

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION OF ACCESS TO COLLEGE

A Thesis

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by

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Abstract

of

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This qualitative study, conducted in a collaborative effort, explored high school students' knowledge about college and how they obtained their information about college. Specifically, it is built on current literature's findings that the rate of enrollment for high school students continues to exhibit a wide gap, with the predominant factor being whether high school students have sufficient information about college and financial aid. Through the use of focus groups, where participants engaged in interview questions in small assemblages, it was found that students were generally knowledgeable about college overall. However, the study also highlighted that various factors may explain the gap in college-related knowledge between students.

Data analysis revealed three interrelated themes that may influence how the participants acquired college information: (a) common resources of information they have; (b) timing of access to college-related information; and (c) extracurricular resources and programs that are available to them. In addition, the current research

discussed and compared AP participants and non-AP participants and discovered differences in relation to the three themes.

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Amber Gonzalez

Date

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

While college enrollment rates have demonstrated an upward trend over the last several decades, recent research indicates that the rates of enrollment continue to vary systematically with regard to socioeconomic status, race, and context. Specifically, low-socioeconomic status (SES) students are less likely than high-socioeconomic-status students to attend college immediately after high school (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Low-SES students also represent a major percentage of the college population that ultimately delayed their enrollment to a later time or not at all. There are several reasons for lower rates of college attendance in low SES communities. Perna and Steele (2011) posit that among high school students of lower SES and underserved communities, the variability in college enrollment rates stem from a resource imbalance. Resource can be viewed as peers and/or other adults who may be more knowledgeable and experienced about college, such as college representatives, peers, counselors, college publications, family, alumni, teacher, newspaper, and TV (Johnson & Stewart, 1991). Perna and Steele (2011) argued that this lack of adequate resources for students in low-SES high schools in turn leads to a lack of necessary information needed to overcome the arduous process of college application and enrollment. The current study investigated high school participants' college-related knowledge in order to build upon recent research regarding the availability of resources for students or lack thereof.

Furthermore, drawing from data collected through the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS), Engberg and Wolniak (2014) examined the influence of the high school socioeconomic context on student's access to information and their ultimate decision to attend college and provided evidence of this resource imbalance. Upon statistical analysis of SES and demographic variables, they found that opportunities to meet college representatives and peers as well as extracurricular college-oriented programs were all resources that were less accessible in low-SES schools than more affluent high schools. The lack of access to college-related resources may contribute to a gap in college-related knowledge between these students and their more affluent counterparts (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014).

The lack of resources, availability of information, and guidance may influence students' mind set and decision making when undertaking the extensive college going process. These imbalances endured by low SES high school students' may affect their college aspirations and can also be thwarted further by complex family relationships and situations (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). For example, high school students who fall within lower-income brackets or those within underrepresented groups are more likely to have parents who have not attended college before. Hence, their parents also have limited knowledge of the processes of admission into college, including financial aid and scholarships (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). Parents in these families may not be able to assist their adolescents in completing admissions and financial aid applications.

Further, Cox (2016) highlighted how students' college aspirations are significantly hampered by interruptions, limitations, and other barriers that exist for many

low-income and underrepresented groups. The researcher's qualitative analysis found that the life circumstances for these students ultimately diverged their initial postsecondary paths. In addition, for many of the students in the longitudinal study, complicated parent relationships, temporary housing, and other economic difficulties obligated them to put less of a priority on their college aspirations and more on the realities of their lives (Cox, 2016). Their decision making was more frequently based on urgent and pressing matters. Cox (2016) provided an example such that one student's application for Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) was repeatedly returned because her complicated family situation made it difficult for her to figure out how to make the necessary corrections. Another student believed, for an extended period of time, that college was too expensive and she would enter the workforce upon graduating high school. Thus, the Cox (2016) findings suggest that limited college-related knowledge means that, despite their college aspirations, lower SES students from underrepresented groups show postsecondary paths that diverge significantly from their original plans. These findings indicate the need to understand difficulties that contribute to a lack of college knowledge.

Overall, the current emerging notion is that a lack of resources and support for students and parents of low SES, coupled with their already complicating family situations, ultimately impacts access to information and eventually, college (Cox, 2016, Perna & Steele, 2001, De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006, Johnson & Stewart, 1991, Engberg & Wolniak, 2014, Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Inevitably, this web of interrelated conditions and contexts leaves high school students and their parents, who lack information or have

misinformation about college, to make the decision to not pursue postsecondary education. Researchers have acknowledged a lack of empirical evidence on how high school context, such as availability of resources and support, influences student engagement in acquiring college related information (Perna & Steele, 2011). With social context playing such a vital role in students' access to resources and information for enrollment into college, the propose study aimed to investigate, through asking high school students what they know about college and what their sources of college information are, whether these interrelated conditions and context contribute to the gap in college enrollment. In addition, the proposed study investigated the differences in participant knowledge about college among AP and Non-AP classes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to extend and build on prior research by examining the information high school students have about college-related process, including their acquisition of knowledge pertaining to college enrollment and finances. Accordingly, the proposed study addresses the following research questions:

- a) What do high school students know about college (including but not limited to, costs, admission requirements, and financial aid)?
- b) How do high school students acquire college-related knowledge?
- c) Are there differences among high school students between AP and non-AP courses in regard to college-related knowledge?

More specifically, the study looked to investigate the knowledge high school students has by analyzing several issues that have been called into question by recent literature, which will be elaborated upon below. This includes the common sources students have in regard to gathering information about college and what type of information each source provides. The study also sought to investigate the gap in college-related knowledge among senior, junior and sophomore students, as well as to analyze whether advance placement (AP) students provide more elaborative responses to interview questions. Lastly, the study examined whether extracurricular programs served as a resource for students to further assist them with additional information pertaining to college.

Method

Current study utilized a qualitative methodology approach, which identified social cultural learning processes in relation to students' knowledge of college related information. The researchers mirrored Vasilachis' (2009), Miller and Fredericks (2002), and Carson, Gilmore, Perry, and Gronhaug (2001) epistemological approach along with Cicourel's (1964) and Garfinkel's (1967) interpretivist paradigm, which are described in the Method section of this paper. Researchers were primarily focused on the low and middle-class families; thus, participants were interviewed at the Sheldon High School in the Sacramento region. In order to capture sufficient quantity of data, the researchers interviewed 15 participants in a semi-structured format. Participants were randomly

selected with the use of flash cards, resulting in three participants in each group.

Researchers were able to complete five focus group interviews; three focus groups were completed during a non-AP psychology class and two focus group interviews during AP psychology class.

Researchers alternated asking questions, both ensured to collect notes, one researcher used a laptop while the other hand wrote the conversation. Both researchers utilized their cellular devices to record each focus group interview. The semi-structures focus group interviews provided participants with a demographic survey solely to identify statistical tally. The participants were asked a series of (Appendix A), and additional questions for clarification purposes. As the researchers actively analyzed the data together, they were able to develop distinct concepts and identify numerous open codes. Researchers joined effort lead to establishing a theoretical saturation discussed in Chapter 5.

Statement of Collaboration

The current thesis, *A Qualitative Approach to Understanding High School Students' Knowledge and Perception of Access to College* was conducted and composed through continuous collaboration by Vinny Quach and Lera Ilyenko. Both researchers explored the idea of high school students enrolling into college by reading through a broad range of peer reviewed journal articles and texts. The researchers met often to deliberate about current research which narrowed the topics for literature review. Once a

topic was agreed upon, the researchers began to review the literature within that area and develop their own critiques. This led to the development of the literature review. Once the literature review was established, the researchers were able to construct their research questions. After research questions were constructed the researchers began to develop the proposed methods. After completion of the literature review and the methods the researchers embarked on carrying out the research design by collecting data and analyzing the data. Collecting data was done through focus group interviews in which both researchers participated. In addition, the process of transcribing recorded interviews was divided among Lera and Vinny equally.

Completion of the thesis was shared between the researchers; both were responsible for finalizing the introduction, review of the literature, analysis of the data, findings and interpretations, transcribing and coding the data. While the work was shared equally, Vinny lead the introduction, review of the literature, findings and interpretation and Lera lead second half of the literature review, the methods, results, comprising the tables and creating templates for approval pages, table of contents, list of tables, appendixes and compiling forms as needed. Regularly, the researchers proofread each other's portion of the work for any grammatical errors, spelling, and sentence structure and more importantly, ensured they were in agreement with every aspect of the thesis.

Organization of the Thesis

This chapter has presented an introduction to the study, its purpose, as well as the qualitative methodology used for data collection. Chapter Two will review existing research on high school student's knowledge about college and various factors that may contribute to the current gap in college enrollment among low SES high schools. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as well as Stone et al. (2012) adaptation of Bourdieu's theory of habitus will also be discussed and established as the theoretical framework guiding this study. The study's methodology will be detailed in Chapter Three including a description of the research design and questions, the current study's participants, data collection procedures, measures employed, and the data analysis conducted. Chapter Four will present the data from participant interviews in the following six areas: (1) college admittance procedures, (2) college sectors, (3) financing college education, (4) options beyond high school, (5) college as a means of social/economic mobility, and (6) resources. Data findings will be discussed in Chapter Five. The limitations of this study as well as directions for future research will also be addressed.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to build on previous findings and further investigate high school students' knowledge about college. More specifically, the researchers aimed to explore three specific subjects:

- a) What do high school students know about college (including but not limited to, cost, admission requirements, and financial aid)?
- b) How do high school students acquire college-related knowledge?
- c) Are there differences among high school students between AP and non-AP courses in regard to college-related knowledge?

Furthermore, current research study aimed investigate whether a gap in college-related knowledge existed among AP and non-AP students. Lastly, researchers investigated whether extracurricular programs served as a resource for students to further assist in additional information pertaining to college related information.

Theoretical Basis of the Study

According to psychologist and theorist Lev Vygotsky, development and behavior are influenced by one's interactions with the social world. In other words, as learning precedes development, any child's growth and advancement cannot be understood without looking at their active engagement with their social and cultural context (Daniels,

2008). This includes negotiation with tools and resources such as peers and other adults who may be more knowledgeable and experienced. This is especially apparent for graduating high school students who look to take the next step in their development through enrollment in higher education. As students engage in the college-going process, norms, values, and expectations come into play and students' perceptions are constructed through transactions with their social and cultural context.

Further, a related concept, habitus, was introduced by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and has been used in college choice research to explain how an internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions are acquired through one interactions with his or her parents and community (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014). Taking it a step further, Stone et al.'s (2012) adaptation of habitus, the relational habitus, brings these two theoretical notions together in a way that captures the experiences and interactions that shapes the college-going process for students. The relational habitus, as introduced by Stone and her colleagues, is the ensemble of relations including the individual, his/her peers, and the tools, tasks that are intersubjectively constructed and sustained over time in formal and informal learning communities such as high schools. This relational habitus explains differences in an individual's attempt at making sense of their world. Moreover, as a theoretical tool, the relational habitus as conceptualized by Stone et al. encompasses the notion of intersubjectivity, which is according to the researchers, the negotiation and construction of a shared understanding that promotes learning and development. Accordingly, intersubjectivity is constantly produced, reproduced and transformed over

time as individuals such as high school students, interact with their social context and tools, and ‘become environments’ for each other (Stone et al., 2012).

Taken together, these theoretical origins reflect what high school students go through as they actively adapt, learn, and influence their environment. These bi-directional, multi-dimensional elements derived from Vygotsky, Bourdieu and Stone lay the foundation for this proposed study. It is clear that as students actively attempt to construct a shared understanding with their social and cultural world, a notion termed intersubjectivity by Stone et al. (2012), they leave an impact those very same social and cultural worlds and are ultimately impacted themselves through an encompassing and reciprocating manner. The knowledge and information that they acquire is used to make decisions that ultimately reflects on those around them. With that being said, different socioeconomic contexts and environments create disparities for students in not only the acquisition of college knowledge, but also the type of knowledge they obtain. This disparity leads to major decision-making differences and consequently leaves a gap between low SES students and their more affluent peers. We look to incorporate these theoretical models to assess low SES high school student’s acquisition of knowledge as well as the source of their information. In the section that follows, we summarize the relevant evidence that form the basis for the proposed study.

Common Resources

College-related information can be obtained through a myriad of sources. Johnson and Stewart (1991) looked at what resources students use when exploring college choices. Students in this study were asked to indicate which of the nine resources they used in selecting a college: college representatives, peers, counselors, college publications, family, alumni, teacher, newspaper, and TV. Their analysis found that students, particularly those from low-income families, most often identified resources such as college students, friends, and high school counselors (Johnson & Stewart, 1991). Importantly, other resources such as opportunities to meet college representatives and access to college publications and prep programs were less available to them. These resources were more readily available for more affluent high schools.

In addition, Johnson and Stewart (1991) examined the extent to which high school students relied on counselors for information about college as well as where to attend. Specifically, for low SES students, the counselor was identified as the primary resource; more often than parents or high school teachers. These proactive counselors were viewed as knowledgeable and familiar with college admissions process in addition to having contact in admission office at selective colleges. They thus often serve as a positive resource to high school students (Persell & Cookson, 1985; Stevens, 2007; Klugman, 2012). However, while the majority of these students used their high school counselor as a number one source of information, one study reported that only 59% received the information they sought (Johnson & Stewart, 1991). Hence, when it comes to seeking

and accessing college-related information, those attending less prosperous high schools tend to lack resources and inevitably, this predicament dictated what kind of information many of these low-income students seek. Thus, there is a need to further assess just what high school students know about college and what their sources of information are, in relation to their social context. The present study aims to build on this emerging phenomenon through examining focus group interviews of high school students and homing in on students' direct responses and perspectives regarding their common sources of college information.

Despite this heavy reliance on counselors, more recent research indicates that low-income parents play a significant role of the college enrollment process for their students (Warnock, 2016). In particular, low-SES parents have the most influence in their child's college choices. This is because a child's college going process first and foremost starts with their application for financial aid, which directly involves their parents. Thus, parents perceived ability to pay, their knowledge of college, and their access to financial aid are important factors that directly affects their child's college enrollment. Building from this notion, when it comes to parents, income is positively associated with obtaining information about financial aid, suggesting that low-income families are less likely to have information about financial aid than are middle- and upper-income families, making it more likely that they will be under the assumption that their child will need to earn money for college (Perna & Steele, 2011). Low-SES parents' perceptions are influenced by the availability of funds.

Furthermore, there is a strong relationship between parents' income and education and perceptions of ability to pay for college. Warnock (2016) posited that low-income and less educated parents are more likely to believe there is no way to get money for college. Low-income and less educated parents are also more likely to believe that their child will be able to earn enough money for college, a finding that suggests that they may not be familiar with or aware of the costs and time necessary to attend college. These differences may serve to explain at least part of the gap in attainment of college-related knowledge and enrollment and indicates that further research is necessary.

Similar research has shown that high school students and their parents tend to lack information or are misinformed about college. De La Rosa and Tierney (2006) found that high school students from underserved communities often made false assumptions about the amount of higher education needed for specific career paths. Likewise, Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009) noted how underrepresented students do not naturally acquire college knowledge; most of these students come from families with limited or no college experience. Subsequently, as Johnson and Stewart (1991) iterated, these students rely on their school to provide information about college to them. Such reliance for information about college is problematic and indicates that further research is necessary, as often the high schools' low SES students attend are ill-equipped to provide sufficient guidance. The present study will look to analyze the information provided by high school participants in their group interviews to assess whether SES context influences their acquisition of college-related knowledge.

Moreover, Perna and Steele (2011) revealed that students with lower levels of information about college, especially information focused on cost and aid, are less likely to apply to or consider college as an option. These students and their families often deem higher education as out of reach or not a priority; they preferably seek to find a job immediately after graduating high school. Further, while Perna and Steele (2011) did not establish whether having college-related knowledge actually causes students to proceed with college enrollment, these students are also significantly less likely to be willing to take out loans to pay for college, or have parents that prepare, plan, and save for college.

While many students rely on family members, and while family often plays the strongest role in the steps to enrolling into college, (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008), not all students have parents with a wealth of knowledge about college. They are often not aware of financial aid and the intricate processes of applying to college. This includes filling out required tax forms, generating parent pin number, and loan/tuition documents (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). As a result, their children receive little to no guidance from their parents about college.

Overall, lack of income, lack of information, and lack of support and guidance in the high school define the perceptions and realities of low-SES families. These findings help to explain how a gap in college-related information leads to low representation of low SES families on college campuses. The proposed study looks to investigate the importance of the resources students have in regard to college and how these sources of information for students may vary by socioeconomic status.

Timing of Access to Knowledge

Little has been written on the timing and acquisition of students' college-related knowledge during high school years. Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) posited that there is a change in students' focus and intensity of college information gathering as they progress in high school. Sources of information change and become more available as well (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). Similarly, Bell et al. (2009) found that in the beginning stages of high school, students were not active in acquiring knowledge about college; information about cost and financial aid were not a concern to them. However, they did observe a change between 10th and 11th grades, as 11th graders more actively sought and collected information about colleges. Particularly, information about cost and financial aid became more of a concern.

Additionally, recent research suggested sources of college information changed as students' progress through high school (Bell et al., 2009, Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999, Goff, Patino & Jackson, 2004). Goff, Patino, and Jackson (2004) contended that in the initial years of high school, students' main sources of college-related information came from their family and peers. For 11th graders, however, the process of acquiring knowledge expanded to include school staff and, upon availability, career centers. The researchers also found that in the latter years of their high school career, personnel such as counselors, university volunteers, and teachers became key college information resources for students and their families. Moreover, Klugman (2012) also found that social/peer resources is yet another vital resource of student knowledge about college.

Engberg and Wolniak (2010) as well as Owens (2010) also stated that high school students who have peers that are wealthy in college related information, are inspirational, goal oriented and can influence peers around them to enroll into a 4-year college or to pursue an associated degree. These findings underscore the need to look more in depth at how timing of access to knowledge may be an important factor in high school students' overall acquisition of college information.

Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) asserted that while all students generally knew the steps required to enroll in college; they knew that they needed to take the SAT and to keep their grades up; 9th and 10th graders mostly stated that they were just concentrating on academics. Eleventh graders however tended to have a more developed idea of what they actually needed to do; they were more informed about college preparation activities and the specific processes of applying to college. The researchers also noted that 11th graders, especially those in upper-resource schools and some middle-resource schools, believed that taking more AP classes would make them more marketable to colleges. Additionally, while more 11th graders than 9th and 10th knew of financial aid and were able to better estimate college costs, those who came from low-resource schools were not as able to provide detailed information or were unsure of how to fill out the applications. However, while the findings were promising, the researchers' conclusions were limited in that it did not explain how socioeconomic context may contribute to the differences in knowledge acquisition of students of various grades. This limitation in particular supports the need to look at the interrelation of timing and context in student's acquisition of college information. Therefore, the present study aims to

employ a focus group interview methodology which will allow participants to describe in their own words when exactly they gained access to college-related knowledge as well as where and from whom are they obtaining it in order to get a better understanding of how college information is manifested throughout their high school tenure.

Moreover, Bell et al (2009) found that while students gained more resources and information about college as they progress through high school, in many low-SES schools these students had yet to employ them by their junior and senior year. Only in more affluent schools were the dots being connected systematically between high school coursework and college awareness and preparation. This discrepancy is more problematic for students residing in low-SES schools as these students are less likely to have parents who attended college and can offer their experiences as models to their children. The proposed study seeks to further investigate how low SES context influences students, as it may be critical in determining how timing and acquisition of knowledge needed for college-going is interrelated with social and economic contexts that students inhabit.

Extracurricular Resources and Programs as Benefit

Today's technological advances have recently allowed students to gain access to college information through the internet. Still, despite the abundance of information on the web, including knowledge about financial aid, scholarships, and other college requirements, Venegas (2006) found that many low SES students and their parents lacked

the instrumental knowledge needed to efficiently navigate through a myriad of websites in order to gain information about, and apply for, financial aid. Similarly, staff members of less privileged schools themselves often lacked proper training to help students to navigate on-line processes.

Furthermore, regardless of socioeconomic status, students do generally receive support from their high school in their endeavor to complete college enrollment applications, forms, and more (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). This includes the often complicated and stressful FAFSA process. To do so, high schools integrate various programs in an attempt to prepare their soon to be graduates for post-secondary-education. However, for many of the lower SES high schools, these programs are tailored towards guiding students through tasks such as applications and online enrollment processes, but do not provide students with the proper mindset of college education. The overarching concept of college is an intricate journey and process that necessitates constant surveillance and clarification. Students, particularly those in underserved communities, require more than just seminars or assemblies that provide basic instructions for completing college application forms or which box to check. Thus, colleges across the state have recently been looking to invest resources into all high schools with the hope of better preparing students in need and ultimately increasing the rate of college enrollment (Schneider, Broda, Judy, & Burkander, 2013). They aim to provide this through extracurricular resources such as college representatives and speakers, tours, in addition to specialized programs. The present study seeks to extend

the current research on these additional resources and inquire whether or not they are available for high school participants to utilize and take advantage of.

Extracurricular programs such as Teach for America (TFA) and Teaching Fellow (TF) recruit college graduates to act as a “coach” for students, modeling their own experiences through college and the steps needed to succeed (Schneider et al., 2013). To yield the most promising results, the college recruits are comprised of individuals who were highly ranked in their graduating class; they are success-driven and set high-achieving standards for not only the students they work with but counselors and teachers as well. Staff who worked with TFA and TF were better able to convey college requirements to the high school students. Moreover, the coaches often worked directly with students to fill out college applications and other required information. In essence, they serve as an open resource for students to ask all and any questions related to college.

Likewise, Schneider et al. (2013) introduced the College Ambition Program (CAP), which serves as a holistic approach to college enrollment. They contended that the program is open to all high school grades, promoting college enrollment and culture. CAP emphasized on improving students’ understanding of secondary-education requirements and the career paths available from numerous college degrees. It aimed to cover the entire spectrum of college readiness, from campus visits to shaping student’s attitudes and goal attainment. In essence, CAP is specifically designed to serve as a mediator for students to more thoroughly connect to vital aspects of secondary-education.

Other intervention programs such as AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) were recently created in California and are offered either as additional

classes or as extracurricular activities (Bell et. al, 2009). The program provides extensive information about financial aid programs and the steps to qualify for them. In addition, the program targets students as they enter high school, with the notion that early intervention may yield more successful and prepared students for their postsecondary aspirations. Students in these programs knew of local, state, and federal programs and could provide concrete information about the requirements for financial aid and other college-going processes.

Overall, the births of these recent extracurricular programs tailored towards college going and preparation have proven to be beneficial for students in terms of gaining college-related knowledge. What remains to be seen, however, is how available and accessible they are to low SES students whose high schools are not as affluent. Highlighted by previous research, these extracurricular preparatory activities and programs are a crucial aspect of the whole college-going process and are interrelated with contextual factors that ultimately contribute to not only students' perception of college, but also their choice and decision making of going to college overall. This notion, coupled with the understanding that students are active agents whose interactions with his or her social and cultural environment shape their construction of knowledge and development, sets the stage for the proposed study. The current study aims to build on previous literature in hopes of better understanding how the availability of additional resources such as college-tailored extracurricular programs may contribute to the gap that exists in college-related knowledge and enrollment among various contextual factors.

Advantages for High School Students Enrolled in AP Courses

Advanced placement courses are becoming more common across high schools. These courses are designed and tailored towards college preparation and provide students who are enrolled in them opportunities to dive deeper into specific course curricula that equivalent to courses taught at postsecondary institutions (Santoli, 2002). Recent research has suggested that students who enroll in these advanced placement (AP) courses during their high school education may benefit from having an additional source of college preparatory knowledge that is inherent in the focused, in-depth, college-tailored courses. For example, Thompson and Rust (2007) focused on college student success in relation to their enrollment of AP or non-AP courses during high school. While their original focus and hypothesis put emphasis on whether high school students enrolled in AP courses would earn significantly higher college grade point averages (GPA) compared to those who did not take AP courses in high school, their findings did not reveal the expected outcome. However, the researcher's findings were fruitful in discovering that AP students in general were greater equipped and ultimately struggled less with gaining access to college. They found that students who took AP courses were more informed, experienced and prepared for the higher level of tough course work. Such finding is paramount and supports the need to more thoroughly examine at how AP courses may be a beneficial resource for high school students in terms acquiring college knowledge.

Hallett and Venegas (2011) provided further confirmation in regard to the advantages of having access to and taking AP courses throughout high school. The researchers explored low-income urban high schools and their connection between increased access of AP courses and the academic quality of AP courses which prepared students for college. They found that low-income students are becoming more aware of the value in enrolling and completing AP exams. Successfully completing AP examination provides cost-saving options and transferable college credit. Additionally, passing an AP exam develops students' skills and increases their knowledge on specific subject matter in order to be successful at the college level. Therefore, in line with other research, Hallett and her colleague findings revealed students who are offered and successfully pass the AP exam are more likely to attend and succeed in college.

Moreover, in a national study, Iatarola, et al. (2011) discovered that the quantity of AP courses offered at high school campus' is mostly dependent on eighth-grade test scores. Focusing on data from small rural communities serving low-income students, Iatarola et al. (2011) found that these communities do not offer many AP courses due to the low quality of education provided and due to fewer qualified and experienced teachers. Their findings indicate a need for Federal and state policy makers and the College Board as well as private foundations to aim to increase AP course offered in any high school location to increase the number of students from disadvantaged communities to succeed and become more motivated to enroll into college. Such disparity sets the tone for the proposed study to take a deeper look into how the availability of AP courses

may be beneficial for students of all socioeconomic statuses, as well as to investigate how it may affect their perception of and preparation for college.

Both Thompson and Rust (2007) and Hallett and Venegas (2011) found that students enrolled in AP courses are more likely to be successful in college. However, Wehde-Roddiger, Trevino, Arrambite, O’Conor, and Onwuegbuzie (2012) note that 40% of high school graduates still experience gaps in their educational skill sets and knowledge needed for post-secondary education. In addition, approximately 40% of students who begin college will drop out within or after the first year. However, research has noted exceptions for students enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses. Schools that have offered multiple AP courses obtained higher rates of college preparedness and enrollment (Wehde-Roddiger et al., 2012). Despite this promising notion, the researchers highlighted that many high school education systems are still lacking in providing their students opportunities to take AP courses that would improve their educational skill sets and to better prepare them for college. These barriers were noted to commonly be imposed by the high school administrative staff (Wehde-Roddiger et al., 2012). In looking to bolster AP prospects, Wehde-Roddiger et al. found that between the years 2001 to 2011, the College Board expanded the AP programs by 134% to prepare students for college. The more exposure students received from AP courses the more they benefited in terms of preparation for college. These findings also benefit educators who are looking to encourage their students to enroll in AP courses.

Overall, students who complete AP courses are better prepared for college than students who did not enroll in AP courses. They are more curious, more engaged in the

course topic and are challenged by their teachers as well as their in-class peers. They are also more likely to pursue knowledge beyond the classroom, a trait that predicts not only actively seeking postsecondary education but striving in it as well (Wehde-Roddiger et al., 2012). Thus, the present study looks to build on these findings through analyzing high school participants' direct experience with and their perspective of taking AP courses in regard to obtaining college-related information.

Similarly, Klugman's (2012) longitudinal findings confirms Wehde-Roddiger et al.'s (2012) notion that students who enroll in AP course are more likely to enroll into college. Klugman expanded on the idea of readily accessible AP courses in high schools which would increase the odds of students in enrolling into college. With specialized knowledge of AP topics, he found that students who had successfully completed AP subjects were able to better mediate their choices between enrolling into universities or junior colleges. In addition, the researcher reported students in the 10th grade, at the 90th percentile of successfully completing an AP course, are more probable to enroll into post-secondary education and to obtain a bachelor's degree. This finding is important as it suggests the long-term benefits of making AP courses more available to high school students, particularly in underserved communities. Students in these communities who are able to enroll in more AP course may be able to gain greater access to college related resources from their AP teachers and peers, thus ultimately leading to a greater possibility of enrollment into four-year university. To build off these notions presented by Klugman and other recent literature, the current study looks to provide insight on whether students who are enrolled in AP courses at Sheldon High school benefit from the additional

resource on college information that they gain compared to their peers whom are not enrolled in AP courses.

Summary

Taken together, findings from existing research, while promising, still signal a lack of empirical evidence on how high school students and their active social context may influence their access to and obtaining of college related information. This indicates a need for further investigation on the interrelation and influence of students' sociocultural environment and their acquisition of knowledge related to college. Thus, the current qualitative study aimed to examine the role of high school socioeconomic context and how factors such as college information resources, college-related extracurricular programs, and timing of access to college information are interrelated in influencing student's knowledge about college. In addition, the study examined how high school students' enrollment into advanced placement (AP) classes may more greatly benefit them in their acquisition of sufficient college information.

Chapter 3

METHODS

Research Questions

To expand on existing literature of what high school students know about college, the goal of the current study was to generate a dialogue geared toward discovering: (a) participants' access to types of resources in regard to gathering information about college and the type of information each source provided; (b) knowledge differences among AP and non-AP participants; and (c) whether extracurricular programs serve as a resource for students to further assist them with additional information pertaining to college.

Research Design

For this study, a local Sacramento area high school was selected due to ease of access and convenience. Researchers relied on collection of data from a population that was conveniently available and easy to access. Researchers lived reasonably close to the school. Gaining access to the school was possible because one of the researchers attended the high school many years ago and knew several teachers who currently taught at that high school. Thus, two Sheldon High School classrooms were available to conduct focus group interviews. The third period psychology class and fourth period AP psychology class provided the opportunity for the researchers to explore the difference in

student knowledge about college. Participants were randomly selected through the use of flash cards and interviewed in focus groups. Each focus group comprised of three participants, totaling three focus groups during third period, non-AP psychology class and two focus groups during fourth period, AP psychology class. The goal of the focus group interviews was to gain a better understanding of what high school students know about college and how they acquired college-related information. Also, focus group interviews provided an in-depth and nuanced dialog that captured a variety of perspectives. The group participants displayed mutual understandings and respect toward each other. This relationship became apparent during the interview and created a sense of trust and openness while responding to answers.

A total of five focus groups were interviewed, each group randomly assembled and comprised of three participants for a total of 15 participants. The researchers interviewed three focus groups in the third period psychology class but only two focus groups during the fourth period AP psychology course. The reason for fewer interviews in the fourth period was related to the class teacher assigning a writing assignment at the beginning of class, limiting the researchers' time to interview participants.

The study used a qualitative methodology to identify the local social and cultural learning processes in relation to students' knowledge of college related information. The researchers also mirrored an epistemological research approach as described by Vasilachis' (2009), Miller and Fredericks (2002), and Carson, Gilmore, Perry, and Gronhaug. (2001) to understand the nature of student knowledge, their rationale and justification of knowledge and Cicourel's (1964) and Garfinkel's (1967) interpretivist

paradigm (i.e. assuming the reality as we know it is constructed intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially). As Emerson, Frets and Shaw (1995) described, in an interpretivist paradigm, the researchers and the interpretations are interdependent and consistently interactive. Therefore, the researchers' goal was to understand and interpret the meaning of gathered data.

The researchers' data analysis lead to an understanding of meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences. Meaning emerged during intersubjective/dialogic experiences. The researchers collected the data utilizing a semistructured interview format that allowed the researchers to achieve a balance of control and flexibility in the reorganization of topics through probing and follow-up enquiries. This strategy made it possible for new ideas and meanings to emerge as the conversation unfolded. Further, a semi-structured interview approach enabled the researchers, depending on the context, modify questions and, at the time, focus on the responses provided by the participants. Ultimately, this interview method created a rich set of data, which made it possible to create a framework of codes designed to answer the research question. Moreover, the codes were explored with a general qualitative lens (Creswell, 2013).

The researchers progressively identified and integrated categories to collaboratively engage in line-by-line open coding (Emerson, Frets & Shaw, 1995). Researchers probed participants for clarifications to obtain thorough understanding of their social world and become further informed on the discussed questions (Appendix A).

Participants and Setting

Fifteen students were recruited from a local high school in the Sacramento area. The Sheldon High School was chosen due to its convenient location, and ease of access to the researchers and students. The high school encompassed low and middle socioeconomic class families; a total of 58% of the student population qualified for free and or reduced lunch (California Department of Education DataQuest, 2015). A total of five focus groups were interviewed; each randomly assembled group comprised of three participants for a total of 15.

Participants were of various ethnic backgrounds, including 40% Asian, 20% Hispanic/Latino, 14% Black/African American, 13% Caucasian and 13% identified as other. Grade classification of participants consisted of 13% sophomore (10th grade), 40% juniors (11th grade), and 47% seniors (12th grade). Responses on a Demographic questionnaire revealed 53% of the participants were 16 years old, 33% were 17 years old, and 13% were 18 years old. Further demographics revealed 67% of participants were of low socioeconomic. Table 1 and Table 2 display demographic information (gender, SES, family structure, ethnicity, grade level and age) for the participants.

Statistical data from International Baccalaureate of North America (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014) revealed the following for the 2013-2014 year: 29.9 percent of Sheldon High School students were deemed “college ready,” 79 percent of the student population were of a minority, and 50 percent of these students were economically disadvantaged. From 2015-2016, the percentage of economically

disadvantage students increased to 58%. Additionally, only 39% of students attending Sheldon High school were enrolled in AP classes, 68% of which passed the culminating AP exam.

Table 1

Demographic Information – Gender, SES and Family Structure

	Female	Male	Yes	No	N/A
Gender	67%	33%			
Free/Reduced Lunch			67%	33%	
Mother attended college			34%	53%	13%
Father attended college			47%	40%	23%
Employed			80%	20%	
Had Older Siblings			87%	13%	
Siblings attending college			47%	33%	20%

Table 2

Demographic Information – Ethnicity, Grade Level, and Age.

	Ethnicity	Grade Level	Age
Asian	40%		
Hispanic /Latino	20%		
Black/ African American	14%		
White	13%		
Other	13%		
10 – Sophomore		13%	
11 – Junior		40%	
12 – Senior		47%	
16 years old			53%
17 years old			33%
18 years old			13%

Procedure

Two weeks prior to conducting interviews, participants in the third period psychology course and fourth period AP psychology course were given parent consent forms (Appendix B) to return signed the day of the interview, along with a signed assent form (Appendix C) to participate in the research study. Participants for each focus group were randomly chosen from students in a third period psychology class and fourth period AP psychology class at the school. The random selection occurred with the aid of flash cards. The same teacher of both third and fourth classes required students, at the beginning of the school year, to fill out the flash card with student name and other

psychology related questions. Those flashcards were used by the researchers to randomly select the participants. For privacy purposes, the participants were interviewed in groups of three in a nearby unoccupied classroom. The researchers arranged the desks into a circle to achieve an interactive dialogue with the participants.

As participants entered the classroom and took their seats they were asked to complete the brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) which was placed face down on each of the arranged desks. To retain anonymity, the researchers encouraged the participants to exclude their names. The researchers encouraged anonymity because participant identities were not essential to the study protocol.

As previously described, data collection occurred in a semi-structured fashion with five separate focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of three participants who were asked the same set of predetermined questions (see Appendix A). The first three focus groups of participants were interviewed from a third period psychology class; the last two focus groups of participants were interviewed from a fourth period advanced placement (AP) psychology class. The focus group interviews were approximately thirty minutes in length each.

Field Notes and Reflexive Journals

Data collection included one researcher taking extensive notes on the laptop while the other researcher jotted down important cues on a note pad. All five of the interviews were audio recorded on both researchers' audio-recording devices, in case one failed. Researchers often referred to their notes while analyzing the data.

Measures

Demographic Survey

Prior to each focus group interview, participants were given a demographic survey (Appendix D). Survey questions were used to identify the socioeconomic range of the group. The questionnaire solely served for statistical tally, which gathered participant's age, gender, ethnicity, grade level, whether they were employed, had siblings and did that sibling attend college/university. The survey enquired about the participant's parents' education, focusing primarily on whether the mother or the father had attended college. The question served as dichotomous because the researchers were not interested in how much education either parent received rather whether the parent had or had not attended college. This measure served as an indication to whether the parents could provide first hand college-going knowledge.

In addition, the survey aimed to collect data related to socioeconomic status by enquiring as to whether they qualified for a free/reduced lunch. The survey questions reflected the variables which were found in previous research as appropriate measures for assessing and providing insight on the socioeconomic context of high school students and the importance of individual background characteristics as interrelated factors contributing to perception and access to college (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014).

Interview Questions

Participants were asked a series of questions (Appendix A). Researchers inquired about participant's overall knowledge about college, they were also asked to list some college requirements, how did they come to know this information, and whether they considered the information they received from different sources useful/practical. The researchers then began to ask more in-depth questions such as the difference between junior college and university, whether it is better to start at the junior or university level. Researchers also wanted to know what information the participants knew in regard to college admission and how to qualify for financial aid or what the process is to apply for financial aid. Participants were asked whether they knew how enrollment influences financial award and whether they knew the difference between half and full-time enrollment. The researchers concluded the interviews with questions about future career choices and the type of education it takes to get that potential job. Throughout the focus group interviews, participants were also asked follow-up questions for clarification purposes. This provided researchers with the opportunity explore participant answers in depth and allowed participants to explain their responses in full detail.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the Carson et al. (2001) epistemological approach, the researchers followed Cicourel's (1964) and Garfinkel's (1967) interpretivist paradigm. Through interactions, participants' knowledge (captured data) lead to meaning making.

Participants' nature of knowledge and their rationale and justification of the knowledge allowed construction of intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity, or a negotiated and shared understanding, is developed through participants' active engagement and participation in making meaning of the social experience (Wertsch, 1985). In the current study, this type of active engagement occurred during a semi-structured focus group interview.

A consistent and thorough qualitative study is one that draws data to be analyzed from multiple aspects. Researchers actively engaged in the data, conducting the focus group interviews together, as well as transcribing and analyzing the data. Initially, the data was transcribed from the first three focus group interviews, which were from third period psychology class (sample one). Data gathered from fourth period AP psychology class (sample two) was transcribed last.

Analysis included developing distinct concepts and forming basic unit of analysis. Researchers used the same approach to analyze the second set of transcribed data gathered from AP participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To achieve greater understanding of open coding, researchers slightly adopted grounded theory procedures; researchers reviewed the data numerous times to identify axial codes (relationships among the open codes).

Initially, the researchers coded the data independently, and thereafter conjointly assessed how their coding of the data was consistent with each other. This approach provided researchers with the ability to make meaning of codes from focus group interviews. Initial coding of collected data revealed multiple connections. Constant comparison of meaning making resulted in establishment of open and axial categories.

The open categories were considered the core or central category, which were then developed into axial categories, which consists of open codes that are explained in relation to one another. This process enabled the researchers to then reach a theoretical saturation.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Participants in AP and non-AP classes were asked to share their general knowledge about college. Analysis revealed that high school students' knowledge about college fit into six main codes: college admittance procedures, financing college education, college as a means of social mobility, options beyond high school and various college sectors (community college and 4-year Universities). In addition, students often referred to resources they used to gather this information, resources related to financing a college education and deadlines to register and submit pertinent application. Furthermore, information shared between AP and non-AP participants were different amongst some codes and relatively similar amongst others.

College Admittance Procedures

One of the six common codes discovered during analysis was the college admittance procedures. Participants discussed basic requirements and steps a student in high school must complete prior to college enrollment. For instance, Jackie, a non-AP junior student, shared her knowledge about college,

There are different levels of colleges like junior college and state and UC colleges. Trying to aim for higher colleges you need extracurricular activities to stand out among the applicants. Junior colleges let you get all the general

education classes out of the way and then transfer to a university to pursue more of a concentrated major.

Junior, non-AP student, Nancy, discussed a basic class each high school student is required to complete prior to applying for colleges. She stated, “You have to complete up to Algebra to get into a four year.” Senior, AP student Michael, extended on this class requirement by adding, “students must have completed three years of a foreign language and at least an Algebra class.”

Julia, a senior AP student at Sheldon High School, described what newly enrolled, freshmen college students learn in college, “you go on to learn further about a specific subject. There is a certain subject matter high school students have to complete to get into college.” Furthermore, a junior, non-AP student, Maximus, concurred with other’s responses and added his opinion on college prerequisites, “There are certain requirements colleges look for in high school students but I am not too sure what those requirements are. I would guess basic classes are completed and a good GPA [grade point average].” Leslie, AP senior, briefly explained basic requirements to attend college,

You obviously must graduate high school before going to college or get your GED [General Education Diploma]. Grades for the junior college is not so much a problem, but when applying straight into a university, it is important to have good grades. Universities look at high GPA’s and obviously good grades can get you the higher GPA.

Sally, Jen and Toby explained that universities require high school students to take and score high on ACT and SAT exams. Sally shared, “I know that during my application, I

was to complete a page of my SAT and ACT scores as well as high school GPA. They look at grades and scores seriously, because it is a competitive process.” Toby added, “I was lucky to take the SAT’s for free and score reasonably high, because my GPA is not very high and I’m hoping that will help me out. I also have a recommendation letter, which schools like to see in the application.” Jen shared similar information to Toby and Sally, “I recently learned that community colleges don’t need SAT or ACT scores. I didn’t know that and so I took them and I am not even planning to attend a university.”

Senior AP student, Julia, explained what colleges potentially review in applications, “Universities don’t really look at grades anymore but they now look at everything. Such as your character, behavior, grades, applications, and everything else.” Another AP participant Michael added, “A lot of colleges are focusing on extra-curricular activities taken in high school and outside of high school. You have to really be involved in something besides completing high school required classes.”

College Sectors, Community College and 4-year Universities

The second common code discovered was the differences between community colleges and four-year universities. Common response among numerous participants was the description of basic requirement of college enrollment. Non-AP Sheldon High School students, Damien, Andrew and Milly stated in order to attend a community college, a high school student must obtain a GED. Damien stated, “to go to a community college, you need a high school diploma or GED. For university, you need that and good GPA [grade point average], like a 3.5 or something.” Andrew also shared, “You have to

collect a high school diploma in order to attend or even enroll college”. Lastly, Milly added, “A community college would prefer to see a high school diploma, but a GED would also suffice.”

Furthermore, participants expressed their knowledge in differences between community college and four-year universities. Nancy shared community colleges are easier to be admitted in comparison to a university level schools, “... it is easier to get into a community college rather than a university because community colleges don’t really look at high school grades or they don’t matter as much. But to get into a university is much harder because it is competitive.” She expresses the importance of good grades when considering a university, however, community colleges requirements are a lot less demanding in terms of grades. Michael added on to Nancy’s statement by explaining how an individual may transfer/advance from one level college to the next, he explained, “Community colleges are usually two years in length and then units taken at the junior level can be transferred to a University.” Sally, a junior AP student, elaborated a bit further, “Junior colleges are more for completing general education courses and exploring different concentration, then transferring to a university to complete classes that are more specific to the chosen major.”

Bill, a non-AP participant, was part of the AVID program and he shared his knowledge on University institutions, “...colleges look at everything now, your characteristics, behavior, grades, GPA, test scores such as SAT and ACT, and any other high school involved extracurricular activities. If you are looking to apply to a four year,

you have to be involved in as much as possible. It is much harder than enrolling into a 2-year community college.”

Financing College Education

Another theme emerged during the analysis of data: finances/expenditures of college. Non-AP student, Bill enlightened the researchers of his knowledge of financial aspect of college, “School is very expensive nowadays, my parents told me they used to pay 20 dollars for a class, so I know college cost a pretty penny. They of course paid out of pocket, but I have to apply for financial aid.” Senior non-AP student, Mark, discussed financial options of transitioning from junior college to a university,

I know that a junior college is inexpensive compared to a UC. Classes are not as costly per unit as university classes. I know tuition at universities cost a student an arm and a leg, so I know it is better to start at the lower level schools and then transfer one I reach closer to my major. It is even more expensive when trying to attend an out of state school. I know this because I, unfortunately, will not be awarded financial aid.

AP senior student, Jen shared that considering college isn’t only about what they can offer but also being aware of tuition costs. Jen stated, “It is competitive to get into schools you want. Money is a big factor when applying for higher education. Ensuring it is where you want to go is important, especially when you have to pay for it.”

Options Beyond High School

Numerous participants explained different options after high school. Overall, the most common responses shared included college being one of several primary options for a high school graduate. For instance, Damien believed going straight into workforce or military after graduating high school are two options aside from attending college, he stated, “College is an option after high school. Apart from military or going straight into employment, or you can be unemployed and sit at home, which is another option.”

Senior AP student, Toby, shared, “I know college comes right after high school and that it is an option.” Another participant, Julia, explained college can be accomplished while simultaneously working and earning an income, “My parents worked during their senior year in high school and continued to work once they graduated. I am following their footsteps; however, I plan to work and attend college. People nowadays can do both, at least I know I can because I plan to live with my parents and would not have to worry about rent and other expenses.”

College as a Means of Social/Economic Mobility

Participants expressed their viewpoints on college education and a common student social status when attending a college theme was discovered. Non-AP student, Ben explained that college provides individuals with greater work opportunities and higher salary:

In America, you need college education. Society is more based on college education. You are more likely to make more money and be more successful in

life if you have a college degree rather than if you were just a graduate from high school and go straight into the workforce.

Nancy also discussed the financial stability a student must have in order to obtain higher education,

If you have money it is good to get into a university but for those who don't should attend a junior college and then transfer. That way you can figure out what you want to do and get the GE [general education] out of the way. Junior colleges are much less expensive

Andrew added, "People look at you differently when attending a university. You appear smarter and get more respect from people around you." Sally, AP junior, shared that her goal is to get into college and succeed but also be able to live in the dorms and fully enjoy the college experience. She stated, "My sister went to San Diego State, she got to enjoy living in the dorms and got to hang out with her friends. It's pretty cool hearing about her college dorm stories and all the stuff she gets to do." College to high school students is an exciting endeavor and believe it to be a positive experience as well as outcome.

Resources

Participants shared their direct and indirect resources. The indirect resources were school teachers, counseling staff, and Sheldon High School career center. Julia shared, "We have a career center here on campus. I always go to check in maybe once a week. I check on due dates to apply for something [scholarships, FAFSA and college]."

Sally added, “yep the career center really walks you through the actual college application process.” Another participant, Mark shared that his English teacher spoke about college readiness during class hours, “My English teacher talks about college and gives us information about her college experience. Sometimes I talk to her when class is over and she [teacher] told me that I could apply for scholarships.”

Another form of resource for participants were school assemblies, for example, Brittany stated at Sheldon High School assemblies, school staff such as counselors and teachers discuss pertinent college information. She explained, “We had a senior conference led by our school counselor earlier this year. I think they [staff] covered a lot of basic information.” Several more participants mentioned senior and/or junior conference held at the Sheldon High School. Staff at these conferences discussed topics such as college application deadlines, financial application deadlines, and other basic college related information. Milly was aware of her resource options; however, she chose not to attend, “...We're supposed to have a junior conference at the end of our junior year to talk about college. I never attended one, because I was never told about it. But I learned my lesson and sought out the information of when to attend the senior conference. There they [school staff] discussed college readiness and what we have to do before we graduate.” Another participant Mark added, “...from what I remember [at the junior conference] they [counselors] tell us when to start applying for college and to apply for FAFSA at the beginning of January because it's first come first serve.”

Yet another indirect resource for high school students were the extracurricular activities on or off campus, such as Mark (senior AP) explained his experience with

Biotech Academy and how it provided access to guest speakers describing specific resources and courses required and provided at different universities, which were pertinent to biotech majors. Mark claimed, “I feel like my Biotech Academy has introduced me to a lot of guest speakers and college tours of specific biotech programs.” Bill (non-AP) shared his experience with extracurricular activities and how that served as an additional resource. He had been a part of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program since the ninth grade and was guided by a college mentor, Bill explained what his resource taught him, “My AVID mentor advised me that colleges look at everything now, your characteristics, behavior, grades, GPA, test scores such as SAT and ACT, and any other high school involved extracurricular activities...” Colleges need highest achieving students with great inclinations to succeed thus application process is highly competitive.

Senior student Julia (AP) recounted her experience with Biotech Academy which provided high school students access to guest speakers who described specific, required resources and as well as the courses provided at different universities that were pertinent to biotech majors. Maximus (non-AP) expressed satisfaction toward the Civil Engineering Academy, “I’ve had the opportunity to be exposed to major concepts, shadow engineers and participate in development workshops. I am told most of what we do is what we will encounter in post-secondary engineering courses.” Lastly, junior AP student, Sally expressed her involvement in extracurricular activities outside of Sheldon High School. An organization known as the 4-H club that educates participants on numerous workforce requirements in addition to appropriate college selection, “...the

group of people I am with we commonly get together and sometimes are accompanied by different leaders who at times are people who have gone to college and help us with appropriate selection. They help us figure out what colleges have to offer that align with our interests.”

Aside from indirect resources, participants had their family members serve as a direct form of resource for college related information. Mark shared about his large family and their military background. Mostly, his uncles serve as his mentors and resource for college information,

I found it [college information] pretty useful because um my uncles went through like a different process with scholarships from ROTC. So, I found their experience and college process to be a lot more helpful. They told me to attend college while enlisting into the military and kill two birds with one stone.”

Mark added, “...they [uncles] always share their experiences and tell me a college education will always get me somewhere, however, military background has limited options once I serve my contract. So it is good to complete school while I’m enlisted.”

Damien’s (non-AP) older sibling served as his primary resource for college related information. Damien shared about older brother taking community college route before pursuing a bachelor’s degree at a university due to financial reasons:

My [older] brother goes to CRC so he tells me about what happens in college, but he mostly talks about administrator side of college and helps me with the financial aid. He [older brother] always tells me what to do and what not to do when it comes to college because he doesn’t want me to repeat his mistakes. I also know

that my mom has friends who work there so they would also give her tips to help him with financial aid and now it will be my turn to get that help.

AP versus Non-AP

The following paragraphs summarize similarities and/or differences of AP and non-AP participant responses in regard to each discovered code. Similarities between AP and non-AP participants were found in five of the themes; resources, college admittance procedures, financing college education, options beyond high school and college as a means of social/economic mobility. Differences in knowledge between AP and non-AP were analyzed in two common themes; college admittance procedures and college sectors, community and four-year universities.

College admittance procedures. Analysis of the data revealed AP and non-AP group of participants were similarly aware of meeting basic requirements to enroll into a college. Both AP and non-AP participants detailed differences in college and university requirement. Basic subjects listed were mathematics and foreign language. Challenges of enrolling into four-year university in comparison to a community college were discussed during focus group interviews. Participants from AP and non-AP classes mentioned that in order to enroll into college, a GED or high school diploma must be obtained.

In addition, there was a knowledge difference between AP and non-AP participants in regard to additional university requirements. AP participants explained

that universities require high school students to complete ACT and SAT exams. Participants briefly discussed the significance of obtaining a higher score on the exams and the higher score allows high school students to stand out on the university applications. They also advocated that during the college application process, a letter of recommendations is required.

College sectors, community college and 4-year universities. Differences in responses to college sectors were discovered among non-AP and AP participants. Non-AP participants spoke of obtaining a high GPA for university enrollment while community colleges only require a GED/high school diploma. Non-AP students explained that community colleges do not necessarily review grades as much as universities, because four-year schools are more competitive and require high earning GPA. AP participants shared in-depth knowledge of the differences between college sectors. A college student may initially attend a community college thereafter transfer the credits earned to a university level. Participants interviewed in the AP classes elaborated that junior colleges are mostly for completing general education courses and exploring different concentrations while a four-year college is more focused on a major and being one step closer to obtaining a bachelor's degree.

Financing college education. Data gathered revealed minor response distinctions between non-AP and AP participant. More information was shared by non-AP participants in comparison to AP participants. Non-AP participants spoke about

general expense of college and in this century college is overall an expensive endeavor. One non-AP participant, Mark, mentioned the out-of-state expense is typically more in comparison to tuition cost at a home state college. AP participants also shared that a high school graduate must take tuition into consideration when selecting a suitable college because not everyone qualifies for financial aid.

Options beyond high school. Several participants in AP and non-AP classes explained that college is one of various options after high school. For instance, Damien (non-AP student) expressed options after high school such as workforce or military. Toby (AP student) knew college is an option after high school. Julia (AP student) added to Damien's statement by explaining a high school student may enter the workforce while simultaneously attending college.

College as a means of social/economic mobility. AP and non-AP participants expressed similar viewpoints on college education as a means of social and economic mobility. Participants shared that college provides greater job opportunities, higher salary, and overall a financial stability after graduation. A non-AP student, Nancy, shared that when in search of a suitable college, one must consider the cost of the school in addition to major opportunities:

If you have money it is good to get into a university but for those who don't should attend a junior college and then transfer. That way you can figure out

what you want to do and get the GE [general education] out of the way. Junior colleges are much less expensive

An AP student, Sally, included the social aspect of college, to her it was important to live in the dorms and enjoy the college experience while surrounded by roommates/friends.

Resources. AP and non-AP participants shared similarities in their form of resource responses. Both groups collected college related information from direct and indirect sources. The indirect resources were school teachers, counseling staff, and Sheldon High School career center. Julia (AP) shared, “We have a career center here on campus. I always go to check in maybe once a week. I check on due dates to apply for something [scholarships, FAFSA and college].” Another AP participant Sally added, “yep the career center really walks you through the actual college application process.” Lastly, participant Mark (non-AP) shared about his English teacher discussing college readiness during class time.

Another form of resource for participants were school assemblies, participant Jackie (non-AP) described their school assemblies where school staff, counselors and teachers, discuss pertinent college information. Several more participants mentioned senior and/or junior conference held at the Sheldon High School. Aside from school staff serving as a resource, participants shared resources such as school academies and extracurricular activities outside of school campus. Participant Julia (AP) was involved in Biotech Academy, Maximus (non-AP) was in the Civil Engineering Academy. Both academies geared the participants toward their interests meanwhile providing information

on different college options and universities that offered majors aligning with their concertation. Additionally, extracurricular activities outside of high school was discussed by AP participant Sally. She explained that the 4-H club provided her with not only job skills experience, but also educated her on different college choices that would suite her needs.

Aside from indirect resources, other similarities were discovered among AP and non-AP participants' responses. Commonly, participants shared parents and siblings were their direct form of resource. For instance, non-AP participant Julia shared her older sister assisted with college advice in order to avoid repeating siblings' mistakes. AP participant Sally also had an older sister who guided her through basic college tuition. She briefly shared, "I would go to a junior college first because from what my sister told me. And from what I've seen her spend on tuition costs." Mark (non-AP) shared about his large family and their military background. Mostly, his uncles serve as his mentors and resource for college information. Participant Damien (non-AP) had an older sibling who served as his primary resource for college related information.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Findings revealed that participants were exposed to variety of college information at different grade levels. The research revealed six main codes: college admittance procedures, participants knew the basic requirements to apply for college; college sectors, they were aware of the difference between community college and 4-year university; financing college education, college costs and financial aid for junior and university college; options beyond high school; and college serving as means of social mobility. Additionally, participants shared similarities in their form of resources. Researchers also discovered differences and similarities between information shared by AP and non-AP participants. Overall, qualitative findings in the current study suggest that the differences and similarities in students' college related knowledge may be explained by these emerging codes and that these codes may serve to ultimately bridge the gap in college-related knowledge among high school students.

Similar to the notions of Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009), the present study found that age or grade-level is particularly telling about how much students know about college. At various grade levels, participants' college-related knowledge differed in regard to the codes revealed by the researchers. In terms of college admittance procedures, college sectors and financing college education, participants at the junior and senior grade level appeared to be more proactive and enthusiastic in their efforts to gather information related to college enrollment and overall admission processes compared to

their lower classmen. Most participants at the senior grade level were also more cognoscente of college requirements and recognized the time-consuming nature and difficulty of the various processes of college application and research.

In contrast, just as Bell et al. (2009) discovered, participants at the sophomore grade level were less aware and the least active in the acquisition of college information. Lower grade-level students who lack resources and access to information appeared to be less motivated and exhibit a negative outlook on college. Some of these participants considered other options beyond high school as they considered going straight into the work force after high school rather than enrolling into college because they felt that the admission process is difficult and extraneous. Thus, there seems to be a change as students transition into their senior year and are actually going through the process of applying for college. This could be due to how process of acquiring knowledge expands as students become seniors and become more actively involved. As seniors, they received more assistance and guidance from counselors and teachers and college became the primary option beyond their high school tenure. However, the present findings did not reveal whether this shift is due to students' willingness to seek out resources or because the school sources are more available to older students.

Moreover, the findings of this study reflected Goff, Patino, and Jackson's (2004) contention that in the initial years of high school, students' main sources of college-related information came from their family and peers. While parents of low SES students encourage the children to attend college in the future, they often lack the experience or

knowledge to assist them in the process. This finding raises questions about the nature of the information students are receiving about college early on in their high school career. For 11th graders, however, the process of acquiring knowledge expanded to include school staff and, upon availability, career centers (Klugman, 2012). The researchers found in the present study that in the latter years of their high school career, personnel such as counselors, university volunteers, and teachers became key college information resources for participants and their families, though it was uncertain whether this obtainment of resources was due to the participant's active engagement or because the sources just became more available to elder students. Still, having these resources allowed them to perceive college as a means of social and economic mobility and as an opportunity for them to have a stable future, something they had not been fully aware of initially. This finding indicated that while students generally increase their knowledge and awareness of resources as they transition into higher grade levels, often juniors and even seniors had not yet fully employed them, echoing a similar statement by Bell et al. (2009) of students from low SES high schools.

Current study also revealed that resources of information were often administrative staff; counselors and/or teachers at their high school. Counselors serve as a positive resource to high school students because they share a variety of pertinent and detailed college-related information. As suggested in prior research (Klugman, 2012; Persell & Cookson, 1985; Stevens, 2007) and in the present findings, most students referenced counselors as the main resource for college information. Particularly in low socioeconomic-status high schools, as Johnson and Stewart (1991) described in their

research, students heavily relied on counselors. Students may gather from counselors a wide range of information pertaining to college such as application specifics, enrollment processes, and college classroom atmosphere.

Findings from the present study are also consistent with Warnock's (2016) explanation that despite counselors serving as information resource, parents and siblings of students from low SES high schools often serve as the majority resource when their children are approaching the topic of college. In reinforcing Warnock (2016), many of the participants in the current study explained that their older siblings provided guidance and appropriate college enrollment steps. They also tended to sway towards the information gained from their family members. Thus, many of the students interviewed revealed that aside from school resources, much of their information about college came from their family.

Perna and Steele's (2011) research touched on the case of family as a source. They found that information gained from family members were usually anecdotal and were often prescribed in terms of what information family have due to their own personal experiences. The problem with reliance on family for information is particularly salient for low-income students. These students are less likely to have parents and siblings who have attended college. Their parents encourage them to attend college but often lack the experience or knowledge to assist in the college-going process (De La Rosa & Tierny, 2006). Also, older siblings may attend college but may only be well-informed about their particular field of study or college.

In summary, while all participants indicated that counselors and parents are useful sources of information, such disparity of information on financial related topics regarding college education is common for low SES students as they navigate through a myriad of information provided by counselors and their own parents and siblings. This information is not always consistent with each other, as individual social contexts and availability of resources is different for each student, which aids to illuminate the gap in college-related information of low SES families (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006).

It was apparent that resources are vital to high school student success. High school students cannot gather college pertaining information without the assistance of family and high school staff, as they are both serve as exceptionally important and beneficial form of resource. The current study revealed family members served as a great source of knowledge, because they drew from experience and provided appropriate guidance. High school staff also served as reminders for college application deadlines and shared valuable information about financial aid and scholarships. The more resources a high school student had, the greater the knowledge and options they obtained regarding college.

The current study highlighted activities at or outside schools that aims at educating students about college and financial. While seeking to discover the availability and usefulness of college-related extracurricular resources and programs it was found that many of the AP participants in the study had been actively engaged in activities that were not specifically college-related but were beneficial nonetheless. Participants revealed that they had been actively engaged in many external activities and programs such as

National Honor Society, 4-H and AVID which are college-related. AP participants felt that being involved in extracurricular opportunities allowed them to develop personal interests and enhance their skills and profiles, all of which aids in shaping their perceptions of their future pursuits.

The findings also underscore the role that advance placement (AP) courses may play in student's wealth of college-related knowledge. The students interviewed at Sheldon High School who were enrolled in AP courses generally had more extensive information about college and were able to carry the conversation more effortlessly than their non-AP peers. When discussing what they knew about college, AP participants in the present study revealed that their AP classes served as an extra resource for them in acquiring knowledge about college.

In addition, regarding AP students' perceptions about college and access to information, Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) noted that 11th and 12th graders, especially those in upper-resource schools and some middle-resource schools, believed that taking more AP classes would make them more marketable to colleges. Having access to information about AP can serve benefit for students not only as a college preparatory resource but also in fostering their motivation and drive for success post-high school. Similarly, Thompson and Rust's (2007) found that students who took AP courses were more informed, experienced and prepared for the higher level of tough course work. Thus, the present study's findings also bring to light that students taking AP courses may potentially be more ambitious about their careers and thus more active in not only

seeking college-related information but in challenging themselves as preparation for college.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings from the current study. The first limitation of the study may be the approach to conducting the interview. Utilizing focus group interviews allowed participants to respond to each other's answers; on more than one occasion a student would answer during their turn in a one-sentence phrase such as "yeah I think that too" or "what he/she said" instead of trying to form their own thoughts. The researchers would typically ask more follow up questions and extend the one sentence answers, but responses were less detailed than they might have been in individual interviews. Another limitation of the study was the outcome of the random selection of focus groups, as they were of different grade levels. Sophomore and junior students may have potentially felt discouraged, uncomfortable, or embarrassed when the senior students in focus group shared and/or discuss more about college. Lastly, future studies may need to consider interviewing students from variety of classes within the high schools and potentially expand investigations further to multiple high schools.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

A wealth of knowledge and guidance likely increases the chances of applying and enrolling into college. The current study at Sheldon High School, a diverse school residing in a low- to middle-income area, yielded findings that demonstrated consistency with previous research. Overall, the students were generally knowledgeable about college; the sources of their information were largely useful in guiding them through the college process. However, various factors may explain the gap in college-related knowledge between some students. These factors may provide insight to high school students' knowledge about college, specifically financial aid, which may ultimately impact student's college-going processes. Parental education and SES, to a degree, may affect a student's acquisition of college-related knowledge, particularly if they are the primary sources of information. School resources, including counselors, teachers, and programs and provisions related to college, may also impact students. These dynamics are evidenced by the fact that the knowledge about the college-going process was somewhat greater for seniors. A clear gap exists between them and their junior and sophomore peers, which may speak to the school's focus primarily on seniors and not their lower classmen.

Moreover, the outcome of this study points to clear advantages of having designated programs and college-related resources for students to receive prep and guidance about their college explorations. In addition to advanced placement (AP) college preparatory courses, extracurricular programs such as AVID and variety of

academies were frequently pointed to by Sheldon High School students as resources that were not only useful but reassuring. College-related processes involve many steps and a myriad of essential information, and even the best students need direction and guidance. These types of programs go hand in hand to reinforce parents, counselors and career center staff at schools to provide students a wealth of knowledge that will prepare them for their academic endeavors after high school.

Future research on student's knowledge about college should explore the influence of these school-based programs on student knowledge and on college-related outcomes, especially for students from underserved schools. Additionally, because more and more information in today's society are becoming readily accessible on the Internet and other media outlets, future research should explore these online initiatives and their influence on high school students. Finally, because this study explored only a handful of students' college-related knowledge at one point in time at one school, future research may look to utilize a longitudinal design across a larger sample of students from different income-level schools to further examine gaps in student's college-related knowledge.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Five focus groups will be interviewed for approximately 30 minutes. Students were asked the following questions, with follow-up and clarification questions, as needed:

1. What can you tell us about your overall knowledge about college?
2. What do you know about college requirements?
3. How did you acquire your information?
4. Do you know of any differences between junior college and university?
5. Where do you think it's better to start, junior college or university?
6. Do you consider the information you received from difference sources useful/practical?
7. What information do you know as far as admission process goes?
8. Do you know what financial aid is and how to qualify?
9. What type of career do you think you will have by the time you are thirty?
10. What type of education do you think you will need for that potential job?
11. Do you know the difference between half time and full time enrollment?
12. Do you know how enrollment influence financial aid award?

APPENDIX B

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Date

Dear Parent or Guardian:

We are graduate students in the Child Development Department of California State University of Sacramento. We are conducting a research project on what do high school students know about college-related information. We are asking for your permission for your child to participate in a group interview.

The study consists of group interviews, which will be conducted once in the beginning of class. Student's answers will be audio recorded and noted. The project will be explained in terms that your child can understand, and your child will participate only if he or she is willing to do so. Only my colleague, the college professor and I will have access to information provided by your child. The interviews will remain anonymous.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect the services normally provided to your child by Sheldon High School. Your child's participation in this study will not lead to the loss of any benefits to which he or she is otherwise entitled. Even if you give your permission for your child to participate, your child is free to refuse to participate. If your child agrees to participate, he or she is free to end participation at any time. You and your child are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your child's participation in this research study.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Audio recorded interviews will be accessed only by my colleague and myself, for educational purposes and will be erased in completion of the research study, March 2016.

Your child's responses and voluntary participation in the group interview will not affect any grade received in the class.

Should you have any questions or desire further information, please email me at ozozulya@csus.edu or my colleague at vinnyquach@csus.edu. In addition, Dr. Amber Gonzalez email is provided for your questions or concerns in regards to the project, agonzalez@csus.edu. You are welcome to keep the first page of the consent form. Please have your child return the second page with your signature, to their teacher.

Sincerely,

Lera Ilyenko and Vinny Quach
Graduate Students of California State University, Sacramento.

Please indicate whether or not you wish to allow your child to participate in this project by checking one of boxes below, signing your name and your child, and returning this page to their teacher.

I **grant** permission for my child to participate in Lera and Vinny's research study on high school student's knowledge about college-related information.

I **do not** grant permission for my child to participate in Lera and Vinny's research study on high school student's knowledge about college-related information.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Printed Parent/Guardian Name

Printed Name of Child

Date

APPENDIX C

Assent to Participate in Research

Assent to Participate in Research

High school student's knowledge on college-related information

1. Our names are Lera and Vinny. We are from California State University, Sacramento.
2. We are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about high school attendee's knowledge of college-education.
3. If you agree to be in this study you will answer a few of our group interviews questions which will be audio recorded.
4. Your participation in our study will not influence your grade in this class by any means.
5. If you are interested in obtaining the final product of the research, you are more than welcome to contact us at ozozulya@csus.edu and vinnyquach@csus.edu.
6. Your parents have given their permission for you to take part in this study. Even though your parents said "yes," you can still decide not to do this.
7. You can ask questions about the study at the end of the conducted group interviews.
8. Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to provide answer to your best knowledge. Please keep in mind that your answers will be kept completely anonymous.

Signature of Subject

Date

APPENDIX D

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

(please check the appropriate box below)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1. What is your gender?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Female</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Male</p> | <p>2. Do you qualify for free/reduced lunch?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A</p> |
| <p>3. What is your age?</p> <p>_____</p> | <p>4. Are you currently employed?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>5. What grade are you in?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Freshman (9th) <input type="checkbox"/> Sophomore (10th)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Junior (11th) <input type="checkbox"/> Senior (12th)</p> | <p>6. Do you have any siblings?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> |
| <p>7. Has your mother attended College/University?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A</p> | <p>8. If so, do they attend college/university?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A</p> |
| <p>1. Has your father attended College/University?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A</p> | <p>10. Please specify your Ethnicity (Race):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Native American or American Indian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Asian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Black or African American</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> White</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> |

APPENDIX E

Letter of Approval

Letter of Approval (Sheldon High School)

Request to Use Sheldon High School in Thesis Research

Hello Lera and Vinny,
You have confirmation from Sheldon High School to interview Mr. Todd Dilbeck's
Psychology and AP Psychology students for your research study.

Thank you.

(Signature)

(Date)

Paula D. Duncan, Principal
8333 Kingsbridge Drives
Sacramento, CA 95829

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