning for college, and provide additional avenues for parents to be engaged in the college choice process.

Additionally, many participants felt the benefits of community college were not widely discussed at their high school. These comments highlight the need for school and post-secondary personnel to explain and emphasize all post-secondary avenues for students. When these sentiments are coupled with the lack of specifics the students had regarding the transfer process, there are opportunities to improve the dissemination of information regarding the benefits of beginning post-secondary education at a community college. Specific strategies to accomplish this goal include arranging additional community college tours and information sessions, inviting community college admissions staff to high school college access events, and exposing students to former classmates that have attended community colleges and completed the transfer process. Students and families should be exposed to as much information as possible to make informed decisions regarding post-high school plans.

Schools should provide structured guidance for students and families throughout their junior and senior years to ensure that each student has a post-high school plan. Since students spend the majority of their time at school, school personnel should receive ongoing professional development about college and career resources, financial aid, and local, state, and national policies. Additionally, secondary personnel should continue to push students and families to engage in North Carolina initiatives and services such as College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC). CFNC is a collaborative service between secondary, post-secondary, and business partners to support access to higher education by assisting students in education and career planning and providing resources for students to apply, pay, and save for college. Each year, CFNC hosts College Application Month during which they coordinate local and regional events to support students applying for admissions, residency, scholarships, and financial aid. These events supplement the work of high school personnel and allow students and families to receive the additional attention that they need.

Implications for Post-Secondary Institutions and Personnel

To ensure a student successfully enrolls in a post-secondary institution, who carries the most responsibility: the high school or the college / university? How can we begin to align a K-16 curriculum that prepares students for the expectations of post-secondary education or the workforce? One solution is to establish collaborations between secondary and post-secondary institutions and economic development agencies and employers to work on simplifying a student's post-high school plans and decisions (Bangser, 2008). Additionally, the education and workforce community should have ongoing meetings and avenues to wrestle with their thoughts and perspectives regarding this vision and find avenues to change public policy and processes.

Furthermore, another key finding for this study is that there is a clear need for additional information and assistance from post-secondary institutions. In addition, trying to decide on a major and institution became an even more complex decision because students were also considering whether to begin their matriculation at a community college or four-year institution. Given their ties to their local area, community colleges need to find additional avenues to disseminate information regarding curriculum programs, financial aid, and the admissions process with students, families, teachers, and counselors. Additionally, college access programs need to include multiple perspectives like the armed services, local employers, community colleges, and four-year institutions. For example, consider a student who wants to someday own a computer repair business; below are just a few of their potential post-secondary education pathways:

- Enroll in a community college in the Associate of Applied Sciences for Computer Information Technology.
- Enroll in a community college in an Associate of Science Program with the goal of transferring and completing a Bachelor's in Computer Science.
- Enlist in a branch of the armed services and train as a Computer Electronics Technician.
- Enroll in a four-year public / private university as a Computer Science major.
- Enroll in a Small Business Development Entrepreneur Training course at their local community college to develop a business plan.
- Seek employment at local business with an Electronics Apprenticeship Training Program.

Without understanding the positives and negatives of each pathway, how are students and their families supposed to choose the best option for them? Moreover, how will they be able to determine the monetary and non-monetary benefits of investing in some type of higher education? As counselors work with families, they should remember that additional one-on-one time is needed, and post-secondary institutions should provide creative avenues for early and ongoing counseling.

Implications for Policymakers

The findings of this study suggest that the decisions of policymakers impact the student college choices. For the students in the study, evidence of the impact can be demonstrated throughout each layer of Perna's model. Laws and policies enacted at the local, state, and national levels impact access, success, and completion throughout K-16 education. At the local level, policymakers should continue to hire additional K-12 personnel, increase per pupil expenditures, invest in an advanced college and career preparatory curriculum, and reduce the student-teacher and student-counselor ratio. As McDonough (1997) suggests, reducing the student-counselor ratio and increasing the amount of time counselors can spend with students will increase equitable access to higher education.

At the state level, policy makers should be cognizant of the high cost of higher education and find ways to increase college affordability. Additionally, policymakers should find ways to reverse the trend of decreasing state appropriations to higher education and provide avenues for greater access. As an example, in 2018, North Carolina will enact the NC Promise Tuition Plan. NC Promise Tuition Plan is North Carolina's commitment to ensure that post-secondary education is affordable and accessible to all. In the fall of 2018, this plan will significantly reduce the cost of in-state tuition at Elizabeth City State University, The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and Western Carolina University

to $500 per semester and cap out-of-state tuition at $2,500 per semester. Currently, the annual in-state tuition rates for these institutions are $2,856, $3,602 and $3,971, respectively. NC Promise aims to increase college access and affordability by decreasing the amount of debt students acquire through loans and by increasing opportunities for students to access post-secondary education. Though it may not be possible to enact this type of policy at all four-year public and private institutions in North Carolina, policymakers can ensure they slow the pace of tuition increases and provide increasing state support and funding to higher education institutions.

At the federal level, policymakers can continue to strengthen programs that impact college access and outreach such as GEAR UP, TRIO, FAFSA, and the Federal Student Loan Program. Providing additional resources to outreach programs will allow them to serve and reach underserved populations, provide additional resources for students and families in the college process, and create avenues for partnerships and the local, state, and national levels. Regarding financing an education, policymakers should continue to make the FAFSA an easy and seamless application, increase FAFSA participation and completion rates, and advocate for increases in the Pell Awards. Furthermore, regarding the Federal Student Loan Program, policymakers need to ensure that students and families are informed about responsible borrowing practices and have pathways for income driven repayment, interest rate reductions, and loan forgiveness. Moreover, more investigation and research should be done on the impact and feasibility of tuition-free community college plans. In the fall of 2017, California, the largest community college system in the nation, signed legislation making the first year of community college free. As states continue to explore increasing student access and success through tuition free community colleges, policymakers should

continue to evaluate the efficacy of these initiatives and provide a federal solution if appropriate.

Ultimately, local, state, and federal agencies must foster an environment that ensures every student has an opportunity to pursue their aspirations for a post-secondary education or career. It is incumbent upon the education and corporate communities to create and identify pathways for students to make the most of their high school education and transition into their chosen field or profession with minimal roadblocks. By doing so, the post-secondary decision process becomes clearer, student and families are able to determine the best path for their context, and there is reduced cost and time to students, families, and taxpayers.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided insight into the college choice process for 14 students enrolled at 6 community colleges within North Carolina. Considering the theoretical framework for this study, there are implications for future research within each of the layers of Perna's Conceptual Model.

Habitus

Future qualitative research could be conducted to involve a larger pool of participants expanding across additional institutions within the community college system. By expanding the scope of the project and recruiting additional participants, researchers should be able to further explore the students' college choice decisions. Moreover, future research should include in-depth examination on the impact of a student's social, academic, and cultural capital. Likewise, future studies should also work to understand the college choice decisions with special populations such as athletes, homeschooled students, career and college promise students, and homeless students. Similarly, further analysis could be implemented by

selecting specific samples based on gender, academic achievement, distance, location, first generation status, and socioeconomic status.

School and Community Context

Future research should also include the voices and perspectives of parents, high school counselors, teachers, and others within the community who support students transitioning to post-secondary education. Studies could investigate the correlation between the amount of time students spend discussing the post-secondary intentions with a counselor or teacher, the impact of the rigor and college preparatory curriculum on a student's post-secondary opportunities, and the perspectives of students and parents regarding the perceived and concealed structural barriers and supports. Additionally, further investigation should analyze the training and preparation that school personnel receive to counsel students within the college choice process.

Higher Education Context

To better understand the higher education context of students' college choice decisions, we must understand the voices and perspectives of two-year and four-year college and university admissions counselors. Additionally, quantitative studies could explore the undermatching phenomenon by examining enrollment patterns at two-year and four-year institutions to understand behaviors and decisions of students in North Carolina. Moreover, an analysis of the college choice process for students could be examined by institutional types including but not limited to proprietary institutions, HBCUs, and private and public two-year and four-year institutions. Lastly, due to the geography of the state, additional analysis regarding the distance, location, and institutional makeup would also offer insight about the factors that influence enrollment decisions.

Social, Economic, and Political Context

When considering the fourth layer of Perna's model, future studies could incorporate the perspective of policymakers and legislators to understand how enrollment patterns and behaviors influence and inform the decision-making process for local, state, and national policies. Additionally, research could explore the impact of state and federal appropriations to education and its impact on the policies and structures that discourage or encourage college enrollment (Perna, 2014). Moreover, future studies could explore the current and historical economic and social impact of policies surrounding undocumented students and their college choice decisions.

Contributions to Literature

The findings of this study make three important contributions to expand the undermatching and college choice literature. First, this study expands on the current literature regarding undermatching by analyzing the enrollment decisions for students considering community colleges versus four-year institutions. The literature has not thoroughly explored undermatching from this perspective; therefore, future research should continue to explore this specific enrollment choice. Secondly, prior research regarding undermatching has focused on a quantitative analysis of student enrollment patterns. This study expands the research of undermatching by seeking to understand the specific student context and college choice decisions for this unique student population. Thirdly, this study utilized a unique multiple site case study design to explore the difference in student experiences from multiple campuses and within rural, urban, and suburban settings. The findings of this study suggest the theoretical framework utilized for this study successfully allows researchers to analyze a student's experience from multiple contexts. However, due

to the depth and complexity of the model, future studies might benefit from an in-depth examination within a single layer.

Researcher Reflections

Conducting this research study has been an invaluable learning experience personally and professionally. Throughout this process, I have learned to pay greater attention to the stories and motivations of our students, for they provide immeasurable insight into their context and lived experiences. As a practitioner and advisor, I have gained an in-depth, first hand understanding of the complex and messy nature of the college choice decision-making process. Additionally, the findings of this study highlight the fact that secondary and post-secondary personnel need to do more to ensure every student has a successful pathway to their chosen educational and career goals. We can no longer afford to allow students and their families to yearn for additional support only to find themselves feeling isolated and abandoned.

As community colleges continue to serve as a main entry point to higher education, we must update and alter our "front-door" experiences to ensure we are meeting the needs of current and prospective students. The participants' experiences highlighted the need for personal and prolonged advising and career counseling early within their decision-making process. Though the long-term solutions are unclear, some immediate actions can be implemented. For example, counseling and advising sessions should last longer, and we need to provide the necessary structure for students and families to help them through self-exploration and assessment, clarifying career aspirations, and planning a course of study. Additionally, we need to continue to explore avenues that engage underserved student populations. Community colleges are well-positioned to provide additional outreach to students and families through partnerships with their local schools, community centers, and

businesses. As post-secondary education practitioners, we must do our best to assist students through this complex process and, as a result, uphold to Dr. Dallas Herring's founding principle to "take students from where they are, and *carrying* them as far as they want to go."

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: NC County & Community College Classification

Classification	Counties (A-Z by county)	Community Colleges (A-Z by category)
Urban	1. Durham	Cape Fear Community College
	2. Forsyth	Central Piedmont Community College
	3. Guilford	Durham Technical Community College
	4. Mecklenburg	Forsyth Technical Community College
	5. New Hanover	Guilford Technical Community College
	6. Wake	Wake Technical Community College
Suburban	1. Alamance	Alamance Community College
	2. Buncombe	Asheville-Buncombe Tech. Community
	3. Catawba	College
	4. Cabarrus	Blue Ridge Community College
	5. Cumberland	Catawba Valley Community College
	6. Davidson	Davidson Community College
	7. Gaston	Gaston College
	8. Henderson	Mitchell Community College
	9. Iredell	Pitt Community College
	10. Lincoln	Rowan Cabarrus Community College
	11. Orange	Fayetteville Tech
	12. Pitt	
	13. Rowan	
	14. Union	
Rural	1. Alexander	Beaufort Community College
	2. Alleghany	Bladen Community College
	3. Anson	Blue Ridge Community College
	4. Ashe	Brunswick Community College
	5. Avery	Caldwell Community College &
	6. Beaufort	Technical Inst.
	7. Bertie	Carteret Community College
	8. Bladen	Central Carolina Community College
	9. Brunswick	Cleveland Community College
	10. Burke	Coastal Carolina Community College
	11. Caldwell	College of the Albemarle
	12. Camden	Craven Community College
	13. Carteret	Edgecombe Community College
	14. Caswell	Halifax Community College
	15. Chatham	Haywood Community College
	16. Cherokee	Isothermal Community College
	17. Chowan	James Sprunt Community College
	18. Clay	Johnston Community College
	19. Cleveland	Lenior Community College
	20. Columbus	Martin Community College
	21. Craven	Mayland Community College
	22. Currituck	McDowell Technical Community College

23. Dare
24. Davie
25. Duplin
26. Edgecombe
27. Franklin
28. Gates
29. Graham
30. Granville
31. Greene
32.Halifax
33. Harnett
34. Haywood
35. Hertford
36. Hoke
37. Hyde
38. Jackson
39. Johnston
40. Jones
41. Lee
42. Lenoir
43. McDowell
44.Macon
45. Madison
46. Martin
47. Mitchell
48. Montgomery
49. Moore
50. Nash
51. Northampton
52. Onslow
53. Pamlico
54. Pasquotank
55. Pender
56. Perquinmans
57. Person
58. Polk
59. Randolph
60. Richmond
61. Robeson
62. Rockingham
63. Rutherford
64. Sampson
65. Scotland
66. Stanly
67. Stokes
68. Surry
69. Swain

Mitchell Community College
Montgomery Community College
Nash Community College
Pamlico Community College
Piedmont Community College
Randolph Community College
Richmond Community College
Roanoke-Chowan Community College
Robeson Community College
Rockingham Community College
Sampson Community College
Sandhills Community College
South Piedmont Community College
Southeastern Community College
Southwestern Community College
Stanly Community College
Surry Community College
Tri-County Community College
Vance-Granville Community College
Wayne Community College
Western Piedmont Community College
Wilkes Community College
Wilson Community College

70. Transylvania
71. Tyrrell
72. Vance
73. Warren
74. Washington
75. Watauga
76. Wayne
77. Wilkes
78. Wilson
79. Yadkin
80. Yancey

Appendix B: Invitation Email to Research Participants

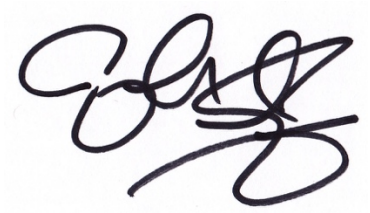
Dear Student:

I am a doctoral candidate at NC State University, conducting a study to learn more the experience of students making college choice decisions and the factors that affected their choice. Specifically, I am interested in students who were admitted into four-year intuitions and chose to enroll in a community college as a transfer student seeking an AA / AS. To do this, I will be seeking to conduct interviews with 5-10 eligible participants at your institution. The information shared by participants in these facilitated interviews will help administrators gain a better understanding of the college choice experience and how a student's context impacts their decision.

If you wish to be part of this study, please contact me via phone or email at: JJEvans3@ncsu.edu or 704-806-2992. Once your correspondence is received, I will send a research consent form and a demographic survey. Participants willing to be a part of the study will be contacted to discuss potential dates and times for the interview. If you do not wish to participate, you may simply ignore this correspondence, and I will not contact you any further regarding this study.

I hope that you will be interested in being part of this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the primary researcher, John Evans, at 704-806-2992 or JJEvans3@ncsu.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



John J. Evans

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

North Carolina State University

TITLE OF STUDY: Mismatched: A case study to understand why NC students choose to enroll in community colleges after being admitted to selective four-year institutions.

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR: John J. Evans
CONTACT INFORMATION: JJEvans3@ncsu.edu / 704 – 806 – 2992

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s)

Purpose of this study
The purpose of this research study is to understand which factors were most influential in your college choice from to enroll in a community college although you were admitted into a selective four-year institution.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in this study because you fit these criteria:
-You are a recent high school graduate enrolled in an AA / AS program.
-You were admitted into one or more of the selective public / private institutions within NC.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to share your story regarding your college choice decision-making process. I will schedule a time to speak with you one-on-one to get to know you, discuss your experience, and ask you to complete an activity. I will also inquire about your college choice decision-making process from the perspective of someone who was influential in helping you make a final decision. I will schedule a one-on-one, in-person interview with you at a location of your choosing, and the interview will last approximately one hour. Given the length, interviews will be digitally recorded, but all personally identifiable information will be changed during the transcribing process to protect your privacy. This is your personal story and you can share as little or as much as you like. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to answer a question, or request to end the interview. With your approval, I will use your findings for the research report and you will have an opportunity to ensure that the interpretations of your story are accurate. Once I have received your feedback, I will incorporate your story into my findings and email a final copy directly to you.

Risks
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study will include only minimal risks. If you experience any discomfort or would rather not discuss certain topics, you are welcome to tell the researcher that you'd like to change the subject, take a break from the interview or terminate the interview at any time.

Benefits
The results of the study may assist high school and college administrators better understand the college choice decisions of students deciding between a community college or a 4-year university setting. We hope this study will assist high schools, colleges, and universities facilitate the creation of more programs which assist students during the college choice process.

Confidentiality
The information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in writing or oral materials that could link you to this study. We will provide you the opportunity to create a pseudonym in order to identify you in a different way in the study. All records and data will be stored securely for until the completion of the study. After the study has concluded, all of the hard copies of information will be shredded and destroyed, and electronic information will be completely erased.

Compensation
There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The researcher will make every effort to schedule interviews at a time and location convenient to the participant. As a thank you, participants will receive a $20 Amazon gift card. This study will approximately take 2 hours of your time.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or procedures, you may contact the researchers, John J. Evans at JJEvans3@ncsu.edu, or the chair of my research Dr. Chad Hoggan at cdhoggan@ncsu.edu

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, IRB Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-515-4514) or debra_paxton@ncsu.edu.

Consent To Participate
I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form. I voluntarily choose to participate, but I understand that my consent does not take away any legal rights in the case of negligence or other legal fault of anyone who is involved in this study. I further understand that nothing in this consent form is intended to replace any applicable Federal, state, or local

laws.

□ I am at least 18 years of age.
Initials:_____

□ I am NOT at least 18 years of age.

Parental signature _____

Participant's Signature_____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature_____Date _____

Please contact me using the following information:
Name: _____
Telephone(s): _____
Best time and day to call:_____
Email: _____@_____

Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

My name is John J. Evans, and I am a doctoral student in the Leadership, Policy, and Human Development Department at NC State University. I am researching the college choice decisions of high school graduates enrolled at a community college in the university transfer program (AA/AS). Your participation will help researchers, educators, and policy makers understand the college choice decision process for community college students like yourself. If you meet the criteria to participate in the study, I encourage you to contact me.

LEAD & SERVE
COLLEGE of EDUCATION
CONNECTING TO THE FUTURE

Participants will receive a $20 Amazon Gift Card.

WHO: First year transfer students enrolled in an AA/AS degree program who were admitted to one or more four-year institutions.

WHAT: An interview which will take approximately 60-80 mins. Additionally, I would like the chance to interview your parent or guardian. In the interview, I will ask you questions about your experiences and which factors led to your college choice decision.

WHERE: In a location convenient and comfortable for you.

WHY: By participating in this study, you will be contributing to research on the college choice decision process, which will assist high school counselors and college administrators.

If you have any questions, please contact me at JJEvans3@ncsu.edu.

John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992
John Evans 704-806-2992

Appendix E: Demographic Survey

1. Name:
   _____
2. Do you have a preferred pseudonym?
   _____
3. Current Institution:
   _____
4. Do you seek to transfer to a four-year institution? Yes / No
5. Current major / Program: Associate of Arts / Associate of Science
6. Intended Major:
   _____
7. Gender:
   _____
8. Residency (circle one) In-State Out-of-state
9. Ethnicity / Racial Background:
   _____
10. How many colleges did you apply to?
    _____
11. Were you accepted to selective four-year colleges? Yes No How many?
    _____
12. If yes, which institutions?
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
13. Name / Location of High School:
    _____
14. High School GPA:
    _____

15. Did you take the SAT? Yes: Scores: _____ / No

16. Did you take the ACT? Yes: Scores: _____ / No

17. Was (Sample Community College) your first choice for college? Yes No If no, which was your first choice? _____

18. How would you describe your family income level?
    Low Middle
    Upper

19. From what type of high school did you graduate? (circle one)
    Public School
    Public Charter School
    Public Magnet School
    Private Religious/Parochial School
    Private Independent College-Prep School Home school

20. Are you the first in your family to go to college?

21. What was your mother's highest education level?
    Not sure
    Less than high school
    High School Diploma
    Some College
    Associate's Degree
    Bachelor's Degree
    Master's Degree
    Ph.D./Ed.D.
    Professional Degree (M.D./D.M.D./J.D.) (medical/law degree)

22. What was your father's highest education level?
    Not sure
    Less than high school
    High School Diploma
    Some College
    Associate's Degree
    Bachelor's Degree
    Master's Degree
    Ph.D./Ed.D.
    Professional Degree (M.D./D.M.D./J.D.) (medical/law degree)

23. What is your mother's occupation?

_____

24. What is your father's occupation?
_____

25. Who was a key helping you make your college decision?
_____

26. May we contact them? Yes / No
Contact Info: _____

If you have questions or concerns, please contact the primary researcher John Evans at JJEvans3@ncsu or 704-806-2992

Appendix F: Student Interview Protocol

(Partially adapted from Duncan, 2014; Gonzalez, 2013)

This interview is being conducted as part of a research study regarding the factors that influenced the college choice decisions of students who were admitted to four-year institutions, but chose to enroll in a community college. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to leave the study at any time. You may also choose not to answer questions with which you do not feel comfortable. Your responses will be confidential and will not be connected directly to you when reported.

- Introductions
- Review of Consent/Permission to audio record
- Ice breaker
- Questions
    - So you've decided to go to Name of College. Tell me how that came about.
        - Probes:
            - Why did you want to go to college?
            - When did you decide that you wanted to go to college?
            - Describe your earliest conversation about college
            - Help me understand the order of events
            - What was significant about that for you?
    - Who influenced your decision to go to college?
        - Probes:
            - Family, Friends, School, others, etc.
                - How does _____feel about your college decision?
                - Where are your friends going to college?
            - How did they encourage / discourage you?
            - How did they influence and impact your decision?
    - Tell me about your high school.
        - Probes:
            - Did you feel academically prepared to go to college?
            - How would you describe the college going rates?
            - Where did you look for information about college?
            - Describe your level of participation in college access programs such as GEARUP / TRIO or community based organizations.
            - How did your school tell you about college or things related to college (i.e., applying, financial aid, living on campus, etc.)?
    - What type of educational setting did you want for your college experience?
        - Probes
            - Tell me all of the colleges to which you applied. Why did you apply? Which ones offered you admission?
            - What made you chose those colleges?
            - What was the closest / furthest college you applied to?
            - How did you learn about specific colleges? Visits, admissions

reps, college fairs, info in the mail, etc?
- What school was your first choice? Why did you not go?
- Why did you choose to attend your community college over a four-year university?

- How did financial aid play into your decision of where to go to college?
  - Probes:
    - What types of conversations did you have a about colleges costs with your family, counselor, etc.?
    - How did your high school stress the importance of FAFSA and and scholarships?
- Given what you have learned about your college decision-making process, what would you do differently?
- Is there anything else that was important to you in making your college decision that I haven't asked about?
- May I contact you if I have any follow up questions?

This concludes the interview. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and assist in this research project. Within the next few weeks, I will be contacting your parent / guardian to schedule an interview. Additionally, once the interview has been transcribed, you will receive a copy to review and provide any feedback for clarification. As a reminder, all of your personally identifiable information will be removed, and I will ensure that your privacy and confidentiality are protected.

Appendix G: Influential Support Interview Protocol

(Partially adapted from Duncan, 2014; Gonzalez, 2013)

This interview is being conducted as part of a research study regarding the factors that influenced the college choice decisions of students who were admitted to four-year institutions, but chose to enroll in a community college. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to leave the study at any time. You may also choose not to answer questions with which you do not feel comfortable. Your responses will be confidential and will not be connected directly to you when reported.

- Introductions
- Review of Consent/Permission to audio record
- Ice breaker
- Questions
    - So (Student) has decided to go to college at Name of College. Tell me how that all happened, from your point of view.
        - Probes
            - What is your relationship with to (Student)? How do you feel about that decision?
            - What do you think your role was in helping (Student) to attend Name of College?
            - How many conversations did you have with (Student) about college? What did you talk about?
            - Why do you think (Student) listened to you?
            - Who else do you think influenced (Student's) decision to go college?
            - How were peers / friends involved in the decision?
    - Do you think it is important for someone to earn a college degree? Can you explain your thoughts?
        - Did you ever have the experience of making the decision to go to college?
        - What was your experience like?
        - What about our experience did you share with (Student)?
    - How did financial aid affect (Student's) decision of where to go to college?
        - Probes:
            - What types of conversations did you have about the cost of college?
            - How did financial aid impact (Student's) decision to go to college or to go to a particular college?
    - What type of education setting did you want for (Student's) college experience?
        - Probes
            - Tell me all of the colleges to which (Student) applied. Why did they apply? Which ones offered admission?

        - What was the closest / furthest college they applied to?
        - How did (Student) learn about specific college? Visits, mail, website?
    - How did (Student's) high school encourage students to go to college?
        - Probes
            - How would you describe the academic environment?
            - How would you describe the resources?
            - Where did you look for information about colleges?
            - How would you describe the college access programs such as GEARUP / TRIO or community based organizations.
            -
    - Given what you have learned about (Student's) college decision-making process, what would you do differently?
    - Is there anything else that was influential in (Student's) college decision that I haven't asked about?
    - May I contact you if I have any follow up questions?

This concludes the interview. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and assist in this research project. Within the next few weeks, I will be contacting your parent / guardian to schedule an interview. Additionally, once the interview has been transcribed, you will receive a copy to review and provide any feedback for clarification. As a reminder, all of your personally identifiable information will be removed, and I will ensure that your privacy and confidentiality are protected.

Appendix H: Research Activity

The college choice decisions for each student are unique. Please review the items below. Thinking back to your college decision making process, please rank each item on a scale of 1-10 in terms of importance. (10 very important – 1 not important). Please place an X by items that were not a factor at all.

____ Cost of four-year institution

____ Cost of two-year institution

____ Distance from home

____ I was unsure of my major

____ I wanted smaller class sizes

____ I received more scholarship money at my community college

____ I felt more comfortable in a community college environment

____ I needed / wanted to work while going to school

____ Transferring would save my family money

____ I did not have to take out any student loans

____ I was encouraged by my family

____ I was encouraged by my peers

____ I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors

____ I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school

____ I did not want to live on campus

____ Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals

____ I did not want to take out student loans

____ I have family / sibling that attend my community college

____ I wanted to be close to my peers

Appendix I: Campus Breakdown and Residency

Campus Breakdown & Residency

First Name:	Last Name:	Current institution:	In-state resident:
Paula	Baker	Urban Campus One	Yes
Daniel	Fernandez	Rural Campus One	Yes
Annalise	Grant	Rural Campus Two	Yes
Jamie	Hollins	Urban Campus One	Yes
Conway	Matthews	Rural Campus One	Yes
Alice	Meheridth	Urban Campus One	Yes
Camia	Ormond	Urban Campus One	Yes
Ariel	Patrick	Urban Campus One	Yes
Ed	Sheran	Suburban Campus Two	Yes
Fisher	Simmons	Suburban Campus One	Yes
Katherine	Smith	Suburban Campus One	Yes
Michelle	Smith	Urban Campus One	Yes
Candice	Swanpole	Rural Campus Three	Yes
Nancy	Whitaker	Urban Campus One	Yes

The participants in the study were all first-year transfer students at their community college, enrolled in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters. The researcher selected 9 institutions, and out of those, 5 institutions yielded 14 students who met the criteria to participate and volunteered for the study. In an effort to protect the study's participants, pseudonyms are used for their name, community college, and other personally identifiable information. Seven students were enrolled at Urban campus one, two students were enrolled at Rural Campus One, one student was enrolled at Rural Campus Two, one student was enrolled at Rural Campus Three, two students were enrolled at Suburban Campus One, and one was enrolled at Suburban Campus Two. All students identified as in-state residents.

Appendix J: Gender and Ethnicity

Gender and Ethnicity

First Name	Last Name	Gender:	Ethnicity / Racial Background:
Paula	Baker	Female	Caucasian
Daniel	Fernandez	Male	Hispanic
Annalise	Grant	Female	Hispanic
Jamie	Hollins	Female	Caucasian
Conway	Matthews	Male	Caucasian
Alice	Meheridth	Female	Caucasian
Camia	Ormond	Female	Caucasian
Ariel	Patrick	Female	Hispanic
Ed	Sheran	Male	Caucasian
Fisher	Simmons	Male	Caucasian
Katherine	Smith	Female	Caucasian
Michelle	Smith	Female	African-American
Candice	Swanpole	Female	Caucasian
Nancy	Whitaker	Female	Caucasian

Background and biographical information was obtained through the demographic survey. Of the 14 participants, 4 were male and 10 were female. In regard to how the participants identified by ethnicity, 3 of the students identified as Hispanic, 10 identified as Caucasian, and 1 identified as African-American. All of the participants were at least 18 years old.

Appendix K: Current Major, Intended Major, & High School GPA

First Name:	Last Name:	Current major:	Intended major at 4-year institution:	High School GPA*
Paula	Baker	Associate of Arts	Communication Sciences & Disorders	4.0
Daniel	Fernandez	Associate of Arts	Finance	3.7
Annalise	Grant	Associate of Science	Nursing	4.3
Jamie	Hollins	Associate of Science	Physics	3.3
Conway	Matthews	Associate of Science	Biology	3.1
Alice	Meheridth	Associate of Science	Nursing	3.9
Camia	Ormond	Associate of Arts	Special Education	3.0
Ariel	Patrick	Associate of Science	Veterinarian	3.6
Ed	Sheran	Associate of Arts	Nursing	3.7
Fisher	Simmons	Associate of Arts	Business / Marketing	3.6
Katherine	Smith	Associate of Arts	Speech Therapy	3.9
Michelle	Smith	Associate of Arts	Nursing	3.7
Candice	Swanpole**	Associate of Science	Biochemistry	3.8
Nancy	Whitaker	Associate of Science	Environmental Science	4.0

*GPAs self-reported. **Attended high school in Arizona, relocated at the end of the year.

To be included in the study, participants had to be enrolled in a college transfer program governed by the NC Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA). Seven students were enrolled in the Associate in Arts program, while seven were enrolled in the Associate in Science degree program. After transferring to a four-year institution, five students intend to enter a STEM field, four will major in Nursing, and the remaining students will enroll in degree programs ranging from Finance to Special Education. With the exception of Candice, each of the students attended a NC Public High School, and each student self-reported a high school GPA of at least 3.0.

Appendix L: Applications and Acceptances

Number and Name of institutions Applied & Accepted

First Name:	Last Name:	4-year Apply:	4-Year Accepted:	Institutions:
Paula	Baker	2	1	Longwood Univ.
Daniel	Fernandez	4	3	Western Carolina Univ., Campbell Univ., Wingate Univ.
Annalise	Grant	4	3	ECU, UNC Charlotte, and NC Central Univ.
Jamie	Hollins	2	1	UNC Asheville
Conway	Matthews	4	2	Western Carolina University, UNC Charlotte
Alice	Meheridth	4	4	ECU, UNC Green., Winston-Salem State Univ., Wingate Univ.
Camia	Ormond	3	1	Methodist Univ.
Ariel	Patrick	1	1	Meredith College
Ed	Sheran	3	1	UNC Greensboro
Fisher	Simmons	1	1	UNC Charlotte
Katherine	Smith	3	2	UNC Greensboro and Wingate
Michelle	Smith	3	2	ECU, UNC Charlotte
Candice	Swanpole	2	2	University of Arizona, Arizona State Univ.
Nancy	Whitaker	6	5	App State, UNCG, Campbell Univ., Elon Univ., Liberty Univ.

To qualify as a participant in the study, each student had to be accepted to at least one selective institution in North Carolina. There were 29 acceptances across 18 institutions with an average for all participants being admitted into 2.07 institutions. Of the 29 acceptances, there were 25 in-state and only 4 out-of-state. The average number of applications for participants in this study was 3, though the spread ranged from 1 application to 6. Additionally, of the 29 acceptances, 10 were from private institutions, and 19 were from public institutions.

Appendix M: Characteristics of Four-Year Universities

Institution:	Type	Setting	Selectivity	Enrollment	In-state tuition	Acceptance rate (Fall 2015)
Appalachian State	Public	Rural	Selective	18,295	$7,136	66%
Arizona State Univ.	Public	Urban	More Selective	51,869	$10,792	83%
Campbell Univ.	Private	Rural	Selective	6,786	$31,190	74%
East Carolina Univ.	Public	City	Selective	28,962	$7,143	69%
Elon Univ.	Private	Suburban	More Selective	6,739	$34,273	57%
Liberty Univ.	Private	City	Selective	75,756	$24,304	21%
Longwood Univ.	Private	Rural	Less Selective	4,883	*$26,670	79%
Meredith College	Private	Urban	Selective	1,981	$35,916	60%
Methodist Univ.	Private	City	Selective	2,445	$32,860	54%
NC Central Univ.	Public	Urban	Less Selective	8,096	$5,882	66%
Univ. of Arizona	Public	City	Selective	43,625	$11,644	76%
UNC Asheville	Public	City	Selective	3,830	$7,145	79%
UNC Charlotte	Public	Suburban	Selective	28,721	$6,834	63%
UNC Greensboro	Public	Urban	Selective	19,653	$7,164	59%
Western Carolina	Public	Rural	Selective	10,805	$7,191	40%
Wingate Univ.	Private	Suburban	Selective	3,193	$31,120	70%
Winston Salem State	Public	Urban	Less Selective	6,442	$5,804	60%

The US News and World Report rankings are published annually and serve as an authoritative voice for providing consumer guides and information about higher education and other industries. For the colleges included in this study, the institution classifications included Less selective, Selective, and More Selective. Additionally, the Fall 2015 Fall Acceptance Rates for institutions that participants were admitted into ranged from 21% - 79%. Lastly, the setting for the institutions included in this study comprised of 4 rural, 5 city, 3 suburban, and 5 urban.

Appendix N: Family Income and Education

First Name	Last Name	Family Income*	First in the family to go to college?	MOTHER's education level?	FATHER's education level?
Paula	Baker	Middle	No	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Daniel	Fernandez	Low	Yes	Less than High School	Less than High School
Annalise	Grant	Low	Yes	Less than High School	Less than High School
Jamie	Hollins	Middle	No	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Conway	Matthews	Middle	No	Associate's Degree	Associate's Degree
Alice	Meheridth	Low	No	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Camia	Ormond	Low	No	Bachelor's Degree	Some College
Ariel	Patrick	Middle	Yes	Less than High School	Less than High School
Ed	Sheran	Middle	No	Master's Degree	Master's Degree
Fisher	Simmons	Middle	No	Associate's Degree	Master's Degree
Katherine	Smith	Middle	No	Some College	Not sure
Michelle	Smith	Middle	No	Some College	Master's Degree
Candice	Swanpole	Middle	No	Some College	Some College
Nancy	Whitaker	Middle	No	Associate's Degree	Associate's Degree

*Family income self-reported.

Three of the fourteen students identified as first-generation students because they were the only person in their immediate family to attend college. Moreover, each of those students identified as Hispanic. Four students came from a family where the mother held a bachelor's degree, and three students indicated that their father held a bachelor's degree. Three of the students came from families where at least one parent completed a graduate degree. Additionally, regarding family income, 4 students indicated they were from low income households, while the remaining students self-reported being in a middle-income household.

Appendix O: High School Demographics

School Name	District	Enrollment 2016-17	Grad. Rate	Minority Enroll	% Econ Disad.	Magnet School
Middle Creek HS	Wake County	2,249	89%	42%	28%	no
Dalton L. McMichael HS	Rockingham	985	87%	31%	98%	no
Garner HS	Wake County	2,650	85%	64%	44%	yes
Wake Forest HS	Wake County	1,953	91%	40%	28%	no
Rockingham County HS	Rockingham	1,082	83%	20%	99%	no
Millbrook HS	Wake County	2,571	90%	51%	31%	yes
West Johnston HS	Johnston County	1,359	88%	31%	30%	no
Northern HS	Durham County	1,448	82%	78%	58%	no
Carrboro HS	Chapel Hill-Carrboro City	825	92%	40%	18%	no
West Davidson HS	Davidson County	792	80%	9%	44%	no
East Davidson HS	Davidson County	958	86%	12%	41%	no
Panther Creek HS	Wake County	2,893	96%	47%	12%	no
Mountain View HS Tucson, AZ	Marana Unified	1,929	93%	46%	38%	no
Heritage HS	Wake County	1,910	90%	47%	26%	no
Cleveland HS	Johnston County	1,468	90%	34%	27%	no
North Carolina Average	**N/A**	**1671**	**88%**	**39%**	**41%**	**N/A**

To protect the participant's confidentiality, while still providing information about the high school the participant's attended, the schools have been identified by name, but the student's information is not associated to them in any way. An analysis of the data shows that all 14 participants in the study attended public high schools. The size of the high schools ranged from approximately 800 – 2,900 students, with schools in the rural areas of Rockingham and Davidson having smaller populations than those in the urban areas of Raleigh and Durham. The graduation rate of the 14 high schools ranged from 80% - 90%, with the average graduation rate of 88%. Of the 14 high schools, 6 of them had a graduation rate that fell below 88%, and each of those schools had a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. In fact, those 6 institutions had percentages at or above the

average of 41% of students coming from economically disadvantaged households. Regarding the minority student population, each of the urban population centers had percentages above the average of 39%, with the highest population of minority student attending Northern High school in Durham.

Appendix P: Research Activity Rankings

Daniel's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Daniel Fernandez
Cost of four-year institution	10
Cost of two-year institution	10
I received more scholarship money at my community college	10
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	10
Transferring would save my family money	10
I did not have to take out any student loans	10
I was encouraged by my family	10
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	10
I did not want to take out student loans	10
Distance from home	9
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	9
I wanted smaller class sizes	8
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	8
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	7
I wanted to be close to my peers	6
I was unsure of my major	5
I did not want to live on campus	2
I was encouraged by my peers	0
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0

Annalise's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Annalise Grant
Cost of four-year institution	10
Cost of two-year institution	10
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	10
Transferring would save my family money	10
I did not have to take out any student loans	10
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	10
I did not want to take out student loans	10
I wanted smaller class sizes	8
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	5
I did not want to live on campus	5
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	3
Distance from home	2
I was encouraged by my peers	1
I was unsure of my major	0
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	0
I was encouraged by my family	0
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0
I wanted to be close to my peers	0

Jamie's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Jamie Hollins
I did not want to live on campus	10
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	10
Cost of four-year institution	9
I was unsure of my major	9
Transferring would save my family money	9
I was encouraged by my family	9
I was encouraged by my peers	9
Distance from home	8
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	8
Cost of two-year institution	7
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	7
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	6
I wanted to be close to my peers	5
I wanted smaller class sizes	1
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	0
I did not have to take out any student loans	0
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	0
I did not want to take out student loans	0

Conway's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Conway Matthews
Transferring would save my family money	8
I wanted smaller class sizes	7
I was encouraged by my family	7
Cost of two-year institution	6
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	6
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	5
Cost of four-year institution	4
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	4
I received more scholarship money at my community college	3
I did not have to take out any student loans	3
I did not want to take out student loans	3
I did not want to live on campus	2
I was unsure of my major	1
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	1
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	1
Distance from home	0
I was encouraged by my peers	0
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0
I wanted to be close to my peers	0

Alice's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Alice Mereridth
Cost of four-year institution	10
Cost of two-year institution	10
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	10
Transferring would save my family money	10
I did not want to take out student loans	10
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	10
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	9
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	8
I wanted to be close to my peers	8
Distance from home	7
I wanted smaller class sizes	7
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	7
I did not have to take out any student loans	7
I was encouraged by my family	7
I did not want to live on campus	7
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	5
I was encouraged by my peers	3
I was unsure of my major	0
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0

Camia's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Camia Ormond
Cost of four-year institution	10
Cost of two-year institution	10
I wanted smaller class sizes	10
I received more scholarship money at my community college	10
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	10
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	10
Transferring would save my family money	10
I did not have to take out any student loans	10
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	10
I did not want to take out student loans	10
I did not want to live on campus	9
I was encouraged by my family	8
I was encouraged by my peers	7
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	7
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	6
Distance from home	5
I wanted to be close to my peers	5
I was unsure of my major	0
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0

Ariel's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Ariel Patrick
I was encouraged by my family	10
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	10
Cost of four-year institution	9
I did not want to take out student loans	9
I was unsure of my major	8
I received more scholarship money at my community college	8
Transferring would save my family money	8
I did not want to live on campus	8
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	8
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	7
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	7
I did not have to take out any student loans	7
I was encouraged by my peers	7
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	7
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	7
Distance from home	6
I wanted smaller class sizes	5
I wanted to be close to my peers	5
Cost of two-year institution	4

Ed's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Ed Sheran
Cost of four-year institution	10
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	10
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	9
I wanted smaller class sizes	8
Transferring would save my family money	8
I did not have to take out any student loans	8
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	8
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	8
I did not want to take out student loans	8
I was encouraged by my family	7
I did not want to live on campus	7
Distance from home	6
I was unsure of my major	6
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	6
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	6
I was encouraged by my peers	4
Cost of two-year institution	2
I wanted to be close to my peers	2
I received more scholarship money at my community college	1

Fisher's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Fisher Simmons
I was unsure of my major	10
I was encouraged by my family	9
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	9
Cost of four-year institution	8
Cost of two-year institution	8
Transferring would save my family money	8
I did not have to take out any student loans	8
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	8
Distance from home	5
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	5
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	4
I wanted smaller class sizes	3
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	3
I did not want to live on campus	3
I wanted to be close to my peers	3
I was encouraged by my peers	2
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	2
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0
I did not want to take out student loans	0

Katherine's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Katherine Smith
Cost of four-year institution	9
Cost of two-year institution	9
Distance from home	9
Transferring would save my family money	9
I was encouraged by my family	9
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	8
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	5
I was encouraged by my peers	2
I did not want to take out student loans	2
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	1
I wanted to be close to my peers	1
I was unsure of my major	0
I wanted smaller class sizes	0
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	0
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	0
I did not have to take out any student loans	0
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	0
I did not want to live on campus	0

Michelle's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):

(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Michelle Smith
Transferring would save my family money	10
I did not have to take out any student loans	10
Cost of four-year institution	9
Cost of two-year institution	9
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	8
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	8
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	7
I did not want to take out student loans	7
I was encouraged by my family	6
I received more scholarship money at my community college	5
Distance from home	4
I wanted smaller class sizes	3
I wanted to be close to my peers	2
I was encouraged by my peers	1
I did not want to live on campus	1
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	1
I was unsure of my major	0
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	0
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	0

Candice's Research Activity Rankings (1-10):
(10 very important – 1 not important. 0 for items that were not a factor at all.)

Statement	Candice Swanpole
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	10
I did not want to live on campus	10
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	10
Cost of two-year institution	9
Cost of four-year institution	8
Transferring would save my family money	8
I did not have to take out any student loans	8
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	7
I was encouraged by my peers	6
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	6
I wanted to be close to my peers	6
Distance from home	5
I was encouraged by my family	5
I did not want to take out student loans	5
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	3
I was unsure of my major	2
I wanted smaller class sizes	0
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0

Appendix Q: A Priori Coding Scheme

Layer	Sublayer	Label	Definition
1. Habitus	a. Demographics	i. Race	Asian, Black, White, etc
		ii. Gender	Female, Male, Other
		iii. SES	Low, Middle, High Income
	b. CulturalCapital	i. Culturalknowledge	Cultural knowledge derived from one's parents
		ii. ValueOfCollege	Value individual places on college and obtaining a degree
		iii. EdAspirations	Educational aspirations of the student
		iv. HistoryCustoms	Family history or customs related to college
	c. SocialCapital	i. InfoAboutCollege	Information about college prior to entry
		ii. Resources	Resources / Assistance with college preparation
		iii. ParentEd	Parent's education levels
		iv. ParentInvolve	Parental involvement / encouragement
		v. Peers	Peer influence / support
	d. Demand for higher ed.	i. Academics	Grades / Academic Achievement
	e. Expected costs	i. Expected costs	Expected cost of college
2. School & Com.	a. Availability of resources	i. SchoolResources	High school resources (fiscal, personnel, etc.)
		ii. Curriculum	Rigorous k-12 curriculum / Academic Prep
		iii. SchoolProfile	Demographics of high school / school profile / school info
		iv. SchoolAgents	The influence of teachers, counselors, or admins
	b. Structural Support/Barrier	i. SchoolMakeup	Diversity of students based on race, gender, ethnic., SES
		ii. SchoolRelationship	Trusting relationships with school teachers, counselors, etc.
3. Higher Ed Cont.	a. Marketing and recruit	i. CollegeRecruit	Marketing and recruitment efforts by the college / university
	b. Location	i. Collegelocation	The location / geography of the college / university
		ii. Distance	How far away the college / university is located
	c. Institutional Character.	i. CollegeType	Public vs. Private / 2 yr. vs. 4yr. / PWI / HBCU / etc.
		ii. EnrollmentSlots	The availability of enrollment slots / Freshman class size
		iii. ActualCost	The cost of tuition to attend
		iv. FinancialAid	The availability of scholarships, grants, and loans
4. Social / Econ	a. Economic Conditions	i. EconCond	Economic conditions
5. Policy context	b. College Access Programs	i. FedStateCollegeAccess	Federal or state college access programs or initiatives
	c. K-14/16 initiatives	i. PostSecPolicy	Local or national K-14/16 initiatives which promote college
	d. Public Policy	i. StateApprop	State appropriations supporting higher education in NC

Appendix R: Research Activity Comprehensive Rankings

Statement	PB	DF	AG	JH	CM	AM	JO	AP	ES	FS	KS	MS	CS	NW	Totals
Transferring would save my family money	8	10	10	9	8	10	10	8	8	8	9	10	8	*	**116**
Cost of four-year institution	9	10	10	9	4	10	10	9	10	8	9	9	8	*	**115**
Transferring still allows me to accomplish my goals	9	10	10	10	6	9	10	8	8	9	8	8	10	*	**115**
Cost of two-year institution	9	10	10	7	6	10	10	4	2	8	9	9	9	*	**103**
I was encouraged by my family	7	10	0	9	7	7	8	10	7	9	9	6	5	*	**94**
I did not have to take out any student loans	10	10	10	0	3	7	10	7	8	8	0	10	8	*	**91**
I needed / wanted to work while going to school	7	10	10	8	1	10	10	7	6	3	0	8	10	*	**90**
I did not want to take out student loans	9	10	10	0	3	10	10	9	8	0	2	7	5	*	**83**
I was apprehensive about attending a four-year school	1	8	5	7	4	8	6	10	9	8	0	0	7	*	**73**
Distance from home	3	9	2	8	0	7	5	6	6	5	9	4	5	*	**69**
I wanted smaller class sizes	4	8	8	1	7	7	10	5	8	3	0	3	0	*	**64**
I was encouraged by my teachers / counselors	6	7	3	0	1	5	7	7	8	2	5	7	6	*	**64**
I did not want to live on campus	0	2	5	10	2	7	9	8	7	3	0	1	10	*	**64**
I felt more comfortable in a community college environment	3	9	0	0	5	7	10	7	6	5	0	0	3	*	**55**
I wanted to be close to my peers	3	6	0	5	0	8	5	5	2	3	1	2	6	*	**46**
I was encouraged by my peers	3	0	1	9	0	3	7	7	4	2	2	1	6	*	**45**
I was unsure of my major	0	5	0	9	1	0	0	8	6	10	0	0	2	*	**41**
I have family / sibling(s) that attend my community college	0	0	0	6	0	10	0	7	10	4	1	1	0	*	**39**
I received more scholarship money at my community college	0	10	0	0	3	0	10	8	1	0	0	5	0	*	**37**
Total	91	144	94	107	61	135	147	140	124	98	64	91	108		**73.89**
Number of 0s	4	2	6	5	4	2	2	0	0	2	8	3	3		

Appendix S: AP Scores and Participation Rates

School Name	**District**	Number of students	Number of AP Exams	Number of AP Exams 3+	# of AP Courses
Carrboro HS	Ch. Hill-Carrboro City	349	841	607	12
Dalton L. McMichael HS	Rockingham	88	161	23	11
East Davidson HS	Davidson County	81	147	79	4
Garner HS	Wake County	357	670	156	12
Heritage HS	Wake County	535	1066	558	16
Middle Creek HS	Wake County	586	1299	867	14
Millbrook HS	Wake County	655	1258	612	18
Northern HS	Durham County	307	548	131	11
Panther Creek HS	Wake County	1,067	2,251	1,626	20
Rockingham County HS	Rockingham	69	102	46	7
Wake Forest HS	Wake County	349	764	364	17
West Davidson HS	Davidson County	131	303	71	5
West Johnston HS	Johnston County	117	172	117	7
North Carolina	**All Districts**	**70,073**	**130,212**	**67,000**	

This table presents the Advanced Placement scores, participation rates, and number of courses offered at each high school. A review of the data shows the differentiation between the participant's high schools regarding their academic offerings. In general, high schools in rural counties offered fewer opportunities for AP coursework; schools in rural counties offered an average of less than 7 AP courses, and schools in urban counties offered an average of over 15 courses. Similarly, high schools in rural and suburban counties had an average of 101 students taking courses (Range: 69-131), and high schools in urban districts had an average of 525 students take at least one course (Range: 307-1,067). The same pattern holds true for the number of AP exams and the number of AP exams passed with a score greater than or equal to three. The average number of exams completed at rural high schools was 177 (Range: 307-1,067) and the average at urban high schools was 1087 (Range: 548-2,251). Furthermore, in rural counties, an average number of 72 exams were passed with a score of 3+ (Range: 23-97), while an average of 615 exams were passed from urban high schools with a score of 3+ (Range: 131-1,626).

Appendix T: SAT Scores and Participation Rates

High School Name	District	#Tested	%Tested	Math	Read	Writing	Average CR + M
Carrboro HS	Ch. Hill-Carrboro City	137	66.8	590	582	567	1172
Dalton L. McMichael HS	Rockingham	90	50.3	480	467	433	947
East Davidson HS	Davidson County	85	42.7	514	507	474	1021
Garner HS	Wake County	258	46.2	483	471	448	954
Heritage HS	Wake County	282	66.5	515	511	497	1026
Middle Creek HS	Wake County	326	69.7	538	522	503	1060
Millbrook HS	Wake County	363	66.1	519	517	493	1036
Northern HS	Durham County	115	36.2	449	456	429	905
Panther Creek HS	Wake County	436	74.9	566	544	530	1110
Rockingham County HS	Rockingham	89	41.0	520	502	457	1022
Wake Forest HS	Wake County	250	58.8	501	502	473	1003
West Davidson HS	Davidson County	76	45.2	500	483	456	983
West Johnston HS	Johnston County	121	42.2	513	501	468	1014
NC (All students)		**54663**	**58.2**	**508**	**502**	**475**	**1010**

High schools in urban counties illustrated greater participation in test takers when compared to their rural counterparts. The number of students ranged from (76) at West Davidson High School to (436) at Panther Creek High School. The rural and suburban high schools averaged 92 test takers, and there was an average of 270 students tested at urban high schools. Similarly, the percentage of students tested follows a similar pattern. At high schools in rural and suburban counties, 44% of students completed the SAT, and in high schools in urban counties, 60% of students were tested. As it relates the math, reading, and writing scores, the same pattern exists between rural and suburban high schools versus their urban counterparts. In the math section of the SAT, the high schools in rural / suburban areas received an average score 505, and those in the urban high schools scored an average of 520. Likewise, for reading, the high schools in rural / suburban counties scored an average of 492, and the high schools in urban counties scored an average of 513. For the writing section of the SAT, the high schools in rural / suburban counties scored an average of 457, and the high schools in urban counties scored an average of 492. Lastly, for the combined critical reading and math score, the high schools in rural / suburban counties scored an average of 997, and the high schools in urban counties scored an average of 1033.

Appendix U: ACT Scores and Participation Rates

High School Name	#Tested	Avg. Comp.	Avg. Eng.	Avg. Mat	Avg. Rea.	Avg. Sci.	% Met 4 Bench
Carrboro HS	204	24.6	24.1	24.1	25.3	24.2	51%
Dalton L. McMichael HS	192	18.1	16.8	18.2	18.1	18.7	9%
East Davidson HS	209	19.0	17.6	19.2	19.5	19.0	15%
Garner HS	505	17.3	15.4	18.2	17.3	17.8	10%
Heritage HS	436	20.1	19.3	20.2	20.4	19.9	22%
Middle Creek HS	476	21.1	19.7	21.2	21.4	21.4	30%
Millbrook HS	542	20.1	19.3	20.2	20.4	20.2	23%
Northern HS	336	16.1	14.6	16.6	16.3	16.5	6%
Panther Creek HS	614	22.8	22.1	23.0	23.0	22.6	41%
Rockingham County HS	216	19.1	17.9	19.5	19.4	19.2	14%
Wake Forest HS	420	19.9	19.3	19.8	20.3	19.9	19%
West Davidson HS	185	18.2	16.6	18.7	18.3	18.6	14%
West Johnston HS	271	19.2	17.7	19.5	19.8	19.5	16%
NC All students	**103,902**	**19.1**	**17.8**	**19.4**	**19.5**	**19.2**	**18%**

The ACT is currently administered to all NC students during their junior year of high school. High schools in rural and suburban areas averaged 214 test takers, and high schools in urban counties tested an average of 441 students. An analysis of the composite scores shows that students from rural and suburban counties averaged a score of 18, and students in urban areas averaged a composite score of 20. For each ACT subtest, North Carolina has established college readiness benchmarks.

ACT Benchmark Scores

Subtest	Score Range	Benchmark
English	1-36	18
Math	1-36	22
Reading	1-36	22
Science	1-36	23

For the English subtest, high schools in the rural and suburban counties averaged a score of 18, and high schools in urban counties averaged a score of 20. Five out of the 13 schools averaged scores above the college readiness benchmark for English. In math, both of the comprehensive averages were below the state benchmark. In the rural and suburban counties, the average score was a 17, and in the urban counties, the average score was a 19. However, two urban county schools had average scores above the state benchmark. Carrboro HS had an average score of 24, and Panther Creek had an average score of 22.

A similar pattern emerges when analyzing the score for the reading section. Again, both averages are below the NC benchmarks for college readiness; the rural and suburban high schools scored an average of 19, and the urban high schools scored an average of 20. Similarly, Carrboro HS and Panther Creek HS were the only two institutions to have average scores higher than the benchmark. Lastly, the pattern persists for the science test; both scores fall below the readiness benchmark. The high schools in rural and suburban counties scored an average of 19, and the high schools in the urban counties scored an average of 20. Once again, Carrboro HS and Panther Creek HS were the only two schools to score about the benchmark.

One of the most revealing statistics from this analysis measures the percentage of students at each high school who met all four college readiness benchmarks. The average for the high schools' rural and suburban counties was 14%, and the average for high schools in urban counties was 25%. Though there are no state benchmarks, the range varied significantly between the high schools; the percentages were from 6% - 51%. The four highest percentages and the lowest overall percentage came from a high school in an urban county.

Appendix V: Non-Disclosure Agreement

CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

This CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, effective as of the date last set forth below (this "Agreement"), between the undersigned actual or potential client ("Client") and **Rev.com, Inc.** ("Rev.com") is made to confirm the understanding and agreement of the parties hereto with respect to certain proprietary information being provided to Rev.com for the purpose of performing translation, transcription and other document related services (the "Rev.com Services"). In consideration for the mutual agreements contained herein and the other provisions of this Agreement, the parties hereto agree as follows:

1. Scope of Confidential Information

1.1. "Confidential Information" means, subject to the exceptions set forth in Section 1.2 hereof, any documents, video files or other related media or text supplied by Client to Rev.com for the purpose of performing the Rev.com Services.

1.2. Confidential Information does not include information that: (i) was available to Rev.com prior to disclosure of such information by Client and free of any confidentiality obligation in favor of Client known to Rev.com at the time of disclosure; (ii) is made available to Rev.com from a third party not known by Rev.com at the time of such availability to be subject to a confidentiality obligation in favor of Client; (iii) is made available to third parties by Client without restriction on the disclosure of such information; (iv) is or becomes available to the public other than as a result of disclosure by Rev.com prohibited by this Agreement; or (v) is developed independently by Rev.com or Rev.com's directors, officers, members, partners, employees, consultants, contractors, agents, representatives or affiliated entities (collectively, "Associated Persons").

2. Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information

2.1. Rev.com will keep secret and will not disclose to anyone any of the Confidential Information, other than furnishing the Confidential Information to Associated Persons; provided that such Associated Persons are bound by agreements respecting confidential information. Rev.com will not use any of the Confidential Information for any purpose other than performing the Rev.com Services on Client's behalf. Rev.com will use reasonable care and adequate measures to protect the security of the Confidential Information and to attempt to prevent any Confidential Information from being disclosed or otherwise made available to unauthorized persons or used in violation of the foregoing.

2.2. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein, Rev.com is free to make, and this Agreement does not restrict, disclosure of any Confidential Information in a judicial, legislative or administrative investigation or proceeding or to a government or other regulatory agency; provided that, if permitted by law, Rev.com provides to Client prior notice of the intended disclosure and permits Client to intervene therein to protect its interests in the Confidential Information, and cooperate and assist Client in seeking to obtain such protection.

3. Certain Rights and Limitations

3.1. All Confidential Information will remain the property of Client.

3.2. This Agreement imposes no obligations on either party to purchase, sell, license, transfer or otherwise transact in any products, services or technology.

4. Termination

4.1. Upon Client's written request, Rev.com agrees to use good faith efforts to return promptly to Client any Confidential Information that is in writing and in the possession of Rev.com and to certify the return or destruction of all Confidential Information; provided that Rev.com may retain a summary description of Confidential Information for archival purposes.

4.2. The rights and obligations of the parties hereto contained in Sections 2 (Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information) (subject to Section 2.1), 3 (Certain Rights and Limitations), 4 (Termination), and 5 (Miscellaneous) will survive the return of any tangible embodiments of Confidential Information and any termination of this Agreement.

5. Miscellaneous

5.1. Client and Rev.com are independent contractors and will so represent themselves in all regards. Nothing in this Agreement will be construed to make either party the agent or legal representative of the other or to make the parties partners or joint venturers, and neither party may bind the other in any way. This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California governing such agreements, without regard to conflicts-of-law principles. The sole and exclusive jurisdiction and venue for any litigation arising out of this Agreement shall be an appropriate federal or state court located in the State of California, and the parties agree not to raise, and waive, any objections or defenses based upon venue or forum non

conveniens. This Agreement (together with any agreement for the Rev.com Services) contains the complete and exclusive agreement of the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof and supersedes all prior agreements and understandings with respect thereto, whether written or oral, express or implied. If any provision of this Agreement is held invalid, illegal or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, such will not affect any other provision of this Agreement, which will remain in full force and effect. No amendment or alteration of the terms of this Agreement will be effective unless made in writing and executed by both parties hereto. A failure or delay in exercising any right in respect to this Agreement will not be presumed to operate as a waiver, and a single or partial exercise of any right will not be presumed to preclude any subsequent or further exercise of that right or the exercise of any other right. Any modification or waiver of any provision of this Agreement will not be effective unless made in writing. Any such waiver will be effective only in the specific instance and for the purpose given.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have caused this Agreement to be executed below by their duly authorized signatories.

CLIENT

Print Name:_____

By: _____
Name:
Title:
Date:

Address for notices to Client:

_____
_____
_____
_____

REV.COM, INC.

_____

By: Cheryl Brown
Name: Cheryl Brown
Title: Account Manager
Date: September 14, 2016

Address for notices to Rev.com, Inc.:

251 Kearny St. FL 8
San Francisco, CA 94108