

## **ABSTRACT**

MERCER, KERRI A. Students With Learning Disabilities and Attention Disorders: Stories of the College Choice Process. (Under the direction of Dr. Audrey Jaeger and Dr. Joy Gayles).

Although there has been legislation that has improved access for students with disabilities, many students are choosing not to pursue postsecondary education. The rate of postsecondary attendance for students with learning disabilities and attention disorders has increased, but they are still enrolling in postsecondary education less frequently than students without disabilities (Newman, Wagner, Cameto & Knokey, 2009; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). There has been little investigation to explain this gap. In response to this need, this study was conducted to explore the college choice process of students with learning disabilities and attention disorders. This qualitative study drew upon the works of Becker (1962), Hossler and Gallagher (1987), and Perna (2006) to frame the data collected from eight participants with learning disabilities or attention disorders at four different community colleges. Three findings emerged from the interview data in this study. First, students with learning disabilities and attention disorders went through the same phases of college choice described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Second, although the participants went through the same phases as Hossler and Gallagher's model, they did not engage in the college choice process in the same way that students without disabilities do. Third, participants in this study utilized human capital school and community context and higher education context in the college choice process.

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Students with Learning Disabilities and Attention Disorders:  
Stories of the College Choice Process

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to  
the rest of the fab four:

Amanda, Dion, Kasey.

Keep on heading towards the finish line!

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Kerri A. Mercer was born and raised in northern Connecticut. She earned her baccalaureate degree from the University of Central Florida in Orlando and subsequently moved to Raleigh, North Carolina. Kerri earned both her master's and doctoral degrees from North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

More students than ever are choosing to pursue postsecondary education as indicated by the steady enrollment increase cited by the National Center for Education Statistics (Snyder & Dillow, 2010). There has been a marked increase in the enrollment of individuals who represent minority backgrounds, such as students from low income backgrounds and students with disabilities (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). However, a considerable gap in college attendance still remains between those with and without disabilities. In 2005, 62.6% of students without disabilities pursued postsecondary education, and only 45.6% of students with disabilities pursued postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2010). The intention of this study was to share the stories and experiences about the college choice process of students who are diagnosed with a learning disability or an attention disorder. These stories explain how those experiences shaped their decision to attend community college.

#### **Definition of Learning Disability**

A disability has traditionally been defined by some tangible or visible sign like a wheelchair, crutches, or cane. However, the term *disability* has evolved to include invisible disabilities as well, such as learning disabilities. Different definitions of the term *learning disability* exist, causing disagreement among federal and international agencies as well as learning disability associations and practitioners in the field (Kavale & Forness, 2000). This is problematic when it comes to research because many studies and the resulting statistics rely on the United States Government's definition of a learning disability, which includes

certain diagnoses and excludes others even if they negatively impact the learning process. For example, the government definition of learning disability does not include attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD), and this study does. The frequency of ADD diagnoses has increased since the federal government defined what constitutes a learning disability, and therefore, the government groups individuals with ADD under the “other health impairment” category. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the definition for learning disability will be

a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors,) and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities [ICLD], 1987)

### **Learning Disabilities and School**

In the past, the educational expectations of individuals with learning disabilities were quite low. Graduation from high school was considered a significant milestone. However, the high school graduation rate of students with learning disabilities has increased over the past

three decades as has the number of individuals being served in American educational institutions under a learning disabilities diagnosis (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). In 2007–2008, approximately 13% of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 were enrolled in special education in grades K–12. Of those, 48% were students with learning disabilities and other health impairments including ADD, which had higher representation than any other disability group (Aud et al., 2010).

When it comes to postsecondary education, only 48.2% of students with learning disabilities and 55% of those with other health impairments including ADD enroll in some form of postsecondary education within 4 years of graduating high school as opposed to 62.6% of students in the general population. A majority of those with learning disabilities or other health impairments who enroll in postsecondary education choose to attend community college. Although a little over half of students with learning disabilities and other health impairments do pursue postsecondary education, they are less likely to pursue postsecondary education than students with hearing impairments or visual impairments (Newman et al., 2010).

The challenge that the American educational system faces today is to understand why many students with learning disabilities and other health impairments who graduate from secondary school don't pursue as many additional educational opportunities as students without learning disabilities and why those who pursue education choose community colleges. Similarly, the challenge extended to the American educational system is not only to

understand why students with learning disabilities and other health impairments choose to bypass postsecondary education but to try and remedy the situation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As described in the last section, the divide between students with and without learning disabilities and other health impairments pursuing postsecondary education has slowly improved, but the gap is still significant (Leiter, 2007; Newman et al., 2010; Sitlington, 2003; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Although there are statistics that establish this gap, more detailed information is needed to understand why the gap exists and why there is a gap between students with learning disabilities who choose to attend community college and those who choose to attend a 4-year institution. This study was designed to collect detailed information on those questions using a narrative approach that involved collecting stories about individuals and situating those stories within experiences (Creswell, 2007). Narrative inquiry was utilized because it is considered the best approach when exploring personal stories or life experiences of a single person or a limited number of individuals (Creswell, 2007).

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to share the college choice stories of students with learning disabilities and to understand the forces that shaped the college choice process for them including why they chose community college. This study was guided by the following two questions:

- (1) What are the life experiences of students with learning disabilities?
- (2) How did those experiences shape the college choice process?

## Conceptual Framework

The college choice process is complex and multifaceted in nature (Bateman & Spruill, 1996). It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a college choice model that encompasses every possible contribution or factor that plays a role in the college choice process and accounts for the varying circumstances of individuals. This study is framed by a simple, yet extensively cited, college choice model—Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model of college choice—and also by the concepts of school and community contexts, higher education contexts, and human capital. The Hossler and Gallagher model has three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. *Predisposition* refers to the time period when students decide whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school (Hossler & Stage, 1992). The predisposition stage is followed by the *search* stage, which involves the gathering of information about colleges (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Finally, the *choice* stage is the actual decision to enroll in a program (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Although there are time frames for each of these stages, it is not known what the time frames are for students who delay enrollment after high school graduation (Perna, 2006). Students with disabilities are more likely to delay enrollment in postsecondary education than students without disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008), which suggests that students with disabilities, specifically those who delay enrollment, may go through a different college choice process than students without disabilities.

This study reaches beyond what Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have provided and considers three other factors that impact the college choice process: the school and community context, the higher education context, and human capital. *School and community*

*context* refers to the volume and type of resources available to students and the barriers and supports in their school structure as they engage in the college choice process (Perna, 2006). The school and community context is often influenced by the *higher education context*. This context purports that higher education institutions are able to market and recruit the type of students they want to fill enrollment slots in both active and passive ways (Perna, 2006).

Likewise, the decision to pursue postsecondary education is influenced not just by school and community contexts and higher education contexts but also by human capital. Individuals build their *human capital*, or the means through which they can increase their income, through many avenues (Becker, 1962). In this study, the primary avenue of gaining human capital is through the pursuit of postsecondary education. However, the decision to acquire human capital can be impacted by the perceived costs and benefits in acquiring the desired resource (Paulsen, 2001). Building human capital is especially important to the population examined in this study because they are already at a disadvantage compared to the population without disabilities, especially in the workforce (Potts, 2005).

Much of what is known about college choice stems from Hossler's research findings (Bergerson, 2009). Hossler's work, as well as the findings of other researchers, creates the literature base for college choice, and ultimately, for this study (Bergerson, 2009). The limited information available on students with learning disabilities and college choice opens the door for researchers to fill the gap that currently exists in this area. Addressing this gap has significant implications for students, school administrators, and society in general.

## **Significance**

This study is significant in both broad and specific ways. Research has shown that there are benefits to both society and individuals when they choose to extend their education beyond secondary school, and this study reveals how those benefits play a part in the college choice process (Baum & Payea, 2004). The results of this study may also encourage changes in how students in K–12 educational levels with learning disabilities are prepared for and engage in the college choice process. In general, this study contributes to the extension of a scant literature base on college choice and students with learning disabilities.

## **Societal Benefits**

When individuals invest in higher education, it benefits society in both economic and social ways (Bowen, 1977; Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2005). From an economic perspective, engaging in postsecondary education translates to lower unemployment rates and results in less reliance on government assistance (Baum & Payea, 2004; Bowen, 1977; Cunningham, 2006; IHEP, 2005). Individuals with even some college are less likely to be employed than those without any postsecondary education (Baum & Payea, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Also, by taking advantage of the economic returns earned by educated workers, more taxes are collected creating a richer economic environment on the local, state, and federal levels (Baum & Payea, 2004; Cunningham, 2006; IHEP, 2005). For example, in 2003, those who had a high school degree paid approximately \$6,700 in taxes, those who had earned an associate's degree paid \$8,600, and those with a bachelor's degree paid almost \$12,000 in taxes (Baum & Payea, 2004).

Postsecondary school attendance results in public social benefits as well. For example, individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to participate in civic engagement activities. This includes volunteerism, blood donation, and voting activities (Baum & Payea, 2004; IHEP, 2005). Those that attend college are also likely to be more lenient of the social, political, and spiritual views of others due to living on a college campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In general, individuals who pursue postsecondary education are more likely to report a higher level of perceived health and are less likely to smoke than those who have a high school degree (Baum & Payea, 2004; IHEP, 2005). The societal benefits of having postsecondary education extend to criminal activity as well; the rate of incarceration is significantly higher for individuals with a high school degree or less education than for those with some college or a college degree (Baum & Payea, 2004).

### **Individual Benefits**

Many of the public benefits of acquiring higher education can also be considered private benefits. Individuals who attain college degrees have higher levels of income. Individuals with a bachelor's or associate's degree have an annual income that generally ranges from \$36,000 to \$46,000, and those with a high school diploma earn a median of \$30,000 per year of full-time work (Aud et al., 2010). Individuals who have college degrees are also physically healthier and have increased levels of job satisfaction than those who do not have a postsecondary education (Bowen, 1977; IHEP, 2005; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988).

### **Equity**

One benefit that can be considered both public and private is that of equity. *Equity* can be defined as rearranging resources so they are in alignment with the philosophical,

moral, or spiritual principles of fairness within a community (McMahon, 2009). Preston and Sabates (2003) argue that higher education is one way to address equity issues within a community and the broader society (as cited in McMahon, 2009).

Equity issues are especially salient for the population under study because individuals with disabilities are often at a disadvantage compared to those without disabilities. They are more likely to be unemployed, make a lower hourly wage, and use government-sponsored programs (Newman et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2005). Individuals with learning disabilities are uniquely disadvantaged because of the invisibility of their disability (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). However, one of the most noteworthy differences between them and students without learning disabilities is in academic ability. Students with learning disabilities tend to score among the lowest for all students with disabilities on standardized tests (Wagner et al., 2005). The results of this study may help raise awareness about students with learning disabilities' need for targeted assistance beyond what they already receive to encourage their postsecondary education attendance.

### **Preparation**

From a policy perspective, this study could help change how students with learning disabilities are prepared for the college choice process. Under the IDEA Act (1990), by the time a student is 14 years of age, a postsecondary goal is required to be established and written into a student's individualized education plan (IEP; United States Department of Education [USDE], 2010). These goals are part of an individualized transition plan (ITP). An ITP is not required by the IDEA Act to be written into the IEP until age 14 (IDEA, 1990) and are not required at all for students with learning disabilities who receive accommodations

under a 504 plan. Regardless, the age of 14 is late for a student to establish postsecondary goals because many students have created a list of potential colleges they would like to attend by the 10th grade, indicating that the choice process starts earlier in a student's academic career (Kinzie et al., 2004). Furthermore, the quality of transition planning for students with disabilities is inconsistent (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). For example, the best practices for ITP design are often not followed in the ITPs of students with learning disabilities because it is often assumed that individuals with learning disabilities don't need as much help as those with other disabilities (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000). This study could influence the age at which ITPs are required under the IDEA (1990) legislation and encourage accountability as far as consistency in ITP design is concerned.

### **Current Literature Base**

In addition to legislation, this study could be used to extend the literature available on students with learning disabilities and college choice. College choice models tend to look at traditional populations of students and the later stages of the college choice process. When special populations are examined regarding college choice, the independent variables tend to be economic and sociological factors, not disability status (Kinzie et al., 2004). The literature confirms that individuals with disabilities constitute the largest minority faction in the United States (Prentice, 2002), yet they are not considered a minority in college choice research. This study, guided by a model and concepts that have not been used with populations such as students with learning disabilities before, therefore constitutes a new direction of study in the field of college choice.

Students with disabilities are particularly difficult to research due to the ranges of disability severities and educational institutions that serve them (Odom et al., 2005). As a research topic, learning disabilities have been looked at in independent sections within the literature. A large proportion of learning disability literature concentrates on K–12 education, highlighting the best practices of strategies to help students with learning disabilities attain short-term goals. A smaller proportion looks at the transition process from high school to postsecondary choices (e.g., work, school) of students with learning disabilities. However, this literature is vague and concentrates on the federally mandated transition process, which requires that students who receive federally funded services have a plan in place for postsecondary goals. The literature discusses the importance of transition planning but does not acknowledge how decisions are made within that context and whether or not transition planning is effective. Instead, the literature focuses on performance in, retention in, and/or completion of a vocation or school. There is a gap in the literature that addresses the process a student with a learning disability goes through when considering whether to pursue postsecondary studies and how the choice is made. This study begins to address what happens for students with learning disabilities during that process.

### **Definition of Terms**

Several constructs will be used repeatedly in this document beyond the definition of learning disability noted earlier. Thus, an explanation of how the terms will be utilized in this research study is included. For example, the term *postsecondary education* will be used interchangeably with the terms *higher education* and *college*. The term *other disability groups* includes individuals who fall into disability categories other than the government

definition of learning disabilities. This category includes individuals with attention disorders, hearing or visual impairments, mental retardation, total deafness or blindness, orthopedic or physical impairments, speech/language impairments, and serious emotional disturbances. It is important to recognize that some studies use the term disabilities to include anyone with any disability, including learning disabilities, and others specifically look at those with learning disabilities. Other terms used in this document that warrant an explanation will be detailed in the following paragraphs.

The two terms this study repeatedly refers to are postsecondary education and community college. First, *postsecondary education* encompasses business, vocational school, technical school, 2-year institutions, and 4-year institutions (Newman et al., 2010; Kinzie et al., 2004). The term *community college* refers to 2-year public institutions.

The definition of disability, as previously explained, is relative to context. Many of the statistics and literature in the early chapters of this study relate to learning disabilities as the federal government defines them. The federal government definition of learning disability is

(i) General. The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations.

(IDEA, 2004, P.L. 108-446, Stat.2657).

The federal government definition does not include attention disorders, which are conditions perceived by participants in this study to be a significant obstacle to learning, and

to them, a learning disability. Therefore, government statistics and literature in the early chapters of this study are based off of statistics that fall under the category *other health impairments*. Students with attention disorders fall into this category (Grice, 2002).

This study also relies on terms and acronyms that have been implemented either as federal legislation or as a result of federal legislation.

- **IDEA** stands for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 and the 2004 revision of the act. It is legislation that guarantees services for eligible youth with disabilities who are American citizens. It governs how states and public agencies provide special education services to qualified youth. (IDEA, 2004, P.L. 108-446, Stat. 2649)
- **FAPE** represents a free and appropriate public education. Under IDEA (2004), FAPE includes special-education-related services that are provided at no charge to qualified individuals. All expenses for FAPE are covered at the expense of the public, are under the supervision of the public, and are documented by an IEP.
- An **IEP** is an individualized education program. An IEP details the services and education plan of a student who has met eligibility criteria under IDEA (2004). An IEP team meets to create the IEP and consists of a student's parents, various school personnel, a member of a public agency, and in some cases, the student with the disability.
- An **ITP** is a transition plan. The IDEA Act (2004) mandates that an ITP be written into the IEP when a student turns 14. The ITP can be written prior to

this age if the IEP team finds it appropriate, but it is not required. A postsecondary goal needs to be identified in the ITP; it can be vocational, educational, or related to independent living. It is strongly required by the IDEA Act (2004) that the student with the disability or a member of a public agency that can represent the student be present when the ITP is written into the IEP (USDE, 2010).

- **A 504 plan** is a document that outlines accommodations to students with disabilities in the classroom. Its intent is to provide students with disabilities accommodations that will meet their needs to the same extent that the needs of students without disabilities are met inside the classroom (USDE, 2011).

### **Summary of Chapter**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an outline of this study. It detailed the research problem and the questions used to address the problem as identified by current literature. This was followed by a thorough discussion of the significance of the study. Finally, key terms were defined and accompanied by an explanation of how the terms are used in this study. The second chapter will describe the conceptual framework used to guide this study and discuss the existing research studies and resultant literature base that provided a foundation for the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

To understand what motivates students with learning disabilities to pursue postsecondary education, it is necessary to examine and understand the historical journey that has led to how the broader term disability is defined by today's society and this study. This discussion will be augmented by a brief overview of the pertinent legislation, the conceptual framework used to guide this study, and a review of the extant literature on college choice.

#### **Government Perspective**

From a federal government perspective, the use of the word disability has evolved into a term that encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions. Up until the 1970s, it was used by the government primarily to identify individuals who had physical disabilities in which the pathology was clearly evident to other people (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001). In other words, a disabled person was considered an individual who had disabilities that were observable. This included individuals who were blind, deaf, had amputated limbs, or were paraplegic. Educational support for individuals who fell under the physical disability category had meager beginnings in the 1800s. Postsecondary education institutions, such as Gallaudet University, were established at that time and were dedicated strictly to serving the observably disabled population. Because of the emphasis on the disability being an observable feature, discoveries made by physicians that would later be labeled as learning disabilities were largely ignored, and those with such conditions were considered to be an anomaly (Learning Disabilities Association of America [LDA], 2010). In the 1900s, mental

disabilities were recognized by the government. This definition primarily focused on individuals with mental retardation, which yet again can be a somewhat observable disability. Between the 1920s and 1970s, little was done on a federal level to try and assist those with disabilities in the acquirement of education and employment (Learning Disabilities Online [LDO], 2006).

The 1970s brought about the most significant change in the way individuals with disabilities were viewed by the government and the general public (Pelka, 1997). Until then, a disability was defined as either physical or mental. Starting in the 1970s, there were a series of legislative acts that sought to expand the term. For example, the Developmental Disabilities Services and Facilities Construction Amendments of 1970 acknowledged developmental disabilities as closely related to mental retardation but different in the sense that they included similar conditions such as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and other neurological conditions (Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, 2009). What was significant about those amendments was that they provided grant support to attract and train personnel to assist individuals with developmental disabilities in the educational environment, specifically in the postsecondary education environment. They paved the way for academic support beyond K–12 education for students with learning disabilities.

### **The Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act**

Although the Higher Education Act of 1965 was amended in the 1970s, it only provided services for those with physical disabilities (Pelka, 1997). The amendments did not benefit individuals with what we now call learning disabilities but other legislation, such as the Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 1975, did cover other

disabilities. Although this bill was created to protect rights of people with developmental disabilities and gave permission for the pursuit legal, administrative, and other remedies to ensure the protection of rights for such people, it set the foundation for other legislation (Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, 2009). What is particularly salient about this legislation is that it extended the term disability to include those with autism, and as relevant to this study, dyslexia, which is a learning disability specific to reading.

### **Section 504**

In the 1970s, more legislative action was enacted to assist with equal opportunities for those with disabilities in the form of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which is often called the Civil Rights for People with Disabilities Act. The section states, “Any educational entity [including postsecondary education institutions] that receives money from the federal government may not discriminate on the basis of disability.” This translated to more students being able to pursue postsecondary education without discrimination, including those with learning disabilities. Although there have been other legislative actions passed since the 1970s, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, there have been no new legislative acts for students with disabilities that have been as significant to accessing postsecondary education as Section 504.

### **Education for All Handicapped Children of 1975**

Perhaps the most relevant and significant legislation for students with learning disabilities that occurred in the 1970s was the creation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. What made this legislation prominent was how it expanded the definition of disability to include individuals with learning disabilities and how it offered

academic support to these individuals. This legislation was only applicable to students between the ages of 3 and 21; in other words, it applied to preschool through typical high school graduation ages. This legislation, which is still used today, indirectly benefited the college choice process of those with learning disabilities as it required academic support to be provided to them that translated to greater academic success and created more of an equal opportunity to pursue postsecondary education.

## **IDEA**

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was eventually renamed the IDEA Act and is still in use today. The central tenet of the IDEA Act is that students with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE; Jones, 2010). Its main purpose is to determine which students are eligible for special education and related services and to encourage positive long-term results for this group of students (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Jones, 2010). Some of the services that students can qualify for include but are not limited to rehabilitation counseling and psychological and medical services. Rehabilitation counseling is especially important as it helps students with disabilities plan for the future, whether or not that includes entering the workforce or pursuing postsecondary education.

The IDEA Act also mandates that various services be offered and procedural safeguards be implemented by public school systems to protect the interests of students with disabilities from birth to age 21 (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). To show accountability for the ensurance of a FAPE, each student receiving special education services is required to have an IEP. In short, the IEP is a plan that shows how a student will meet educational goals set by a team that includes a representative from the local educational agency, other school

personnel (e.g., special education teachers, regular education teachers), parents, and sometimes, other public agencies.

**Individual transition plan.** Although the IDEA Act does not directly impact the postsecondary plans of students with disabilities, it does have a component that has the potential to help students plan for the future. As of the 1990 reauthorization of the IDEA Act, there is now a mandatory ITP that must be written into the IEP for a student once they reach the age of 14, requiring that either further education or a vocational route be chosen after graduation (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). An ITP can be constructed before the age of 14 if the IEP team finds that to be appropriate (USDE, 2010). An ITP can be defined as

a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that (a) is designed within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to postschool activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (b) is based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community services, the development of employment and other postschool adult living objectives, and if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (IDEA, 2004, P.L. 108-446, Stat. 2658)

An ITP must include

appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate,

independent living skills; and (2) the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the child in reaching those goals. (IDEA, 2004, P.L. 108-446, Stat. 2709)

Once the ITP is in place and a student is no longer eligible for a FAPE under IDEA, there is no requirement that a public agency must follow up and see if the postsecondary education plans detailed in the ITP have been met (USDE, 2010). By using an ITP in the early stages of a student's high school career, the ITP team that may include educators, parents, counselors, and specialists can work together to plan school experiences for the student with learning disabilities that will drive the student toward the academic and social development necessary for postsecondary attendance (Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002).

However, there is a disconnect between what should happen during ITP meetings and what does happen. Research shows there is a lack of student participation in them (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004) and that even when transition planning meetings are successful, many students who express interest in pursuing postsecondary education are still not academically prepared by their senior year in high school (Hitchings, Retish, & Horvath, 2005). Due to the unproved effectiveness of transition planning, it has now become the parents' responsibility to counsel their students in their pursuit of long-term goals such as postsecondary education (Purcell, 1993).

The IDEA Act (2004) does apply to private schools but under different stipulations than public schools. Students whom need special education services and are placed by parents in a private school still need to meet the same eligibility criteria as students enrolled in public school, but they are not *entitled* to individual special education services and parents

have fewer rights in questioning the services their child receives than would be the case in public schools (IDEA, 2004; Weber, 2007). Also, the funds provided to private schools for special education are not the same as those for public schools. The IDEA Act (2004) stipulates that private schools only receive a proportion of the funds based on the overall enrollment in private schools in the school district. If 5% of a school district is enrolled in a private school, then the IDEA Act allocates 5% of the school district's funding for services for those students (Council for American Private Education, 2004). Legal professionals have argued that the IDEA Act benefits students with disabilities in private schools as a group but is not effective on an individual level due to inconsistencies in the eligibility process (Weber, 2007). In other words, private schools may receive a certain amount of money for special education services, but how that money is used for each student who needs special education services is inconsistent.

### **Current Definition of Learning Disability**

As discussed, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was a significant turning point for individuals with learning disabilities. The definition of learning disabilities created by this legislation was appropriate for the time; however, it is still being used 30 years later when knowledge about learning disabilities has dramatically increased (Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009). The definition of learning disabilities provided by the federal government is

- (i) General. The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do

mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(IDEA, 2004, P.L. 108-446, Stat. 2657)

The failure to use current research to update the federal definition of learning disability has resulted in many operational definitions of learning disabilities (Kavale et al., 2009). There is substantial disagreement among professionals about the exact definition of learning disabilities (Hallahan, Lloyd, Kauffman, Weiss, & Martinez, 2005). Scholars such as Albrecht et al. (2001) have contended that the complex and multidimensional nature of disability makes it difficult to create a standardized definition of learning disabilities. That being said, it is easy to agree with Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, and Barnes (2006) who said, “No single problem has plagued the study of learning disabilities more than the problem of definition” (p. 25).

### **Stipulative Definition**

For purposes of this study, it is vital to have a uniform definition when discussing what qualifies as a learning disability. The definition that will be used in this research is the operational definition developed by the ICLD (1987):

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental

retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (p. 222)

### **Types of Learning Disabilities**

Generally, types of learning disabilities fall under one of the four stages of cognitive processing: input, integration, memory, or output. *Input* refers to how information is received by an individual, which would be by either visual or auditory avenues. Auditory deficits may manifest in a student having difficulty in attending to the teacher's voice when competing sounds are present or not being able to process individual phonemes in words. Visual deficits present as a student having a hard time distinguishing the most important concept to look at when viewing a page with a lot of information, missing lines when reading, reversing letters and numbers when writing, and having difficulty with depth perception (LDA, 2010).

The next stage of cognitive processing is *integration*. During integration, information is sequenced, comprehended, and then developed into a complete thought. For example, some courses require the memorization of facts in a specified order. Individuals with difficulty sequencing could find that task to be overly challenging. After the information has been sequenced, comprehension or abstraction takes place. Individuals who present with comprehension difficulties often misunderstand the meanings of words, especially when used as slang or in an idiomatic fashion. The last stage of integration is marrying sequence and comprehension to create a full, organized thought (LDA, 2010).

Following integration is the process of *memory*. Essentially, memory is holding onto the complete thought developed in the integration stage. Finally, *output* refers to expression by verbal or physical means. Students who experience difficulty with verbal output often have a hard time answering questions on demand because it requires the simultaneous coordination of finding words, organizing words, and speaking. In terms of physical output, students who have difficulty with fine or gross motor skills have problems with handwriting and may appear to be more awkward in their gross motor movements (LDA, 2010).

The most commonly diagnosed learning disabilities include dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, auditory and visual processing disorders, and nonverbal learning disabilities (LDA, 2010). Dyslexia, which is the most commonly diagnosed learning disability, occurs when a person has difficulty understanding written words; it also includes difficulty with pronunciation, spelling, and writing (LDA, 2010). Unlike dyslexia, which is a language disorder, dyscalculia is a mathematically based learning disability that manifests in difficulty understanding concepts related to mathematical operations (LDA, 2010). These difficulties extend to solving word problems, understanding fractions and money values, and understanding abstract concepts such as time (e.g., days of the week, months; LDA, 2010). Dysgraphia is a writing disability in which a person cannot effectively convey his or her thoughts on paper, which is complicated by difficulty in handwriting itself (LDA, 2010). Dyspraxia is difficulty planning and completing tasks that require fine motor skills (LDO, 2006). Often times, it exhibits as increased difficulty in body coordination, writing, and speech activities (LDO, 2006). Auditory and visual processing disorders are sensory-based disabilities that cause an individual to struggle with identifying and interpreting information

presented by sight or sound (LDA, 2010). Finally, individuals with nonverbal learning disabilities often have a hard time distinguishing and understanding facial expressions and tone of voice in an accurate and appropriate manner (LDA, 2010).

### **Attention Disorders**

Although attention disorders are primarily regarded as a behavioral disorder, in this study, they are considered learning disabilities. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD) is behaviorally based; it is difficulty controlling behavior, including sitting still or paying attention. There are three types of ADD. One is characterized by inattentiveness, another is hyperactivity and impulsiveness, and the third type combines inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. These behaviors can be obstacles in academics where it is necessary to follow instructions, wait one's turn, not talk excessively, stay focused on and keep track of school work, and keep school materials organized. Unlike other learning disabilities, there is medication available to help some of the behaviors characteristic of ADD; however, not everyone who has ADD uses them (LDO, 2006).

### **College Choice**

Understanding the range of learning disabilities is important when investigating college choice because many college choice models look at students as a homogeneous group rather than considering individual circumstances. College choice was defined by Hossler and Stage (1992) as “a range of postsecondary educational decisions including (a) the decision of students to continue their education at the postsecondary level and (b) the decision to enroll in a specific postsecondary institution” (p. 426). The literature on college choice began in the 1920s and continues to grow today. However, up until the 1980s, limited research was

conducted on the college choice process. Early college choice literature focused on increasing the enrollment numbers within higher education (Kinzie et al., 2004). Their concern was not which ethnic groups or genders were more prevalent at institutions but rather why students chose certain institutions over others (Kinzie et al., 2004). This focus indicates a concentration on the later stages of the college choice process.

Some of the earliest attempts at understanding the college choice process were made during the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, the societal value of being well educated was increasingly sought after; choosing the right college was perceived as a step toward securing social status in society (Kinzie et al., 2004). Again, these studies tended to look at the later stages of the college choice process when students had already made the decision to attend but were trying to choose which college (Perna, 2006).

The 1980s were a time period when the process of college choice gained markedly more attention. By this time, there were countless postsecondary institutions a student could choose from to further his or her education. College choice became less focused on enrollment and more concerned with equity and access opportunities for underrepresented populations (Kinzie et al., 2004). It was at this point in history that college choice models were used more extensively than they had been in the past.

Early college choice models focused on economic or sociological principles that factor into the decision to either pursue higher education and/or to attend a certain institution. In more recent years, models became more comprehensive by combining aspects that acknowledge the combination of economic and sociological approaches and emphasizing the

first stage of the college choice process instead of later stages (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Perna, 2006).

Models that focus on the economic perspective of postsecondary education are not specific to the field but more broadly applicable. In the field of postsecondary education, economic models are used to predict the likelihood of a student pursuing more education (Hossler & Stage, 1992). One of the most frequently mentioned economic models in college choice literature is the human capital investment model (Perna, 2006). It is a linear model that when applied to postsecondary education claims that students look at the direct costs of postsecondary attendance, such as tuition, and measure them against the perceived benefits of obtaining a postsecondary education when considering attending college (Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Perna, 2006; Bateman & Spruill, 1996). However, economic models neglect individual preferences within the college choice process and focus strictly on the financial aspects of the process. They do not acknowledge that certain segments of the college-bound population weigh other choice factors more heavily than financial costs (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005; Perna, 2006). The economic model also tends to concentrate on the last stages of the college choice process (Hossler & Stage, 1992).

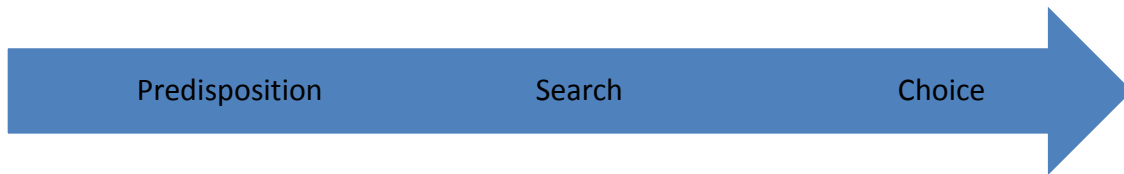
Conversely, sociological models set aside the costs and benefits of pursuing postsecondary education and instead focus on factors associated with status attainment (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Perna, 2006). Those factors include the role of parents, peers, and high school personnel in the college choice process and campus climate, student academic ability, socioeconomic class, gender, and the programmatic offerings of an institution (Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Kinzie et al., 2004).

Two of the most cited sociological models were developed by Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982). Chapman fashioned a model that investigated how student expectations of the postsecondary education experience related to student attributes and outside factors (Bergerson, 2009). This model was causal in nature; it was produced specifically for administrators to distinguish which factors impacted students' choices of postsecondary institutions (Bergerson, 2009). However, Chapman's model had limitations; it did not account for students from diverse backgrounds and was restricted to examining the outcomes of college choice and not the process itself (Litten, 1982).

Litten (1982) took Chapman's (1981) model a step further and developed a model that, while using similar sociological principles as Chapman, specifically took into account factors such as race and gender (Bergerson, 2009). Litten maintained that using basic marketing techniques such as market segmentation would advance returns on the recruitment efforts of postsecondary educational administrators. To accomplish this segmentation, Litten examined student college choice by race, sex, ability level, parents' educational levels, and geographic location to establish how these aspects impacted the college choice process. Although Litten's model included diversity aspects lacking in Chapman's model, Litten argued a need for a more comprehensive model of college choice that would consider both process and outcomes, as his model focused on outcomes. Answering that call for a combined model that looked at both process and outcome, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed the most commonly cited college choice model in current literature and the one used to frame this study (Bergerson, 2009).

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was developed utilizing the concepts of school and community contexts, higher education contexts, and human capital along with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model (Figure 1). Hossler and Gallagher's model is process oriented; that is, it looks at the decision to pursue postsecondary education, the gathering of information on institutions that meet the criteria of the student, and the choice of which educational institution to attend. Human capital and school contexts both play roles in the college choice process.



*Figure 1.* A representation of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model.

This widely cited model asserts that there are three phases in the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The predisposition stage references the aspirations and plans students have post-high school, whether they are further education or entry into the labor force (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once students decide to pursue postsecondary education, they enter the search phase, which involves reviewing the available choices, searching the Internet for information, and thinking about personal preferences (e.g., geographic location, institution

size). Finally, the choice phase is entered once the student decides which institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model has been used with diverse populations eliciting mixed results. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) found that the model has limited use when studying students from low socioeconomic and racially diverse backgrounds. This is likely because low-income students and students of color often do not have access to higher level classes like students of middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds (Bergerson, 2009), and low-income students and students of color have limited resources that provide information about college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Bergerson (2009) argued that because students from low income or racially diverse backgrounds do not have the same access levels to such resources as those from middle or upper socioeconomic backgrounds, they are unable to make a fully informed decision about postsecondary attendance. Bergerson suggested that concentrated, in-depth qualitative research that looks at individual choice processes and is conducted with students in disadvantaged groups, such as those identified by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), could help establish whether Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is applicable to students from disadvantaged groups.

Although there are a number of college choice models that could be used in this study, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) framework has been used as a framework to develop other college choice models and in discussing college attendance behavior in general. The Hossler and Gallagher model is presented in phases, and additional research has added factors to those phases (see Stage & Hossler, 1989). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987)

framework is a solid foundation to build from when developing new college choice models that may consider factors that directly influence students with disabilities (Bergerson, 2009).

### **Human Capital**

Human capital can be defined as “activities that influence future real income through the embedding of resources in people” (Becker, 1962, p. 9). These resources can include health, training, and the acquisition of knowledge and wage increases that result in higher levels of productivity (Becker, 1967; Schultz, 1961). As it relates to this study, an investment in higher education is considered to be an investment in human capital (Paulsen, 2001).

Acquiring human capital is especially important for students with disabilities, because they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than people without disabilities (Potts, 2005). People with disabilities often face obstacles beyond what nondisabled people encounter in the job search process (Potts, 2005).

Human capital theorists suggest that students use a cost to benefit ratio when deciding whether or not to pursue higher levels of education (Paulsen, 2001). Students consider the direct costs involved in pursuing higher education (e.g., money for tuition, books, fees) and the wages that will be lost by delaying entry into the labor force and whether those costs outweigh what would be earned by going directly into the labor force (Paulsen, 2001). Grants, scholarships, loans, and other subsidies sometimes mitigate the direct costs, making the attainment of higher education more attractive for a student (Paulsen, 2001). Beyond subsidies motivating individuals to pursue higher education, human capital theory has shown that other factors also contribute to higher education attendance. Students are more likely to pursue higher education when there is (a) a greater difference in income between high school

and college graduates, (b) a lower amount of earnings missed by bypassing immediate entry into the labor force, (c) a more future-oriented perspective taken by the student, and/or (d) a larger rate of return for a student's intended major (Paulsen, 2001). However, these factors do not affect all students the same way. Paulsen (2001) noted that other factors beyond finances that are less concrete (e.g., socioeconomic status, student ability, home and school environment) may outweigh the financial aspect of human capital theory. It is not known what or if other factors outweigh the financial aspect for students with disabilities when making the decision to pursue postsecondary education.

### **School and Community Contexts**

School and community contexts play a pivotal role in the college choice process, especially as they relate to the high school environment and the choice a student makes to pursue postsecondary education or enter the workforce (McDonough, 1997). Studies have shown that whether a high school is set up to promote college attendance influences student interests in pursuing postsecondary education (McDonough, 1997). High school guidance counselors have the ability to positively influence the college choice process of students if there is regular interaction with the student, the counselor has a small caseload, and the counselor has college advising experience (McDonough, 1997). In addition, schools that have a curriculum that emphasizes college preparatory level work and/or have implemented a gifted and talented program tend to have students who attend top quality colleges (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; McDonough, 1997). Overall, a high quantity of resources available at a school governs the options available for students in the college choice process (McDonough, 1997).

Another piece of school and community contexts is the existence of social capital. *Social capital* was defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997) as social support that preserves middle class status and is present in an individual's interpersonal contacts. Access to social capital is indispensable, because many of the resources that result in societal progression are accessible only through social networks such as friends, family members, guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar asserted that accessing social capital to learn about resources for college and gathering information on the college choice process is particularly difficult for minority students, who have a hard time engaging in supportive or trusting relationships outside of their immediate family.

### **Higher Education Contexts**

Comparable to school and community contexts, higher education institutions have the capability to influence the college choice process through marketing, location, and institutional characteristics (Perna, 2006). Marketing efforts include college representatives' attendance at college fairs through visiting high schools and serving as a resource for potential students and their families (Chapman, 1981; Perna, 2006). Higher education institutions also influence the college choice process in more obscure ways such as being within a reasonable distance to a student's home (Griffith & Connor, 1994; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). Finally, students are positively impacted by the characteristics of higher education environments that match their ideals and attitudes (Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006).

**Community colleges.** One of the more unique higher education contexts is that of community colleges. Community colleges are public, 2-year institutions whose purpose is to

provide educational access to a variety of populations (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). These populations include not only individuals who have recently graduated but also older students who would like to return to school to change jobs or get additional training (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). One of the central tenets of community colleges is that they exist to serve the community, which means serving the local population of displaced workers and inmates in federal prisons, providing lifelong learning opportunities and workforce development, and conducting training for local companies (AACC, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Community colleges offer preparation for transfer to a 4-year university, occupational training, and developmental education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Unlike 4-year universities, there is a heavy concentration on vocational education, which accounts for 54% of the degrees awarded by community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). By the year 2015, community colleges will account for approximately 45% of all higher education enrollments (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

As of December 2009, there were approximately 987 public community colleges in the United States (AACC, 2012). Community colleges get approximately 45% of their funding from the state in which they are located and about 20% from student funds and local funds. Community college costs an average of \$2,544 per academic year, which is nearly a half or a third of what a 4-year university costs (AACC, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

The community college is of significant importance to individuals with learning disabilities, especially because they pursue a community college education more often than a 4-year university (Newman et al., 2010). Community colleges are a particularly attractive choice for students with learning disabilities because they are open access, which means that

the standardized testing required for a 4-year university is not required for admission to community colleges (Mellard, 1994). Community colleges are more student oriented. As such, many community colleges have created programs that help individuals with disabilities successfully complete curricular requirements, and some provide job placement services, making community college a desirable choice for this population (Prentice, 2002).

### **Predisposition**

What is known about the predisposition stage of college choice and students with learning disabilities stems from government-sponsored reports and standard college choice literature that addresses sociological factors. Typically, the same factors in college choice appear in the literature: socioeconomic background, demographics, level of parent education, student aspirations, parent expectations and encouragement, academic ability, and relationships with school personnel.

A student's socioeconomic background is one of the most defining factors that determine postsecondary educational attendance for students with and without learning disabilities (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Newman et al., 2010; Sewell & Shah, 1967). For the general student population, socioeconomic status may not always have a direct impact on college choice, but rather an indirect effect (Hossler & Stage, 1992). That is, students' socioeconomic status impacts academic and educational expectations they believe others have of them (Hossler & Stage, 1992).

For students with learning disabilities, the data support that students with learning disabilities are more likely than those with other disabilities to come from families in the top quartile of income (Wagner et al., 1991). It is not known if socioeconomic status is a direct or

indirect predictor of postsecondary educational attendance for students with disabilities, but it is a strong predictor in the general population (Wagner et al., 2010). It has been established that students with disabilities from all disability groups who are most likely to enroll in postsecondary education are in the top third income bracket, followed by students from the middle third (Newman et al., 2009). Students with disabilities from the lowest income bracket are least likely to attend college (Newman et al., 2009). This suggests that a large percentage of students with learning disabilities should be pursuing postsecondary education because of their socioeconomic statuses. However, the percentage of students with learning disabilities who pursue any type of postsecondary education—including vocational, business, technical, 2-, or 4-year schools—is 48% compared to 62% of students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2010).

Another aspect of college choice is racial and ethnic background. Studies concentrated on the general population of students have been conflicted in their results. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) purported that students who are White or Asian are more apt to pursue postsecondary education than students in other racial minority groups. Other research has claimed that race has no predictive value when socioeconomic status was controlled for (Ekstrom, 1985). For students with disabilities, ethnicity and race are not predictive factors of postsecondary education attendance (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine & Garza, 2006). Students with learning disabilities are almost equally likely to enroll in postsecondary school regardless of whether a student is White, Black, or Hispanic (Newman et al., 2009). However, it is important to note that the enrollment rates of Whites with all

disabilities had a statistically more significant increase in postsecondary enrollment between 1990 and 2005 than other racial categories (Newman et al., 2010; Snyder & Dillow, 2010).

As opposed to race and ethnicity, gender is a strong predictor of postsecondary education attendance for those with and without disabilities. Since 1988, the postsecondary education enrollment rate of females has outpaced that of males, and projections show females continuing to outnumber males in statistics on postsecondary attendance through 2018 (Aud et al., 2010; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Reynolds (2001) noted that the educational aspirations of males lagged behind females starting all the way back in the seventh grade. Conlin (2003) suggested that males are more likely to have disciplinary issues and more prone to be diagnosed with learning disabilities that translate into negative early educational experiences. Females on the other hand, enjoy special programs and incentives designed to motivate them to pursue higher levels of education (Conlin, 2003). These opportunities take the form of gender-specific camps, programs, and conferences that concentrate on attracting women to certain careers and also scholarships and grants for females only. Consistent with students in the general population, females with disabilities are more likely than males to enroll in postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2010).

Research has consistently shown that higher levels of parental education make postsecondary education attendance more likely for the general student population and the students with disabilities population (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher 1987; Wagner et al., 1991). It is also likely that parents who have higher levels of education also have higher levels of income (Bergerson, 2009). Additionally,

mothers with higher levels of education and income are more likely to be involved in school-related activities with their student (Wagner et al., 2005). Students with learning disabilities are more likely than students in the general population to have parents who are not high school graduates (Wagner et al., 2005). However, it has been established that having an educated head of household outweighs the income variable when it comes to the pursuit of postsecondary education (Wagner et al., 2006).

*Aspiration* refers to the desire or intention to pursue postsecondary education, and *attainment* refers to the actual matriculation of a student into postsecondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). For the general student population, these educational aspirations generally develop by Grade 9 (Stage & Hossler, 1989). It is not noted in the literature how educational aspiration development may differ for students with disabilities. However, to stay the course to attainment, it is imperative to sustain those aspirations throughout the college choice process. Aspirations are often not realistic; many of the career choices that students make require attendance at high-cost institutions that are not affordable or require a certain amount of academic ability (Schmit, 1991). There has been a broad range of studies looking at the gap between aspiration and attainment as it pertains to postsecondary education. These studies have looked at the gap between racial populations (Solarzano, 1992), ethnic populations (Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009), and low-income students (Berzin, 2010).

Pertinent to this study, research supports that a gap between aspiration and attainment exists for students with learning disabilities and those without. Leiter (2007) found that students with disabilities are likely to have lower aspirations for and expectations of pursuing

postsecondary education than those without disabilities. Research has shown that 45.6% of students with learning disabilities choose to enroll in postsecondary education, with a majority enrolling in a 2-year or community college setting (Newman et al., 2010). Yet, when looking at the educational aspirations of students 15 to 19 years old with learning disabilities, almost all stated that they probably or definitely would get some form of postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2009). Thus, a large percentage of students with documented learning disabilities do not actually pursue postsecondary education opportunities even though they said they aspired to do so.

There is a clear divide between students with learning disabilities who aspire to postsecondary education and those who attain it. Hitchings, Retish, and Horvath (2005) looked at the records of 130 special education students who had graduated high school, 79 of whom had learning disabilities. They found that 85% of the students explicitly expressed interest in pursuing postsecondary education on their ITPs in the 10th grade, but by the 12th grade, that interest had decreased to 47%. This suggests that students with disabilities may have the same problem as those without disabilities. That is, their aspirations are not congruent with factors such as academic ability and the financial resources to attend the postsecondary education institutions necessary to achieve their goals.

One of the pivotal factors in closing the gap between aspiration for and attainment of a postsecondary education is parents (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The frequency of parental encouragement helps grow and retain educational aspirations (Flint, 1992), especially when it starts early on in a student's educational trajectory (Hossler et al., 1999). The elements of parental encouragement include

involvement in a student's school activities (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) and actions taken to save money for college tuition (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Not only are students who receive high levels of parental encouragement more likely to pursue postsecondary education, they are also more likely to matriculate into it the fall after high school graduation rather than waiting (Perna, 2000, Perna & Titus, 2005). The presence of parental encouragement has been positively correlated with college attainment when students have distinguished academic ability and come from affluent socioeconomic backgrounds (Sewell & Shah, 1967). Parental encouragement is a variable that can be manipulated; that is, improving parental encouragement can outweigh the value of socioeconomic status, especially for male students (Trusty, 2004).

High school counselors play less of a role in the college choice process than parents or peers of students in the general population (Newman et al., 2009). School counselors are more likely to be involved in a student's college choice process if the school in which they work has (a) a small student body, (b) a large number of school counselors, and (c) a low number of students on free or reduced lunch (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, 2009). High school counselors are also more likely to be sought out by African American females than students in other demographics. Students are less likely to see their high school counselor if they perceive that the counselor has low aspirations for the student. For students with learning disabilities, parents play a more significant role in decision-making processes than do peers or school personnel (Newman et al., 2009). However, students with disabilities have been shown to rely on school personnel, specifically high

school guidance counselors and teachers, more than students in the general population (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2007).

It has long been determined that ability is a strong predictor of college attendance for students in the general population (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987; Jackson, 1986; Nora & Cabrera, 1992). Literature based on data collected in the 1980s purported that this trend is similar for students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 1991). Students with disabilities who have an IQ of at least 91 are the most likely to pursue postsecondary education (Wagner et al., 1991). The mean IQ for students without learning disabilities is 100; the mean for students with learning disabilities is 81.9 (Wagner et al., 2006). Research has also shown that students with disabilities in all disability groups are more likely to pursue postsecondary education if they have taken mainstream academic courses (Baer, 2003). This is supported by the results of a study that showed that students with learning disabilities tend to earn higher grades in courses and better grades on state proficiency tests and other standardized tests when in mainstream classrooms as opposed to being pulled out for instruction (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). However, students with learning disabilities are less likely to receive a college preparatory curriculum in high school as opposed to nondisabled students, which translates to less preparation for higher education opportunities (Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

## **Search**

The search stage begins once a student decides to pursue higher education (Schmit, 1991). During this phase, students start gathering information about college, including making personal visits to college campuses and developing a broad list of institutions

(Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Litten, 1982). Students consider institutional characteristics that may interest them including but not limited to sizes of the cities and towns where the institution is located, the size of the institution, the quality of education at the institution, and the living arrangements for the institution (Schmit, 1991). Parental encouragement and support continues to be important in this phase because students consider which institutions they have information about and how their parents might feel about them attending certain institutions (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Schmit, 1991). The set of institutions that a student has listed at this stage is largely related to how thorough the student has engaged in the search phase of the process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000).

The literature indicates that there is great variability as to how students with learning disabilities or any disability go through the search stage (Siperstein, 1988). This is complicated by the fact that there is little information to guide these students to schools where they are more likely to succeed and a lack of exposure to what options and support are available within a higher education atmosphere (Hitchings et al., 2005; Siperstein, 1988; Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

### **Choice**

The final part of the college choice process is the actual choice of institution that a student intends to attend. A student engages in a myriad of activities that could include becoming more aware of the perceived expenses of attending certain institutions, submitting applications for admission, and filling out financial aid forms (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). At this point, institutions themselves impact a student's decision more than parents or peers (Bergerson, 2009). Most importantly, this stage is driven by academic achievement (Hossler

& Gallagher, 1987). Students who have higher levels of academic achievement enjoy privileges such as better access to information about postsecondary options and having an array of postsecondary options to choose from (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; Teranishi, Allen, & Solorzano, 2004).

The research studies generally used participants who had already completed the college choice process and were about to be or were currently enrolled in college. They tended to concentrate on transition, persistence, and retention issues. For example, Coccarelli (2010) used currently enrolled college students with learning disabilities to explore the experience of transitioning from high school to college for students with learning disabilities and identified ways that others could help a student with learning disabilities prepare for college. Breslow (2007) and Steenken (2000) used current college students with learning disabilities to examine how early educational experiences influence degree persistence and also how they impact decision making for students with learning disabilities. Other studies, such as Arceneaux (2006), looked at the characteristics of and strategies that students with learning disabilities used to persevere in the college atmosphere. Huger (2009) examined retention issues of students with learning disabilities, specifically why so many are leaving 4-year educational institutions.

**College choice literature base.** There is scant literature that addresses the time in high school when the actual choice process occurs (Hoffman, 2008; Leiter, 2007). The literature that does exist concentrates on predictive variables, making the unit of analysis a group of students with disabilities or learning disabilities rather than individual experiences. One such study was conducted by Hoffman (2008) who used Hossler and Gallagher's (1987)

college choice model to look at the relationship between family-, student-, academic-, and school-related factors and attendance at a 2- or 4-year institution. Hoffman's study used data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, and participants had to have identified postsecondary plans, among other criteria, for their data to be included. Students with learning disabilities were not separated out, and the study reported on individuals with any disability. One of the pivotal findings of the study was that, for 75% of the participants, college attendance aspirations were the same in both the 10th and 12th grades. Hoffman suggested that may have been the result of having developed aspirations prior to secondary school attendance, before transition plans were written into the students' IEPs.

The current literature base, including large-scale data sets, has its share of weaknesses. First, the available studies on college choice and learning disabilities tend to reflect data collected as far back as the late 1980s, when the identification of learning disabilities was not as prevalent nor was the level of awareness as high as today. The current literature also does not consistently separate students with learning disabilities from other disability groups, limiting the utility of the data used to confidently determine predictors of postsecondary education attendance for students with learning disabilities. Lumping students with disabilities together assumes that students with learning disabilities face the same challenges as other students with disabilities. Even separating out students with learning disabilities fails to account for variation among those within the group. The type of and severity of learning disabilities can range from having a minimal to a major impact on daily functioning (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Other literature separates disability groups in ways that an individual with a learning disability could fall into more than one category, again

making the utility of the data less than ideal (see Blackorby, Knokey, Wagner, Levine, & Schill, 2007).

Moreover, many studies that look at college choice and learning disabilities have methodological weaknesses. Two of the three large-scale major studies most commonly cited in the literature base excluded schools that enroll only students with disabilities (Curtin, Ingels, Wu, & Heuer, 2002; Newman et al., 2010). Consequently, over half of students served by the IDEA Act (2004) were not part of the sample for those studies. It is unknown what percentage of those excluded had learning disabilities; therefore, the data may not provide a complete picture. In the third study, participants were not asked if they had a disability. Instead, their parents were asked about the participants' disability statuses (Rossi, Herting, & Wolman, 1997).

To summarize, the current college choice literature cites socioeconomic status and gender as established predictors of postsecondary education attendance for both students with and without disabilities. However, for students with disabilities, and more specifically, learning disabilities, the picture becomes murkier with aspects such as ability and parental involvement having no definite value in predicting postsecondary education attendance. Finally, this section established that there is a clear gap in the literature as it relates to students with learning disabilities and college choice.

### **Summary of Chapter**

This chapter has reviewed the definition of learning disability and provided a brief overview of disability legislation as it applies to this study. The conceptual framework incorporating Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) work and the concepts of school and

community contexts, higher education contexts, and human capital were reviewed and other college models were discussed. Finally, the current literature base on college choice was examined, noting the major studies, limitations thereof, and resultant gap in the literature. The next chapter will outline how this study remediates the gap in the literature as it relates to college choice and students with learning disabilities.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Following the explanation of the problem and the pertinent literature in the previous chapters, this chapter discusses the merits of qualitative research and why this technique is appropriate for answering the research questions, which are

(1) What are the life experiences of students with learning disabilities?

(2) How did those experiences shape the college choice process?

Subsequently, I will defend the use of narrative inquiry in this study and examine the application of this approach to both learning disabilities and education research. This will be immediately followed by detailing the setting of the research study and the sampling procedures used with the participants. The participant selection process will then be clearly outlined. Next, I will address the limitations and delimitations associated with conducting this study. Following the discourse on limitations and delimitations, I will describe how data were collected from the participants and summarize how those data were analyzed. I will illustrate how the trustworthiness of the data was ensured and discuss the ethical considerations involved in conducting this research.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The objective of the qualitative researcher is to make sense of or interpret that world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). The process of interpretation is not accomplished by statistical measures, as it is with quantitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Instead of utilizing quantifiable measures, descriptive procedures are used that

concentrate on a participant's "spoken or written words and observable behavior" (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 2). This research study has been designed to share participants' experiences beyond what can be represented numerically, thus making qualitative research the most favorable route for data collection.

Educational researchers agree that there are identifiable characteristics of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). First, qualitative research occurs in a natural setting; that is, data are collected in the field or the context wherein participants experience the topic of interest to the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies typically focus on participant experiences and the subjective meanings of those experiences. These experiences are "reflective of the everyday life of individuals" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6), so it makes sense to conduct data collection at sites where their everyday lives occur. Qualitative research also aims to provide a comprehensive view of a social occurrence. The social occurrence examined in this study is the process of making a college choice for individuals with learning disabilities. To obtain a comprehensive view of the phenomenon and keep the feel of a natural setting, this research study took place in the actual secondary educational institutions participants chose to attend.

Qualitative research refrains from employing standardized measurements such as surveys or questionnaires, particularly those created by other researchers (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Instead, the researcher is the key instrument in the data collection process (Merriam, 2009). This research study did not utilize surveys or questionnaires beyond a basic interest form and demographic questions. Data were collected via interviews by using an interview protocol containing open-ended questions. Once the data were

collected, the analytic process began. The data analysis process in qualitative research is inductive, recursive, and interactive (Creswell, 2007). Pertaining to this study, that meant that the data analysis process was rigorous; it required me to set aside any assumptions of what I might find in the data and be prepared to interact with the data repeatedly, triangulating them with other sources of information to see what emerged.

Using a qualitative research method for this study was unique because this method has not been drawn on extensively to study the combination of disability and education (McClimens, 2002; Reid & Button, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Reid and Button (1995) noted the irony of how a research design that allows the voices of the participants to be heard is rarely seen in the literature on individuals with learning disabilities. Reid and Button (1995) emphasized that “We [those without disabilities] have not listened to *their* [those with disabilities] voices” (p. 600). Instead, many studies on individuals with learning disabilities focus on numbers, and thus, we have very little in-depth information from these individuals about their experiences. This is surprising given that “many of the criteria that establish the appropriateness of choosing qualitative methods parallel the conditions in special education” (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 46). These conditions include smaller sample sizes and the variation in severity of disability within and across groups. Another reason qualitative methods were a good fit for this research is that the focus is different in quantitative and qualitative studies. Mertens and McLaughlin (1995) affirmed that qualitative research in the area of special education is necessary to capture the unique aspects of individuals with disabilities that numbers cannot capture.

## Narrative Inquiry

As previously stated, there is a need for research that allows stories to be heard. There are many definitions of *narrative inquiry* (Miles & Huberman, 2002). Polkinghorne (1988) described narrative as “the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite” (p. 13). Polkinghorne viewed narratives as pieces of a puzzle; researchers gather the pieces (i.e., human actions and events) and then craft them into a complete picture. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) defined narrative inquiry in more vague terms: “the study of experience as story . . . is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience” (p. 477). Although both Polkinghorne (1988) and Connelly and Clandinin (2006) implied that narrative inquiry is a vehicle for sense making, Polkinghorne (1988) defined narrative inquiry as story creation, whereas Connelly and Clandinin’s (2006) definition referred more to a reflective process. This study combined both perspectives; that is, it viewed narrative as not just story creation, but also as a story indicating complexity beyond simple storytelling.

Narrative inquiry is an applicable, appropriate research design to use with the learning disabilities population because narrative “seeks to describe the meaning of experience for those who frequently are socially marginalized or oppressed” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 6). It is considered by Creswell (2007) to be the most suitable choice for securing comprehensive accounts of life events that focus on the lived experiences of a small number of individuals. More specifically, McClimens (2002) mentioned that students with learning disabilities are frequently excluded from the academic discussion that occurs about them, so their voices fail to be heard. These individuals have stories that can be told, just like

anyone else (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006). In fact, it could be said that individuals such as those with learning disabilities who need to tell their story are the least permitted to do so (McClimens, 2002).

Narrative inquiry has been used in research in a range of fields, including in the field of education. Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) asserted that many educational researchers are attracted to the use of narrative inquiry in their work because of the historical relationship that exists between narrative inquiry and education. Clandinin and Raymond (2006) noted, “Listening to stories and watching stories being lived out is what we, as university teachers, school teachers, principals, and researchers, spend most of our time doing” (p. 101). Although it is well documented that narrative inquiry has extensive roots outside education (Clandinin et al., 2007), Connelly and Clandinin (2006) built upon those roots and related narrative inquiry to education, as they believed that there was theoretical importance in viewing life as it related to educational experiences. Narrative inquiry has helped those in the field of education examine and improve upon their practices (Clandinin et al., 2007).

### **Participants**

Choosing participants “represents a key decision in qualitative research” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 69). That being said, the sampling procedure should be purposeful and well thought out (Patton, 1990). Nonprobabilistic or *purposeful sampling* entails choosing participants from whom the most can be learned about the topic (Merriam, 2009). The type of sampling strategy employed in this study was criteria sampling. *Criteria sampling* means that participants meet a set of requirements specific to the topic being studied to be eligible to

participate in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The criterion for participant selection is detailed in the following paragraphs.

### **Selection Criteria**

This study sought individuals who met various criteria. Participants were required to be between 18 and 24 years of age and had to be enrolled as degree-seeking students or dual-enrollment students who were earning a high school diploma and an associate’s degree concurrently. The participants were also required to identify as having a learning disability diagnosis made by a medical doctor or psychologist. Data were collected until new data appeared to add little substance, deeper dimension to, or appeared redundant in nature with the data already collected (Krathwohl, 1998; Lincoln & Guba 1985).

### **Research Sites**

This study was conducted at four public community colleges in the United States. To protect the identity of the community colleges used in this study, data available from the NCES (2012) are used to describe them in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *Research Site Demographics*

	<b>Community College 1</b>	<b>Community College 2</b>	<b>Community College 3</b>	<b>Community College 4</b>
Location	Southeast	Southeast	Southeast	Northeast
Setting	Town	City	Suburb	City
Primary Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female

Table 1 Continued

	<b>Community College 1</b>	<b>Community College 2</b>	<b>Community College 3</b>	<b>Community College 4</b>
Primary Race	White	Black	White	White
Student Population	4,528	5,933	17,071	12,271
Percentage of Students Under Age 25	54%	38%	58%	69%
Percentage of Students Enrolled in Disability Services	3% or less	3% or less	3% or less	3% or less

### **Recruitment of Participants**

Participants were recruited using two methods. The primary method was by contacting subscribers to an e-mail list who were members of an association that specifically related to disabilities and higher education. In May 2011 and August 2011, I sent an e-mail to the list subscribers asking for assistance with my dissertation and attached a flyer to hang up at their institutions (see Appendix B). Five subscribers responded to my request, and each provided me with assistance. Three committed to hanging the flyer in their disability services office and spreading word among faculty members and others at their institution about the study. One subscriber referred me to a community college that she knew had a high number of students with learning disabilities. Finally, the fifth subscriber contacted me to put me in touch with another graduate student who had similar research interests. I recruited one participant through this method.

The second method I used to recruit participants was making personal visits to three community colleges within a commutable distance of my home. All three community

colleges required that I fill out their versions of the Human Subjects Review form. I then had a formal meeting at each school to discuss the possibility of conducting my research there. During the formal meetings, I utilized the recommendations of Bogdan and Biklen (2006) in gaining access to a research site. I summarized the details of the study for the college administrators, including the benefits and risks to participants, and assured them that my presence would not be disruptive to the daily functioning of the students and the school. I also explained why I had chosen their colleges for the study and what would be done with the findings of the study. Once the administrators approved my study and the Human Subject review forms, I hung up recruitment flyers at the schools in the disability services office and other areas with a high exposure to students. Seven of my study participants were recruited through this method.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

All research studies have limitations and delimitations. *Limitations* are defined as conditions or factors that may impact the results of the study and/or how results are interpreted (Baron, n.d.). Although some limitations are out of a researcher's domain of control, it is up to the researcher to decide how to rationalize whatever limitations are present. Conversely, *delimitations* are factors that influence the study within the control of the researcher, and they serve to narrow the magnitude of the study (Baron, n.d.).

In this research study, the potential limitations were related to the unique population being studied. The primary limitations were gaining access to research sites and securing participants. Students with learning disabilities are protected under a multitude of laws, including privacy laws. Despite being assured that student privacy would be protected in this

study, many schools when contacted were hesitant or unable to participate in for fear of legal ramifications. It was implied that if my participants were college students without disabilities, approval to conduct my study would not be a problem. Even when I was approved at a school to hang flyers, the location and number of flyers permitted and distributed varied tremendously. One school only wanted one flyer hung in the disability services office. Others were only willing to have them posted on public bulletin boards. This variation limited exposure to the flyer, which in turn impacted the number of potential participants who contacted me.

Potential participants put themselves at personal risk by contacting me. Because having a learning disability is not observable, many people chose not to share it with others or only with a select group of people. Some of my participants had not disclosed to others that they had a learning disability, so sharing it with someone who was initially a stranger was intimidating. I believe this made other potential participants wary of responding to my request.

The final limitation was how the quality of communication with the participants varied. Because I interviewed students with learning disabilities whose conditions ranged on a scale of severity, with some individuals more affected in their functioning than others, it was apparent that some participants could navigate the interview situation more effectively than others.

Delimitations are the boundaries the researcher places on the study. In this study, the sample constituted the delimitation. The sample was limited only to traditionally aged

students who were enrolled in community college and identified as having a learning disability.

### **Data Collection**

The process of collecting data from participants with learning disabilities is similar to what is done in standard qualitative research (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995), but a great deal of sensitivity and patience was exercised in the data collection process for this research study. The standard methodology for qualitative data collection includes participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. These same methods are implemented to gather data in qualitative research on students with learning disabilities; however, some participants with learning disabilities have a difficult time responding to questions due to speech and language impairments or other aspects related to their disability (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995). Because of these possible problems, I provided the interview questions to participants before the interview. I also conducted up to two interviews with each participant, which allowed for greater flexibility in the responses to the questions being asked.

### **Interviews**

Although participant observation and document analysis had the potential to add peripheral information to this research study, I was most interested in hearing the stories of my participants, and the best way to hear those stories was through interviewing (Seidman, 2006). DeMarrais (2004) viewed interviewing as a process of exchange in which the researcher and participant take part in a conversation that concentrates on answering the questions of the research study. Thus, data for this project were collected by conducting up to

two interviews. The interview protocol used in the interview process went through the approval of the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University and was made available to participants prior to the interview itself. Before the first interview started, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to be identified by in the final report. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 120 minutes in length. Participants were informed ahead of time, both verbally and on the consent form, of the measures being taken to ensure that the information they provided did not reveal their identities. I conducted all of the interviews without co-investigators to maintain the confidentiality of the participants (Merriam, 2009).

The first interviews were as loosely structured as possible and utilized open-ended questions (Merriam, 2009). This flexible structure gave the participants the chance to become comfortable with me and feel a sense of control over the type and amount of content they shared within the interview. It also allowed me to see what experiences participants deemed pivotal in their lives without my suggesting or directing specific questions that would have led them to discuss certain experiences. The questions developed for the first interviews (see Appendix C) asked the participants to share stories and experiences based on the factors that impact college choice as outlined in the conceptual framework of this study. Participants were asked to share information about family and personal life, academic experiences and how they engaged in the college choice process (see Appendix C). Based on the data collected from these questions, I created more specific questions for the follow-up interviews (Seidman, 2006). These questions explored topics that were brought up in the first interviews included more pointed questions about reconstructing experiences at certain stages of their

lives. Upon the completion of the data collection process, participants were given an incentive of a \$50 gift card and thanked for their participation.

**Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP).** Interviews were conducted using VoIP, which is commonly utilized in video-chat software such as Skype 5.0. Skype can be used to make either video calls or voice-only calls and is available for a very low cost, or in some cases, for free (Skype, 2012). Skype offers video calling in high definition, which results in a clear video between callers (Skype, 2012).

Bertrand and Bordeau (2010) explained that conducting interviews using VoIP is a new data collection technique for data collection in qualitative research (as cited in Esteves, 2010). In this study, there were many advantages to using it. Allowing the participants to engage in the interview process via VoIP may have been perceived as a less threatening way to conduct interviews. It can be an advantage to both interviewers and participants as each gets to stay in an environment they perceive as safe and familiar (Mann & Stewart, 2002). It allowed participants to interview from a place that was comfortable to them. For one participant, that was a room in the library. For another, it was from her kitchen where she had a snack and beverage while we talked, and for another, it was his living room where he could sit comfortably with a pillow. As opposed to face-to-face interviews, Internet interviewing has been shown to yield responses that more accurately reflect the everyday interactions of participants (Shuy, 2002). The use of VoIP is also more convenient for participants, allowing them to interview at different times of the day (Mann & Stewart, 2002). Most of my participants asked if I could interview them in the late evening, which would not have been feasible if I had conducted in-person interviews.

For this study, five participants either chose not to use the video feature or were unable to use it due to technical difficulties. The voice-only option for Skype was used for those who did not use the video aspect of the software. Research has confirmed that Internet interviewing works best when both the researcher and participant are equally comfortable with the technology being used and that it is best to permit participants to decide through which means interviews are conducted to increase participation (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Young, Persichitte, & Tharp, 1998). Using the voice only option also offered additional confidentiality, as simply hearing a participant's voice makes them less identifiable than seeing a face and a voice. Beyond comfort with technology and the implications for the response rate of the study, I also allowed the participants to choose the method of interview because of the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed. Therefore, I left the choice up to my participants whether to use video or only voice in the interview process.

*Advantages.* There were many advantages to collecting data using VoIP. Interviews could be recorded in an unobtrusive way, unlike in a face-to-face interview where participants have an audio recorder within their line of vision, which could potentially impact the responses being given. Although the participants in this study knew they were being recorded, they could not see the recording device, a software program called CallBurner 1.0.0.35. As the researcher, my primary advantage of using VoIP was related to cost. One of my participants was from a different region of the United States, and several of my participants were located at least an hour away; had we interviewed face-to-face, the costs associated with data collection would have increased dramatically.

***Disadvantages.*** Although there were many advantages to using VoIP to conduct interviews, there were disadvantages as well. Although it was helpful for me to see the participants' nonverbal communication as we spoke, there was sometimes a delay in the video transfer. The audio would reach me before the video, causing a mismatch in participants' verbal and nonverbal communication. Another disadvantage was related to technical issues. In one case, my computer decided to install updates while I was in the middle of an interview and subsequently shut down, causing me to reboot and contact my participant to pick up where we left off.

**Recording data.** Audiotaping is the most common way to record data from interviews (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). All participants were notified verbally and on the consent form that the interviews would be audio recorded, but not video recorded, by computer software. It was essential to make participants as comfortable as possible with disclosing sensitive information, thus making other ways of recording data, such as video recording, undesirable. By audiotaping, I was certain to accurately quote participants, and it also freed me to take field notes and note ideas or questions that developed while interviewing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Audiotaping began after we greeted each other and I confirmed that the recording equipment worked correctly.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

I requested that each participant respond to a demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the first interview. This information accounted for the factors outlined in the conceptual framework section of Chapter 2 that impact college choice. It enhanced my understanding of a participant's background and helped me generate an interview protocol

for the second interview. The questionnaire established the participants' learning disability diagnoses, races, socioeconomic statuses, genders, and parents' educational levels.

### **Researcher Journal**

Throughout the study, I kept a researcher journal. In it, I recorded observations, personal reflections, and preliminary analyses of the data I collected. The journal was a confidential document kept on a password-protected flash drive and did not refer to any participants by their real names, nor was the location of the research revealed. Some contents of the journal were utilized in the data analysis portion of this study.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of data analysis is to make “sense out of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). To accomplish this goal, data analysis should be both rigorous and systematic (Patton, 1999). Consequently, data analysis for this project occurred both informally, while engaged in the interviewing process, and formally, once a round of interviews was completed. The analysis was conducted using the phases outlined in the following paragraphs.

The informal phase began with the mental processing of what I heard the participants say during the interview itself. Bogdan and Biklen (2006) recommended making researcher notes during the course of the interview about possible themes or ideas that may emerge. As each interview concluded, I revisited the researcher notes and wrote in my researcher journal what certain descriptions given by participants reminded me of or what analogies or metaphors might have applied to these descriptions.

The first formal analysis phase began at the completion of the first round of interviews with the participants. In this phase, I listened to the recorded audiotapes of the

interviews and had them transcribed professionally in preparation for the analysis process. Transcription can be a labor intensive project, and thus, I used an experienced, professional transcription service to transcribe the interviews (Merriam, 2009). There were risks with using an outside transcription service including a lack of familiarity with terminology used in the learning disability field (Merriam, 2009), but I verified the accuracy of the transcripts once I received them back from the service. I never referred to participants' real names, making them unidentifiable on the recording.

After reading the transcripts several times, I created a memo on potential patterns and themes and my personal reflections. The memo also identified information that might be missing from the interviews that I would want to follow up on with the participants (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). After all the data were collected, I repeated the process, again ending the phase with a memo on observations about themes and stories (Merriam, 2009).

Once the interview, transcription, and memoing phases were complete, I began the phase of data analysis that involved reducing data into manageable chunks. I read through the transcripts, bracketed relevant text, and wrote vignettes for each participant (Seidman, 2006). By constructing vignettes, I shared the participants' voices in the format of a narrative, which is consistent with the methodological approach for narrative inquiry (Seidman, 2006). Since participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts, I did not have them review the vignettes. I then revisited the transcripts, memos, and journal notes and engaged in manual coding. In particular, I searched for excerpts related to human capital, school and community contexts, higher education contexts, and the phases of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987)

model explained in Chapter 2 (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seidman, 2006). I coded twice. The first time, I used open coding to see what themes emerged, and the second time, I used a priori categories established by the conceptual framework that pulled from the Hossler and Gallagher model (1987). Once data analysis was complete, the data were presented using vignettes to introduce each participant. That was followed by developing the themes from the transcripts, memos, and journal notes that highlighted the similarities and differences found in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Actions for Quality and Trustworthiness**

It is crucial that the data collected are considered trustworthy and of high quality. This was accomplished by establishing credibility, acknowledging transferability, and by specifying the actions that were taken to ensure confirmability in the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility.** *Credibility* is defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) as making sure “the findings are accurate and credible from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader” (p. 86). Triangulation is used to establish credibility in a study by gathering and comparing information from multiple sources (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). By triangulating information, an objective representation of the data is collected (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this study, I triangulated information from multiple sources by using member checking by participants, reviewing and comparing the data from the interview process with the literature, and using a peer debriefing process.

**Member checking.** Member checking has been described as the most important technique in establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking occurred

once the interviewing process was complete. I e-mailed participants transcripts from our interviews. In a separate e-mail, I instructed each participant to verify the accuracy of and clarify and/or modify their responses in the interview. Member checking was especially important in this study because I used individuals who were part of a population I did not wish to further marginalize.

Another aspect of credibility is the use of collaboration in the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, the participants were viewed as assistants in the research process. I asked them to help write their personal vignettes as part of the final document for this study. For those who wished to do so, their voices were incorporated directly into the study, thus enhancing the credibility of the data.

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing is another way to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, three peers were asked to engage in discussion regarding the data collected and interpretations made. They were also asked to consider the match of the project with the research questions, purpose, conceptual framework, and research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). At no time were the actual names of participants revealed to those involved in the peer debriefing process.

**Transferability.** The goal of *transferability* is to investigate whether a research study could be conducted in an alternative context yet still yield similar findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This is often achieved by the researcher providing a comprehensive perspective of what is being studied that draws on details or “thick description” (Mertens, 2005, p. 256). I incorporated thick description and detailed the participants’ experiences beyond surface details to enhance the transferability of this research study.

**Confirmability.** *Confirmability* refers to the researcher's objectivity during the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). One way to establish confirmability in a research study is to construct a researcher bias statement. My statement can be found in Appendix A.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Based on personal experience, I understood the desire for participants to protect their confidentiality. Therefore, the participants in this study were guaranteed confidentiality. I implemented several techniques to ensure the anonymity of the data I collected on them. All participants were given a pseudonym that was used in the final report. To further confirm confidentiality, all interviews were audiotaped and stored on a password-protected flash drive that was only accessible by me. A spreadsheet with the participants' real names and pseudonyms was housed on my home computer, separated from the password-protected flash drive. The only individuals that had access to the collected data were me, three peers for the debriefing process, the transcription service, and the co-chairs of my dissertation committee. Except for me, none of these individuals had access to the real names of participants. The location of the research sites was confidential except to the co-chairs of my dissertation committee.

The data collection process did not begin until this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at my institution. The approval process required me to summarize the contents of this document and provide copies of the instruments I used to collect data and the consent form I had participants sign before commencing data collection.

## **Chapter Summary**

The primary purpose of this chapter was to introduce the general features of the research study. The methods and design of the overall study were explained. Also, an outline of the data collection procedure was provided, which included particulars about participant criteria and specific information about the research site. Additionally, the data analysis procedures were examined and the trustworthiness of the data was established. The next chapters will focus on the participant profiles, data collected from participants, findings and conclusions from that data, and recommendations for areas of further research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **PROFILES**

The purpose of this chapter is to give a holistic view of each participant, so the reader can understand the world as each participant perceived it (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). The backgrounds and life stories in the profiles will set the foundation for answering the research questions. The research questions that guided this study were

- (1) What are the life experiences of students with learning disabilities?
- (2) How did those experiences shape the college choice process?

To answer these questions, I interviewed eight participants during the fall of 2011. They were between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age, had matriculated into a community college, and had a learning disability diagnosis. Follow-up interviews were also completed during the fall of 2011. The interviews were conducted using VoIP technology for all eight participants, with some participants opting to use video and audio components and others opting only for the audio component. The basic participant demographics can be found in Table 2, and each participant's profile follows.

Table 2

*Participant Summaries*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Description</b>
Hayden	male; Caucasian; 22 years old; diagnosis: dysgraphia, processing disorder; mother and father have master's degrees; middle child with two siblings; applied and accepted to two institutions; 3rd-year student in community college; transfer to 4-year institution intended
Paige	female; African American; 18 years old; diagnosis: attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity; 1.2 high school GPA; mother has bachelor's degree; oldest child with two siblings; dual enrollment in high school and community college; transfer to a 4-year institution intended
Sophie	female; Caucasian; 23 years old; diagnosis: dyspraxia/motor disability, Asperger's syndrome; 3.5 high school GPA; mother has master's degree, father has bachelor's degree; oldest child with two siblings; applied to three institutions and was accepted by two; 2nd-year student at community college, attended a public 4-year university for 1 year
Sam	male; Caucasian; 23 years old; diagnosis: processing disorder; 2.4 high school GPA; mother and father have associate's degrees; oldest child with two siblings; applied and accepted to one institution; 2nd-year student at community college; intends to transfer to 4-year institution
Olivia	female; Caucasian; 20 years old; diagnosis: attention deficit disorder; mother has master's degree, father has doctoral degree; adopted; youngest child with four older siblings; applied to and was accepted by two institutions; 1st-year student at community college, attended private 4-year institution for 1 year on scholarship
Shawn	male; Caucasian; 19 years old; diagnosis: dyslexia, attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity; 3.5 high school GPA; parents divorced; mother has master's degree, father has doctoral degree; middle child with two siblings; applied to and was accepted to one institution; 1st-year student at community college

Table 2 Continued

Participant	Description
Emily	female; African American; 19 years old; diagnosis: attention deficit disorder; 3.5 high school GPA; parents divorced; mother has master's degree, father has bachelor's degree; only child; recruited by two institutions for athletics; 1st-year student at community college, attended private 4-year institution for 1 year
William	male; Caucasian; 19 years old; diagnosis: written expression, attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity; 3.0 high school GPA; parents attended but did not complete college; youngest child with one sibling; recruited by two schools for athletics; 1st-year student at community college

*Note.* GPA = grade point average.

### Vignettes

#### Hayden

*My handwriting is—except to me—pretty much illegible.*

Hayden, an expressive and refined young man, currently lives with his family, although he expresses the desire to move out when financially possible. He is currently employed part-time while attending community college full-time. The nature of both his parents' work has required the family to relocate throughout Hayden's educational trajectory. Therefore, Hayden has lived in various regions and has attended different schools throughout his lifetime, including public, private, and military schools. He attended public school through the third grade and then changed schools because of a change of parental employment.

By the time Hayden was in sixth grade, the family moved again. Hayden dropped out of public school to attend military school for the summer between sophomore and junior year of high school and then moved back to the region of the United States he had lived in up until the third grade. He finished the last 2 years of high school at a private school.

Hayden said it was obvious to him, as early as the third grade, that his handwriting was a problem. Hayden underwent testing that revealed he was gifted. The following year, he was diagnosed by a psychologist with dysgraphia and low-processing speeds.

Hayden received accommodations through an IEP at his school starting in the sixth grade. In the 8 years after he was diagnosed with dysgraphia, he only recalls one unsuccessful IEP meeting that took place in the sixth grade. Hayden said if he needed help at that point, he explained his situation on an as-needed basis to teachers; some accommodated him and some did not. He says that the only A grade he received in K–12 education was in elementary school. He is only now, as a student at a community college, earning his first A grades since elementary school.

## **Paige**

*I think one of the concerns I did have in middle school was, you know, paying attention, sitting down, you know, not moving a lot, you know, trying to focus, and stuff like that, and I think that's what brought up, you know, hey, well something's not right, you know, this is not normal.*

Paige looks like a typical college student in her jeans, trendy shirt, and square black glasses. She sounds like a typical college student in conversation spotted with “like” and accompanied by grand hand gestures. However, her educational journey has been anything

but typical. She has been to eight different learning institutions in the course of her life, yet she has always lived in the same home. She has been to schools that have closed down, she has also been asked to leave by school administrators for behavioral issues. Despite her past difficulties with education, she is a dually enrolled student and is set to earn both her high school diploma and an associate's degree from a public community college.

Paige comes from a single-parent home. During the interview she never mentions her father, and shares that she is the older sister to two younger siblings she supervises on a regular basis. During our conversation, she directs her siblings to dinner and solves an argument while her mother is at work. The four of them enjoy going out to eat and to the movies, playing video games, and talking. Yet privately, Paige has battled severe depression for many years and was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity in middle school. Despite how these diagnoses have impacted her academically, Paige has big plans for her future. She aspires to work in a technology-oriented field, perhaps with a focus on video game design. Paige is especially focused on attending a public 4-year university that has a program that would meet that goal.

### **Sophie**

*It took me until I was 15 to learn to properly grip a pencil.*

Sophie, a quiet and sharp-witted young woman, likes to cook with her sisters and raise therapy dogs. She lives with her biological parents and two younger siblings who are still in high school. Sophie and her mother are very close, and her mother is involved in Sophie's educational endeavors, especially as they relate to higher education, because that is her field of employment.

Sophie was deprived of oxygen at birth, so there were early indications that she had disabilities. A medical physician diagnosed her with dyspraxia as a preschooler and later with Asperger's syndrome. As a result, she recollects being in various therapies for a good portion of her life to try and address her severe motor problems. Sophie has lived in the same area of the state for her whole life, moving only once. She attended public school for K–12, with the exception of the seventh grade. During her seventh-grade year, Sophie attended a very small private school for children who had significant academic impairments. However, she was very uncomfortable there and returned to public school for her eighth-grade year. Upon returning to public school, Sophie received services for her disabilities and was mainstreamed into the general population of students. She was schooled in the resource room daily, but once she reached the age of 16, she chose to stop going to the resource room for help. She stopped going because she felt as though she did not fit in with the other students who used the resource room. After spending 1 year at a 4-year university that her mother wanted her to attend, she is pursuing her first semester at a community college.

### **Sam**

*I would be saying something, and I'd—I'd sound completely normal, but then I would, uh, put in a word that was kind of similar to what I want—I intended, but it wasn't exactly right.*

Sam, a laid-back young man with bright blue eyes and long, curly, blond hair lives with his fiancé. As a child, he attended all public schools but moved residences twice during his K–12 attendance. The year after he graduated from a public high school, he moved to a nearby city where he lived for 2 years. He moved to his present residence 3 years ago.

Sam is a fighter, and he considers himself fortunate to be alive. Between the ages of 13 and 15, he fought a life-threatening disease and won. Shortly after he overcame his illness, he was diagnosed with a processing disorder by a private physician. Sam did not find it necessary to pursue services through his school because he was already getting academic accommodations for his medical condition.

Sam indicated that he is not very close to his father or two younger siblings, but he and his mother have a special connection. Sam notes that his mother took him to every treatment for his illness and at times ignored her other children to concentrate on getting Sam better. At one point, she was the only one that believed Sam had a learning disability.

After graduating high school, Sam attended a community college for a year and was then laid off from his job, forcing him to relocate. Since the relocation, Sam has started attending another community college and plans to transfer to a 4-year public university.

### **Olivia**

*I know I can do this stuff, I know that I'm smart enough to do this stuff, it's just that there's a block.*

Olivia is a vivacious, extraverted young woman who resides in the southeastern region of the United States with the family that adopted her. She is Hispanic but identifies herself as Caucasian because she came to the United States as an infant. Olivia comes from a well-educated family; her mother has a master's degree in an education-related field and her father has a doctorate in engineering. Olivia has a close relationship with her mother, who has been heavily involved in Olivia's education since she was a preschooler.

Olivia shifted between public and private school for grades K–12; however, she never moved actual residences. She began attending a Montessori school as a preschooler and was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder by a private psychologist who also determined that she had a very high IQ. Olivia remained at the Montessori school through the second grade, but she struggled to keep focused on her academics. In an attempt to address Olivia's problem with focus, her mother transferred her to a private school where she repeated the second grade and remained enrolled through the eighth grade. Olivia says that despite her mother's efforts, they were unable to get academic assistance because Olivia could not qualify for services due to her high IQ. Once Olivia graduated from the eighth grade, she attended a public high school and was again denied services. Alternatively, she was enrolled while in high school in a program for students with learning disabilities or disadvantaged students. After spending a year at a private university on a scholarship, she has now chosen to attend a community college.

### **Shawn**

*. . . it got to the point where I just decided I'm tired of getting chewed out over spelling tests. So I started cheating on spelling tests all the way back in second grade.*

Shawn is a tall, tan, young man with tousled blond hair who recently relocated to the southeastern region of the United States. He comes from an upper class family with biological parents who divorced when he was 4. Shawn has two biological siblings, and he is the middle child. Up until the latter part of his senior year, Shawn had not been in contact with his father for several years. He describes his parents' divorce as long and drawn out, lasting from when he was 4 until he was in the eighth grade. His parents both remarried; his

mother divorced her second spouse when Shawn was a senior in high school and his father is still married to his second spouse. Shawn's relationship with his father was rekindled when Shawn and his mother had a domestic dispute involving authorities.

Shawn's family moved frequently prior to him entering his first year of school at the age of six, and settled in the Midwest. Shawn lived in the same house until his senior year of high school. He attended public school for Grades K–12, with the exception of Grades 6 and 7 when he attended a private school for children with severe behavioral problems. In the second grade, Shawn's teacher approached his mother to share her concerns about his classroom performance. Shawn's mother was not initially persuaded that there was a problem and thought his dyslexia was the result of poor eyesight. This caused a lapse in time before Shawn was diagnosed with dyslexia by a private educational psychologist. Consequently, he did not receive support services until the sixth grade and then was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity as a sophomore in high school. Shawn is currently a 1st-year student at a community college.

### **Emily**

*I remember when I would try to focus, I couldn't because things were just flying through my mind all the time.*

Emily is an articulate and polite young woman who maintains a best friendship with her mother. She rarely mentions her father, except to say that he and her mother are no longer married and there was a significant loss in income when she was a junior in high school that greatly impacted the standard of living to which she had been accustomed. This loss of income has forced Emily to take on two jobs while attending community college full time.

Emily was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder by a private physician when she was in high school, although she says it was obvious that something was wrong long before that. She can recall having problems in school as early as the sixth grade, when she was forced to participate in a program to help address organization skills. When Emily exited the program and began to play on school sports teams was when she really noticed her inability to stay focused on academics.

Because Emily was an accomplished athlete, she was recruited by several universities and colleges to play sports. She attended a private 4-year university that became too expensive after 1 year of attendance. She left the private 4-year university and college level sports behind and Emily now attends a 2-year public community college close to her home.

### **William**

*I have thoughts, but it's hard for me to put my thoughts into words on paper.*

William is a cheerful and optimistic young man with a thick regional accent. He spent his time in high school playing sports on various athletic teams and was consequently recruited for his athletic ability by two colleges. He is an accomplished athlete who hopes to go into the physical therapy field in the future. In the meantime, he is currently attending his 1st year of community college after spending a year on an athletic scholarship at a private 4-year institution.

William's educational journey has been relatively stable because he has lived in the same town his whole life and moved residences twice within the city limits. However, William was diagnosed in elementary school with a written expression disorder and was re-diagnosed last year with both a written expression disorder and attention deficit disorder with

hyperactivity. He says he received services in the form of an IEP from kindergarten through high school, at which point he decided that he no longer needed help to succeed academically.

William comes from a lower middle class socioeconomic background, with two parents who attended some college but did not complete a degree and a brother who immediately went into the workforce after high school graduation. William would like to be an inspiration and motivation to others who aren't expected to pursue or complete postsecondary education plans.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter shared the varied backgrounds of the eight participants in this study. In general, these profiles, which were reconstructed from participant interviews, highlighted the differences in their diagnoses and experiences up to enrollment into community college. The next chapters will draw from and analyze these experiences using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model and the concepts of human capital, school and community contexts, and higher education contexts.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: HOW COLLEGE CHOICE IS  
EXPERIENCED**

**Abstract**

Students with learning disabilities are pursuing postsecondary education at a less frequent rate than students without disabilities, despite coming from similar demographic backgrounds (Newman et al., 2009; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). This study focused on how individuals with learning disabilities experience the college choice process. To learn more about these experiences, eight participants with learning disabilities who were enrolled at one of four community colleges in the eastern half of the United States were interviewed. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice framework was used to frame the experiences collected through the interviewing process.

The results of this study were that students with learning disabilities often have a range of experiences that fall within Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) framework and impact whether and where they consider pursuing postsecondary education. The study found that the complexities of the college choice process, compounded by the presence of a learning disability resulted in students with learning disabilities being left on their own to navigate the college choice process during a crucial window of time in high school, for reasons that are not completely understood.

**Introduction**

In the mid-1970s, the percentages of students enrolled in K–12 education in the United States who were identified as having a learning disability or other health impairment

were 1.8% and 0.3% respectively (Snyder et al., 2009). Fast forward 30 years and the numbers have increased at an alarming rate. Government statistics report that in 2006, 5.4% of K–12 students enrolled in school in the United States had specific learning disabilities and 1.2% had other health impairments, including attention disorders (Snyder et al., 2009). Educational practice and policy have, for the most part, adjusted to this increase in the K–12 educational system as it relates to developing coping methods and ensuring short-term student success. The passage of legislation such as Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 have augmented these efforts. Although there are shortcomings in the Section 504 and ADA legislation, it is because of these efforts that students with learning disabilities have more support navigating the K–12 system than has been available to students in earlier decades. Progress has been made as it relates to achieving short-term goals for individuals with learning disabilities, yet there is still progress to be made for the long-term success of these individuals.

Although many students with learning disabilities successfully complete high school, there is a significant gap between them and students without disabilities in the pursuit of postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2010). This gap widens as disability categories are separated out; only 47.3% of students with learning disabilities and 54% with attention disorders pursue postsecondary education within 4 years of high school graduation (Newman et al., 2009). The existence of this gap is a problem, as this population is already at a disadvantage because they are more likely to be unemployed, make a lower hourly wage, and use government-sponsored programs than those without disabilities (Newman et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2005).

Research has addressed how other disadvantaged populations, including Hispanics and African Americans (see Perna, 2000) engage in college choice, yet there is scant literature that examines how students with disabilities engage in the college choice process and whether their processes fit within existing college choice frameworks. What makes the population of students with learning disabilities different from other disadvantaged populations is that they are more likely to come from families within the top quartile of income and less likely to come from a poverty stricken home as compared to students with other disabilities (Wagner et al., 1991). Students with all types of disabilities who are most likely to enroll in postsecondary education are in the top third income bracket; students from the middle third are next most likely, and the least likely are from the lowest income bracket (Newman et al., 2009). This suggests that a large percentage of students with learning disabilities should be pursuing postsecondary education. However, the percentage of students with learning disabilities who pursue postsecondary education is 47% as compared to 62% of students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the higher education literature neglects to acknowledge students with disabilities as part of a marginalized population (Burch & Sutherland, 2006; Leiter, 2007). Similar to more discussed marginalized populations, individuals with disabilities have experienced oppression for many years, and although progress has been made, obstacles still exist. This study sought to address this problem by using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, a widely cited framework in higher education literature (Bergerson, 2009).

## **Conceptual Framework**

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model is process oriented; that is, it looks at the decision to pursue postsecondary education, the gathering of information on institutions that meet the criteria of the students making the decision, and the choice of educational institution to complete their education. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), there are three stages or phases in the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition stage refers to the aspirations and plans that students have post-high school, whether they are to seek further education or enter into the labor force (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once students decide to pursue postsecondary education, they enter the search phase, which involves reviewing the available choices, searching the Internet for information, and thinking about personal preferences (e.g., geographic location, size of institution). Finally, the choice phase is entered once the student decides which institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model continues to be used in higher education literature and has been used with diverse populations, yielding mixed results. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) found that the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model had limited use when studying students from low socioeconomic and racially diverse backgrounds, mostly because low-income students and students of color often do not have access to the same higher level classes as those of middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds (Bergerson, 2009). Low-income students and students of color have limited resources that provide information about college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Bergerson (2009) argued that because students from low income and racially diverse backgrounds do not have the same access levels as those from

middle or upper socioeconomic backgrounds, they are unable to make a fully informed decision about postsecondary attendance.

Bergerson (2009) suggested that concentrated, in-depth qualitative research that looks at individual choice processes conducted with students in disadvantaged groups, such as those identified by Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), could help establish whether Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is applicable to students in special populations. This study followed that suggestion and investigated how the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model functions with students with learning disabilities.

### **Methods**

A qualitative approach was used to learn more about the college choice experience of students with learning disabilities. This approach captured the range of each individual's experiences with the college choice process as it related to the Hossler and Gallagher college choice model.

### **Sample**

The type of sampling strategy employed in this study was criteria sampling; that is, to be eligible to participate in the study, participants met a set of requirements specific to the topic being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants were required to be between 18 and 24 years of age and were enrolled as degree-seeking students or dual-enrollment students who were earning a high school diploma and an associate's degree concurrently at a community college. The participants were also required to identify as having a learning disability diagnosis. This diagnosis must have been made by a medical doctor or psychologist. Data were collected until the new data appeared to add little substance or

deeper dimension to the data already collected or was redundant in nature (Krathwohl, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Site Selection**

This study was conducted at four public community colleges in the United States. To protect the identity of the community colleges used in this study, data available from the NCES was used to describe these sites and will not be cited. Three of the four community colleges were located in the southeast region of the United States, and one was in the northeast region. Each school reported a different geographical setting; one was in what NCES classifies as a town, one was in a midsize city, one was in a large suburb, and one was in a large city. The schools used in this study had student bodies that ranged in size from 4,500 students to over 17,000 students, and half of three of the schools' student bodies were under the age of 25. One reported having a primarily African American student body, and three reported primarily Caucasian student bodies.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited in two ways. The primary way was by contacting subscribers of an e-mail list who were members of an association that specifically relates to disabilities and higher education. Additionally, an e-mail was sent to the list asking for assistance hanging up an attached flyer at their institutions. Given the limited response from those recruitment strategies, I made personal visits to three of the four community colleges in the study. Once the administrators approved the study and the Human Subject Review was complete, recruitment flyers were hung up at the schools in the disability services offices and

other areas with high student traffic. As participants contacted me, the data collection process began.

### **Data Collection**

The process followed for collecting data from participants with learning disabilities was similar to what is done in standard qualitative research (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995), but I was conscious to be particularly sensitive in the data collection process for this research study. The standard methodology for qualitative data collection includes interviews. Interviews are also used to gather data in qualitative research on students with disabilities; however, some participants with disabilities, especially those with learning disabilities, have a difficult time responding to questions due to speech or language impairments or other aspects related to their disability (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995). Because of this, I offered the interview questions to participants before the interviews in written form. I also conducted up to two interviews with each participant that allowed for greater flexibility within their responses.

Participants were asked to share the story of how they ended up at the schools they were currently attending. Probing questions were then used to learn details about those stories and to address aspects of the college choice process. Participants were asked questions that addressed their family and personal life, academic experiences and how they engaged in the college choice process (see Appendix C). The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 120 minutes in length. Participants were informed ahead of time, both verbally and on the consent form, of the measures taken to ensure that the information they provided would not reveal their identities in the final project.

Due to the sensitivity of the topic being discussed, interviews were conducted using VoIP. It is commonly utilized in video-chat software such as the commonly known and used Skype 5.0. Using VoIP is a new data collection technique in qualitative research, and there were many advantages to using it in this study. It can be more convenient for participants, allowing them to interview at different times of the day (Mann & Stewart, 2000). As opposed to face-to-face interviews, responses during Internet interviewing have been shown to more accurately reflect the everyday interactions of participants (Shuy, 2002). It was also more convenient for me, because it reduced travel costs and allowed the participant pool to be extended geographically (Aday, 1996).

All participants were notified verbally and on the consent form that the interviews would be audio recorded, but not video recorded, by computer software. Doing so was essential for making participants as comfortable as possible with disclosing sensitive information, thus making other ways of recording data, such as video recording, undesirable. By audiotaping the interviews, I was certain to accurately quote participants, and it also freed me to take field notes and note ideas or questions that developed while interviewing (Bognar & Biklen, 2006). The audiotaping began after we greeted each other and I confirmed all the recording equipment worked correctly.

Once consent was acquired and audiotaping begun, each participant responded to a demographic questionnaire. This information accounted for the factors that impact college choice as outlined in the conceptual framework of this study, and they enhanced my understanding of the participants' backgrounds and helped generate an interview protocol for the follow-up session. The questionnaire established the participants' learning disability

diagnoses, races, socioeconomic statuses, genders, and educational levels of parents. Once the data collection process was complete, data analysis commenced.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using both the data collected via the interview and the reflective writing of the researcher. Data was initially coded following Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendation to use the conceptual framework as a foundation. Following that recommendation, the data in this study were compared with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice process. As the data were reviewed, other codes in addition to the conceptual framework themes emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were reviewed and coded using nVivo 9.0 software on separate occasions to be certain that the data were coded into the correct categories and to ensure their quality and trustworthiness.

**Actions for quality and trustworthiness.** It is crucial that the data collected are considered trustworthy and of high quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, information from multiple sources was triangulated through using the participants' interview data, consulting the existing literature, and the peer debriefing process (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Because this study looked at participants' perceptions rather than the researcher's, a member check was employed to ensure authenticity (Krathwohl, 1998). During the member check process, participants reviewed the interview transcripts and were given the opportunity to make modifications if they chose. Furthermore, the data from the interview transcripts were reviewed for consistency and then triangulated with the extant literature on college choice and students with disabilities (Krathwohl, 1998). Finally, a peer debriefing process was used to ensure that the data were coded accurately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Participant Diagnoses**

The participants in this study had variations of perceived learning disabilities, and many had coexisting conditions with the learning disability. Three participants had difficulty with written expression, two had processing disorders, one had dyslexia, one had dyspraxia, and four had attention disorders. One participant had an attention disorder and dyslexia. Participants identified other conditions they had in addition to learning disabilities such as Asperger's syndrome and depression, and one participant had battled a life-threatening medical condition but had recovered.

Just as there was variation in diagnoses, there were differences in how participants perceived the impact of their disabilities on their academic functioning. For some of the participants, learning difficulties were quite pervasive in some areas but not in others. For example, the participant with dysgraphia tested as gifted, and his academic difficulties were restricted only to the physical act of writing. Another participant had extraordinary skill in playing a musical instrument but could not maintain focus in classroom settings that required her to sit passively for long periods of time. These gifts, however, did not supersede their academic challenges: one participant said that the last time he earned an A grade was in elementary school, and another disclosed that her difficulty maintaining focus was the catalyst for leaving the first postsecondary school she attended. However, one participant was insistent that his life experiences were no different because of his learning disability and that it really didn't affect him that much academically, even though he later admitted that he did not seek disability services at the first postsecondary school he attended and subsequently

failed out because he could not keep up with writing assignments. These examples illuminate some of the limitations of the study.

### **Limitations**

Studying students with any disability comes with limitations. The first limitation is access. Individuals with disabilities are a legally protected group and cannot be identified without their permission. People with learning disabilities are even harder to identify because their disabilities, in most cases, are not visible. Therefore, this study relied on individuals to self-identify and contact the researcher to participate. Although there was an incentive offered to participants, it did not cancel out the act of self-disclosing to a virtual stranger that they had a condition that has historically been stigmatized by society.

The second limitation relates to the range and severity of conditions included in this study. Potential participants who contacted me had a range of conditions that can be perceived as a learning disability. For example, I did not specifically recruit for individuals with attention deficit disorder, which does not fall under the government definition of learning disability, but some individuals perceived that the condition had impacted them academically. For that reason, I included them in this study. The severity of a disability can range from having minimal impact on one's life to having major impact on one's life. This study had many participants that seemingly fell into the middle range of severity, with few falling on extreme ends of the scale. That variation confirms that the needs of people with learning disabilities are not applicable to any single, given condition.

Another limitation was the ability of participants to recall events and reflect on them in length. Some participants could easily recall events from the past, and others had difficulty

recalling significant events from as recently as last year. Beyond recalling facts, very few of the participants were able to reflect on behaviors and situations at length in order to make sense of them. The findings and discussion section of this chapter illustrates how participants often shared a situation factually without exercising critical thinking skills to analyze or explain their response to it. Thus, it is important to note that this study focused on the experiences of participants and did not utilize information from other individuals, such as parents and school personnel, who may have been able to provide additional information regarding participants' college choice process.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The participants' responses reflected the three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model: predisposition, search, and choice. The data showed that the participants at some point decided to pursue postsecondary education, gathered information about the options available, and then made a decision on where to attend in a manner similar to students without disabilities. However, there was variation among individuals' experiences during each step, suggesting that the college choice process is a highly individualized experience, especially for those with learning disabilities because they often face challenges during the process that students without disabilities may not face (Sitlington, 2003). Participants indicated that this highly individualized experience starts in the predisposition stage of the college choice process.

#### **Predisposition**

The experiences that participants described tended to fall under the predisposition phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. Previous research has

established that the predisposition of students to pursue postsecondary education is influenced by many factors including demographics such as family income, parental level of education, personal attributes such as academic ability and aspirations, involvement in extracurricular activities, and the encouragement of parents, peers, and high school personnel (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). In this study, many of the experiences reported by participants touched on these factors, but there was a range of experiences pertaining to each factor.

**Family income.** Income is considered one aspect of many that determines social class in America (Tse & Werschkul, 2005). Other aspects include educational level, occupation and wealth (Tse & Werschkul, 2005). To determine the social class of participants in this study information about the participant's parents income were matched against 2002 data from the United States Census Bureau. In cases where participants did not provide income information, parental occupation was used to determine social class. Four participants had household incomes or parental level of education placed them in the highest class, one participant was identified as having an upper middle class status, one with a middle class status and the remaining two were determined to be from families of a lower middle class status. . One of the participants from a lower middle class status recalled,

. . . when I was six, I realized what my mom was about to have my little brother, that we're not the richest family in the world. So if we wanted anything major, we're waiting till Christmas to get it, and Grandma buys it. So Grandma's like the dad of the family. She buys everything for us 'cause we're the grandkids, you know. She'll buy anything special: iPods, laptops, anything you can think of, she'll buy it. But I

did realize we weren't the richest family in the world. So you know, we have enough to do the basics, rent, water, electricity, that good stuff—so I mean, don't get me wrong. There are times where we do get a little extra to splurge, you know, but it's not like an every month kind of thing.

The remaining five participants reported having a family income that placed them in the middle class status or higher, and at least three of them came from homes that brought in at least \$100,000 annually putting them in the top fifth of American earners. A participant whose parents were both nuclear engineers said, "We always—we were pretty well set." Another participant's family experienced a dramatic loss of income just as she started college. She shared,

My mother and father had a VA [Veteran's Assistance] contract for about 12 years, and they would transport veterans back and forth to the VA and back home. And they made a large amount of money. But like 2 years ago, they had to stop the contract because they weren't a veteran-owned business. So that was a life-changing experience because I used to get everything—and I mean everything—that I wanted. And now, I have to work—I work at CVS and I work in the [ABC] Bookstore. And—but it's made me humble because before, I used to have a very bad attitude and I didn't care about anything. But now I see that in order to get somewhere, I have to work.

In general, participants whose families had a lower income had parents who worked in service industries. Three of the participants' parents worked in postsecondary education, either as a professor or administrator, which was consistent for people with an upper middle-

to upper class status. Participants who came from families with higher incomes had parents who worked in engineering or healthcare fields.

As far as paying for college, many participants' said their parents would worry about the financial part of college, leaving many participants not knowing what the budget was for college or how their parents were financing it. At least three of the participants had parents who had maintained a savings account for college attendance purposes. For example, one participant said her mother had "some sort of savings account" for her for college but did not know how much was in it or any additional details about it. The paternal grandparents of a different participant had established an account for him, but he did not know how much was in the account and indicated that his parents were custodians of the account and that they drew from it to pay his community college tuition. Another participant's father had started a college fund back in the mid-1980s, before he was even born. Although none of these participants knew much about the savings accounts for their college educations, they did know they were being used for their current educational endeavors.

The low cost of community college appeared to be a deciding factor in choosing one for half of the participants. For others, it seemed to be only part of the reason that drove community college attendance. Every participant except one mentioned the low cost of community college as a driving factor in the choice process, which is consistent with Paulsen's (2001) view that economics plays a primary role in the college choice process.

Further illustrating Paulsen's (2001) finding was the experience of one participant in the study. This participant lost an athletic scholarship because of his grades. He said he chose to attend community college once he lost the scholarship because tuition at the school he had

been attending was about \$30,000 a year. The tuition exceeded his family's annual income, making his choice to leave that school consistent with St. John and Noell's (1989) research that found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more sensitive to increases in tuition, or as in this student's case, a loss of aid.

Another participant chose community college because he said he didn't qualify for any financial aid at the only 4-year school that accepted him. Finances had not been discussed when he initially applied to the school, and his mother did not fill out the financial aid forms because she perceived that she "made too much money" to qualify. It is not known how she came to the conclusion that financial aid would not be offered to him. The participant said that as far back as he could remember, the expectation was that he would pursue a 4-year education and his parents would pay for it. Although he was surprised when his mother suddenly said they could not afford the 4-year school that accepted him, the participant did not probe the issue further because he did not really want to attend that particular school anyhow. At that point in time, it was simply too late to apply to any other 4-year schools, so he attended community college.

One of the more unique situations was presented by a participant who came from a lower middle class socioeconomic background and was in a dual enrollment program. She attended community college at no cost because her tuition, fees, books, and transportation were covered by the program. This financial help assisted her presently, but she understood that the program would be ending and would not transfer to the 4-year university she planned on attending in the future. Of the participants, she was the most concerned and most informed about the costs of pursuing postsecondary education.

Cost was not an issue for another participant. She said her parents were willing to pay for her to go anywhere she wanted, including a school that was approximately \$30,000 a year for tuition. This participant came from a private 4-year institution where she had some academic challenges. Her reason for attending community college was primarily because she needed a morale boost and could fulfill some general education credits at the same time.

The role of cost in the college choice process for the participants in this study was, for the most part, in alignment with what is known about the process for students without disabilities. However, the research maintains that cost is not only a primary driver in the college choice process, but it also works in tandem with parental level of education (Hallinan, 2000; Lopez-Turley, Santos, & Ceja, 2007).

**Parental level of education.** When participants in this study were asked about their parents' level of education, some participants were more knowledgeable and confident in their responses than others. One participant called to her mother to ask her directly:

Interviewee: *[Side conversation]* Mom, what's your highest degree of education?

Mom: A master's.

Interviewee: A master's in?

Mom: Education.

Other participants were tentative when sharing their parents' level of education. For example, one participant said, "She has—I think she has a master's" and another said, "I think my father has a doctorate in nuclear engineering." A different participant was not sure what his parents' level of education was as indicated by his nonverbal communication and hesitation to answer the question. Eventually, he asked me, "What would ITT [Tech] be classified as

because he finished from there?” When asked about his mother, he responded, “I think she went to secretary’s—uh, secretarial school, but I don’t think she finished. So I think just high school.”

Given that income levels were skewed toward upper classes, it comes as no surprise that many of the participants in this study came from families that valued and attained high levels of education. Out of eight participants, six had a parent or parents who had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. Two participants had a parent who had earned a doctorate. Yet when participants described their childhood experiences, it was clear that the incomes of those in the middle and upper class income levels came at a heavy price due to relocations for employment.

**Relocation.** About two-thirds of the participants in this study recollected moving residences during their elementary and middle school years due to parental employment, in some cases causing many changes from school to school. With little emotion in his voice, one participant recalled,

Around third grade, we moved [out of state], and we lived up there for 3 years, and the [out of state] school system wasn’t very accommodating of my learning disabilities, and so that made things very difficult.

When middle school came around, we moved to Virginia because my mom got a job . . . it was out in Charlottesville, but we were outside of Charlottesville, and so we were in kind of the rural area surrounding Charlottesville, and those—the people working there didn’t really have the experience to really help me, you know, deal with dysgraphia or whatever.

Another participant said, “My dad was in the Navy, so the whole time that they were married, we moved. I was actually born in Guam, and we moved to Florida. We lived in Palau for a little while—Puerto Rico—all the way up until I was about 6, starting kindergarten.” This seemed to taper off in the high school years, and most of the participants ended up graduating from the same high school they attended freshman year.

Almost all of the participants in this study attended public high school, as do 98% of students with disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder, 2003). However, two left their public high schools to attend other schools briefly, and one participant shifted between public and private schools until graduation but ultimately returned to public high school to graduate. One participant graduated from a parochial high school, one from a private school, and another participant had not graduated high school yet as she was in a specialized dual enrollment program.

**Quality of school.** From the participants’ stories, it was clear that the resources available at these schools varied. Half of the participants in this study described their high schools as being low-resource schools with restricted electives and limited extracurricular activities. One participant that attended a low-resource school said that lifelong success at her high school was defined as graduating with a high school diploma; the idea of college was never brought up because, she believed, no one expected her or her classmates to attend college. She said,

I was like thinking, like you know, most of these counselors told me I wasn’t graduating, so I was like, I wasn’t really thinking about college like that. I was kinda,

shoot, kinda went over my head like oh I'm kinda done with school, so there's no need to be thinking about college.

As a whole, participants did not perceive that they had many choices in the selection of courses in high school. One participant, a public high school graduate, summed that up when he said, "The [redacted] county system is very—I mean, it's kind of specific about what you have to take." They often deferred to guidance counselors and parents, specifically their mothers, to tell them which courses to take as opposed to having an active role in the process. One participant, whose mother orchestrated much of his academic career, said, "My mom was on point with everything." Only one participant was enrolled in an advanced placement course in high school, and she said she was quickly removed from that environment because her mother did not believe she could handle the demands of an advanced placement course given her disability. When asked if the courses taken in high school were college preparatory classes, none answered the question confidently, with many not knowing what the term meant. One participant who had graduated from private school indicated that there was flexibility in the curriculum.

**Parental encouragement and expectations.** A limited amount of literature has noted the specific role of mothers in the college choice process for the general student population (Freeman, 2005; Smith & Fleming, 2006), but there are no articles that address maternal expectations and college choice for the population of students with disabilities. However, literature supports that more often than not, mothers are the ones who are charged with their child's educational endeavors (Reay, 1995). Moreover, well educated mothers of students both with and without disabilities are more likely to be involved in their child's education

than fathers or mothers with lower levels of education (Newman, 2004). The mothers of the participants in this study were no exception. There were high expectations of parents, particularly of mothers of the male participants, five of whom had master's degrees.

In this study, participants' mothers were perceived as controlling, focused, and unrelenting when it came to their child's academic pursuits. As consistent with what was found by Reay (1995), fathers were very rarely mentioned by participants, with most fathers as being described as "going along for the ride." One participant said, "My mom really didn't like to hear that I wasn't the golden child." Another participant portrayed his mother like this:

My mom is very focused, very—I don't know how best to put it, but she's an A-type personality. And so when she decides she doesn't want me to do theater in college, she pushes until that's the way it is, you know, it's kind of unrelenting. And so eventually, I just gave in and was like, you know, I'll look at other things.

All of the male participants noted that their mothers had put undue pressure on them to succeed academically and to not only pursue postsecondary education but careers that would require education beyond postsecondary education. This was explained by a participant who said, "My mom was like, you'd be a good lawyer, or you'd be this or you'd be a good that, and it all was stuff with, you know, a postgraduate degree or a doctorate or—you know, nothing that was functional straight out of college."

One of the participants, who intended on attending a 4-year university after graduation, was pushed by his mother to pursue community college because with her, "it's all control. If I'm living with her, she's still got control over me, and she can influence on what I do. She kept pressing on me, 'Why don't you go to the community college here?' —all this

stuff.” There was pressure for this participant to attend community college as opposed to a 4-year university even though his mother was well educated, with a master’s degree in a lucrative field. When asked why he thought his mother was so adamant about him attending community college, he felt as though she was considering her need to have him nearby rather than what his preferences were. He did not express that his mother had any concern about his ability to succeed based on his severe learning disability and attention disorder.

Only three participants could recall believing they would pursue postsecondary education from an early age. These participants envisioned themselves not at community college, but at a 4-year school or university. Only two participants in this study were offered the option of pursuing community college by parents, and the rest of the participants were encouraged by parents and school personnel to attend a 4-year university, even if it was obvious that the participant experienced great academic difficulty during his or her high school years. One participant could recollect his parents discussing the idea of college attendance as early as his elementary school years. When asked if his parents were supportive of pursuing postsecondary education, he laughed in response and then said,

Participant: I would say they called it supportive, but it was mandatory, you know, like, there was never any question of me not going to college. It was “This is the way things are, this is what’s going to happen.”

Interviewer: Okay. And what did they tell you was going to happen?

Participant: That I was gonna work hard, and I was gonna get into a college, and they were gonna pay for it, and I was gonna get a 4-year degree and after that, I could pay for whatever education I wanted.

Interviewer: Did they expect you to go on after the 4 years?

Participant: Yes. It was kind of an unstated expectation.

Although many of the parents in this study held the expectation that their child would pursue postsecondary education, research has found the opposite to be true. A higher percentage of parents of students with learning disabilities expect that their child will not pursue postsecondary education than parents of students without disabilities (Newman, 2004).

**Peer encouragement.** In this study, very few of the participants said they had an extensive network of peers. Rather, many remembered having a couple of close friends, and two participants admitted to having had no friends. One participant shared that she “had a couple [of friendships], but uh, never really like the best friend relationship that you really kind of imagine.” A male participant said, “I had a very confined number of friends. I didn’t try to branch out and be everyone’s friend.” The participant who was an athlete noted that any friends she did have were teammates and more like friends of circumstance than of choice. She said, “I had a—yeah, maybe two or three. Not too many. The girls on my basketball team—I was on JV at the time, so a lot of those girls, they were nice.”

No participants could recall discussing the college choice process or attending any college recruiting functions with their peers, yet many of them had peers who pursued postsecondary education. Their peers all selected 4-year universities, and no participants reported having any friends who chose a 2-year school. A participant from a more affluent family who seemed to have more friends than other participants divulged, “At least three of

my friends went to UNC [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill]. One of my friends went to Cornell. One went to Duke. One went to Meredith College, [an] all girls' school—” Unlike most adolescents, peer groups did not play a contributing role in the decision-making aspects of the participants' lives. This is consistent with Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Marder's research (2007) that found that students with disabilities are significantly less likely to rely on friends for decision making and problem solving than students without disabilities and that they are more likely to rely on their parents.

**High school personnel encouragement.** According to the research, students with disabilities are more likely to rely on the assistance of teachers and guidance counselors than students without disabilities (Wagner et al., 2007). The opposite was true for the participants in this study.

When asked if and how they were encouraged to pursue postsecondary education by high school personnel, a majority of the participants had to be probed extensively to recall whether they had or not. That was surprising, because many participants had been in the high school environment within the last year. Because high school personnel were not interviewed for this study it was difficult to ascertain their actual role in the college choice process for the participants.

A few of the participants explained that they purposely tried to avoid relationships with high school personnel—including administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors—for a myriad of reasons. One participant reflected, “I always tried to keep any relationships to a minimum, if that makes sense. I just tried to stay away from any extra anything.” He never explained why this was; however, he had changed schools frequently growing up, had very

few friends, and his academic achievement was extremely poor, so those factors may have explained some of his skepticism toward engaging in relationships with people. Other participants seemed to only pursue high school personnel on an as-needed basis.

Participants seemed disassociated from instructional faculty and administrators at their high schools. Some participants maintained temporary or inconsistent relationships with instructional faculty that ended when the course concluded, but these relationships generally appeared superficial in nature and concentrated on present academic endeavors rather than future academic endeavors. When asked about any positive relationships with faculty or administrators, one participant admitted, “No one stood out. I didn’t really like any of my teachers.”

The general theme among participants was that the school personnel members were there on an as-needed basis only. In more than one case, participants admitted not knowing who fulfilled school personnel roles, because the school would frequently change which students certain school personnel served. Another participant perceived that some school personnel could only be so helpful because of the participant’s interests. She said,

He—my guidance counselor—I saw him every once and a while to get my school schedule done, but other than that, he really couldn’t help me—in his defense, because the major that I wanted, he knew nothing about. So he didn’t really know how to direct me to the right places.

Another participant said she found school personnel too flexible and out of touch with what her needs were as a student on the more severe end of the disability spectrum. In a flat voice, she recollected, “My guidance counselor, he just said, ‘Wherever you want to go.’”

The experiences reflected by these participants are not unique. Although guidance counselors are in 99% of secondary schools, they have an average caseload of 352 students and have multiple responsibilities in high schools, many of which are determined by the principal (Fitch, Newby, Ballestro, & Marshall, 2001; Wagner, Newman, et al., 2003). Moreover, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012) has a confounding list of responsibilities for high school guidance counselors. The responsibilities are not limited to academic support and goal setting, but also include educating and counseling students on study skills, substance abuse, diversity issues, organizational skills, problem solving, crisis intervention, academic support, and goal setting (ASCA, 2012). Given the time constraints of school guidance counselors, it is understandable why approximately 40% of students with learning disabilities report relying on school personnel “not much” (Wagner et al., 2007).

Although none of the participants mentioned the role of special education teachers, many participants discussed having to go to the school’s resource center as part of the accommodations provided for their disability. In general, participants spent little time with special education teachers and more time with teachers in the mainstream classroom.

**Ability.** The little face time participants in this study had with their guidance counselors may have resulted in less knowledge about where they stood academically. It was a challenge to assess the academic abilities of the participants. Because not all of them had taken the SAT or the American College Testing (ACT) exams for college attendance purposes, they were asked to provide their high school grade point averages (GPAs). Going strictly by the data collected, it appeared there was a range of ability among the participants.

Some of the high school GPAs provided by participants were surprisingly high, especially given the academic difficulties they cited in other parts of the interview.

Some participants would provide neither a GPA nor an SAT or ACT score, even when asked at different times. In many cases they stated that they could not remember this information. However, it was clear during other parts of the interview process that most, if not all, of the participants could easily recollect their academic achievement as it related to specific courses they either did very well in or did not pass in high school and why. One participant who could not recall his GPA admitted to repeating a grade, another recalled taking summer courses to make up for failing grades, and two others temporarily went to what one participant termed a “special school” to assist with academics. It appeared that many participants had areas of academic strengths and weaknesses. The experiences noted by participants, such as repeating a grade, are typical for approximately 35% of students with learning disabilities (Wagner, Newman, et al., 2003). Although the participants could not articulate their academic strengths and weaknesses themselves, the descriptions of the obstacles they encountered were consistent with what is known about the academic challenges that students with learning disabilities often face (see Wagner, Newman et al., 2003).

**Aspiration.** In spite of the academic difficulties many of these participants faced, all of them aspired to pursue postsecondary education. This was not surprising as 87.3% of students with learning disabilities expect to pursue some form of postsecondary education (Wagner et al., 2007). In addition to pursuing postsecondary education, 93% of students with learning disabilities intend to pursue paid employment, which is higher than that of any other

disability groups (Wagner et al., 2005). The findings from the participants in this study fell within that majority; they all aspired to both pursue postsecondary education and had occupational aspirations.

As the participants reflected on their career plans and aspirations as high school students, it was evident that many had changed their minds about their future. As senior high school students, many of them had career plans that have since changed. Two of the participants stated that they had been interested in fields that only necessitated community college attendance to get a vocational degree, and others implied that as high school students, they believed they would go onto graduate school and pursue doctoral degrees. A majority of the participants expressed that they had intended on pursuing a career that would require a 4-year degree.

Although many of the participants had changed the career that they wanted to pursue since high school, there were two participants who had not changed their aspirations. One of the more athletically inclined participants said he had planned to go into sports medicine or physical therapy while in high school and was continuing along that path by taking a heavy science-based curriculum while enrolled in community college. He said,

Yeah, I'm going to get my bachelor's while I finish up my stuff at the same time before I pursue a doctorate in physical therapy, which I have a tremendous aspiration for it, I have a lot—I'm trying to pursue that really hard. I've always liked physical therapy. I was in it in high school sports medicine and all, this, all other stuff.

The other participant whose plans had remained static since high school planned to pursue a career in the culinary arts. She disclosed that although she loved the culinary arts, her real

passion is for advocacy, but she quickly dismissed it as an impractical career choice. For those two participants, the aspiration to pursue specific occupations stemmed from participation in extracurricular activities during their high school years.

**Extracurricular activities.** There was great variation in the extracurricular activities that participants engaged in during high school. Three participants engaged in school-based extracurricular activities; one young man recollected being in the drama club for all of high school, and at least two other participants recounted being involved in athletics. Although research by Brown and Evans (2002) found that students with or without a disability who participate in school-based extracurricular activities tend to be more engaged in school itself, that did not seem to be the case with the participants in this study. For example, the participant in the drama club said he kept all relationships to a minimum in high school, citing that he had very few friends and that he purposely did not get involved in “extra” anything other than drama.

Other participants chose not to engage in extracurricular activities offered by their schools, but instead, they pursued their own hobbies independently. One participant was an avid fisherman, and another liked to try new recipes to see what she could come up with in the kitchen. Two participants loved to go shopping, one participant liked to sing and played an instrument, and another liked to fiddle around with electronics to figure out how they worked. On the whole, every participant had something outside of academics they found to be enjoyable, which is typical of students both with and without disabilities (Wagner, Marder, et al., 2003). Ultimately, three of the participants received some form of financial aid based on extracurricular activities that not only encouraged them to pursue these interests in a

postsecondary environment, but also helped drive the search phase of their college choice processes.

## **Search**

The search phase in the college choice process generally starts in the 10th grade and finishes by the middle of the 12th grade (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). One of the most important tasks of this phase is for students to gather information about potential postsecondary schools (Bergerson, 2009).

In this study, the search process for most of the participants did not begin until the 11th grade, with some participants waiting up until the spring of the 12th grade to start thinking about what would happen after graduation. This timeline was a problem for some participants given that admission deadlines are in the early spring for 4-year institutions. Getting a late start in the search process resulted in some participants attending community college not because it was their first choice, but because it was the only choice because the deadline for admission to a 4-year school had passed. The delay in fully engaging in the search process may explain the type of search behavior that students with learning disabilities tend to exhibit.

Hossler et al. (1999) asserted that there are three types of search behaviors: active, attentive, and interactive. Students who engage *actively* in the search process look for information about the options that are available to them but do not necessarily seek out people to answer their questions like an *interactive* searcher would do (Hossler et al., 1999). Interactive searchers gather information from family, school personnel, and personnel at institutions they are considering attending (Hossler et al., 1999). Finally *attentive* seekers

assume a more passive role in the process. They are willing to learn about opportunities but are not significantly engaged in the process itself.

Four of the participants in this study engaged in attentive search behaviors, two participated in interactive behaviors, and the remaining two participants exhibited none of Hossler et al.'s (1999) search behaviors. Four participants were indirectly exposed to the college choice process, and because of involvement in athletics or another program were brought to different postsecondary institutions that were selected for them. These participants were open to visiting different colleges, but only if the school was chosen for them. Two participants cited actively seeking information: they visited different schools; talked to other people, especially family and college representatives, about colleges; and were proactive about seeking out information. The remaining two participants were not open to the search process. They blocked out anything having to do with postsecondary education because they didn't want to think about it, already knew where they were going after high school, it was never brought up, or they were too focused on trying to complete high school.

The number of colleges looked at by participants ranged from one to ten. Two participants knew they were headed to a specific community college, and neither of them visited the campus until the first day they were enrolled as students. Two participants were recruited for athletics and were brought to various 4-year universities to meet with athletic directors who brought them on campus tours. The remaining participants considered, but did not necessarily visit or actively seek out information on, 4-year colleges. None of the remaining participants looked at community colleges as an option; they ultimately chose from one to three schools.

Two participants indicated that they had thoroughly checked out the disability services office during the search process. When other participants were asked why they hadn't done the same thing, the answers ranged from "I thought I would try it on my own" and "I didn't want anyone to know" to "I was embarrassed" and "I didn't know what to ask for." Participants said that at that point, they did not know what would make their college experience successful, and they did not know what to expect from the college experience itself. This is not surprising, as research has found that many high school students with disabilities are not adequately prepared for the dramatic change going from high school to college (Brinckerhoff, 1996). Not knowing what to look for in a college during the search stage makes for an uninformed decision in the final choice stage.

### **Choice**

In the final stage, which occurs during the 11th and 12th grades, a student makes the choice of which institution to enroll in (Perna, 2006). For many participants in this study, the choice stage, like the search stage, was delayed. Half of the participants had not made a choice by graduation, which again forced some of them to pursue a 2-year education because of missed deadlines.

As part of the choice stage, students take standardized college entrance examinations and fill out applications (McDonough, 1994). Taking the college entrance examinations is an important step in the college choice process, because academic performance dictates access to many institutions (MacAllum, Glover, Queen & Riggs, 2007). Six participants in this study took either the SAT or ACT, but many could not recall what their scores were, making it difficult to determine whether those scores impacted the choice part of the process.

The attentive behaviors seen in the search phase were also reflected in the choice phase. One participant had applied to five somewhat selective 4-year universities and was accepted at four of them. She ultimately chose the same school that her mother worked for. She said her mother urged her to attend that school because it was close to home and her mother was familiar with the disability services office. Ultimately, this participant did not thrive in its environment and found the disability services office to be less than helpful in accommodating her very specific needs. She became depressed, dropped out of the 4-year university, and then repeated the college choice process to end up at the community college she currently attends.

For the participants who were recruited for athletic teams, choice was related more to how good the athletic team was and the benefits beyond the scholarships schools were offering. One participant said he made his decision in May of his senior year. He told a story of how recruiters appealed to him to attend their schools for most of his senior year. There was no discussion about admission requirements, and he was told he would be provided with “help” with academics, which this participant assumed would address his learning disability. He ended his story by saying that he chose the school with the “most money.” Another participant who was recruited for her athletic ability ended up choosing a school not because she liked it, but because she did not like the campus environments of the other two schools that were recruiting her. In both of these cases, the schools approached the student.

For some of the participants, the choice of college was easy, as they had only looked at one school or they simply chose the school that offered the best financial aid package or was closest to home. This is not surprising as choosing a school based off economic

implications for the student is consistent with many years of research, and some would say it is the primary driver of college choice (Fuller, Manski & Wise, 1982; Leslie & Brinkman, 1987; Manski & Wise, 1983). It is also not surprising that the geographic location of the school was considered by these participants. The geographic location of a postsecondary school has also been a consistent and important factor that students consider, according to many years of research (Holland & Richards, 1965; Kinzie et al., 2004; Raley, 1972 as cited in Carrington & Sedlacek, 1975).

The findings of this study on all three phases of the college choice process leads to implications for practice and policy that may help close the gap in postsecondary attendance for students with learning disabilities and students without disabilities.

### **Implications**

Three major implications for policy and practice emerged from the findings of this study. From the participants' interviews, it is clear that more needs to be done to prepare students with disabilities for the college choice process. This study found that students with learning disabilities are not engaging in transition activities which hinders the college choice process. Moreover this study found that students with learning disabilities are minimally engaged in the college choice process and get little support from those other than parents as it relates to developing skills to prepare them for the future. Although the data highlights the role of school personnel in the college choice process, the overarching implication of this study is a need for collaboration among many individuals. This could include individuals who create and carry out disability policy, individuals who administer and teach students

with disabilities, community service agencies that serve children with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities.

Yet, it is challenging to offer forth implications for a multitude of reasons. College choice is a complex process, and for students with learning disabilities this process is more complex than for students in the general population for three reasons. First, there are multiple individuals involved in the college choice process for students with learning disabilities. IEP teams are composed of various school personnel, parents and sometimes members of community agencies. So while students in the general population may only have the involvement of parents and possibly one member of school personnel, students with learning disabilities have a team of individuals federally required to assist them. Second, students with learning disabilities are often overprotected by parents, who have been the driving force in their child's education for many years. Third, once children hit the age of eighteen privacy laws, such as FERPA, take effect and parents are no longer entitled to access to their children's educational information. It is for these reasons that it is difficult to say that any one approach to solving the problem of college attendance for students with learning disabilities.

### **Policy**

The first implication that emerged relates to transition planning. Transition planning in K–12 education is only required for students who have an active IEP at the age of 14, not for students who receive accommodations through 504 plans. Even for participants who had IEPs, transition planning was not conducted or accounted for, which is inconsistent with Cameto, Levine and Wagner's (2004) research which reports that almost all students who

receive special education receive transition services. Only one participant, who attended a high-resource high school, vaguely recalled having a meeting where postsecondary planning was brought up. The meeting occurred only 2 years ago, and his recollection of it was very poor, suggesting that his personal engagement in the meeting was minimal. Other participants indicated that aside from their parents, they were on their own to seek out information and encouragement to attend postsecondary education. Although the federal mandate to include transition planning as part of an IEP sounds helpful, the participants' data and the research indicate that this planning is inconsistent, and it is usually left to parents to navigate the college choice process with their students (Purcell, 1993).

There are two actions federal government can take to help improve transition planning. First, transition planning is only required for students with learning disabilities that are on an IEP, and are not required for students who receive accommodations through a 504 plan. Although students on 504 plans have access to college planning, these services are not above and beyond what students in the general population receive. Students with learning disabilities face similar obstacles in the college choice process regardless of which legislation they are covered by, thus the need for transition planning is essential for any student with a learning disability.

Second, transition planning needs to start earlier than the age of fourteen (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Cummings, Maddux & Casey, 2000). This is supported by Koller (1994 as cited in Cummings, Maddux & Casey, 2000) who noted that students with learning disabilities frequently have unrealistic expectations of careers and employment opportunities, along with a lack of knowledge about their condition and how that translates to an

educational or work environment. Levinson and Ohler (1998, as cited in Cummings, Maddux & Casey, 2000) suggested that these skills take many years to improve and refine, and should start back in elementary school.

### **Practice**

The second implication from this study is that a collaborative effort between parents and school personnel needs to develop in order to provide additional support for students with learning disabilities. The participants in this study cited a lack of support from school personnel related to planning for their future beyond high school, despite what the government has mandated for transition planning. There was a window of time in every participant's life when they could have been encouraged or approached about the idea of pursuing postsecondary education by a teacher, a guidance counselor, or any school personnel. However, that window of time passed, forcing many of the participants to rely only on family members or athletic coaches to navigate the college choice process, rather than a team including informed professionals. Some participants cited having multiple guidance counselors or personality conflicts with school personnel that complicated building any sort of stable relationship with them. One of the female participants laughed when asked about her relationship with her guidance counselor and said,

I had like five different ones I went to. I mean, you know, every counselor had everybody's records, so I kinda just went to whoever was in the office at that point, you know. It wasn't like, no set, you know, set name or something that each counselor had. It was just, you know, whoever was in the office at the time was who you went to, so . . .

As it is, classroom teachers struggle to find time to teach course content, grade papers, and manage the ever-expanding student populations within their classroom. Guidance counselors have workloads that often revolve around what is happening in their school now, handling academic issues, scheduling courses for students, and meeting with students to discuss their current progress. Participants that did meet with a guidance counselor cited that the discussion about future plans was not particularly fruitful, as many guidance counselors were not equipped to discuss it. This was evident even in high-resource schools that would likely have had the budget to hire someone to strictly handle the college choice process. Maybe this lack of encouragement by school personnel sent the unintended message that these specific students should not pursue postsecondary education. This finding highlights the need for students to be able to advocate for themselves, and also the need for individuals from a myriad of resources to work together to prepare students with learning disabilities for post-school activities .

Ideas for collaborating effectively can be found in literature that emphasizes the best practices of transition planning. For example, W. High, a high school in Wisconsin was successful in creating a transition program that provided a clear timeline for students with disabilities. This timeline includes an annual assessment of skills, job shadowing opportunities, visits of colleges and career expos and apprenticeship opportunities. More importantly, W. High implemented a transition team that discussed transition planning activities for all students with disabilities. This team was composed of teachers from different subjects as well as special education and also had a school psychologist, guidance counselor, transition coordinator and an administrator. There was also a community team that provided

support to the transition team. W. High's transition planning was well received by students. (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998)

The third and final implication of this study is to help students develop advocacy skills. Although participants knew what their diagnoses were, they weren't always able to explain how they impacted them academically. Now that they were in college, many of the participants were quickly discovering that they were struggling and still couldn't identify exactly what aid they thought they needed to succeed. Even the participants who pursued the disability services office during the search process were not knowledgeable about the services they would need to be successful in college. Other participants were of the mind-set that the disability services personnel would know what was best for them, and that regardless of which school they chose, they would be offered the same accommodations.

Through a collaborative effort including parents, school personnel and community agencies students with learning disabilities should be encouraged to take advantage of external sources of support, which will help them as early as possible in the college choice process. Support opportunities that develop self advocacy and career awareness skills may be available through outreach programs and initiatives through a student's school or local college. One such opportunity is offered by Landmark College, which is a college that specifically serves students with learning disabilities. Landmark offers a summer program to rising juniors and seniors in high school that focuses on getting students to learn more about their learning style and how to advocate for one's needs (Landmark College, 2012). Other opportunities, such as federally funded TRiO programs may also offer support to students with learning disabilities starting as early as middle school (Gregg, 2007). Transition

programs that bridge the time between high school graduation and college entrance are also available in many states (Gregg, 2007). These programs help students adjust to college and teach how to find and use campus support services.

As the number of students with learning disabilities increases, addressing the need for collaboration between parents and school personnel will become increasingly important if the gap between students with and without disabilities who attend college is to close.

### **Conclusion**

The laws that protect the identity of individuals with disabilities compounded by the invisibility of learning disabilities pose a challenge to conducting research with this population. Given these limitations, it is easy to see why there is a dearth of literature on the topic. Research on students with learning disabilities often focuses on short-term student success and coping methods; in other words, it is practice-related research that assists in getting a student through the school year. Research that addresses how students with learning disabilities engage in the process of setting long-term goals, such as the pursuit of postsecondary education, is negligible in the literature base.

The research that has been conducted specifically on students with learning disabilities and the college choice process is limited, resulting in no college choice model that considers the differences these students experience. Furthermore, the ranges of severities and academic impacts that are associated with learning disabilities are varied. To lump all students with learning disabilities into one group does not account for these variations, and as evidenced by this study, there is definite variation in how the college choice process occurs for students in this population.

The results of this study highlight three areas of research that need further attention. First, there is a need for to understand how students with different types of learning disabilities and different ranges of severity of learning disabilities experience the college choice process. Moreover, the field of higher education would benefit from research that captures the voices of students who are in this special population and doesn't relegate their higher education experience to numbers. Second, what we learn from additional qualitative research on students with learning disabilities can be utilized to develop a college choice model that accounts for the variation in experiences among students with learning disabilities. As it stands currently, no model addresses the college choice process of students with learning disabilities, causing students in this group to be considered the same as any other college student. Based on what we have learned in this study, some students with learning disabilities tend to experience the stages of college choice differently than their peers, making a generalized college choice model inappropriate for their purposes. Third, we need to understand more about the relationship that exists between students with learning disabilities, parents, school personnel and community agencies.. More research needs to be conducted to address why students with learning disabilities are not getting the collaborative support they need as they pursue postsecondary opportunities.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE ROLE OF CONTEXTS AND HUMAN CAPITAL IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE ATTENDANCE FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

#### **Abstract**

Postsecondary education opportunities are pursued by 45% of students with disabilities as opposed to 62% of students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2010). According to past research, the number of students with learning disabilities who pursue community college is greater than that of those who choose 4-year universities or vocational schools (Newman et al., 2009). A qualitative study was conducted to explore how context and human capital function for students with learning disabilities when choosing community college. The concepts of context as used in Perna's (2006) college choice model and human capital as used in Becker's (1962) work guided this study that aimed to understand what experiences encouraged participants to attend community college over other educational institutions. Interviews were used to collect data, and coding was conducted using a priori categories.

There were four major findings in this study. First, the data confirmed that students with learning disabilities received minimal direction from institutional agents in the college choice process. Second, students with learning disabilities did not consider the academic support available to them at the postsecondary schools they chose between. Third, institutional fit was not a factor that motivated participants in this study to choose community college. Fourth, both cost and location were cited as major factors in choosing community college for these students.

## **Introduction**

The number of students in the K–12 American education system who have learning disabilities has tripled over the past three decades (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). The quantity of students with these disabilities who graduate high school has also increased over time, which is likely the result of policy change at the K–12 level (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). Even though policies from legislation such as the IDEA Act of 2004, Section 504, and the ADA Act of 1990 have ensured access for students with disabilities to a FAPE, the number of students with disabilities choosing to pursue postsecondary education still lags behind students without disabilities by 17% (Newman et al., 2010). Students with learning disabilities disorders who do go on to pursue postsecondary education select 2-year schools at a rate more than twice than that of 4-year universities (Newman et al., 2009). This study posed a question on how the concepts of context and human capital operate for students with learning disabilities when choosing to attend a public community college. To answer that question, the contextual aspects of Perna’s (2006) college choice model (Figure 2) and the concept of human capital were examined in data collected from eight participants with learning disabilities.

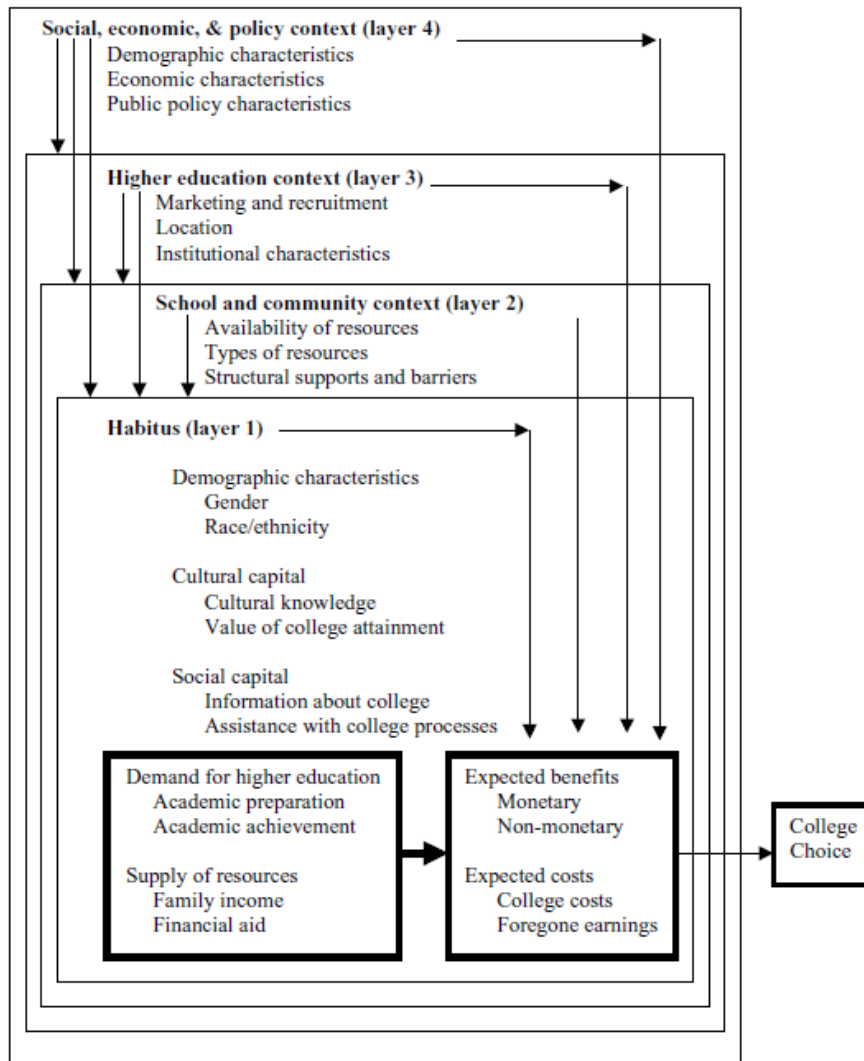


Figure 2. Perna's (2006) model of college choice.

### Conceptual Framework

This study was framed by the concepts of context from Perna's (2006) model of college choice and the concept of human capital from Becker's (1962) work. Unlike older

college choice models that tend to view college choice either from a strictly economic or sociological standpoint, Perna's (2006) model accounts for a number of factors from both areas that shape the choice process. These factors are organized into four layers, with each layer impacting the layer beneath it (Figure 2). Because this study gathered the college choice stories and experiences of participants, and in order to give the study more depth rather than breadth, it was most appropriate to focus on the higher education context (layer 3) and the school and community context (layer 2) to frame the data collected.

### **School and Community Context**

The role of school and community context is prominent in the college choice process, especially as it relates to the high school environment and the choice a student makes to pursue postsecondary education or enter the workforce (McDonough, 1997). Studies have shown that whether the high school is set up to encourage college attendance, either explicitly or implicitly, impacts student predilection for pursuing postsecondary education (McDonough, 1997). High schools that have guidance counselors who habitually interact with their students, have smaller caseload ratios, and have college advising experience positively influence the college choice process of students (McDonough, 1997). Also, high schools that have a college preparatory curriculum and a gifted and talented program tend to have students that attend better quality colleges (Gonzalez et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997). Ultimately, whether a school has a high quantity of resources or not determines the options available to a student in the college choice process (McDonough, 1997).

School context also relates to social capital. *Social capital* is defined by Stanton-Salazar (1997) as social support that maintains middle-class status and is present in a

person's interpersonal network. Access to social capital is necessary, as many of the resources that result in advancing society are accessible only through social networks such as friends, family members, guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Trainor, 2008). Trainor (2008) argued that the role of social capital in the transition from high school to postsecondary education is essential. She asserted that the resources a student's family has, the family's level of participation in the student's school, and how well that participation is received by school personnel all impact a student's access to social and other types of capital.

Social capital is especially important to individuals who are part of populations who are already at a disadvantage, such as students in marginalized populations (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Trainor, 2008). Research on marginalized groups has supported the notion that accessing social capital to learn about resources for college and gathering information on the college choice process can be difficult for some minority groups who have a hard time engaging in supportive or trusting relationships outside of their immediate family (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This is consistent with what is known about students with disabilities, because they are more likely to rely on parents and siblings over friends, teachers, and guidance counselors for support and decision making than are students without disabilities (Wagner et al., 2007).

### **Higher Education Context**

Similar to the school and community context, higher education institutions have the ability to influence the college choice process through marketing, location, and institutional characteristics (Perna, 2006). Marketing efforts by higher education representatives include

their attendance at college fairs, visiting high schools and serving as a resource for potential students and their families, and even exposure by being within a reasonable distance to a student's home (Chapman, 1981; Griffith & Connor, 1994; Kinzie et al., 2004; McDonough et al., 1997; Perna, 2006).

Students tend to be positively impacted by the characteristics of higher education environments that are congruent with their ideals and attitudes (Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006). Horvat (1997) said that students generally prefer to attend a school where they know they will fit in. This finding supported Nora's (2004) research, which suggested that students who investigate the social aspects of a postsecondary institution during the college choice process tend to experience higher levels of satisfaction with their choice and have a higher probability of staying at the school they chose.

The idea of fitting into an academic environment is especially salient to this study. Students with learning disabilities may experience a harder time fitting in socially, as many of them have fewer friends and a lower social status than students without disabilities (Wong & Donahue, 2002). Beyond the fit socially, students with learning disabilities may experience difficulty fitting in academically, as they often times, but not always, perceive themselves as less competent than their peers (Hallahan et al., 2005). This suggests that finding a postsecondary environment that is a good fit is especially important for students with learning disabilities.

### **Human Capital**

In addition to context, human capital has been shown to influence the college choice process. However, it is not known how disability functions within the economic choice of

pursuing postsecondary education. Models that focus on the economic perspective of human capital are not specific to higher education. In the field of postsecondary education, economic models are used to predict the likelihood of a student pursuing more education (Hossler & Stage, 1992). One of the most frequently mentioned economic models in college choice literature is the human capital investment model (Becker, 1962; Perna, 2006). It is a linear model that when applied to postsecondary education claims that students look at the direct costs of postsecondary attendance, such as tuition, and measure them against the perceived benefits of obtaining a postsecondary education (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Perna, 2006). However, economic models neglect individual preferences within the college choice process and focus strictly on the financial aspects of the process. They do not acknowledge that certain segments of the college-bound population, such as students with disabilities, weigh other attendance factors more heavily than the financial cost (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005; Perna, 2006). Economic models also concentrate on the last stages of the college choice process (Hossler & Stage, 1992).

Human capital can be defined as “activities that influence future real income through the embedding of resources in people” (Becker, 1962, p. 9). These resources can include health, training, the acquisition of knowledge, and wage increases that result in higher levels of productivity (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961). When a person invests in higher education, it is considered to be an investment in human capital (Paulsen, 2001). Acquiring human capital is especially important for students with disabilities, because they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than people without disabilities (Potts, 2005). People with

disabilities often face obstacles beyond what nondisabled people encounter in the job search process (Potts, 2005).

Human capital theorists have purported that students use a cost to benefit ratio when deciding whether to pursue higher levels of education. Students consider the direct costs involved in pursuing higher education (e.g., money for tuition, books, fees), the wages that will be lost by delaying entry into the labor force, and whether the future benefits outweigh what would be earned by going directly into the labor force. Grants, scholarships, loans, and other subsidies sometimes mitigate the direct costs, making higher education attainment more attractive for a student (Paulsen, 2001).

In addition to subsidies motivating individuals to pursue higher education, human capital theory has shown that other factors also contribute to higher education attendance. Students are more likely to pursue higher education when there is (a) a greater difference in income between high school and college graduates; (b) a lower amount of earnings that a student would miss by bypassing immediate entry into the labor force, (c) a more future-oriented perspective taken by the student, and (d) a larger rate of return for a student's intended major (Paulsen, 2001).

It is important to note that Paulsen's (2001) factors do not affect all students the same way. There are other features beyond finances that are less concrete and may outweigh the financial aspect of human capital theory (e.g., socioeconomic status, student ability, and home and school environments; Paulsen, 2001). It is not known what or if other factors may outweigh the financial aspect for students with disabilities when making the decision to pursue postsecondary education.

In this study, human capital, along with the school and community context and higher education context, was used to help understand the choices of students with learning disabilities to pursue community college.

### **Methods**

To understand more about students with learning disabilities and the factors they consider in choosing to attend community college, this study was conducted using eight community college students.

#### **Site Selection**

This study was conducted using participants who attended four public community colleges in the United States. Data available from the NCES is used to describe these sites, and their names will not be cited to protect the identities of the community colleges used in this study. Each school was from a different geographical setting: one was in what NCES classified as a town, one was in a midsize city, one was in a large suburb, and the last one was in a large city. Three of the four community colleges were located in the southeast region of the United States, and one was in the northeast region. The schools used in this study had student bodies that ranged from small (4,500 students) to large (over 17,000 students). One of the four schools reported having a primarily African American student body, and three reported having primarily Caucasian student bodies. At three of the schools, more than half of the study body was under the age of 25.

Table 3

*Community College Demographics*

	<b>Community College 1</b>	<b>Community College 2</b>	<b>Community College 3</b>	<b>Community College 4</b>
Location	Southeast	Southeast	Southeast	Northeast
Setting	Town	City	Suburb	City
Primary Race	White	Black	White	White
Number of Participants in Study	1	3	3	1
Student Population	4,528	5,933	17,071	12,271
Annual In-State Tuition for 2010–2011	\$1,905.00	\$1,888.00	\$1,890.00	\$3,144.00
Percentage of Students Enrolled in Disability Services	3% or less	3% or less	3% or less	3% or less

**Sample**

Eight participants were recruited for this study. Each participant was required to be between 18 and 24 years of age and to have a learning disability or attention disorder. To enhance the credibility of the study, each participant was required to have been diagnosed by a medical professional. Participants qualified for the study if they were enrolled as degree-seeking students at a public 2-year community college. I also accepted one dual enrollment student who was earning a high school diploma and an associate's degree simultaneously, because she had essentially gone through the college choice process by way of participating

in the dual enrollment program although she had not fully matriculated into the community college yet.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited using a flyer circulated through an e-mail list and flyers forwarded to individual community colleges' disability services offices. The e-mail list subscribers were members of a professional association related to disabilities and higher education. In addition, I made on-site visits to three community colleges. Once the study was approved by a community college, recruitment flyers were posted at the school in the disability services office and in other areas exposed to heavy student traffic.

### **Data Collection**

The conceptual framework of this study guided the development of the interview protocol. The questions asked in the interview process invited participants to share stories and experiences based on the factors related to the conceptual framework. A learning disability is an invisible disability, and not all the participants had shared their condition with other people. Therefore, it was crucial that every participant's identity was protected to the fullest extent possible. Participants were informed ahead of time, verbally and in written form, of the measures being taken to ensure that the information they provided did not reveal their identity in the final project. Also, because some individuals with learning disabilities have a difficult time responding to questions due to features related to their disability, I offered the interview questions to participants before the interview in written form (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995). The participant interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours in length

and questions addressed each participant's family and personal life, academic experiences and the factors each considered in the college choice process (see Appendix C).

Interviews were conducted using Skype 5.0, which is an audio- and video-chat software. All participants were informed on the consent form that the interviews would be audio recorded, but not video recorded, by computer software. By audiotaping them, I was able to capture participants' experiences while being freed to make my own notes (Bogden & Biklen, 2006). Audiotaping began after I reiterated that the interview would be recorded and the participant and I confirmed that all the recording equipment operated correctly.

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

After consent was obtained and audiotaping begun, I asked each participant to verbally answer a demographic questionnaire. The participants were asked to share their learning disability diagnoses, races, socioeconomic statuses, genders, and the educational levels of their parents. The answers to these questions provided me with an understanding of a participants' backgrounds and assisted me in the generation of a follow-up interview protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

The data that were analyzed were both the data collected via the interview and my reflective writing. The data were initially coded following Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendation to use the conceptual framework as a foundation. Following that recommendation, the data were analyzed by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice process. As the data were reviewed, other codes in addition to those tied into the conceptual framework emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were reviewed and coded using

nVivo 9.0 software on independent occasions to be certain the data were coded in the correct categories and to ensure their quality and trustworthiness.

Once data were collected, the analysis was started. The data analysis process in qualitative research is interactive, inductive, and recursive (Creswell, 2007). Pertaining to this study, the data analysis process was rigorous; it required me to set aside any assumptions of what I might find, be prepared to interact with the data repeatedly, and to triangulate the data with other sources of information to see what emerged (Creswell, 2007).

### **Quality and Trustworthiness**

It is essential that collected data are considered trustworthy and of high quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, data from multiple sources were triangulated through using the participants' interviews, the existing literature, and the peer debriefing process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A member check was used to ensure the data's authenticity, as this study was based on participants' perceptions rather than the researcher's (Krathwohl, 1998). As part of the member check process, participants reviewed the interview transcripts and were given the opportunity to make modifications if they chose. In addition, the data from these interview transcripts were reviewed for consistency and then triangulated with the existing literature on college choice and students with disabilities (Krathwohl, 1998). A peer debriefing process was used to verify that the data were coded accurately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Participant Overview**

There were eight participants in this study. They ranged from 18 to 23 years of age. The gender of the participants was divided equally between four males and four females. The

race of the participants was predominately Caucasian. Table 4 gives further information on each participant in the study.

Table 4

*Summary of Participant Characteristics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>HS GPA or SAT</b>	<b>LD Diagnosis</b>	<b>Unique info</b>
1	male	Caucasian	22	1390*	dysgraphia & processing disorder	tested as gifted in elementary school
2	female	African American	18	1.2	attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity	dual-enrollment student
3	female	Caucasian	23	3.5	dyspraxia & motor disability	also diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome/ depression
4	male	Caucasian	23	2.4	processing disorder	fought life-threatening medical condition
5	female	Caucasian	20	1130*	attention deficit disorder	tested as high IQ in middle school
6	male	Caucasian	19	3.5	dyslexia & attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity	
7	female	African American	19	3.5	attention deficit disorder	athlete
8	male	Caucasian	19	3.0	written expression & attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity	athlete

*Note.* GPA = grade point average, HS = high school, LD = learning disability. \*Provided SAT score in math and reading.

## **Limitations**

In this research study, the limitations revolved around the individual nature of each participant. They had disabilities that varied in severity, and some participants had more than one applicable condition. Although this study was qualitative in nature, this variation made it difficult to form generalized conclusions about how the school and community context and the higher education context shaped the college choice process. For example, one participant had dyspraxia, a motor disability, and Asperger's syndrome. In this particular case, it was impossible to isolate whether the choices she made during the college choice process were resultant of her learning disabilities or from the Asperger's syndrome. Despite this limitation, it is important to recognize that up to 30% of individuals with learning disabilities have coexisting disabilities (Hallahan et al., 2005), and the participants in this study were no exception.

Beyond the severity and variation in learning disability diagnoses and the presence of comorbid conditions, another limitation was the consideration of an attention disorder as a learning disability. Some existing literature supports the notion that attention disorders should count as learning disabilities (see Stanford & Hynd, 1994), but the government definition does not define attention disorders as learning disabilities. Many of the participants in this study who did have attention disorders were medicated, which they said mitigated a number of symptoms they would otherwise experience. They indicated that they were not always consistent with taking the medication; some said they went off the medication for long periods of time, and others noted that they only recently started taking medication. Their experiences differed from those of participants who did not have attention disorders and

whose symptoms were not manageable by medication and therefore continuing to impact academic functioning. Despite attention disorders not being included in the government definition of learning disability, they were included in this study because the conditions can negatively impact academic functioning (Stanford & Hynd, 1994).

The final limitation of this study was the individual college choice experiences of the participants. Some participants initially chose to attend a 4-year school. Their reasons for attending a 4-year school were different from their reasons for attending a 2-year school. In at least three cases, money was not the primary factor for the choice of a 4-year school, but when it came time to choose another educational institution, it was.

### **Findings**

The findings of this study were organized by the concepts of school and community context, the higher education context, and the concept of human capital. Based on the existing literature and data collected in this study, the findings both supported and challenged what is known about the college choice process for students with and without disabilities.

#### **School and Community Context**

School and community context generally refers to the school a student attends and the resources available to them, such as guidance counselors, special programs, and the existence of relationships within that realm (Perna, 2006). In general, the participants were not aware of the resources available at their school, or if they were, they were not proactive in taking advantage of them for reasons that were not articulated.

Overall, guidance counselors seemed to offer little direction to the participants about college choice. Many of the participants used guidance counselors strictly for scheduling

classes; others noted that they did not have a consistent guidance counselor. One participant said he had a guidance counselor in school but never used her. He explained, “I had no relationship [with my guidance counselor] whatsoever.” He then asked, “I mean, is a guidance counselor basically the person that helps you set up your schedule?” Another participant recalled, “At [my high school] you would just play around and everything. You didn’t really know who your teachers—some people didn’t even know who their teachers were, more or less [*sic*] guidance counselor.”

Problems such as having a personality conflict with a guidance counselor or having too many guidance counselors were also mentioned by participants. One student described both:

I had like five different ones I went to. I mean, you know, every counselor had everybody’s records, so I kinda just went to whoever was in the office at that point, you know. It wasn’t like, no set, you know, set name or something that each counselor had. It was just, you know, whoever was in the office at the time was who you went to, so . . . or I had one counselor that was supposed to help me get my credits in order and all my classes in order, but I really didn’t like her and she didn’t like me, so she wasn’t too much help.

In some cases, the resources were available, but participants perceived that they received inaccurate or a lack of information. For example, when asked whether her guidance counselor was helpful in the college choice process, a participant replied,

No. He just sat there. We just did whatever. Like, if I had said, “I want to go to Harvard,” he would’ve said, “That might not be a good idea to apply there.” But he

didn't really, say, have an opinion on it. He came from another school. Like I'm from a very competitive school, but he came from a school that wasn't so competitive. So he didn't know who he was dealing with when he came. So he suggested— at first he'd suggest the schools that my mom laughed at. Well, not laughed at, but she sort of told him—he had come from a Catholic school or something and a working class area. So he started to suggest Catholic colleges. My town is mostly Jewish or Asian. So they're more about going to prestigious schools and stuff.

This experience not only highlighted the guidance counselor's lack of expertise or interest, but also did not set the stage for continued interaction with the college choice process. One participant did have a conversation with her guidance counselor about college, but very few participants cited having any sort of relationship with school-related personnel. Those that did maintain relationships with school personnel often based their conversations around a current academic situation or course, athletics, or personal relationships. One participant explained it like this:

When you're in high school, especially at [my high school], when you're at [my high school], you're basically like a sitting duck out there on a pond. You're by yourself. I mean, you might have a couple of teachers that might want to help. I will say, I did have like maybe three teachers—that was my, that was my history teacher for civic[s] and economics and my two teachers for JROTC [Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps]. Those were the only three teachers I could depend on in that school. But mostly, I mean if you don't really have that support, you just basically, like you know, well, you're either gonna do one of three things. You're gonna either do your

work and graduate, you're gonna do your work, goof off, and then you know might not graduate with your class, but you're still gonna graduate, or you just drop out. This participant recalled having little direction or support to get through high school, never mind the college choice process.

Beyond direct relationships with school personnel, there were some participants who could recall being part of a program where the college process was emphasized. One participant visited four public 4-year in-state schools as part of the program in the 10th grade. When asked about whether the program offered to help with filling out college applications or information on financial aid, she said, "They probably did, but I probably was not paying attention. *[Laughter]*." The other participant who remembered a program went on a road trip with her parents to visit colleges and said,

I mean, I went into this course called *[redacted]* when I was in high school, but it didn't really help with anything. It was just, like, trying to get you to prepare for college, to get your—like, just getting you prepared, and it really didn't help me at all.

In both these cases, the participants indicated that school personnel made an attempt to engage them in the college choice process, but no meaningful relationship was established between the participants and school personnel.

### **Higher Education Context**

Besides the school and community context, participants in this study were minimally shaped by the higher education context. The higher education context refers to the marketing that colleges use to get students to attend their college and the characteristics of the college,

including the location of the college campus (Perna, 2006). Two participants were recruited for athletics; no other participants were recruited to any type of college. None of the participants could recall looking at any printed materials related to colleges. One said he went to a college fair but couldn't remember exactly what went on there. Another participant said he didn't go to anything related to a college fair or presentation by a college representative unless there was some sort of free giveaway involved. One participant visited the admissions office at a 4-year university and was told he should consider not attending college at all. He explained,

. . . and I was talking to an admissions advisor, and they turned to me and said, "You know, maybe you should look for other options." I mean that literally—I don't know, it was disheartening because, you know, with that being an expectation I had grown up with my entire life, that that was gonna be something that happened . . .

Overall, the participants in this study had little experience interacting with college representatives and received little if any marketing materials related to attending college. This was surprising because Perna (2006) suggested that marketing plays an important role in the higher education context of students seeking to pursue postsecondary education opportunities.

Similar to the general student population, location played a major role in the college choice process for participants in this study (Bergerson, 2009; Manski & Wise, 1983). Two participants did not have driver's licenses, so they had to choose a college that was close enough to home to commute by public transportation or live on campus. Other participants

said it was easier to stay closer to home to be closer to their families or to have a reasonable commuting time.

In addition to location, two participants mentioned that their parents had ideas about what characteristics they thought they should look for in the college choice process when initially exploring the options available for college. One participant said his mother “pressured” him to apply to a certain 4-year school. He explained, “She said, ‘You’d really like it; it’s a different style of learning.’” Another participant’s parents placed no limit on what they would spend on her education but insisted she only look at 4-year in-state institutions because “we didn’t want to pay out of state tuition.”

Although no participants recalled looking at institutional characteristics or evaluating how well they fit community college, it is important to note that half of the participants in this study did not start out at a community college. Initially, two participants attended 4-year schools on athletic scholarships. One left because she wanted to transfer to a state university but then found that many of her credits from the private university would not transfer, which would mean taking more classes and costing more. Another participant left his 4-year school because he was unable to fulfill the academic expectations of his athletic scholarship. He said he had picked that school because they offered him the most money and perks of the schools offering him scholarships, and academics did not factor into his decision at all. He said academic support was not something he looked for in a school, and he did not pursue learning accommodations once he was at the school, which he believes contributed to him losing his scholarship. Like many students with learning disabilities, he tried to separate

himself from the label he had in high school (Field, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Only by the time of the interview could he admit that he needed accommodations.

Another participant who had started off attending a 4-year university chose it because her mother worked there and pressured her into going there as well. Retrospectively, she determined it was not a good fit for her and said she should have chosen somewhere that had a more diverse student body, especially in age. She felt that the services she received for her disabilities were not applicable to her individual needs. She recalled, “They [disability services] just gave you what they want to give you, what they thought. And like, I felt what they provided was pretty useless.” She went on to say that she found some of the suggestions for accommodations and assistance made by disability services to be insulting and offensive. The experience of attending a 4-year school where she felt like she didn’t fit in threw her into a deep depression, and she ultimately decided not to return to that school. Instead, she decided to pursue a vocational track at a community college, because it was more “practical.”

A participant who had originally attended a 4-year private school on a music-related scholarship lost her funding because of her poor academic performance. Similar to other students with learning disabilities, she did not pursue accommodations at the 4-year school, because she had not qualified for accommodations at the K–12 level (Brinckerhoff, 1994). One of her reasons for pursuing community college was to get a “boost in morale” after losing her scholarship. The 4-year school had initially seemed to be a good fit because of its cost and programmatic offerings, but they did not override the fact that she needed academic assistance and did not investigate what support was available to her.

No participants said they chose a college for their academic support services, such as disability support. In fact, one participant emphatically said she did not want to go to a college specifically for those with disabilities because she felt the admissions standards were low. There were a few colleges relatively close to where she lived that were equipped for students with disabilities, and the general consensus was that they didn't have the rigorous or practical curriculum she was looking for.

Overall, school and community contexts and higher education contexts did not play a major role in the participants' college choice processes. They did not engage with the resources available to them, noted that there was little to no discussion of the college choice process with school personnel, and said that postsecondary institutions did not recruit them to attend their schools beyond the participants who had scholarships. Nonetheless, the participants in this study still pursued postsecondary education.

### **Human Capital**

Beyond the contextual factors, data were also examined in terms of the effect of human capital on college choice, because research has not addressed this regarding students with learning disabilities. Whether or not a student invests in human capital depends on weighing the costs of postsecondary education versus the benefits (Becker, 1962; Paulsen, 2001). Human capital operated differently for the participants in this study. The participants seemed to have gone to college without much thought about cost; instead, their responses reflected more of the benefits of college attendance.

As far as costs were concerned, many participants had parents who said they would pay for college, yet the participants did not know what their budget was for college expenses

or exactly how their parents paid for it. This was somewhat consistent with the findings of Hossler et al. (1999) who found that prior to their senior year, students assumed parents would cover the costs related to college. The costs associated with community college seemed to be a major factor for half of the participants in why they attended one, including two participants from families who had high incomes. For others, it was one of many reasons that led them to attend community college. However, every participant but one mentioned the low cost of community college as being an attractive feature in the choice process.

At least three of the participants had parents or grandparents who had established a savings account for college attendance. Establishing a savings account is an important signal to students because it suggests parental encouragement to pursue college (Hossler & Vesper, 1993; Stage & Hossler, 1989). A parent-established savings account may be even more important to students with disabilities, as they often rely more on parents in their decision making than students in the general population and their parents are less likely to expect their child to pursue postsecondary education (Newman, 2004; Wagner et al., 2007). However, the parents of two of the three participants who had savings accounts established them before their child was diagnosed with a learning disability or attention disorder.

One participant said that his father had established a college fund for him through a state plan. He explained,

My dad set up the—or the Florida College prepay, and I think what it was is way back in '85 when they graduated high school and went into college, they said, “Hey, if you guys ever have kids you can set this for them and pay this year’s tuition and that’s what they’ll get when they come around. They’ll have a full ride for 4 years.”

And that's what they did for me and all my brothers, which has gone to waste on my biggest brother, but I'm taking advantage of it.

Another participant said her mother had "some sort of savings account" for her for college but did not know how much was in it or any other details about it. She said, "Well, I mean, I know my mom has some kind of college fund for us. I do know that. That's how I got my laptop that I'm on now, so I do know we have some kind of college fund." The paternal grandparents of one participant had established an account for him, but again, it was not known how much was in the account. In that case, the participant implied that his parents were custodians of the account and that they drew from it to pay his community college tuition.

There were participants who clearly chose community college due to the low cost. One participant who lost an athletic scholarship because of his grades chose community college because it was about \$30,000 less a year than his previous college, which was more than his family's annual income. Another participant chose it because he didn't qualify for financial aid at the only 4-year school he was accepted at. When he was considering 4-year schools, his mom filled out the financial aid forms for him, and in turn, the college said they made too much money to qualify for anything. After not doing well at a 4-year school, a different participant said she didn't want to go into debt at one, so she chose to pursue community college.

One participant was in a dual enrollment program, which means she was attending community college at no cost. This financial help assisted her at the time of the interview, but

she understood that the program would not extend to the 4-year university she planned to attend in the future. As she described it,

But to be honest, I don't really know what we're gonna do, because the program that I'm in now, it's free tuition, free food, and free bus back and forth, so I got pretty much everything covered for me . . . So I really don't have to worry about anything right now, but it has been a conversation this week, really, this past week, because I do want to either go to [a 4-year university]. That's where I want to go for video game design after I graduate next year, or I would have to stay at [a tech school] and work on my associate's degree. Either way, I have to pay for college, so we're trying to figure that out, actually. I don't know if we would be able to afford [the 4-year university], but I mean, you know, my mom's able to, since she knows what it's like to be in college and work with students, she knows how to pull strings and stuff, so . . .

Only one participant did not cite cost as being grounds for her choice, and she noted that her parents were willing to pay for her to go anywhere she wanted. This participant came from a private 4-year institution where she had some academic challenges. She thought that by attending community college she could get a boost in morale. Also, she felt that because many of her credits from the private school would not transfer, she needed to get some general education credits out of the way.

There were benefits of pursuing postsecondary education that implied throughout the interview process. While none admitted to explicitly weighing the costs and benefits it was evident that participants had given some thought to the benefit of pursuing postsecondary

education. Every participant acknowledged that there was value in going to college indicating that there was some degree of cost/benefit analysis conducted, however passive.

Some participants framed their decision to pursue college as being able to overcome or prove something to other people. For example, one participant shared that she really wanted to be at a school with a challenging curriculum and to be treated with respect despite her disability. Another participant saw his attending college as a statement to the world that he was going to overcome the odds stacked against him. This participants in particular cited many times that he wanted to show people that he could accomplish the same things they did even though he had additional challenges in his life.

In addition, participants in the study received other tangible benefits of going to college as opposed to entering the workforce. One participant, who was employed part-time, said that eventually he would need to get a “real” job, pay his own bills and move out of his family home. He enjoyed living at home but had acknowledged that once he graduated from community college he thought his parents would prefer that he move out. Another participant’s mother was also attending the same community college and they took a physical education class together. She said that she and her mother are best friends and she liked that her mother was at the same school she was. One of the most cited benefits among participants was the boost in morale they received from being in college. This was best summarized by a participant who said with great pride,

Never in my whole life, I got an ‘A’. And get this, the learning disability people at *[redacted]* they kept me focused on my stuff and I got an ‘A’. I really – I did a paper

all by myself. My first paper I had help on, the second paper I had no help on, I still got – I got even a higher grade on my second paper, I was like wow.

Not only did the boost in morale come from having disability support services that encouraged academic success, but also from the format of classes. At least two participants shared that having courses offered online was beneficial and enjoyable for them. All of the participants in this study appeared to like being in college and enjoyed the benefits of being there.

As has been discussed in this section, both context and human capital influenced the college choice process for students with learning disabilities. The next section will share the four major findings of this study and discuss them further.

### **Discussion**

In answering the research question about the factors that students with learning disabilities consider when choosing community college, there were four major findings about what was not considered that warrant further discussion: (a) Institutional agents played a minimal or nonexistent role in the process, (b) Participants in this study did not consider information about the availability or range of academic support services during the college choice process, (c) Participants also did not consider the fit of the college to their needs, and (d) Cost was the driving factor for some of the participants, but it was only one factor of many for others. However, caution should be used when interpreting these findings, as the data in this study came strictly from participants and not from parents or school personnel, who also may have had significant influence in the college choice process.

## **Institutional Agents**

In terms of the school and community context, the role that institutional agents or school personnel played in the college choice process was intriguing. When asked about what relationships with school personnel they had, many participants said they had no relationship with teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators. In most schools, guidance counselors would be the school personnel most likely to facilitate the college choice process (ASCA, 2012). Through coupling the data with the previous research, three potential reasons emerged as to why guidance counselors did not play a major role in the college choice process of the participants in this study.

**Institutional neglect.** Gonzalez et al. (2003) asserted that when schools or school staff fail to prepare typical students for the college choice process, either by being unwilling or incapable, it is *institutional neglect*. Institutional neglect was apparent in many of these participants' experiences. Based on the data collected, none of the participants received concrete direction from a guidance counselor on the college choice process, regardless of whether their high school was a high- or low-resource school. At least one participant cited a lack of expertise by her guidance counselor about the college choice process in general. None of the guidance counselors suggested or recommended community college as an option to participants in this study. None of the guidance counselors mentioned or encouraged participants to investigate available academic support at the colleges they were considering. Beyond guidance counselors, no participants mentioned other school personnel (e.g., resource teachers, classroom teachers) that encouraged them or helped them engage in the

college choice process. Schools failed to prepare the participants in this study for the college choice process.

Although institutional neglect can occur for any student whether or not they have a disability, Gonzalez et al.'s (2003) research suggested that institutional support could have more of an impact on students in underrepresented populations because they need additional assistance with the college choice process and may not have accrued the social capital that other students have.

**Time.** Another reason guidance counselors were not heavily involved in the college choice process for these students may have had to do with time. This makes sense because almost every public high school in the United States has a high ratio of students to counselors, which restricts the amount of time spent with each student (McDonough, 2005). Some of the participants in this study said they had a different guidance counselor every time they sought one out, others did not know who their guidance counselors were, and many said they only saw their guidance counselor during the registration period for course selection. None of the participants said that guidance counselors sought them out to discuss college. With the exception of one student who met with the guidance counselor with her parents, any college-related discussions were haphazard add-ons to a meeting that had a different purpose.

These findings are consistent with what is known about Latino students. According to the research, Latino students report that guidance counselors are not available to them and that, similar to the participants in this study, seeing the guidance counselor was strictly for scheduling classes (Vela-Gude, 2009).

Students with learning disabilities have additional factors to consider in the college-choice process (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002) and therefore need additional and targeted assistance as compared to students without disabilities. Levinson and Ohler (1998) specified that the targeted assistance students with disabilities need to be successful in a postsecondary setting include building self-awareness, the ability to advocate for themselves, and information about the different career options available.

**Avoidance.** In general, it appeared that many participants avoided seeing or talking with their guidance counselors. Given the academic difficulties that many of the participants faced, it seems likely that they avoided the guidance counselors to avoid talking about how things were going for them at the time. Although participants had the social capital to get information about the college choice process from school resources, they preferred to defer to or use parents' social capital for that purpose.

Using parents rather than guidance counselors for assistance with the college choice process may have been the result of both overprotection by parents and the low expectations of guidance counselors (Sanders, 2006). Overprotection by parents often makes a child with a disability dependent on them for major decisions even through young adulthood (Sanders, 2006). Likewise, having low expectations for a student with a disability can also backfire. When little is expected of a student with a disability, they often internalize the low expectations, and they begin to believe that they are capable of less (Sanders, 2006). This has been confirmed by Bryan et al. (2009) who found that high school students were less likely to pursue school counselors for information about college when they believed school counselors did not expect them to attend college. This has shown to be especially true of

students with learning disabilities who have experienced academic challenges as they may not consider themselves competent for college (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Both overprotection and low expectations can adversely affect the long-term goals, such as the pursuit of postsecondary education, of students with disabilities (Sanders, 2006).

### **Academic Support Services**

In the higher education context, one of the most surprising findings was how minor a role the presence of academic support services was in the college choice process of the participants. Although cost and location seemed to be a primary driver of choice, few participants mentioned investigating what support services were available to them at their potential schools. Only one participant had accommodations through disability services at his community college. One participant was in current negotiations regarding specific services he needed (i.e., a note taker), and two told me they would be visiting disability services “next week,” as they were beginning to realize they needed services to be academically successful. One participant noted that he didn’t look at any academic support services offered by schools because, in his opinion, they all offered the same services.

Knowing what accommodations are available at a college is critical, because colleges can have different requirements for documentation to receive services and not every college offers the same accommodations to students with disabilities (Cocchi, 1997; Hamblet, 2009). The assumption among the participants was that because they had a 504 plan or an IEP in K–12 education, it would automatically qualify them for services at the college level. This is a common misperception among students with disabilities (Cocchi, 1997; Hamblet, 2009).

At the postsecondary level, disability support services staff members make sure students are provided with reasonable and appropriate support and accommodation while simultaneously making sure they are within the legal obligations of the school (Komives & Woodard, 2003). Hamblet (2009) shared that accommodations such as unlimited time to complete assignments, alternative formats for examinations, and the use of note takers are much more difficult to get at colleges because there is a lot of flexibility regarding what is considered a reasonable accommodation (Hamblet, 2009). It is safe to say that what is available at one college as an accommodation may not be available at another.

There are differences within disability services offices as well (Hamblet, 2009). I looked at the disability services office for each of the schools that participants attended. There was great variation in the number of staff members in each, ranging from 1 to 10, and in their levels of education and experience. That can all make a difference in the services and accommodations that students can receive at college (Hamblet, 2009).

Although investigating what services and accommodations are available at a school ahead of time may be helpful, there is another side of the issue to consider. College has different expectations than high school, so students who may have received a small quantity of services in their K–12 education may need more or different support in college given the change of academic environment (Hamblet, 2009). Not knowing what the college environment will be like makes it difficult for students to know what services to ask for or investigate while engaging in the college choice process. This would not be a problem if students were exposed to college-level courses ahead of time, as was the participant in the dual-enrollment program. It allowed her to learn about the college environment and what to

expect while exposing her to campus resources. Other participants had not even stepped on the campus of the school they chose until the day they started class.

Recurrent themes in the participants' interviews were neglecting to learn about the resources available to them, such as academic support services at the postsecondary institutions they were considering, and making assumptions about the types of supports they would be provided with once they arrived on campus. Although the participants were not educated about academic support services ahead of time, many did seem to know how much tuition cost at the schools they considered.

### **Cost**

The role of cost was the sole consideration of some participants. For others, it was secondary, almost an afterthought. There were some participants who chose to directly attend community college after high school, and cost was the primary reason. The benefits of attending community college outweighed the costs for this group of students. Some saw attending community college as a financial savings; others admitted it wouldn't have been possible to attend college for 4 years given the financial circumstances of their family. Some of the participants who initially chose to attend a 4-year school ended up at community college because they lost their funding or scholarship due to academic difficulties. None of those who lost their scholarships because of their grades had pursued academic assistance, which highlights the need for students to investigate services during the college choice process.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, school personnel are not taking an active enough role in the college choice process of students with learning disabilities.

Second, rather than the student driving the college choice process, other people are taking too much of a role. This resulted in participants not knowing what their role was in the college choice process. For some, this meant being pushed into attending a 4-year school that they could not successfully navigate, failing, and then being sent to community college where their mistakes would be less costly. For others, it meant attending community college because that is where they were told to go.

The participants in this study did not appear to be asked what they wanted to do once they graduated high school, and this lack of input seemed to be a theme throughout their lives. One participant cited numerous situations dating back to elementary school where she never got what she really needed. She shared how school personnel failed her, how her mother made decisions for her without asking for her input, and how she was put in different school environments to try and fix her problem, but not once was she asked what she wanted. I pointed this out to her and said, “You never seem to get what you need.” To which she replied, “Yeah, I don’t.”

### **Implications**

The results of this study have implications for theory, which will provide a framework for practitioners to use as they consider the college choice process of students with learning disabilities.

Both the school and community context and higher education context appear to play a minor role in the college choice process of students with learning disabilities. For these contexts to be relevant, as illustrated in Perna’s (2006) model, it is assumed that students take advantage of the resources provided by their schools. In this study, participants were either

not offered or did not take advantage of the resources provided for college counseling. This suggests that these contexts operate differently for this group of students. Future research should explore whether these findings hold for the general student population.

Human capital also operated differently for students with learning disabilities. Although the human investment model emphasizes the economic costs and benefits of pursuing higher education (Paulsen, 2001), these students made college choice decisions based on non-monetary values, such as the participants enjoyment of the actual learning experience as noted in the previous section (Perna, 2006). When parents engaged in college choice, they took on the role of looking at college from a monetary perspective. It makes sense that the participants' parents valued the attainment of higher education, because they were well educated. But parents were not interviewed, so it is hard to pinpoint exactly how human capital functioned within the college choice process.

This study also has implications for parents of students with learning disabilities. Parents drove the college choice process for many participants in this study. This makes sense as many of the parents in this study had taken an active role in their child's education throughout the K-12 experience. Despite parents knowing about their students' conditions, how the conditions impacted their academics, and having advocated for services for their children before, they did not necessarily consider that prior experience when engaging in the college choice process. Participants relied heavily on parents for guidance in the college choice process.

## **Recommendations**

Students with learning disabilities need to be more integrated into and involved in the college choice process. The following recommendations may help with that process. First, given that the school and community context and the higher education context operated differently for these students there is a clear need for more collaboration among students, parents, school personnel and community agents in the college choice process.

Another recommendation is conducting group counseling for students with learning disabilities alongside students from the general population. Although students with learning disabilities have additional needs in the college choice process, they do, like students in the general population, still need to be informed about their postsecondary choices including entry into the workforce or attending a trade or vocational school, community college, or a 4-year university. School personnel should encourage all students to consider the institutional characteristics that are best for them, especially as they relate to the best fit for a student, whether or not they have a learning disability.

Second, students with learning disabilities need to become more involved in the college choice process, especially as it pertains to finding schools that are a good fit for them. Because of the privacy laws that protect the identities of students with learning disability, postsecondary schools need to rely on secondary schools to promote services and accommodations that are available to students. However, the students also need to contact postsecondary schools to determine if they qualify for many of these services, as all services are not available to everyone who wants them. Postsecondary schools can help correct this problem by better marketing their image to potential students.

Finally, parents need to consider their role in the college choice process of their child. Although it is understandable that parents of students with disabilities tend to be more overprotective and take over much of the decision making for their students, it is important that they teach their children skills that promote the independence they expect them to achieve. Students with disabilities need to be able to explain their conditions, how they impact academic functioning, and how to advocate for themselves so they receive the help they need to be academically successful. Parents often times take on the advocacy role rather than share it with their child (Brinckerhoff, 1994). Ultimately, it seems that those parents drive the college choice process for their children, when they really need to encourage their student to pursue assistance from other sources including secondary school guidance counselors, a private college admissions counselor, and eventually, college representatives.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the increase in learning disability diagnoses, scant attention has been given to how having these conditions influences the college choice process, particularly in understanding how many of these students end up at community college. Although this paper discusses the role of human capital and context as they shaped the choice to pursue postsecondary education, continued research is warranted.

First, more research, both quantitative and qualitative, needs to be conducted on the relationship between school personnel and their role in advising students with learning disabilities in the college choice process. As illustrated by the participants in this study, relationships with school personnel were strictly related to the scheduling of courses, with no mention of college advising. Second, more research should be conducted that relates to the

importance of finding a good fit for the students in the college choice process. Third, more research should be conducted on why students with learning disabilities are not being recruited by a range of postsecondary institutions, especially in a time when equity and access are prominent issues as they relate to college choice.

If the trend continues as it has over the past three decades, the number of students diagnosed with learning disabilities will continue to rise. There will be opportunity for these students to be more engaged in the college choice process. That will allow future researchers to understand more about how the college choice process operates for these individuals, particularly as it relates to community college attendance, and help practitioners find ways to better serve and prepare these students for the experience.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:**

**PARTICIPATION IN THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS**

**Abstract**

The needs of students with learning disabilities, which includes attention disorders for this study, have become more relevant in the last three decades because diagnoses have soared (Snyder et al., 2009). Much of the available literature on students with disabilities concentrates on the K–12 educational environment or on the postsecondary environment after a student has already matriculated into it. However, little is known about how students with disabilities engage in the college choice process. It is known that students with disabilities pursue postsecondary education less frequently than those without disabilities, but the literature does not address why (Newman et al., 2010).

This research study focused on community college students with learning disabilities and explored what experiences impacted their decisions to pursue postsecondary education in opposition to Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college choice model. In general, the data showed that students with learning disabilities were often minimally engaged in the college choice process and had experienced obstacles that fell outside of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. First, the data showed that students with learning disabilities had little knowledge of their condition, how it impacted them academically, or how it might impact academic performance in a college environment, thus shaping how they went about the college choice process. Second, students with learning disabilities in this study often times failed to seek help with academics or the college choice process.

## **Introduction**

The USDE stated that one of the educational challenges that needed to be addressed in the future was the ensurance of accessibility and full participation in postsecondary education for students with disabilities (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2003). The challenge noted by the USDE may well be the result of the dramatic increase in the past three decades of students in the American education system identified as having a learning disability (Snyder et al., 2009). The increase in diagnoses has brought attention to practices in the K–12 educational system, where much of the research on students with disabilities has been conducted.

Learning disabilities have been looked at by educational levels in the literature, with research concentrating on either K–12 or postsecondary education. The literature has not really examined how students with learning disabilities get from one educational level to another. A large quantity of learning disability literature concentrates on K–12 education, highlighting the best practices and strategies to use within the classroom environment to help students with learning disabilities attain short-term goals (Cohen, 1993; Rief, 2005; Smith, 2004). A smaller fraction of the literature examines the transition process from high school to the postsecondary choices (e.g., work, school) of students with learning disabilities (Cummings et al., 2000; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). However, this literature concentrates on the federally mandated transition procedure, which requires that students who receive federally funded services have a plan in place for postsecondary goals. The literature discusses the value of transition planning but does not recognize how decisions are made within that context and whether transition planning is effective (Gregg, 2007; Purcell, 1993).

The remaining literature focuses on performance in, retention in, and/or completion of a vocation or postsecondary education (Getzel, 2008).

There is little literature that explores the process a student with a learning disability undergoes when considering whether to pursue postsecondary studies and how the choice of institution is made. Addressing this area is important, if the USDE hopes to fulfill its objective of having college be accessible and participatory for students with disabilities. It's needed to better understand why less than half of students with disabilities go on to pursue postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2010). This study examined how students with learning disabilities participate in the college choice process by challenging the framework set forth by Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

### **Framework**

College choice is viewed as “a range of postsecondary educational decisions including (a) the decision of students to continue their education at the postsecondary level and (b) the decision to enroll in a specific postsecondary institution” (Hossler & Stage, 1992, p. 426). This study seeks to challenge the framework posed by Hossler and Gallagher's (1987), which is viewed in three stages: predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition is the time period when students determine whether they would like to extend their education beyond high school (Hossler & Stage, 1992). The search stage follows the predisposition stage and involves collecting information about colleges and making a stronger commitment to attending college (Pitre, 2006). Finally, the choice stage is the actual decision to register in a program (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Although there are other college choice models that could be used to guide this study, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) framework has been used as a framework to develop other college choice models and in discussing college attendance behavior in general. Other college choice models, such as Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) and Hossler and Stage (1992), have used the phases of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model to conduct additional research that has added more depth to those phases. Because there is no college choice model that considers the experiences of students with disabilities, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) framework is used as a foundation to build from for this study (Bergerson, 2009).

### **Method**

A qualitative approach was taken to understand more about students with learning disabilities and the factors they consider in choosing to attend community college.

### **Sample**

The participants in this study were 18 to 24 years of age and had a learning disability diagnosis. This diagnosis was required to have come from a physician or psychologist. Participants qualified for the study if they were enrolled at a 2-year public community college as degree-seeking students or as dual enrollment students earning a high school diploma and an associate's degree simultaneously. Eight participants qualified for this study.

### **Recruitment and Site Selection**

Recruiting materials were disseminated to a professional association's e-mail list and individual community colleges. Participants in this study attended one of the public community colleges described in Table 5. The table displays data from the NCES on each community college in this study.

Table 5

*Site Information*

	<b>Community College 1</b>	<b>Community College 2</b>	<b>Community College 3</b>	<b>Community College 4</b>
Setting	City	Town	City	Suburb
Location	Southeast	Southeast	Northeast	Southeast
Primary Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Primary Race	Black	White	White	White
Student Population (approximation for Fall 2011 semester)	6,000	4,500	12,000	17,000
Percentage of Students Under Age 25	38%	54%	69%	58%
Percentage of Students Enrolled in Disability Services	3% or less	3% or less	3% or less	3% or less

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data were analyzed using both the data collected via the interview and from my reflective writing. Each participant was asked questions that focused on family and personal life, academic experiences and how each participant engaged in the college choice process (see Appendix C). The data were initially coded following Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendation to use the conceptual framework as a foundation. Using their

recommendation, the data were compared with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice process. As the data were reviewed, other codes in addition to ones related to the conceptual framework emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were reviewed and coded using nVivo 9.0 software on independent occasions to be certain that data were coded into the correct categories and ensure their quality and trustworthiness.

Once the data were collected, analysis was started. The data analysis process in qualitative research is interactive, inductive, and recursive (Creswell, 2007). Pertaining to this study, that means that the data analysis process was rigorous; it required me to set aside any assumptions of what I might find and be prepared to interact with the data repeatedly as well as triangulating them with other sources of information to see what emerged (Creswell, 2007).

### **Quality and Trustworthiness**

It is essential that the data collected are considered trustworthy and of high quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, data from various sources were triangulated through using the participants' interview data, the existing literature, and a peer debriefing process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Member checks were used to assure authenticity, as this study focused on participants' perceptions rather than the researcher's, (Kratwohl, 1998). As part of the member check process, participants examined the interview transcripts and were given the opportunity to make modifications if they chose. Next, the data from the interview transcripts were reviewed for consistency and then triangulated with the extant literature on college choice and students with disabilities

(Krathwohl, 1998). Finally, peer debriefing was used to verify that the data were coded correctly (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Limitations**

This study had limitations related to accessing the research site and recruiting participants. Due to legal concerns, there were many schools that were reluctant to participate in this study. Even the schools that did agree to participate gave stringent parameters about how I could recruit students and where I could hang flyers. The number of locations where I was allowed to post flyers varied immensely. Despite this limitation, I was able to recruit participants for my study.

Other limitations included finding participants who met the criteria of the study. Initially, I had asked for students registered with disability services and then quickly discovered that many students with disabilities chose not to do that for a multitude of reasons. One reason cited by a participant was that he did not want to be stigmatized. Given that information, potential participants had to take a personal risk by contacting me because it implied that they did indeed have a learning disability.

The final limitation was related to the amount of data I extracted from participants. I interviewed young adults with learning disabilities whose conditions ranged on a continuum of severity. This meant that some individuals were more affected in their functioning than others, making some participants better equipped to handle an interview situation. Furthermore, some of the participants had limited capability to reflect on their experiences and others had a markedly difficult time remembering incidents that occurred as recently as a year ago. That being said, this study focused on the data participants provided and did not use

information from other individuals, such as parents and school personnel, who may have been able to provide additional information regarding participants' college choice process.

### **Findings**

Although, a majority of the data collected in this study fit within the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) framework, there were some themes that emerged that were not considered in the framework. Thus, three significant findings emerged that impacted the college choice process for participants in this study but are not part of the college choice process based on the existing literature. First, participants knew their diagnoses but had a difficult time expressing what it meant to actually have that specific condition. Second, they could only provide limited examples of how their disability impacted learning. Both of these findings suggest that participants did not know what to look for in the later phases of the college choice process. Also, participants did not ask for help with academics in high school, leaving many of them unprepared to handle the rigors of postsecondary school. They also did not ask for or pursue help in navigating the college choice process, which resulted in an appearance of being minimally engaged in the pursuit of postsecondary education.

#### **Knowledge About Condition**

The participants in this study knew little about their conditions. Every participant knew their diagnoses with no hesitation and could give a brief overview of their condition. For example, one participant said, "I have thoughts, but it's hard for me to put my thoughts into words on paper." Another participant recalled, "One of the concerns I [people] did have in middle school was, you know, paying attention, sitting down, you know, not moving a lot, you know, trying to focus . . ." A female participant remarked, "I don't know how much you

know about people who have ADD, but math is one of the parts where they struggle.”

Another participant shared, “I’m diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. ADHD—well, they both plagued me all through school completely. And dyslexia was [a] big impact in the younger years when Ds and Bs were exactly the same to me and I didn’t care why.”

Yet despite knowing the names of their conditions, participants were unable to specifically say how they impacted their abilities to function in an academic environment. It was clear, though, that the participants in this study experienced academic difficulty.

### **Impact of Learning Disabilities on Academic Functioning**

Although participants could not give a significant number of concrete examples of how their condition impacted learning, it was clear from other areas of the interview that they had some awareness of where they had some significant academic difficulties. In other words, participants knew they had difficulty learning but did not connect it to having a learning disability. This was best captured by a participant who said, “The tools were put in front of me to cope with it [my learning disability], but I didn’t know what I was coping with.”

Despite not knowing how their conditions related to their academic performance, participants cited a range of academic difficulties from having to repeat grades, taking summer courses, and failing courses during their middle and high school years. The courses that many participants had difficulty with widely ranged. Participants cited failing foreign language, biology, English, and math, and some participants recalled having to take certain courses several times before they passed. Two participants said they were retained for a

grade in either elementary or middle school, and one failed his senior year and had to take the summer that followed it to make up what he had not passed.

Although none of the participants directly said so, the inability to articulate how their learning disability impacted academic functioning might have influenced their college choice processes. Not knowing what type of postsecondary environment to look for in the search phase of the process to accommodate their needs and being unaware of the resources that they needed to be academically successful could have easily led them to a school that is an ill fit. The lack of knowledge students had about their condition and how it impacted academic functioning could explain why they did not ask for help either with academics or the college choice process.

### **Asking for Help**

A majority of the participants in this study did not independently seek help or accept assistance related to their disability in secondary school. Many participants had a parent or parents who served as advocates for their child and secured academic assistance, leaving participants in a position where they had little knowledge about their disability or the accommodations to which they were entitled. Some of those participants accepted the help, some accepted and later rejected help, and some rejected any help that was offered.

The accommodations that the participants in this study had were both formal and informal. There was one student who, after having formal accommodations at one school, was denied formal accommodations at another school. Because he could not get formal accommodations, he asked specific teachers for what he needed. He can only recollect one time when he was denied and given no accommodations at all. Half of the participants

recalled having formal accommodations in high school, which were pursued by their parents. Others had informal arrangements with individual teachers, which were also secured by parents.

On that note, parents played a necessary and pivotal role in advocating for some of the participants. However, the level of engagement among parents varied, with some parents going in together with the participants to the school, fully informed and equipped to advocate for their children. One participant said his mother always went to school meetings about accommodations, making sure that he received what he needed. There was an upbeat tone to his voice as he told me, “My mom was on point with everything.”

Other parents attended accommodation meetings and simply went along with whatever was recommended, which caused continued resentment for one participant. Another parent ignored the school when they tried to contact her about her son’s academic difficulties. He described,

Well, in second grade, they kept trying to set up conferences with my mom and stuff like that, and then that vision bus came around that gave us free vision for elementary kids, and they decided that I was legally blind in my left eye. And my mom was just like, “Oh that must be it.”

His mother waited for three years after that, until his academic difficulties were glaringly obvious, before bringing him to be formally evaluated for a disability, causing her son great frustration and setbacks academically, including being retained a grade.

Formal accommodations for learning disabilities and attention disorders seemed to be tolerated by participants until the high school years, when many chose to opt out of going to

the resource room or using other services that were offered through the school. One participant said she “stopped going to resource room after I turned 16—but a little over a year—I didn’t like it. There were people there who were bad. They were there for behavior reasons.” Throughout the interview, this participant said she was repeatedly given services that she felt were inappropriate, unhelpful, and in many cases insulting. Even while discussing these events years later, the frustration she felt was still very tangible. Another participant stopped going to the resource room because he wanted to be a “normal kid.” Using services such as the resource room led him to feel as though he were different from other students, and that carried over to his first college experience where he failed out because of his academic performance.

A few participants chose not to go through the school system to get formal accommodations but instead decided to work out informal accommodations with individual teachers. One said, “All of my teachers, they were pretty cool about it. They gave me the time that I needed, so that was fine.” Another noted that her accommodations weren’t “on a piece of paper saying, you know, she needs this, or something like that, so . . .” Other participants had a harder time recalling how they received accommodations. For example, one participant said,

I think we [my mother and I] brought it to the attention of my teachers. Yeah, it was brought to the attention of my teachers because they gave me extra time for tests and quizzes and lecture notes and things like that.

However, not everyone had a positive experience with the informal route of getting accommodations. One participant, who was denied formal accommodations, was put into a

special program at her school unrelated to having a learning disability that emphasized setting future goals. She said the premise of the program was to help prepare students for employment and concentrated on creating a resume. The participant expressed disappointment that the program didn't focus on where she was at that moment, which she said was where her needs were. She found little value in the program because it didn't help her with her current academic needs, and she dropped out of it at the end of her sophomore year. When asked why she was put in the program, she said she "didn't know" as it was for disadvantaged students and she came from a household that had high levels of income. This may suggest that the school put her in this program because they expected her to pursue employment rather than postsecondary education after high school.

One participant who had difficulty getting accommodations also happened to have been identified as gifted. Initially, he and his mother tried to go the formal route by getting an IEP. He said that ultimately the IEP didn't work out after having to go back for three or four revisions. After that didn't work, he tried to get accommodations at a different school on his own and was met with resistance. He explained,

That particular teacher was from the Navy, and I don't know, it was very difficult for her to—for me to explain to her, you know, I need more time on written papers in class. I need more—you know.

Another participant expressed frustration not with getting accommodations but in getting the right accommodations. She described the problem:

I wanted a scribe—I wanted a note taker, but I couldn't get that. I couldn't get that in high school. They just gave you what they want to give you, what they thought. And

like, I felt what they provided was pretty useless. It was pretty standard for everyone who went there. “We’re going to treat you all the same. We’re going to give you the same regardless of what—” and then they had like antibullying programs, social program[s] outside of the school. I didn’t find those really useful either. Felt they were forced on me, and I didn’t like them . . . I got lumped in with people with more severe disabilities. And I didn’t think that I benefited from the stuff because it was really geared towards their level, not mine.

In general, the participants in this study cited a range of experiences with securing accommodations for their learning disability. Some did not get the right accommodations, some did not get any accommodations, and some rejected accommodations. Given that few, if any, received or took the accommodations offered to them in high school or perceived them as helpful, that may explain why relationships with school personnel were nonexistent for this group.

### **Asking for Help From School Personnel**

Overall, participants in this study did not express that they had deep relationships with any school personnel. When asked specifically about the role of guidance counselors in high school, participants had little to say about it. Some participants did not even know who their guidance counselors were. One participant specifically said he tried to keep any relationships with school personnel to a minimum and that he purposely disengaged with the school culture and activities. He was not able to tell me why he chose to do that. Only one participant said she sought out information and help from her guidance counselor. Unfortunately, her guidance counselor was not able to provide her with any helpful direction.

One participant admitted that he did not like to ask for help. Other participants implied that they did not ask for help either because they did not want to or they did not know to ask. The participant who said he did not ask for help indicated that he knew when he needed help, he just didn't want to ask for it. He said, "It's one of those things that I struggle with personally, is just, you know, being able to step forward and say, yeah, I need somebody to help me."

A different participant gave up on asking school personnel for help. She related, "Well, when they do things, I never found it helpful because their idea of helping is, 'We'll send you to speech therapy. We'll send you to an antibullying program. And then you'll know how to defend yourself.'" Other participants said they simply tried to figure things out on their own when they needed academic help. One cited that he'd prefer to solve problems on his own rather than ask for help.

Some participants did not ask for help because they did not know how and when they needed to ask for it and when they did ask for help, they were met with a lack of expertise. Others preferred not to ask for help even if they knew they needed it. This had implications for their academic performance in high school and in planning for the future, especially as it related to the college choice process.

### **Considering Academic Support in the College Choice Process**

In general, participants seemed to understand that their learning disability was a lifelong condition, with a small fraction knowing they would need academic support in college and a larger fraction hoping they would not need academic support. A majority of

participants indicated that they did not seek out disability services or any academic support services on campus because they wanted to try school without accommodations.

One participant was adamant that he would not ask for academic support under any circumstance in college because he wanted to be perceived as a normal student. He stated, “I felt [feel] like I’m a normal person, which I am, I can do this on my own.” This participant spent much of the first part of the interview claiming how he was not different:

I know I learn differently, especially with English and how I put words down on paper, but I don’t feel like I’m different. I don’t feel like, because I put my words down on paper, I feel different. It actually makes me upset that people think that. It really does.

He went to great lengths to hide his learning disability throughout his school years and found his condition to be stigmatizing. When his mother started to ask about disability support services at one college he was considering, he stopped her. He said, “I was like, ‘Mom, just please, let me do it on my own.’” However, he did not pursue accommodations and consequently suffered from poor academic performance. This suggests that he wanted to advocate for himself in the college choice process but did not know how or what he needed.

Another participant who enrolled in community college only because it was too late to apply anywhere else, also held off on getting academic support. He did not consider his needs as a student with a learning disability in the college choice process at all. Similar to the previous participant, he also did not want to be seen as different. He said,

The main concern I had was if I make my learning disability public, then it might hurt my chances of getting accepted. That was the only concern I ever really had, because

I don't wanna be someone who's considered slower or should be left behind because he can't keep up. And I've done everything my whole life to be the guy that "You guys gotta keep up with me."

This was not surprising because he rejected support that was offered to him in the sixth grade for dyslexia. He said, "They started trying to make accommodations, but I didn't like being different. So I said, 'No, I'll just stick with the rest of the kids.'" When asked what accommodations he might have found helpful, he simply said, "I don't know." Although he did not accept accommodations in high school, he quickly found that he would need them in the middle of his first semester of college. This, along with the fact that he had conducted little to no research during the search phase of the college choice process, suggests that he was not aware of how the academic expectations would be different in college as opposed to high school.

Interestingly, a participant who was a dual enrollment student found herself at a tremendous advantage as far as academic support. Being a part of a program that allowed her to finish high school and pursue college at the same time had paid off in terms of her understanding what the environment would be like once she finished her high school credits. About a month into the program she made this observation,

My only concern with testing is I need to have either more time or a place to sit quietly, 'cause I've noticed that I cannot sit in a college room full of 45 people staring at me, and then I'm just sitting here ticking my pencil 'cause I can't find nothing on the test so . . .

In general, the findings showed that participants were not aware of how their learning disabilities impacted their academic functioning, did not willingly seek help or assistance easily, and therefore, did not consider the role of their disability in the college choice process. They also did not seek help with the college choice process.

### **Discussion**

For the most part, the data from this study have reflected what is known in the literature about students with disabilities and the challenges they face in the college choice process. The previous research has established that students with disabilities are often deficient in advocating for themselves especially relating to what they need for accommodations, and they do not fully understand the differences between high school and college (Cummings et al., 2000; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002) This was illustrated by the participants in this study, none of whom were able to tell me what they expected college to be like. A majority of them did not consider accommodations or how they could advocate for themselves in the college choice process.

These challenges are not considered or included in college choice models, such as the widely cited and used Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. Although the participants in this study still seemed to go through the stages that Hossler and Gallagher identified as the college choice process, the predisposition stage had some additional obstacles for them that have not been apparent for students without disabilities (Sitlington, 2003). According to the research, students with learning disabilities encounter different challenges than students without disabilities in the college choice process (Sitlington, 2003), especially because their

disability is often barely discernible in many cases (Field, 1996; Getzel & Gugerty, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

There are additional complexities to the college choice process for students with learning disabilities. First, there are multiple individuals involved in the educational process for students with learning disabilities. IEP teams can be composed of regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, administrators, parents and sometimes members of community agencies. So while students in the general population may only have the involvement of parents and possibly one member of school personnel, students with learning disabilities have a team of individuals federally required to assist them. Second, students with learning disabilities are often overprotected by parents, who have been the driving force in their child's education for many years. Once children hit the age of eighteen privacy laws, such as FERPA, take effect and parents are no longer privy to or as engaged in their children's educational pursuits. It is for these reasons that it is difficult to say that any one approach to solving the problem of college attendance for students with learning disabilities.

### **Role of School Personnel**

Although the research contends that students with disabilities are more likely to rely on the guidance of school personnel than students without disabilities (Wagner et al., 2007), that was not the case with these participants. It appeared that most of the participants had disclosed their disabilities to at least one member of the school staff, but conversation about how that those disabilities impacted their learning and the establishment of long-term goals was nonexistent. The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model acknowledges that the role of school personnel, such as guidance counselors, is minimal in the college choice process, and

the lack of interest by school personnel in a student's future may be interpreted differently by students with learning disabilities. In a prior study, high school students were less likely to pursue school personnel for information about college when they believed school personnel did not expect them to attend college (Bryan et al., 2009). This has been shown to be especially true of students with learning disabilities who have likely experienced academic challenges, because they may not consider themselves intelligent enough for college (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

It is unclear why there was a lack of conversation about college with participants in this study. Many participants implied that their guidance counselors were for course registration purposes only, and many said that whom could help them changed daily depending on who was in the office that day. This is consistent with literature that notes that guidance counselors have multiple responsibilities in high schools outside of being a guidance counselor, leaving little time to counsel students appropriately (Fitch et al., 2001). The ASCA (2012) has a staggering list of responsibilities for guidance counselors at the secondary level. Some of the major responsibilities include educating and counseling students on study skills, substance abuse, diversity issues, organizational skills, problem solving, crisis intervention, academic support, and goal setting. Beyond that, guidance counselors are also used in some schools for other duties in addition to counseling, such as supervising lunch, checking student attendance, and even serving as a substitute for classroom teachers (Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2010). Given the number of responsibilities that school guidance counselors have, it is understandable that the participants in this study defined their high school guidance counselor as someone they only saw as necessary for

course registration. Based on their multitude of responsibilities, it is possible that guidance counselors in these high schools simply did not have the time to engage any student, with or without a disability, in a discussion about future goals.

Furthermore, guidance counselors are often times charged with meeting with students in academic distress (ASCA, 2012). Although none of the participants in this study mentioned meeting with a guidance counselor for this reason, the participants all mentioned poor academic performance including having to repeat courses and entire grades, which may explain why meeting with their guidance counselor for anything might not be an appealing option. The poor academic performance mentioned by participants in this study corresponds with Smith, Polloway, Patton, and Dowdy's (2004) findings that determined that the degree of failure for students with disabilities tends to be higher than for students without disabilities. Assuming that their guidance counselors were aware of the academic performance of the participants in this study, it is possible that the overriding concern for some of these students was to get them to successfully complete high school, therefore making any discussion of the college choice process irrelevant.

Many guidance counselor programs do not include courses on how to counsel students with disabilities (Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005), which also might explain why the participants' guidance counselors were not proactive in college advising. Beyond guidance counselors not having the information to help such students while they are in high school, there is also not enough information available about the college programs in which they are most likely to experience academic success (Siperstein, 1988; Sparks & Lovett, 2009). Many colleges tout having programs for those with learning

disabilities, but not every student with a learning disability can access the services that are advertised, and little data is available about retention, transfer, or graduation rates.

### **The Role of Fitting In**

Many individuals with disabilities indicated a feeling of not fitting in with their environment (Gerber, 1998). The participants in this study reflected this feeling through their responses, particularly the frequent refrain of not wanting to be different as a reason for rejecting accommodations for their disability. Participants who experienced a drastic transition in their academic environments (e.g., changing schools) reported the feeling more than others in the study.

It is possible that these participants believed they did not fit in with other students who did not have learning disabilities but wanted to appear as though they did to avoid the stigma that accompanies having a learning disability (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). When asked about disclosing their disability to peers, only one said he had shared it with his few close friends. That may explain why the participants in this study did not pursue accommodations for their disability— because they had a fear of being found out and stigmatized by peers.

### **Knowledge About Condition**

The findings from the participants in this study did not deviate from Schreiner's (2007) findings that found that students with learning disabilities often cannot articulate how their condition impacted their academic functioning. It was clear that every participant's academic functioning was impaired in one way or another; however, many participants could not cite specific examples of the impairment. In further probing, participants disclosed certain classes that they had difficulty in, which made sense given their condition. For

example, one participant had dyslexia and found that English courses were particularly difficult for him, but not math. This makes sense because the amount of reading in English courses exceeds the reading for math courses. Another participant with attention deficit disorder did not care for lecture classes where she had to sit still for a long period of time, but she excelled in science courses that had labs where she could get up and walk around. So although participants could not say how their learning disability impacted academic functioning, inferences could be made based off of how they answered other questions.

However, the participants' inability to articulate how their disabilities impacted their learning may have had a significant impact on the predisposition stage of college choice. Not one participant expressed that they had felt they weren't ready or prepared for college. None mentioned the possibility of pursuing employment directly out of high school or of taking a gap year before deciding what to do next. Yet no participants mentioned taking a college preparatory curriculum, and few knew much about what to expect from the college experience other than it being a means to getting a job. They did not seem to be well informed about what their choices were after high school or how having a learning disability would play into those choices.

Past the predisposition stage, not being able to explain their condition or how it impacted academic functioning may have been a potential obstacle in the search stage of the college choice process (Brinckerhoff, 1994). If a student with a disability is not aware that they need accommodations or what type of accommodations they need to be successful, then they are not likely to investigate the support services available to them at different institutions.

## **Getting Help**

A significant obstacle to the participants in this study was asking for help, which is consistent with Cummings et al.'s (2000) research. There may have been a multitude of reasons for participants not asking for help. In most cases it was difficult to establish why they didn't. About half of the participants relied on their parents to get them help in K–12 education, and they knew little about the meetings parents had with school personnel regarding accommodations, which corresponds with Brinckerhoff's (1994) research. Although teaching students with learning disabilities how to advocate for themselves was suggested in literature dating back at least 15 years (Brinckerhoff, 1994), a majority of the participants in this study still did not appear able to advocate for themselves, and none seemed to have received guidance in becoming more self-aware. This suggests that participants did not have the opportunity to advocate for themselves and their needs in getting accommodations because they felt more comfortable deferring to their parents for educational decisions.

## **College Choice Models**

The extant literature on college choice extends back to the 1920s and continues to grow today. Initially, college choice models were used to increase enrollment in postsecondary institutions and did not consider the needs of different populations nor did they examine the early stages of the college choice process (Kinzie et al., 2004). It was not until the 1980s that college choice models started to focus on equity and access issues (Kinzie et al., 2004). It was during that time that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed their college choice model, which has been widely cited in postsecondary education literature

(Bergerson, 2009). Many of the current college choice models that have been developed since the 1980s are based off of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model (Bergerson, 2009). Although there are college choice models that have considered factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, none have included or looked at disability as being a factor in the process. As equity and access continue to be issues that need to be addressed, it is necessary to consider the needs of individuals with disabilities in the college choice process.

The data collected in this study show that students with learning disabilities do not neatly fall into existing college choice models. It is true that these students go through the same phases of predisposition, search, and choice, but there are three additional issues that need to be considered for this group of students, as discovered in this study.

First, during the predisposition phase, school personnel need to educate students with learning disabilities and attention disorders about their condition and how it impacts academic functioning. Students with learning disabilities need to learn how to articulate what their needs are to other people to achieve academic success both in high school and in the postsecondary environment. During the predisposition phase, it is recommended that high school personnel facilitate role playing with students to prepare them to explain their condition to disability services in the college environment (USDE, 2007). Students with learning disabilities should be able to explain their learning disability and why they need certain services to be academically successful (USDE, 2007).

Second, during the search and choice phases, these students may need more assistance than students without disabilities in figuring out which school is the best fit for

their specific academic needs. Students tend to look at institutional characteristics such as whether a school is private or public, whether it is 2 year or 4 year, whether it is commuter or residential, the cost, and the location (Chapman, 1981; Kinzie et al., 2004; Litten, 1982). When participants in this study were asked to recall what type of characteristics they looked for in a college, they had little to say. Yet the research recommends that students with learning disabilities pay close attention during the search phase to the size of the institution, the size of classes at the institution, and the availability of support services (Education Resources Information Center [ERIC], 1997). Although Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model considers institutional characteristics, it does not emphasize the role of support services in the college choice process.

Along with these characteristics, students begin to assess whether they will fit in with the other students at the institution during these phases (Hossler et al., 1989). This is especially important to students with disabilities because they already feel different than other students, as data in this study support. None of the students in this study attended a school with peers from high school, and some of them did not step foot on campus until the first day of class, making it highly unlikely that they assessed the student body beforehand.

Third, during both the search and choice phases, students with learning disabilities need to find out what accommodations potential schools can provide them with. As the participants in this study exemplify, students with learning disabilities have varying academic needs, depending on diagnosis and severity. They need to find which school can best meet their individual needs, rather than simply identifying what others have called a good program for students with learning disabilities (ERIC, 1997). Also, students with learning disabilities

should not assume that all schools offer the same services, as one participant did, because there are some colleges that can provide better services based on location or size (USDE, 2007).

### **Future Research**

Between what was learned in this study and what is known about the problem of access and participation for students with disabilities, three areas for future research have been developed.

First, the role of policy as it pertains to students with learning disabilities should be examined. Although there have been policies that have been passed to facilitate the postsecondary attendance rate of students with disabilities , such as required transition planning, a gap in postsecondary attendance rates still exists between those with and without disabilities. This suggests that what is known about the college choice behavior of the general student population does not fit students with disabilities. Future research should focus on how policy can better augment the college going behavior of students with disabilities beyond what is provided in current legislation.

Second, to further understand how the college choice process differs between students with and without disabilities, a theoretical model needs to be developed that is specific to the needs of students with disabilities. The college choice model used in this study generally fit the participants' experiences, but additional aspects of their experiences were not accounted for. Both the participants in this study and the prior research confirmed that additional obstacles exist for students with disabilities related to the college choice process. Future college choice models for students with disabilities should consider additional factors that are

not found in Hossler and Gallagher's model. These factors include- whether or not a student can advocate for themselves in order to obtain help from guidance counselors and others in the college choice process, the role of institutional fit and support services in the search phase of the process and also how persistent low academic achievement hinders the college choice process.

Finally, further research needs to be conducted concerning the collaboration of secondary school personnel and parents of children with disabilities as it relates to preparation for the college choice process. It was unclear from both the literature and this study why students with disabilities were not prepared to explain their conditions and did not understand how their condition impacted academic functioning or the college choice process.

### **Conclusion**

There has been great progress in terms of access to postsecondary education opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities. However, it is clear from this study that there is still work to be done, especially helping students with learning disabilities become more engaged in preparation for the college choice process and in the process itself.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Limitations**

This study came with its share of limitations, many of which were not discovered until the study itself was completed. This study had five major limitations which included- the variation of learning disabilities represented, the severity of each participant's learning condition, the presence of co-existing conditions represented by participants, the amount of information known or shared by participants and the different paths each participant took to community college.

The first limitation of this study was the variation of learning disabilities that participants had. Participants' learning disabilities manifested themselves in different ways- some had difficulty with writing, others had difficulty with focus and others had difficulties with reading. These differences limited my ability to make generalizations about the students with the learning disabilities population at large and how they went about college choice. Further research should examine the college choice process by specific diagnoses to better understand how having deficits in specific areas impacts the college choice process.

The second major limitation was the range of severity among the participants in the study. This range limited my ability to draw conclusions about the college choice process within the diagnosis category that each participant fell into. For example, one participant with attention deficit disorder had a higher degree of difficulty throughout her educational experience. Yet for another participant with the same diagnosis it seemed to only be a minimal impact on her educational experience. Therefore, I was unable to make a broad

statement about the college choice process about students with the same learning disability. Going forward, research should try and focus on specific disabilities and specific ranges of severity to get a better idea of how the college choice process works based on those factors.

The third limitation was that there were participants that had other existing conditions and circumstances that may have impacted the college choice process. For example, one participant had a severe domestic dispute with his mother in the same time frame that he was filling out the financial aid forms to attend college. Another fought a life threatening medical condition in his early years of high school. Therefore, it was hard to tell what role having a learning disability played in their lives. The existence of these comorbid or coexisting conditions may have impacted the college choice more than the participants' learning disabilities. The role of co-morbid conditions should be considered as more research is conducted on college choice and students with learning disabilities.

The fourth limitation was the quantity and quality of information that participants were able to provide. Plans for college, including how it was going to be paid for, was not information that participants were privy to. In many cases, participants knew their college was being paid for but did not have the exact details of how their parents were paying for it, or even how their parents got information about the college planning process. Along the same lines, it was difficult to establish the role of school personnel in the college choice process for participants in this study. Although many participants had graduated high school within the last year, they were not yet able to reflect and explain why they did not seek help with the college choice process. Interviewing parents and school personnel may have provided more information about the college choice process of the participants.

The fifth limitation in this study was that not every participant attended community college as their first college, which again prevented me from making conclusions about how the college choice process functions for students with learning disabilities. After high school graduation, some participants chose to attend four year schools and then left those schools to attend community college. Participants did not speak in great length about the decision to attend community college after the four year school. Two participants implied that their parents had a role in this decision, which indicated that parents may have had a larger role in this decision than the participants. Future research should include getting data from parents to fully understand the factors that contributed to the decision to attend community college after leaving a four year school.

### **Summary of the Research**

This study augments what is known about students with learning disabilities, specifically how students in this population engage in the college choice process. In addition, this study analyzed how Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) typology applied and did not apply to the college choice process of the participants in this study. Data in this study were also analyzed by considering the roles of context (Perna, 2006) and human capital (Becker, 1962). Multiple findings emerged from the data in this study.

First, students with learning disabilities and attention disorders engage in the phases of college choice as suggested by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Although the participants in this study went through the three stages, they had little direction from guidance counselors in the process and relied heavily on the direction and knowledge of parents, more so than students without disabilities. Second, they did not engage in the college choice process in the

same way as students without disabilities. The participants knew little about their conditions, how they impacted their academic functioning, and had little to no experience advocating for what they needed throughout their K–12 educational years. This lack of experience and knowledge translated into less engagement in the predisposition phase and a less sophisticated search and choice process. Third, school and community contexts, higher education contexts, and human capital seemed to have mixed value for this group of participants. Many of them indicated that they were given minimal instruction on the college choice process and relied solely on their parents for that instruction. As far as making the choice to pursue postsecondary education, all participants found the benefits of pursuing postsecondary education to outweigh the costs involved in the process.

Beyond those findings, this study also highlighted how the presence of a learning disability was ignored in the college choice process. The few school personnel members who brought up the future with the participants discussed it without considering students' needs as they related to the learning disability. Parents did not directly address how students' learning disabilities would impact their choices of college either. Further research may clarify the reasons for that. As discovered in this research, the presence of a learning disability matters to the college choice process because the students need support to be academically successful.

Given all of these findings, future researchers have plenty of areas to choose from relating to college choice and students with learning disabilities. The college choice process for students with learning disabilities varies not only across groups of students with learning disabilities but also within groups. Thus, further research needs to explore within-group

differences to establish common experiences and barriers and use what is learned to develop a college choice model for students with learning disabilities.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

My researcher bias statement is organized using Maxwell's (2005) framework that outlines the reasons for a researcher undertaking a study. Maxwell asserted that the reasons for pursuing a research study can be reduced to three goals. These goals may be personal, practical, and/or intellectual. I sought to fulfill all three of those goals.

Although I did not have any certification or degree in the area of students with learning disabilities, I had experience with individuals with learning disabilities as both an educator and as a parent. I was conscious of these experiences as I planned this research project. I had great concern about students with learning disabilities. However, I was aware that channeling that passion in a constructive way was crucial so the stories of the participants were portrayed accurately. One of the advantages of being well informed about learning disabilities was the rapport I established with participants. I also had a general understanding of the struggles of having a learning disability.

On the personal side, my preschool-aged child was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Individuals with Asperger's syndrome have difficulty participating in social interaction and interpreting the nonverbal cues from other individuals. Individuals with Asperger's syndrome frequently have an intense, restricted focus on certain topics and have a high demand for structure in their daily functioning (Attwood, 2005). Although Asperger's syndrome mostly affects social interaction, the need for structure can interfere with the learning process.

Once my child was diagnosed, I pored over various studies, journals, and textbooks. I consulted a myriad of professionals for clarification and advice and forged social

relationships with other parents of children with Asperger's syndrome. It was through these relationships that I developed a practical goal for this research. The parents of other children with Asperger's frequently discussed the future, especially whether their child would attend college and be able to secure employment. It became obvious to me that college attendance was a widespread, legitimate concern among the learning disability community of parents. This led to establishing the practical goal of addressing college attendance concerns in order to inform school personnel and families and friends of those with learning disabilities about the process of college choice. It was my aspiration to motivate others to build upon the findings of this study so they too could contribute to a positive shift in college attendance for students with learning disabilities.

Undertaking this study also fulfilled an intellectual goal of mine. Prior to the commencement of my doctoral study, I taught undergraduate, general education, social science courses at a large, research university. I was an academic advisor within a social science department. At the beginning of every semester, a handful of students would approach me and share their need for accommodations because of a learning disability. After meeting some of these students, I was admittedly curious about the journey they took from high school to college. This motivated me to learn more about students with learning disabilities in relation to postsecondary education. Once I learned that many students with learning disabilities choose not to pursue postsecondary education, I was curious as to why and was surprised to see so little information about this topic.

## Appendix B

North Carolina State University is a land-grant university and a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina

Office of Research and Innovation  
Division of Research Administration

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Campus Box 7514  
Raleigh, North Carolina 27695-7514

919.515.2444 (phone)  
919.515.7721 (fax)

From: Carol Mickelson, IRB Coordinator  
North Carolina State University  
Institutional Review Board

Date: April 26, 2011

Title: Students with Learning Disabilities: Stories of the College Choice Process

IRB#: 2013

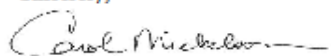
Dear Ms. Mercer,

The project listed above has been reviewed by the NC State Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research, and is approved for one year. **This protocol will expire on April 25, 2012 and will need continuing review before that date.**

NOTE:

1. You must use the attached consent forms which have the approval and expiration dates of your study.
2. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
3. Any changes to the protocol and supporting documents must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
4. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days by completing and submitting the unanticipated problem form on the IRB website.
5. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

Sincerely,



Carol Mickelson  
NC State IRB

## Appendix C

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

Pseudonym:

Place:

Interviewer: Kerri Mercer

Schedule time:

Date:

Start: \_\_\_\_\_ End: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Thank you so much for coming today. Today we will talk about your educational journey and the process you went through that brought you to this community college. Any information you give me today will be kept confidential and I will be using a fake name or a pseudonym as opposed to your real name in this study. This study is voluntary. You do not have to participate. Let's review the consent form together and then I will be asking you to sign it. There are no right or wrong answers and there is no rush to answer the questions. If you would like to skip a question please just let me know and I will move on. Please answer the questions with as much detail as possible.

- a. To begin, let's talk about some basic things I should know about you. Tell me about your beginnings- how did the story of 'pseudonym' begin?
- b. Who do you consider to be your family?
  1. Describe your relationship with them
    - a. What do you think of them?
    - b. How would each family member describe you?
  2. What is your favorite thing to do with your family?
  3. What is your least favorite thing to do with your family?
  4. Tell me more about your siblings. Who are they, what do they do, what kind of a relationship do you have?
  5. What life-changing events have happened in your life?
    - a. Moving?
    - b. Death/Divorce?
    - c. Illness?



2. Tell me a story about a time that you had an especially positive interaction with a school staff member? A negative one?
- vii. Who were your friends in high school?
1. What did you do with them?
  2. What about your friends- what did they plan for themselves after high school graduation?
  3. Did any of your friends from high school end up coming here? Why do you think they chose to come here?
- e. When you were in high school what did you ultimately want to do when you “grew up”
- i. Did this change throughout high school? How?
- f. Now I want to specifically talk about your graduation plans.
- i. Walk me through the process you went through when deciding what you were going to do after high school graduation.
  - ii. Over the course of your time in school, what were your expectations for what you might do after you graduated high school?
  - iii. At what point do you recall other people discussing what the expectations were for you after graduating high school? What were the expectations by others?
- g. Before coming here had you ever been on a college campus...whether it was visiting a friend/sibling or as part of a program?
- h. As you look back on your time in high school, tell me what you knew about college.
1. How did the topic come up with different staff members at your school?

2. How about your classmates- what was their general impression of college? Would you say more than half or less than half of your graduating class went to college?
- ii. What did your parents tell you about college?
  1. Did they have a savings account for you?
  2. Did they help you with filling out financial aid forms?
- iii. When you were in high school were you close friends with anyone who was enrolled in college?
  1. What did they say about it?
- iv. Did any colleges contact you? How?
- v. Did you visit any colleges? How did you choose which ones to visit? Who went with you?
- vi. As a junior or senior in high school describe what you would have considered to be an ideal college.
 

1. Location?	12. Relatives
2. Cost?	attend?
3. School size?	13. Where friends
4. 2 yr or 4 yr?	were going?
5. Class size?	14. Social life?
6. Financial aid?	15. Living
7. Support	arrangements?
Services?	16. Other?
8. Admission	
requirements?	
9. Choice of	
majors?	
10. Parent	
approval?	
11. Transportation	
?	

- i. Tell me about the final choice.
  - i. When did you make the choice that this was the school you wanted to attend?
  - ii. There are quite a few other schools in this geographic area, both 2 year and 4 year schools. What was different about here? What was the attraction?
  - iii. What is your major here?
  - iv. As of today, what do you plan on doing when you graduate?

*Thank you for your participation in my study and for sharing this information with me!*