AN INVESTIGATION OF A COLLEGE AND CAREER PREPARATORY PROGRAM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FIRST-GENERATION, LOW SOCIOECONOMIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Many high school students living in poverty or who have limited support networks at home and school find the college or workforce preparation and application process to be a daunting, unattainable goal because of the academic and social challenges they face on a daily basis. Despite many federal and state financial aid incentives, specialized college preparation programs, and university sponsored activities for impoverished high school students, less than 50% of American students living on or under the poverty line go to a post secondary institution after high school, compared to 80% of students from the country’s most affluent homes (Baum & Ma, 2007).

Academic deficits of first-generation can be one of many predictors why first-generation, economically disadvantaged high school students are not successful in attending college or workforce institutions. Lack of motivation, performance vulnerability, negative self-image, cultural isolation, and lack of support from peers, family members, and teachers can be the primary reasons why many first-generation students choose not to pursue a post-secondary education or workforce program (Baum & Ma, 2007). Although there are many factors which hinder college and workforce training for first-generation students, educational outreach, pre-collegiate advising, and mentoring by career professionals have the potential to increase first-generation, economically disadvantaged high school students’ career and college readiness.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influenced economically
disadvantaged first-generation, college bound high school students in a Mid-Atlantic
region of the United States.

The qualitative study examined whether or not high school 12th-grade students in the
subgroup were more inclined or motivated in applying to colleges and workforce
development programs, and being accepted to higher education institutions after they
participated in a college/career readiness program. The study determined that social,
human, and cultural capital in the form of support networks such as family, friends,
school faculty, and community members influenced participants’ decisions to pursue a
college or workforce program. Furthermore, the qualitative research study concluded
that targeted college or workforce readiness programs and college preparation activities
increased the number of students in the research sample who applied and intended on
enrolling in post-secondary educational programs after high school.

Local policy makers may use the results of the study as an evaluative measure to
determine if the college and career readiness program is effectively meeting the goals and
expectations of the school district when serving first-generation, low socioeconomic high
school students. Secondly, school administration and the school board of the
participating school district may use the results of the study to determine if the school
system should continue to financially support the college and career readiness program in
the future. Furthermore, the findings of the research from the participating school district
may encourage other school districts, community agencies, and policy makers to improve
college and workforce readiness practices as well as instructional programming
procedures which address specific academic and sociological needs of first-generation,
college bound students.
Finally, other school districts in the area may use the findings of the study as a guide in the decision making and the execution of future K-16 educational initiatives, college preparation programs, or when following secondary policy guidelines established by the reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act of 2003 (Department of Education, 2013).
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Despite many federal and state financial aid incentives, specialized college preparation programs, and university sponsored activities for impoverished high school students, less than 50% of American students living on or under the poverty line go to college or a workforce program, compared to 80% of students from the country’s most affluent homes (Baum & Ma, 2007). Less than half (47%) of first-generation, high school graduates enrolled in a post-secondary educational program a year after high school compared to 85% of high school graduates whose parents earned college degrees (Berkner & Chavez, 1997). Additionally, recent research has demonstrated that a large proportion of high school graduates have not developed the skills necessary to succeed academically in a post-secondary program (Callan, Finney, Kirst, Usdan, & Venezia, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2005). Educational outreach, social services, financial planning, pre-collegiate advising, and mentoring by career professionals have the potential to positively influence a first-generation, economically disadvantaged high school student’s career and college readiness.

The economy and educational advancement of low socioeconomic families continue to lag behind households who have middle and upper class incomes and educational levels. From 2000 to 2010, the economy took a downturn and many college-educated Americans were unemployed or underemployed; however, the benefits of having a college degree outpaced not having a college education. Thirty years ago, full-time workers with a college degree earned 40% more than workers with only a high-school diploma. In 2010, the gap between degreeed workers and non-degreed workers reached
83%. Moreover, college graduates are far less likely to be unemployed than non-graduates (Leonardt, 2011). In 2013, 3.3% of unemployed persons had a college degree compared to 8.1% persons without a college degree (Thompson, 2013). Finally, adding 20 million workers with college educations would help raise the wages of employed individuals in the United States, increase economic equity of individuals, and significantly raise the country’s global competitiveness (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

More opportunities for employment, higher family incomes, and an improved quality of life are attributed to an education beyond a high school diploma. This is primarily due to the unpredictable global economy, international competition, and the shift from a manufacturing society to a knowledge based society. By 2018, approximately 63% of jobs in the United States will require employees to have a post-secondary education (Carnevale et. al., 2010). This is an increase of 28% from 40 years ago (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

**Statement of the Problem**

Although states and the federal government have opened the doors for more economically disadvantaged high school students to have access to financial aid in the last 20 years, there continues to be a gap in college enrollment and degree completion of this targeted demographic of high school graduates (The College Board, 1999; Hoffman, 1997). Many institutions of higher learning, private donors, and state or federal agencies increased their financial contributions to needy high school students who are the first in their families to attend a post-secondary institution. Financial assistance may be available in the form of financial aid packages, work-study programs, scholarships, and
needs-based grants; however, the financial aid application process continues to be complex and confusing because many families have never previously navigated the college admissions process (Oliverez & Tierney, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2006).

Behavioral characteristics, school experiences, and academic preparation are key factors in predicting whether first generation, low income high school students apply to college or a workforce program; however, accessing and acclimating into a college-going culture can be the most difficult obstacle to overcome for many of these students. Adelman concluded in his research of pre-college outreach programs that low socioeconomic students from rural areas and small communities have the lowest participation rate of college enrollment than students living in urban areas due to limited access to college preparatory programs, advanced curriculum, and positive perceptions about attending college (Adelman, 1999).

Many first-generation, high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have low self-efficacy, lack of academic support, as well as perceived and real barriers that prevent them from pursuing an academic path toward a post-secondary education (Gibbons & Schoffner, 2004). Evidence points to lack of motivation, performance vulnerability, negative self-image, cultural isolation, and lack of support from peers, family members, and teachers (Baum & Ma, 2007). There is a likelihood first-generation, low socioeconomic school students will be more successful in the post-secondary world if they see first-hand the benefits of learning a college degree from individuals in their school and community (Perna, 2000).
An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influenced economically disadvantaged, first-generation, college bound high school students in a Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. Was the college readiness program effective in assisting first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students in applying to attend college or workforce programs after high school graduation?
2. Did the college and career readiness program influence first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students to develop future educational or workforce participation goals beyond high school?
3. Were there societal influences that affected first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decision to pursue college or a workforce program after high school?

Method Overview

The qualitative study used a grounded theory approach because it allowed the researcher to interview participants and analyze the situational context in conjunction with the free responses of participants before making a theoretical conclusion (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The data determined whether the students’ experiences in the participation of the college and career readiness program played an influential role in the
career and post-secondary educational decisions of the study’s participants. Twenty-seven students in the twelfth grade were identified as first-generation and economically disadvantaged. The researcher interviewed thirteen participants at their high school during their twelfth grade year in high school. The interviews were 30 to 45 minutes in length.
Definition of Terms

*Career Coaches*- Community college employees who work in high schools to assist students in developing career plans, establishing academic goals that support career aspirations of individuals. Career coaches expose high school students to workforce development programs, community college options, and other post-secondary institutions.

*Career Counseling*- Guidance counselors, teachers, and career professionals who offer advice to individuals about career fields, educational or skill qualifications, and career preparation.

*College Bound*- A high school student who has fulfilled the high school graduation requirements such as attendance and earning enough academic course credits in secondary school. The student has passed state graduation exams required for a high school diploma, taken appropriate high school courses for college acceptance, and has satisfactory grades and college entrance test scores for college entry. The student is prepared to attend a post-secondary institution.

*College Ready*- A high school student who has fulfilled the high school graduation requirements such as attendance and earning course credits in secondary school. The student has passed state exams that are required for a high school diploma, taken appropriate high school courses which are necessary for college acceptance, and has satisfactory grades and college entrance test scores for college entry. The student is academically prepared to attend a post-secondary institution but has not applied to a college or been accepted to a college.
Cultural Capital- Skills, cultural knowledge, and abilities passed on by certain groups in society. Linguistic competencies, mannerisms, and habits that are usually inherited by an individual’s class, race, societal influences, and gender identities (Tierney & Jun, 2001).

Federal Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA)- A required application by most states and post-secondary institutions. The application verifies family income, assets, financial information from the Internal Revenue Service, Selective Service, Immigration and Naturalization Services, and the Social Security Administration. The FAFSA process will determine a family’s financial contribution to college expenses and a student’s eligibility for federal, state, and other financial aid programs.

First-Generation Student- A student who is currently in grades K-12 whose parents or guardians did not graduate from a post-secondary institution of higher learning. This may include a community college, technical school, or four-year university or college.

Governor’s School- Governor's Schools are self-contained, magnet educational programs in the public high schools of many states along the Eastern seaboard. The schools provide educational services for academically gifted or artistically talented students.

Human Capital (in the context of learning) - Positive school engagement, high parental involvement in student learning, positive peer reactions to school, and a social network which supports learning.

Low Socioeconomic Status-Persons living on or below the poverty line as established by the United States Department Health and Human Services. The income rates are federal poverty guidelines based on location in the state (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2013). Public schools determine economic status of children based on their eligibility for the free and reduced government lunch program.
Social Capital- The set of elements of the social structure that affects relations among people and its inputs or arguments of the production and/or utility of function (Schiff, 1992).

TRIO Programs- TRIO is not an acronym but its name originally stood for three federally funded programs which supported higher educational outreach for disadvantaged high school students. The programs derived from the Higher Education Act of 1965. Presently, there are eight federally funded TRIO Programs which promote pre-collegiate outreach and academic intervention programs for economically disadvantage, high school students.

Underrepresented students-Students who are identified as minority, female, or individuals who live in low socioeconomic households with limited access to educational opportunities.

Workforce Development Programs- Career apprenticeships, industry certifications, and professional licensures for students who are attending college courses (i.e.: plumbers, electricians, nursing assistants, and dental hygienists).

Assumptions

During the qualitative research process, the researcher had the following assumptions:

1. Low socioeconomic high school students are less equipped to complete the college or workforce application process than middle and upper class students.

2. Low socioeconomic, first-generation high school students are more likely to participate in college and career preparatory programs if family members, educators, or mentors encourage them to participate in the program and assist them in the application process.
3. Low socioeconomic, first-generation high school students are more likely to pursue educational and career goals if their aspirations are validated by family members, educators, and community members.

4. Low socioeconomic, first-generation high school students are more likely to pursue their educational and career goals if they are academically achieving, are successful when pursuing their interests, or demonstrate potential in their interest areas.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations and delimitations of the study pertained to specific characteristics of the participants and the learning environment of their educational institution. The participants were vulnerable subjects because they were high school students under the age of 18. In order for interviews to occur during the study, parent or guardian permission was required, as well as participant assent. A limitation of the study pertained to the small sample size of willing participants who were identified as first-generation students. Ten potential participants declined to be interviewed or were unable to receive permission from their parent or guardian. Two potential participants were willing to be interviewed but had to decline because they had parents who had completed college degrees. The small sample size inhibits the ability to make the transference other high schools with similar demographics and college and career readiness programs would have the same results.

A second limitation of the study was selecting participants who had fulfilled high school graduation requirements and met minimum grade point average qualifications for college admissions. The participants of the study needed at least a 2.50 grade point
average and/or SAT scores of a 1710. The grade point average and SAT requirements were determined by minimum acceptance standards six universities hold in the Mid-Atlantic part of the region. This was a limitation because many students in the high school did not fit all of the requirements for the study. In order to adhere to the study’s research specifications, the researcher sought participants who were in the twelfth grade and who would graduate from high school in 2015. Selecting twelfth grade students as participants may have influenced the study’s conclusions differently than opening the selection process to other grade levels; however, the researcher believed seniors were more inclined to utilize a college and career readiness program than underclassmen because most had completed graduation requirements by the time they reached twelfth grade and they were going to leave the school system in a shorter time frame than others.

Two delimitations in the study pertained to the demographics of student participants and the selected high school in the study. The participants of the qualitative study were self-identified as economically disadvantaged. The researcher targeted this particular demographic because it aligned with the literature the researcher studied. The researcher selected the high school because it had the highest number of students in the region who were living in poverty and the selected high school had the highest number of graduates in the region who did not attend an institution of higher learning after high school (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). Furthermore, the school had a student dropout rate of three percent which was greater than neighboring county high schools with similar demographics. This delimitation may give the impression that all high school students living in poverty are at-risk of dropping out of high school or choose not to attend a post-secondary institution because of their economic status.
Literature reviewed focused primarily on college and career readiness programs targeting low socioeconomic, first-generation high school students who attended public schools because it aligned with the purpose of the study. This was a delimitation of the study because the researcher did not review literature pertaining to college readiness programs for students living in middle and upper-class households or programs found in private schools. Moreover, the researcher did not review literature of college or career readiness programs that were fully sponsored by private or non-profit institutions, or programs which had a selection process for student participation. Such programs did not align with the study’s demographics or align with similar high school experiences the study’s participants encountered while in high school.

The final delimitation of the study pertained to the school location. The research study focused on subjects from a public high school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States which had a college and career readiness program. The selected high school was one of the first high schools in the Mid-Atlantic region to have a designated educator responsible for developing a career and college readiness program. This impedes the generalization that all high schools have similar programs across the county.

The methodological procedures of the study did not use written surveys of participants but used face-to-face interviews. The researcher believed surveys would not convey authenticity of responses as much as face-to-face interviews with the participants. Secondly, the researcher believed participants would not be as thorough in answering questions if they had to take the time to write responses versus orally answering questions. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews capture social cues, non-verbal reactions to questions, and require more reflection than a written survey.
The interviews were held during school hours and were limited to times which did not interfere with students’ class schedules and extra-curricular activities. The participants self-reported their academic standing during the time of the interview; however, it was verified by the guidance counselors and the college/career coach that all participants were economically disadvantaged and first-generation students. The sample size was limited to 13 individuals due to the number of students who volunteered to participate in the study, who had parent permission to participate in the study, and who met the qualifications. All of the participants of the qualitative study fully cooperated during the interview process and appeared honest when self-reporting their academic standing, as well as when answering questions about their high school experience and their future educational or career plans after high school graduation. The saturation rate of responses was met with eleven participants.

**Significance of the Study**

Researchers Baum and Ma (2007) found low self-esteem, cultural isolation, and lack of support from family, teachers, and friends as contributing reasons for first-generation high school students’ decision not to pursue a college education or workforce certification after high school. Tierney and Jun (2001) as well as Choy et al. (2000) made similar distinctions in their research that positive family relationships, school engagement, and guidance by school personnel, neighbors, and community members greatly influence college aspirations and career desires of low socioeconomic, first-generation, college ready students. Furthermore, social theorists such as Bordieu, concluded that high schools and colleges need to develop and foster the human, social, and cultural capital of economically disadvantaged, first-generation high school students...
while they pursued their goals to prepare and apply for college as well as enroll in an institution of higher learning (Bordieu, 1983).

Social, human, and cultural capital influenced economically disadvantaged, college bound students’ motivation to pursue attending college or a workforce program after high school; however, few studies were in existence that investigated the effectiveness of high school programs which centered on college and career readiness and provided individualized attention to first-generation students. Many studies examined targeted college readiness programs but few studies focused on the amount of individualization guidance departments or college preparatory programs gave to encourage first-generation students to apply to college or workforce programs (Cooper & Liou, 2007; McDonough, 2004). Scholarly literature criticized the lack of knowledge guidance counselors had when assisting students in the college application process as well as an absence of designated faculty members in high schools who were responsible in assisting students with the transition from high school to college or workforce programs (McDonough, 2004). Finally, research pertaining to college and career readiness of first-generation, high school students did not fully cite the positive or negative influences high school guidance departments or career readiness programs had on first-generation students’ decisions in applying for college or workforce programs.

**Summary**

Chapter one reviewed the reasons why the number of first-generation, high school students applying to college or a workforce program continues to lag behind the number of middle-class and affluent students who apply to college. Government agencies, universities, and the private sector have implemented college incentive programs for first-
generation students but they have not steadily increased enrollment of first-generation students. The literature in the study emphasized the importance for first-generation, college bound students to build their awareness about college and career readiness and become exposed to activities and learning environments which play a critical role in the academic and career decisions they make for life beyond high school. First-generation, economically disadvantaged students’ human, social, and cultural capital characteristics influence their decisions to pursue college or a workforce program. This qualitative research study examined the capital characteristics of participants, as well as interactions they had with the school’s college and career readiness coach and the guidance department while they were enrolled in high school and particularly when they were making college and/or career decisions after high school graduation.

Thirteen high school seniors who were identified as first-generation, college ready were interviewed during the first semester at a public high school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The selected high school was located in a rural community that had a designated educator responsible for coordinating a college and career readiness program. Through interviews and questioning of school faculty, the researcher discovered that the school’s counseling department worked collaboratively with the college and career readiness program to assist students in the college application and financial aid process.

The study provides the participating school district suggestions on how to improve their existing college and career readiness program, as well as providing a guide to other educational institutions in developing programs for first-generation high school students. Educational policy makers may find the results of the study influential when executing
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature reviewed in this study clearly demonstrates that many first-generation high school students living in low socioeconomic conditions do not have the college readiness advantages as high school students who have college educated family members who live in middle and upper class households. Moreover, the broad consensus of the literature illustrated that first-generation high school students need exposure to a variety of activities, college and career readiness skills and strategies, and mentors that support the importance of being academically and socially prepared for the workforce or higher education.

Academic and emotional support during adolescence is critical for many young people as they explore potential college and career pathways, as well as complete graduation requirements in high school. When low socioeconomic high school students lack academic and emotional encouragement from family members, teachers, and peers, they are more likely to not be successful in school. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) concluded in their research that first-generation high school students who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, struggle academically, and lack confidence in their educational future. This would support the research that low income students are five times as likely not to graduate from high school as their middle class peers and six times as likely to not get diplomas compared to their affluent classmates (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, Kewal, Ramani, 2011). For instance, in the state of Maryland, low income students represented 27% of high school graduates and only 20% of university freshman
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(Chapman, et al., 2011). Only 10% of low income students completed a Bachelor’s Degree compared to 76% of high income students (Ramist, Lewis, & McCamley-Jenkins, 1994). Statistics from various sources suggest that many high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are at risk of graduating with a high school diploma and the odds are slim they will start college, let alone finish college with a degree (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; McDonough, 2004). School districts, higher educational institutions, and communities should be concerned by the degree attainment gap between low socioeconomic students and degrees earned by middle class or upper class students because it ultimately creates an educational equity divide in communities and across the nation.

Limited Parental Education and College Knowledge Influence Admissions

Many low income households and parents of first-generation students have little education past high school, yet they significantly influence a high school student’s access and motivation to pursue a college degree (Choy, 2001). Susan Choy (2001) confirmed that educational advancement of parents had more bearing on a student’s attainment of a college education than academic preparation, educational expectations, parental involvement, and peer persuasion. Moreover, family members who lacked the experience and knowledge of the required curriculum needed for college admissions were less likely to encourage their son or daughter to take advanced courses or pre-requisites needed for college admissions such as Algebra II or Chemistry. Horn and Nunez (2000) determined that students with parents who encouraged them to pursue rigorous courses in high school were more likely to enroll in college. Many first-generation, college bound high school students had the academic qualifications and test scores to be eligible to
attend college, but many lacked the skills or the college knowledge to actually apply to college. Furthermore, low income, first-generation students encountered misinformation about the college application process or financial aid guidelines because they or their parents had never investigated or spoken to school officials about the college application process (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

Understanding the importance of higher education beyond high school can be a foreign concept for many families of first-generation high school students. A 2006 report on college attendance of first-generation, high school students by the Pell Institute, found that low aspiration to attend college was a primary barrier for many first-generation students (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). Several students did not think holding a college degree was pertinent to career advancement or that persons with limited incomes would be able to attend college. The misconceptions were alleviated and the aspiration to attend college increased when first-generation high school students and their families received assistance from individuals who established trusting relationships with them and had experience in the college application process. For some, the establishment of personal relationships between the first-generation high school student, their families, and the college prep counselor or guidance counselor took several months and even years to develop. Persistence in assisting students and families with the college application process was more effective than passively waiting for families to ask for help or sending families to find resources themselves (Engle et al., 2006).

In a 1998 study (Adelman, 1999), 84% of low income students reported that they or their immediate family members had not consulted with anyone about the college enrollment process. Furthermore, 53% of low income students with acceptable academic
transcripts admitted that they or their parents had not spoken to school or financial advisors about financing college. Adelman’s conclusions revealed that low income students and their families needed individualized attention from educators, high school counselors, and college/career readiness experts on the college application process. Moreover, school officials and college admissions programs which focus on serving first-generation, college bound students should identify adolescents while they are in high school and develop academic relationships with them so their parents are comfortable seeking advice about workforce programs or asking questions about the college-going process.

First-generation, high school students may not have the appropriate knowledge when navigating the college admissions process and may even unintentionally create limitations in the college selection process because of their limited knowledge or lack of parental encouragement about higher education (Horvat, 1996; McDonough, 1997). For example, in the Horvat study (1996), some parents of first-generation students who were interviewed believed they did not have the economic or cultural capacity to assist their students in the college admissions process, or they believed it was not their place to initiate or arrange their son’s or daughter’s plans for college or careers.

Small learning communities of devoted and knowledgeable personnel will not replace the influence of parents, but they can effectively advise first-generation students to make long-range goals relating to college and career decisions. When school personnel invest time in getting to know students and their strengths during high school, they will later be able to encourage them to pursue their interests as well as recognize when they are struggling with academic challenges or future decisions (Farmer-Hinton & Adams,
2006). Establishing trusting relationships between first-generation students and school personnel was a key component to college and career advising in many educational environments. For example, Horn and Nunez (2000) concluded that school or community academic outreach programs for first-generation, college bound students were more successful in persuading students to pursue advanced curriculum in high school if they first established trusting and supportive learning relationships with the young people. Later studies concluded that students were more receptive of college and career advice and more willing to overcome academic obstacles if they established trusting relationships with school personnel (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Schussler & Collins, 2006; Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak, Powell, 2000).

**Financial Aid Does Not Increase College Enrollment of First-Generation Students**

In a country where public, private, and non-profit agencies willingly provide financial aid incentives and needs based scholarships to low socioeconomic, college bound students, many first-generation students fail to complete the Federal Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) paperwork which several agencies require before they award academic scholarships or loans to students. First-generation, low socioeconomic students are the least likely of any college bound demographic to complete the necessary documentation (King, 2004) and recent studies show there is a correlation between the completion of the FAFSA paperwork and college attendance (Roderick, Nagoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Students who completed the FAFSA paperwork during the spring of their senior year in high school were 50 percent more likely to attend college the following fall.
The intricacies of the financial aid application process are found to be a confusing and an unclear endeavor for many first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students and their families (Kirst, M. & Venezia, A., 2004). One of the hurdles that first-generation students face when completing the FAFSA paperwork is the amount of personal information the application requires of students and families. The FAFSA application allows students and families to skip questions but oftentimes, families are fearful to leave the documents blank, so they provide inaccurate information, which later produces an incomplete document and a denial of financial aid. Eventually, some families get frustrated with the intricacies of the application or the lack of guidance from FAFSA representatives, which causes them not to submit or resubmit the FAFSA paperwork to the federal government. As a result, one in five eligible high school students never completed the financial aid eligibility requirements, which deny students the opportunity to receive state Pell Grants, federal financial assistance or eligibility for other needs based aid (Kirst, M. & Venezia, A., 2004).

Lack of clarity about college financing is another hurdle for many families. Much of the financial aid information families receive is not consistent and many financial aid offices lack personnel and the technology infrastructure to individually assist students and families (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA), 2008; American Council of Education, 2006). The benefits of completing the FAFSA paperwork can be overshadowed by the specific financial questions families and students are ill equipped to answer and the lack of understanding of how financial aid works (Feeney & Heroff, 2013). First-generation, low socioeconomic students and their families generally overestimate the cost of college attendance, or they become
intimidated by the cost of a four-year degree. FAFSA assumes families can financially contribute to their high school graduate’s college education but many, unfortunately, cannot take on the financial burden of their child’s post-secondary education (ACSFA, 2008). The negative experience of seeking financial aid and the fear of not receiving a financial aid package may convey the impression that a college degree is an unattainable goal to pursue after high school.

Financial aid agents including members the Commission of Higher Education (ACSFA, 2008), admitted that the financial aid application can be redundant, vague, and inefficient to complete. This is why it is so imperative for first-generation, low socioeconomic students and their families to have a social capital network they can rely upon when they have to complete the paperwork during the student’s senior year of high school.

**Federally Funded College and Career Readiness Programs**

Researchers Perna and Swail (2000) believed financial aid programs were not the panacea for increasing college enrollment of economically disadvantaged high school graduates. High schools, higher education institutions, and community agencies need to investigate whether first-generation, low socioeconomic college ready high school students are academically, psychologically, and socially prepared for the rigors of college life and for the workforce. Moreover, educators and community advocates must determine whether underrepresented high school graduates are prepared for the environmental differences a college campus setting is compared to their home, high school, neighborhood, and community.
Since the implementation of the Educational Opportunities Act of 1967 and TRIO programs, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions provide academic instruction and college preparatory activities on college campuses after school, on the weekends, and over summer vacation to low income, first-generation high school students (United States Department of Education, 2009).

The TRIO programs refer to the three original federally funded programs which support higher educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. The purpose behind the TRIO programs was to boost the academic skills and student motivation of low income, first-generation high school students so they could be prepared after high school to apply to a post-secondary institution (Economic Opportunity Amendment of 1967, 2013).

The three federally sponsored programs established in 1968 were Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services. Presently, there are eight programs in existence to support low income high school students who want to apply to college and for those who are in college but need academic and guidance services while they pursue their baccalaureate degrees. Moreover, the TRIO programs provide educational services for students with disabilities in grades six through post-secondary school. Upward Bound is the most recognized TRIO program in the country which has the highest participation rate of 964 programs in high schools and 65,000 students enrolled across the United States (United States Department of Education, 2013).

In 2009, Mathematica Policy Research Center was contracted by the Department of Education to conduct an evaluation and longitudinal study of the Upward Bound program.
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and its impact on low income, first-generation, college bound high school students. Survey data was collected by Upward Bound participants who graduated or left high school seven to nine years after the period they were enrolled in the program, as well as a control group from the same demographic who did not participate in Upward Bound (Mamun, Seftor, & Schirm, 2009).

The Mathematica Policy Research Center found there was no significance or detectable effect on post-secondary enrollment or selectivity of institutions high school students enrolled in after their experience in the Upward Bound program compared to the control group in the study. There was only a two percent increase of post-secondary enrollment by Upward Bound students, which mirrored the enrollment of the control group. Additionally, the Upward Bound program did not increase the likelihood that first-generation, low income high school participants would apply for college financial aid or receive a Pell Grant. The study did find that Upward Bound participants in certain subgroups were more likely to complete a four-year degree six to twelve percentage points higher than those from the control group (Mamun, Seftor, & Schrim, 2009). Finally, longer participation in the Upward Bound program and strong parental involvement increased the likelihood that students would enroll and complete a post-secondary degree.

Nearly 60% of students identified as first-generation college-ready and who lived in the lowest quartile of economic income did not attend college after high school. The research concluded that full participation in the Upward Bound program, high school course selection in the areas of mathematics, high parental involvement, and the
motivation level of students played a pivotal role in whether a student applied and completed a post-secondary program (Mamun, Seftor, & Schrim, 2009).

Many studies conducted in the past identified college readiness programs for first-generation high school students living in low socioeconomic conditions, but few studies evaluated the human, social, and cultural capital elements associated with program success and college enrollment outcomes. Researchers Gandara and Bial (2001) found that many research investigations lacked information and data analysis on the effectiveness and sustainability of college readiness programs. Secondly, many college readiness programs and other programs catering to first-generation college bound students lacked longitudinal research and outcome effectiveness. Finally, Perna and Swail (2002) concluded that several programs which served low socioeconomic, first-generation students collected only participation and enrollment data, not program evaluation information or the amount of time students were actively engaged in a college readiness program.

Harvill, Maynard, Nguyen, Robertson-Kraft, and Tognatta (2012) reviewed 12 college access and preparation programs in the United States which specifically examined college readiness programs for first-generation and economically disadvantaged high school students. Four program components in the evaluation addressed students’ human, social, and cultural capital characteristics. They included: counseling programs, social interaction and skill building, academic enrichment such as field trips to colleges, and mentoring opportunities. Only two of the twelve programs provided all four program components.
First-Hand Exposure to Career and College Opportunities

Researchers Gladieux and Swail (1998) found in their studies that students from low socioeconomic households needed more than scholarships and financial aid resources in order to successfully apply to and attend college. Low socioeconomic high school students needed to see first-hand, the benefits of earning a college degree (Perna, 2000). Individuals who have completed a college degree or an accredited workforce credential are more likely to transition out of poverty, yet many do not choose to pursue higher education. Of those who do pursue a post-secondary education or workforce program, at least 40% of individuals never complete their degree or workforce certification (Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999; Complete College America, 2011).

Advanced education has the potential to increase individuals’ financial, social, physical, and psychological stability during their lifetime. Young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 who graduated with an advanced degree and who work full-time, earn close to 40% more than similarly aged peers who have not completed a degree and about two-thirds more than similarly aged adults with only a high school diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Employability research found that job entry through a workforce program or school contact increased an individual’s nine-year earning potential by 17% (Rosenbaum, 2001). Furthermore, building one’s awareness about college or workforce development programs and exposure to a higher educational learning environment played a critical role in the academic decisions a student made after high school (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989) as well as increase their maturity level and “focus in thinking about a career” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Developing social capital among economically disadvantaged, first-generation high school students helps them aspire to earn a degree in higher education, seek a certain career path, and provide emotional support that boosts academic self-confidence (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2000; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Williams (2006) outlined in his research that social capital strengthened emotional support, provided access to scarce resources, and increased one’s autonomy in unfamiliar settings such as in a career. When analyzing post-secondary success, social capital can be contextualized as social support, an important predictor of student adjustment, academic persistence, and potentially a predictor in post-secondary enrollment (Perna, 2000; Williams, 2006; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989).

Numerous theories predict why economically disadvantaged high school students are not successful in attending college. Evidence suggests that lack of motivation, performance vulnerability, negative self-image, cultural isolation, and lack of support from peers, family members, and teachers can be contributing factors to the low number of low socioeconomic high school students who attend college right after high school (Baum & Ma, 2007; Perna & Titus, 2005). Furthermore, the educational conditions in classrooms such as curriculum alignment, academic rigor, and college preparation are not at a satisfactory level in many rural high schools that have a high rate of economically disadvantaged students compared to the academic guidance and college prep support found in middle class and suburban public high schools (Baum & Ma, 2007). These factors impact student confidence, goal attainment beyond a high school diploma, and post-secondary options students may choose after they complete high school (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009).
Guidance Offices Can Overlook the College Admissions Process

Numerous first-generation high school students do not understand the college admissions process and have limited access to individuals in their family or in their community who attempted the process (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). Underrepresented high school students generally rely on their high school guidance counselors for course scheduling assistance and college planning advice because they often do not have family members who are aware of college admissions requirements or have completed college (McDonough, 2006). Unfortunately, increased state academic mandates and decreased human resources in high school guidance departments have limited the amount of individualized attention many guidance counselors can give to first-generation students who are exploring college and workforce programs.

A 2008 survey among Michigan high school guidance counselors, (The Joyce Ivy Foundation, 2009) found that 30% of their work time was doing administrative duties and completing paperwork such as proctoring state mandated exams. Twenty-five percent of counselors surveyed said their work time was devoted to responding to “critical disciplinary incidents or immediate needs” of students. The remaining 45% of a counselor’s time was spent on developing high school course schedules and conducting college planning meetings with students. Unfortunately, the average caseload for every public school guidance counselor in the state of Michigan was 362 students compared to 250 students attending private school; therefore, it was unrealistic to be able to have individualized meetings with students about their academic plans after high school graduation (The Joyce Ivy Foundation, 2009). Lack of information in the college planning process and limited interactions with guidance counselors will result in fewer
underrepresented students taking required college admissions coursework or understanding the college admission requirements such as being exposed to rigorous curriculum, having an appropriate grade point average or SAT exam score for college eligibility (Barton, 2003).

**Guidance Counselor Roles Shift to Career and College Readiness**

Scores of first-generation high school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have low self-efficacy, lack of academic support, perceived and real barriers which prevent them from pursuing an academic path toward a post-secondary education (Gibbons & Schoffner, 2004). According to Gibbons and Schoffner (2004), first-generation students may benefit from group guidance counseling interventions when navigating the college application process. Group guidance interventions can assist students in gaining an understanding of the expectations and requirements colleges have for admissions, as well receive assistance in college application procedures while they interact with peers who are facing the same challenges. Recognizing the need for guidance interventions for first-generation college bound high school students, the Department of Education and its legislators implemented such a program in low socioeconomic high schools nine years ago.

The Community College System (CCS) began its Career Coaches Program in January of 2006, with 11 career coaches in 13 high schools across the Commonwealth of Virginia. The purpose of the Career Coaches Program is to empower high school students to make informed decisions about their future career and educational plans and to assist students in the postsecondary education and training process. More importantly,
participants in the Career Coaches Program have the opportunity to explore a variety of post-secondary options such as community college enrollment, 4-year college or university enrollment, apprenticeships, and workforce training in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Seven years later, the career coaches programs had 101 career coaches in more than 161 high schools throughout the Commonwealth. Sixty-eight percent of the students who participated in the Career Coaches Program were enrolled in rural high schools (Virginia Community College System, 2013).

Data from the 2009-2010 academic year indicated that rural high schools with a designated career coach in their school, had a higher rate of graduates who enrolled in a community college within one year, demonstrated a percentage increase of graduates who enrolled in a career and technical program at a community college, and participated in dual enrollment courses which transferred to any state college or university (Virginia Community College System, 2013).

The literature contends that career coaches or guidance counselors, who have the time and the resources in the areas of career and college preparatory services deeply influence the choices, decisions, and long-term goals first-generation, economically disadvantaged high school students. The Virginia Career Coaches Program is one example of implementing college and career readiness resources to public high schools that have the greatest concentration of first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students in their classrooms. Not only does the program introduce students to career and college readiness skills but it aligns them with a network of college and workforce experts.
Human, Culture, and Social Capital Influences First-Generation Students

Human, cultural, and social capital influences first-generation, college bound students’ ability to pursue the college academic track in high school. Many first-generation, college bound high school students who live in impoverished conditions are deficient in human, social, and cultural capital characteristics because they are not exposed to a high degree of positive school engagement among family members, friends, and community groups. Furthermore, many students do not have family members who are involved or show an interest in the activities or daily routines of school because of societal and economic circumstances. Finally, several first-generation, college bound students lack positive peer encouragement in their schools and in their community. They are not part of a social network that emphasizes a college ready culture and supports academic accomplishments (Choy, S., Horn, L., Nunez, A., & Chen, X., 2000).

Human, social, and cultural capital influences first-generation, college bound students’ ability to pursue the college academic track in high school and provides them the fortitude and stamina to apply to and attend a 4-year institution of higher learning or a career training program. The human capital theory and the cultural capital theory emphasize the social and psychological behaviors of individuals and illustrate how family and friends can shape decision making of high school students (Choy, S., Horn, L., Nunez, A., & Chen, X., 2000).

The Human Capital Theory

The human capital theory can be contextualized by one’s understanding of post-secondary admissions requirements, choices in the college application process, and post-
secondary enrollment decisions which can affect future income earnings and social mobility. Another interpretation of human capital is for individuals to treat education, especially higher education or workforce programs, as an investment in one’s future income earnings and productivity as an employer and as a citizen (VanderMerwe, 2010). Limited human capital can influence academic decisions and long-term career goals for first-generation students. For example, a lack of academic preparation and limited access to information about the college admissions process has the potential to influence whether students will be accepted into college or if they will be prepared to learn in a collegiate environment. Eventually, an individual’s capacity for human capital will influence his or her career choices, future income, and social status (Hill, 2008; Perna, 2000).

In a 2008 study in the Chicago Public Schools System (Roderick, Nagoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008), only 41% of Chicago Public Schools seniors stated they aspired, actually applied to, and enrolled in a 4-year, college or university at the end of their senior year of high school. Positive human capital characteristics such as parental and school support inclined many students’ decisions to apply to a four-year school. First, some seniors decided to attend a 2-year college or vocational program. Others decided to delay their enrollment until the spring of their senior year. Finally, there were seniors who decided to delay their college-going plans until a year after graduation. Surprisingly, the students with the highest academic qualifications to attend college were the most at-risk of completing the college application benchmarks (applications, financial aid information, and acceptance information).
Human capital can be a driver in a student’s ability to be accepted into college. A high school student’s human capital such as an intrinsic interest in a field of study, academic course selection, family encouragement, economic status, financial support, and access to social networks and resources is critical when making the college-going journey (Cossler & du Toit, 2002). Educational resources and advocacy within a high school environment can off-set the human capital deficits many economically disadvantaged, first generation college-going students may experience as they embark on the college application process.

**The Social Capital Theory**

Coleman believed (1987) that a child’s connectedness to his or her family members and overall welfare inside the home directly influences his or her academic achievement and learning aspirations. Moreover, positive relationships among students, parents, and family members will increase social relationships in school and the community, as well as boost social involvement in school. If parental involvement or even a positive parent presence is found in students’ academic lives, they will be more engaged in school and their academic outcomes may be more attainable.

Astone, Nathanson, Schoen, & Young (1999) applied Coleman’s theory a step further by incorporating social capital as a way to network with persons outside of the home and to access resources with the assistance of others who are not family members. Astone and fellow researchers believed that students could build strong relationships with individuals from the school, neighborhood, or church community and in turn, seek guidance and be able to access resources from persons other than family members. As a result, long, stable relationships in a neighborhood, school, or church will increase
students’ social capital and guide them to make positive career and college preparation decisions.

The reality for many students who live below the poverty line and whose families have experienced generations of poverty is that employment and educational opportunities are influenced by financial circumstances (Payne, 2005). For example, parents may not be able to rise above a minimum wage job because of their lack of education. Students may opt out of enrolling in a community college or workforce program after high school because they need to work full-time to support their families. Furthermore, many students living in poverty have not been exposed or taught social expectations found in business and in educational settings.

A lack of parental involvement in college or career planning of high school students cannot be the sole consequence of parental apathy or lack of engagement. Patricia McDonough found in her research (2006) that the “disappearing parent syndrome” can be the fault of schools. Parental involvement is increasingly discouraged by school systems as a child progresses through middle and high school. Secondary institutions do not openly publicize the need for parents to volunteer in classrooms or become involved in school initiatives. Consequently as school curriculum becomes more rigorous and specialized as children advance in grade levels, parental involvement with student homework completion and content mastery is less likely to occur. If parents are uninvited by the schools and ill equipped to help with curriculum, there will be less of a parental presence in a child’s education.

David Longanecker, Executive Director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, believed that building relationships among students, families, and
advocates such as teachers, coaches, counselors, and administrators are the best lines of early intervention when setting high expectations and long-term goal setting for students (2003). Moreover, a teacher’s enthusiasm and genuine interest in his or her students’ interests, academic progress, extra-curricular activities, and future aspirations beyond high school graduation increases academic development and fosters student engagement (Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; Oregon Department of Education, 2000).

Wubbels, Levy, and Brekelmans (1997) studied over 50,000 students and teachers for fifteen years on the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in the classroom environment and how they influenced student achievement and student attitudes about learning. Wubbles et al. found that “According to students, the best teachers are strong classroom leaders who are friendlier and more understanding and less uncertain, dissatisfied, and critical than most teachers. Their best teachers allow them more freedom than the norm.” Based on past research, it is probable that strong student-teacher relationships in the classroom or school setting will increase the social, human, and cultural capital of first-generation, college bound students.

The Cultural Capital Theory

The cultural capital concept was examined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s and 1980s. Bordieu defined cultural capital as “verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic influence, and an understanding of information about school systems and functionalities, as well as educational credentials” (Swartz, 1997). In his research, Bordieu believed students would benefit more educationally and socially if cultural capital were acquired over a period of time through family and home interactions. A
child’s attitude about school, academic goals, and school performance were influenced by parents; however, many children from impoverished environments appeared to gain cultural capital in the school setting by teachers, rather than by adults living in the home (Bourdieu, 1983).

DiMaggio discovered in his findings (1982) that boosting cultural capital was more beneficial to males from low income households than females living in similar economic conditions. He concluded that males were more motivated by upward social mobility and social status because it was a sign of respect. Furthermore, social status was praised in certain male dominated cultures. McDonough (1997) found differences in cultural capital when she studied how females selected colleges. Families with more privileged backgrounds had access to college admissions information and were comfortable in seeking out information about college enrollment and the admissions process, compared to students who had parents from lower social classes. The low income or less privileged parents were supportive of their daughters’ desire to attend college but they did not know how to support them or give them guidance in the college decision-making process (McDonough, 1997).

Cultural capital is a necessary skill to have when navigating in social structures and situations. Students who have a high degree of cultural capital tend to be more successful in a college setting, have positive educational outcomes, secure upward mobility (DiMaggio, 1982), and are able to obtain an occupation aligned with middle and upper class status (Bourdieu, 1983).

After reading Bourdieu’s research, sociologists Lareau & Weininger (2003) believed that the definition of cultural capital needed to be expanded to “an individuals’ strategic
use of knowledge, skills, and competence when encountering institutionalized standards of evaluation.” They further concluded that cultural capital skills generate value added benefits, advantages, and profit in the workforce, in education, and in social status (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

In 2008, qualitative studies on social class differences in the college application and enrollment process were conducted by Lareau and Weininger. They concluded that cultural capital was prevalent among students who had involved parents who thought it was important to be engaged in their son’s or daughter’s academic future and in the college application process. Those participants in the study were recognized to have a successful admissions experience (Lareau & Weininger, 2008).

**Peer Networks Influence Career and College Planning**

Many experts in educational research still question the significance of peer influences toward fellow students, who are in the college-going decision process, yet in several current studies, the correlation of peers influencing decision outcomes remains high among low income populations (Chen, 1997; Kindermann, 1993). In the Engberg and Wolniak study (2009) of high school context and students’ post-secondary outcomes, the researchers discovered that peers influenced student human capital characteristics as well as future career and academic decisions. As more peers made plans to apply and attend a 2 or 4-year college, the odds of students’ attending a higher educational institution increased. Conversely, if peers decided on attending a 2-year career or college program, the interest in attending a 4-year college or university decreased among students. Enrollment in a 4-year college or university increased if there was discussion among
students and their friends’ parents about college aspirations and the college application process.

**First-Generation Students Benefit from Mentoring**

First-generation, economically disadvantaged high school students need mentoring which incorporates cultural and human capital characteristics. The greatest impact a counselor or school faculty member can have on a first-generation student is to provide on-going and active advising on career and college opportunities (McDonough, 2006).

Coleman (1987), a social capital theorist, found in his research that mentoring relationships between positive adult role models and at-risk youth bolstered human development and allowed students to develop attitudes and behaviors that prepared them for adulthood and the workforce. Social learning theorist, Bandura (1977) also believed that individuals emulate the behavior of those they admire. One-on-one counseling by a caring adult who takes a personal interest in a student’s life, models positive self-concept, demonstrates realistic goal setting and problem solving skills will strengthen a student’s resolve and ability to reach his or her aspiration. Egan (1994) later concluded in his research that mentors who play a guidance role can alleviate students’ anxieties and self-doubts. Over time, a mentor-student relationship will foster a working knowledge of social expectations and help the student access resources which can support his or her goals.

According to a study by Glasser and Ross (1970), one of the main characteristics many successful persons from economically disadvantaged backgrounds possessed was goal orientation and taking steps to reach one’s aspirations. Individuals with a vision and dream who develop long-range goals with consistent effort and preparation in reaching
the goals are more inclined to succeed than persons who only set short-term goals with little planning or consistent effort. More importantly, individuals who believed they were in charge of their future and were solely responsible for reaching their goals were more inclined to succeed.

The evidence points out that long-term mentoring or guidance from a trusted adult can positively influence a first-generation, economically disadvantaged high school student’s effective belief system (Lee, 1999). High self-efficacy skills and expectations, as well as core values are traits occupations and institutions of higher learning want in their employees or students; therefore, it is imperative for first-generation students to be exposed to them.

Stanford University conducted a six-year national study on high school outreach programs, exit-level, placement, and college entrance policies. The Stanford Bridge Project interviewed high school administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers from six states about high school coursework and college counseling for students seeking admissions into a post-secondary institution after graduation (Kirst, Antonio, & Venezia, 2004). The Bridge Project wanted to discern what parents and students knew about college admissions, course placement policies, and if they knew how to access information and resources relative to college admissions.

The Bridge Project data concluded there were several disconnects in communicating college admissions guidelines to high school students. For example, students in accelerated courses received better communication than those who were not on similar ability tracks. Most outreach programs attracted students from middle and upper class households rather than students from lower socioeconomic homes (Kirst et al., 2004).
Because of the daily contact with the students, Kirst et al. (2004) study found teachers played more of a central role in helping them prepare for college admissions than high school guidance counselors. Furthermore, teachers were able to develop strong connections and student-teacher relationships with students due to the positive classroom atmosphere. These relationships are difficult to foster for many guidance counselors because of their expansive work responsibilities, heavy student case load, and limited time with individuals (Krist, et al., 2004).

The Bridge Project and the Krist et al. studies both demonstrate the need for first-generation, low socioeconomic students to develop positive relationships with adults who have a vested interest in their educational future. Building strong communication lines with students and family members, developing community networks, and establishing high academic expectations beyond high school can engender social capital among first-generation, low income high school students who have the ability to pursue a post-secondary education.

The effects of positive adult role models mentoring economically disadvantaged high school students reaps high self-efficacy, goal setting, and future aspirations; in addition, research by Lee and Cramond (1999) found that mentoring of low SES students for more than a year resulted in improved career and educational aspirations. Schools, community organizations, and student advocacy groups must invest human resources and time into a college and career program in order for positive college-going outcomes to arise for first-generation, low income high school students. An investment of time and human resources will cultivate students’ positive self-efficacy, an awareness of career and college options, and the skills needed to pursue long-term goals.
Summary of the Literature

The literature reviewed shows that first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decisions about career and college preparation are significantly influenced by individuals whom they can trust. Academic preparation, educational expectations, and knowledge of the college admissions process may not be supported by families of first-generation students because of their lack of awareness about the college admissions process (Choy, 2001). Many qualitative and quantitative research findings suggested that in order to increase the enrollment of first-generation, low income students into workforce programs and institutions of higher learning, they need to work with trusted adults who care about their future aspirations and can assist them in accessing workforce and enrollment information (Horn and Nunez, 2000; Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Vargas, 2004; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006).

In spite of the many private and public college financial assistance programs available for first-generation students, researchers proclaimed that low income students are least likely to apply to them (King, 2004; Roderick et al., 2008). Financial aid applications can be confusing for many families to complete without the assistance from FAFSA representatives, school personnel, and adequate technology. Moreover, many first-generation students and their families believe paying for college tuition is unattainable; therefore, they do not even attempt to seek financial assistance (Feeney & Heroff, 2013).

Federally funded college and career readiness programs have been in existence for first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students for 50 years, but only a small number of programs focus on increasing students’ human, social, and cultural capital, and few increase the likelihood of participants completing four-year college degrees (Harvill
et al., 2012). The research concluded that first-generation students who are recognized for their academic and career aspirations by family, friends, school personnel, and community members will have a greater likelihood of securing long-term academic and career goals (Horn and Nunez, 2000). It is also important to note that unified support from family, friends, school, and community stakeholders will increase a first-generation, high school student’s social, human, and cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; McDonough, 1997).

The role of high school guidance counselors has changed in the last decade due to increased state and federal graduation mandates in public schools. This has restricted the amount of time and resources, guidance counselors can devote to individualized career and college planning for students (Barton, 2003; The Joyce Ivy Foundation, 2009). In a 2004 study, Gibbons and Schoffner concluded that group counseling interventions relating to college and career readiness may benefit first-generation students because counselors could provide support for a number of students as well as foster positive group interactions. A state in the Mid-Atlantic region implemented career and college readiness programs described by Gibbons and Schoffner in thirteen high schools in 2004. This study investigated one of the thirteen programs which is located in a rural high school. Chapter three describes the methodology of the college and career readiness program study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Many studies have examined targeted college readiness programs sponsored by the private and public sectors, but very few studies have focused on the level of support high schools give to encourage students to apply to college or a workforce program (Gibbons & Schoffner, 2004). Previous research focused on college and career readiness programs for first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students; however, it is important to consider whether students’ human, social, and cultural capital increased due to the college and career readiness interventions. The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influenced economically disadvantaged, first-generation, college bound high school students in a Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach. It allowed the researcher to analyze qualitative data in order to determine if the results were related and possessed common themes. Furthermore the grounded theory approach determined if the results were independent from one another. Grounded theory relies heavily on a “corpus of data” derived from qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participation in the study was voluntary; however, participants needed to be identified as students in the twelfth grade, economically disadvantaged, and children of individuals who had not gone to college. Participant responses from the qualitative data determined whether students’ participation and experiences with the college and career readiness program played an influential role in their future decision-making to apply to college or a workforce
program. From the randomly selected sample of 27 students, 13 students met all the criteria and approval process and were interviewed.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to guide the qualitative study:

1. Was the college readiness program effective in assisting first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students in applying to college or workforce programs after high school graduation?

2. Did the college and career readiness program influence first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students to develop future educational or workforce participation goals beyond high school?

3. Were there societal influences which affected first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decision to pursue college or a workforce program after high school?

**Description/Rationale of Participants**

The interview questions related to significant predictors or variables (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) of the social, cultural, and the human capital theories and how they influenced future college or career decision making of the participants. In order to have maximum variation, the college/career coach and one of the guidance counselors employed at the participating high school randomly selected 27 students from diverse backgrounds, academic pursuits, and differing academic or career goals after high school to participate in the study. The participants were twelfth grade high school students who self-identified as first-generation, college bound students and who came from
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economically disadvantaged backgrounds. One of the guidance counselors in the high school and the college/career coach verified the economic status of the participants based on free and reduced lunch enrollment or college application waivers students applied for in the guidance office. The participants all attended the same high school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Students who agreed to participate in the study also had permission from their parents to participate in the study. Individual interviews were conducted at the end of first semester of the participants’ senior year in high school. Participants were graduating from high school in May, and at the time of the interview many were beginning the college application process or had previously applied to colleges or workforce programs. Some participants had already been accepted to a university for the upcoming school year.

The interview questions explored students’ rationale for participating in the college and career readiness program, as well as its effectiveness in assisting them with the college or workforce application process. Throughout the interview process, the study’s participants were asked to share their experiences relating to academic preparation, goal setting, and college readiness support from family members, friends, and educators at their high school. A saturation of data was reached by eleven participants. During the second semester, the researcher spoke to a guidance counselor, an English teacher who taught only seniors, and the college/career readiness program coach about the participation rate of various college and workforce activities, gathered anecdotal data about the success of various activities, and the participation level from family members of first-generation students.
Instrumentation

In a personal interview, participants answered open-ended questions from the researcher for approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The questions focused on personal interactions among family members, teachers, and friends pertaining to college or career goals, as well as high school activities that helped or hindered their decisions in applying to a college or a work force program. Each interview was digitally recorded and saved on password protected files in order to ensure confidentiality. During the interview process, the researcher took field notes of participants’ body language and non-verbal communication cues such as facial expressions. In order for students to speak freely and not be concerned about time constraints, the researcher coordinated interview appointments around the participants’ class schedules and extra-curricular activities.

As a means of determining if the questions made sense to the participant and met the intent of the researcher, the interview questions were created by the researcher and tested on high school students who did not participate in the study or attend the selected high school. During the interview process, the questions served as a guide, but the researcher allowed the participants to share additional information that was not part of the interview questions.

For the duration of the interviews, the researcher was cognizant of not leading the participants to respond to questions a certain way or give the perception of bias. The questions asked by the researcher were objective and did not illustrate any opinion which gave the participants reason to believe the researcher was in favor or against the college/career readiness program, any department in the high school, faculty member, or students. Moreover, the researcher journaled participants’ opinions and gestures in the
field notes as well as used appropriate responses and gestures of acknowledgement which did not show bias toward the participants’ comments.

**The Researcher’s Role**

As an educator of high school students for 23 years and a former administrative intern for the participating school district, the researcher was very familiar with the academic and social environment of the study’s participants. Prior to the study, the relationship between the researcher and the school was trust-based and professional. The researcher fostered dialogue with participants, faculty, and school administration in an objective manner. Moreover, having experience working with teenagers may have increased the participation level and set the participants at ease when they were interviewed. Additionally, the researcher had regular access to the study’s participants because of the professional relationship she had with the counseling department, college/career coach, and school administration. The researcher was sensitive to the socioeconomic backgrounds and family circumstances the participants came from and did not pursue interview topics that might have been embarrassing or uncomfortable for the participants. In order to maintain objectivity, the researcher documented participants’ personal opinions about school faculty or persons of influence in her field notes and in the transcripts. The researcher was cognizant of the limited availability participants had to be interviewed, as well as the limited time school faculty could provide when assisting on matters related to the study. The researcher coordinated interviews around students’ course schedules and extra-curricular activities in addition to frequently using email or the phone to correspond with students.
Data Collection Procedures

The researcher began data collection in November of 2014, and completed the data collection by the end of February of 2015. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants who were identified as high school twelfth grade students living in low socioeconomic conditions who were the first in their immediate family to attend college or a workforce program. The students all attended the same high school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The researcher asked the school’s career coach, a member of the guidance department, and teachers who taught senior level courses to select individuals for the qualitative survey who fit the purposeful sampling criteria. Twenty-seven students who fit the study’s criteria and demonstrated interest in participating in the study attended an informational meeting about the study which was led by the researcher. Follow-up correspondence of the 27 interested students was made by email and by phone. Thirteen students completed a consent form prior to the interviews. The permission slip given to family members indicated that participants were randomly selected to participate in the interview process of the study. Ten students declined to be interviewed and two students who were invited to be part of the study realized their parents attended community colleges; therefore, they were not eligible to be interviewed. Two students were unable to be reached after the initial meeting. Prior to the interviews, the researcher sought approval from Creighton University’s Institutional Review Board and had appropriate permission from family members of the participants to participate in the interview.

Participants were informed in writing and orally by the researcher that their interview responses would remain confidential and that participating in the study was voluntary.
The interviews were conducted privately at a mutually agreed upon time at the students’ high school in the guidance office conference room or the school library. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants received a $10 gift card to a local convenience store. Participants could withdraw at anytime during the study without penalty and could rescind or add information after they received the interview transcript from the researcher. Saturation was noted after ten interviews and reached after eleven interviews.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The interviews were conducted over a series of weeks that did not interfere with mid-year exams, state mandated assessments, school holidays, and school vacations. In order to analyze the interviews as one unit of data without excluding key pieces of information, the researcher digitally recorded each interview and maintained the transcripts in a 256-bit encrypted zip file. Transcripts were developed by a bonded, professional transcriptionist contracted by the researcher during the study. The transcripts were maintained in word format in a similar encrypted file and were password protected by the transcriptionist and the researcher. Once transcripts were completed, participants were given a copy of the transcript as a way to member check and to ensure their responses, opinions, and personal experiences were appropriately conveyed before the researcher began analyzing the responses. The audio files were erased once the transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher and the participants. Participants were told in writing that they could retract or add information to their responses.

The interview questions were semi-structured and audio recorded for data analysis purposes. Interview questions were primarily the same for all of the participants; however, the order of the questions, the exact wording of the questions, or the type of the
follow-up questions varied among the different participants. The identities of the interviewed participants remained anonymous. When responses were recorded in the study, the researcher used pseudonyms such as “Student 01,” “Student 02,” and “Student 03.”

Once the interviews were completed, the researcher used open and axial coding procedures to generate themes, labels, and categories which applied to the research. In order to organize the qualitative data, responses were categorized by themes, phrases, and common areas. Moreover, the researcher used the open and axial coding procedures when making observations between the career coach and the participants. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2004), it is imperative researchers assess the qualitative data and determine the organization of the data before they begin coding the data. In the study, the names of the participants remained anonymous and were identified with a code number. Open coding ensured the researcher did not have preconceived categories and that the responses are derived from the data (Punch, 2009). Secondly, open coding prevented the researcher from focusing too much on specific data or to rush to interpretation. The data was broad and conceptual in nature during the analytical process of the research study.

Emerging themes were found during the open coding operations and from the specific interviews; therefore, axial coding was a second procedure used during the analytical process of the study. Axial coding specifically took fragments of the participant responses and observational information and interconnected them back into the causal theoretical relationships.
The causal relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were analyzed from the axial coding process and included:

- Causal conditions or events that influenced the participants’ decisions to pursue a college or career path.
- Context or nature of cultural, family, or friendship influences the participants had during their high school experience.
- Intervening conditions or persons which or who led to the decisions participants made when selecting high school courses, participating in activities in and outside of school, and making future plans after their high school educational experience.
- Acting strategies such as goals-oriented activities the participants used in response to causal conditions or to pursue goals relating to career or college preparation while in high school.

When coding the responses, the researcher categorized qualitative data by themes, and frequent responses. In addition to categorizing data by themes and frequent responses, the researcher found relationships between coded categories and theoretical definitions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). It helped the researcher differentiate and collate the participant responses with the human, social, and cultural capital theories that were researched during the study.

The researcher kept an interview journal with notes, reactions from the participants, and observations made during the interview sessions. The researcher also compiled note cards with direct quotes from the participants for future analysis. The researcher reviewed the interviews and validated research questions, as well as determined if any themes relating to the data were evident. Follow-up questions were devised to offset any
discrepancies found from the semi-structured interview. In order to preserve the intended meaning of responses by the interviewee, the researcher made every effort to note in a journal the context of responses. The collection of data was analyzed in an objective and unbiased manner. The journal will be destroyed after the research has been published.

Creswell and Miller (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000) determined that qualitative validation is important to establish because the researcher must assure that qualitative data collection is accurate and consistent when analyzing the interview responses and the quantitative results. The researcher triangulated the data during the study. Toward the end of the study the researcher contacted the career coach and the guidance counselor to determine attendance records of activities pertaining to college readiness, as well as to verify comments students made about the structures of school programs. Moreover, the researcher observed some college and career preparation activities in which the study’s participants took part during the second semester of high school.

**Quality and Verification**

Once the interviews were completed and the transcripts were made, the researcher gave participants the opportunity to review their responses for accuracy and ensure their opinions and feelings were appropriately portrayed in the transcripts. The researcher maintained a journal which documented the dates and times of the interviews and member checked specific events described in the interviews with the participants and school faculty members. The journal could be audited later for future verification of comments made by the participants or events depicted in the interviews. In order to
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uphold the context of information and opinions of participants, the researcher maintained note cards of participant quotes, and a journal during the research process and followed Creswell’s suggestion (2013) to bracket personal opinions, anecdotes, and inferences relating to the researcher’s experiences as an educator. The journal and note cards were cited as needed in the findings and did not reflect any subjective reflections by the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

When the qualitative responses were documented in the study, the researcher did not use the real identities of the participants. All of the data remained in a secure location and the researcher kept the interviewees’ identities and responses confidential. In order to maintain the confidentiality agreement and protect the vulnerable subjects’ perceptions and experiences, the researcher did not discuss the responses of the participants with the families of the participants, the school’s career coach, guidance department, or central administration.

When interviewing the participants, the researcher did not lead the participants to provide specific answers, reactions, or examples to the questions. Furthermore, the researcher minimized inevitable biases through member-checking and triangulation of responses and data. The researcher did not receive any compensation for the study and the participants or the participating school district did not pay an honorarium to the researcher. The researcher paid for her own expenses, which included the researcher’s fuel costs in traveling from the school to her home or workplace. She also paid for the ten dollar gift cards that each participant received as a thank you gift. The school division was not compensated for agreeing to the study, but they were recognized in the
research. Copies of the parent consent and participant assent letters are found in Appendix C and D.

**Summary**

The research study sought to determine the effectiveness of a targeted college and career readiness program and how it influenced economically disadvantaged, first-generation, college bound high school students’ future career and college plans after high school and whether their human, social, and cultural capital increased due to the college and career readiness interventions. The qualitative research was a narrative study of 13 students in the twelfth grade who were first-generation, economically disadvantaged and academically prepared to pursue a post-secondary education. The participants of the study attended a specific high school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and met the specifications of the study. All of the participants met the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) qualifications and the researcher filed the appropriate participant assents and parental consents before interviewing the participants. Furthermore, the researcher adhered to all of the IRB requirements with regards to the completion of the qualitative study. Data were gathered through individualized interviews with voluntary participants who shared their high school experiences as they pertained to college and career readiness, their participation level with the school’s college/career coach, the guidance department, and the individuals who influenced them in future career and educational goals.

The researcher made observational notes of participant behaviors, and non-verbal mannerisms made during the interviews. In order to analyze potential themes and
common occurrences, the researcher made note cards of participants’ direct quotes and experiences the participants shared during the interviews. The researcher also kept a journal of participant anecdotes and school activities pertaining to college/career readiness. Activities and school related scenarios were later verified by a member of the guidance department. Each of these measures was taken to ensure the validity of the study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This qualitative grounded theory study, investigated first-generation, low socioeconomic, high school students’ participation rate in their school’s college and career readiness services, their personal influences as they made future educational and workforce decisions, and their perceptions of their high school’s college and career readiness program. The researcher interviewed high school seniors from a Mid-Atlantic high school who were identified as first-generation, low socioeconomic students eligible to apply to a college or workforce program. Chapter Four begins with an overview of the study’s methodology and the procedures used to analyze the data. Additionally, the researcher provides demographic information of the study’s participants as a source of reference for the reader. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the data categorized by themes, direct quotes from participants, and research questions.

Review of the Methodology

This qualitative study used a grounded research approach. Participants of the study were identified by members of the guidance department as first-generation, low socioeconomic high school twelfth grade students. Participation of the study was voluntary with data gathered by face-to-face interviews from 13 participants during the end of first semester and the beginning of second semester of their twelfth grade year of high school. The interviews were 30-45 minutes in length and were held in the school library and the school counselors’ conference room. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed on password protected digital files by a bonded transcription service. Participants were advised that their names, comments, and demographics would
remain anonymous. After the interviews were transcribed, the participants would receive a hard copy of their interview.

Before each interview began, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, explained the interview process, and asked if the participant had any questions. The researcher reminded the participant that if at any time, he or she wanted to stop the interview or not answer a question, he or she could do so without penalty. As recommended by Ritchie and Lewis (2007), the researcher arranged guided questions (Appendix A) which followed a theme with key topics; however, the researcher anticipated that the order of topics may be rearranged based on the responses of the interviewee and the depth of the topics covered. The researcher took observational notes of non-verbal communication of participants as was warranted. Saturation was noted in interview 10 and confirmed in interview 11. The researcher completed thirteen interviews but no follow-up interviews by the interviewees were needed.

The researcher had a professional relationship with the participating high school but had never personally met any of the participants prior to the interviews. In order to avoid professional or personal bias from entering the study, the researcher noted phrases that were used by the participants and researcher observations during the interviews.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Once interviews were completed, the researcher electronically sent them to a professional transcriptionist on a 256-bit encrypted zip file. In order to maintain confidentiality, the names of the participants were coded with a number to the corresponding transcription document. Participants were given two weeks to contact the researcher if they had concerns or questions about the transcript. The researcher used
open and axial coding. In order to organize the qualitative data, responses were
categorized by themes, phrases, and common areas. During the analysis of the qualitative
data, the participants’ direct remarks and general responses to the questions were noted
with their corresponding code number.

**Participant Demographics**

**School Demographics**

Participants were enrolled in a high school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United
States. The community is considered rural but it is 30 miles from urban and suburban
areas of the state. The high school serves students in grades 9-12 and has a population
of 1,181 students. Forty-five percent of the student population was identified as minority
and 43% of students lived in low socioeconomic households (Department of
Education, 2015). Gender make-up of the high school was 51% males and 49% females.
The researcher selected the high school because it had the highest number of students in
the region who were living in poverty even though the community was close to two urban
centers with low unemployment rates. Secondly, the high school had the one of the
highest numbers of graduates in the region who did not attend an institution of higher
learning after high school. Finally, the school had a student drop-out rate of six percent
which was greater than three neighboring county high schools with similar demographics.
The drop-out rate of neighboring high schools ranged from 3% to 6%.

**Participant Demographics**

The racial and gender make-up of the participants was appropriately aligned with the
demographics of the high school. Eight participants were African-American and five
participants were Caucasian. Five males and eight females participated in the interviews. Table 1 describes the racial demographics, gender of the first-generation participants, and their decision to pursue post-secondary education or a career directly after high school graduation.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Racial Demographic</th>
<th>Pursuit of college or career after high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Community college and then transfer to a state university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Community college and then transfer to a state university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Community college and then transfer to a state university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4-year university and ROTC (military)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Community college and then transfer to a state university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>4-year university and participate in college athletics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>4-year university out-of-state university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4-year college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4-year university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4-year university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Undecided—may enroll at local community college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Not all participant responses were relevant to the study’s purpose; therefore, the researcher was thorough in recognizing which interview responses provided linkages to the research study and which responses were not pertinent to the research questions or the study. Several of the questions resulted in repetitive responses from the participants, and this resulted in a saturation rate of findings, as well as the discovery of particular themes the researcher did not anticipate.

The constant comparative methodology of the study revealed that participants’ experiences guided them in future decision making as it related to college or a career choice. More specifically, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred to it, grounded theory can emerge from events, settings, principles, and concepts. The researcher derived grounded theoretical properties based on the participants’ personal influences and experiences (i.e. teacher engagement, family or community engagement, personal goal setting, school culture, peer perception, and social background) as they related to the college and career readiness. Secondly, grounded theory processes were further determined based on the school’s response to the career and college readiness program and the participants’ relationship with the college/career coach or guidance department in the high school.

The high school has one part-time career coach and three full-time guidance counselors. The career coach’s office is located in the back of the high school where the industrial arts, Junior ROTC program, and career technology classrooms are situated in the building. The guidance office is located next to the main office of the high school. Within the 13 participants, the researcher discovered two distinct categories of students.
The first category of participants was those who regularly utilized the career coach during their high school experience. The second category of participants primarily used their guidance counselor as their point of contact when exploring colleges and workforce programs. Eight participants sought the career coach’s advice and program services. Their visits included learning about the college admissions process, seeking help when completing college applications, and navigating different programs such as federal financial aid, career technical fields, military recruitment, and college athletic policies or recruiting procedures. The second category of participants were those who preferred to work directly with their guidance counselor when learning about the college admissions process and seeking help with the college application process. Four participants fell into this category; however, they utilized the services the College and Career Center offered such as the use of the computers, printers, processing dual enrollment registration paperwork, and attending university admission officers’ meetings. The four participants preferred to seek college and career advice from their guidance counselor. Furthermore, they all had a clear idea of what career field they wanted to pursue and they all had established specific post-secondary educational goals. One participant did not fit into either category. He primarily used his guidance counselor for high school course scheduling purposes and for some college admissions advice. He stated in his interview that he primarily was exploring post-secondary options alone and was not familiar with the college/career center’s services until the last semester of high school. At the time of the interview, he began seeing the college/career coach about community college enrollment.
After the interviews were completed, the researcher began looking for themes and discovered there were axial coding themes which identified the career coach’s positive influence and college planning assistance to several participants and their peers who were not interviewed. Eleven participants visited with the college/career coach during their tenure in high school, but five of the participants used the college/career coach’s services at least two times a week since the beginning of the 2014-15 school year. Eight of the participants interviewed began meeting with the college/career coach in eleventh grade, and three began meeting with her in the 12th-grade. Four participants utilized the college/career coach’s services as early as 9th and 10th-grade. The participants who met with the college/career coach on a regular basis found her guidance to be invaluable when they were exploring college and career opportunities. Five of the participants who predominately used the coach’s services were males and three participants were females.

Four salient themes emerged from the 13 participant interviews. Individualized attention from the College/Career coach was invaluable to eleven of the participants. Financial aid advice and scholarship information were sought by eight participants and considered important components for the College/Career coach, guidance counselor, and high school to address to students. Seven students voiced their concern about the lack of accessibility of the College/Career coach or their guidance counselor. Lack of communication about career and college related events sponsored by the school or the College/Career Center was a complaint for five participants. Ten participants noted that college and career readiness was essential for all students to have while they were in school.
Table 2 illustrates the frequency of themes raised during the participant interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Salient Theme</th>
<th>Salient Theme</th>
<th>Salient Theme</th>
<th>Salient Theme</th>
<th>Salient Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individualized Attention About College and Careers was Invaluable</td>
<td>Financial Aid Advice and Scholarship Information was Important</td>
<td>Lack of Accessibility to Coach or Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>Lack of Communication about Career/College Related Events</td>
<td>Encouraged College/Career Readiness for all Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>05</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>06</td>
<td>x</td>
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Table 2

Frequency of Themes from Interviews

**Identified Themes**

**Theme #1: Individualized Attention is Invaluable for First-Generation Students**

Many of the participants interviewed remarked that they received individualized attention from the college/career coach when they were exploring the possibility of applying to a college, military service, or a career technical program. Until they met with the college/career coach, many had misconceptions about college options, scholarship opportunities, and even the college admissions process. The coach’s guidance encouraged the first-generation students to explore a variety of post-secondary programs and not be dispirited if certain opportunities were not going to work for them or if they needed to change their future pathway after high school.
Participant 01 was influenced by the career coach’s advice and one-on-one attention. She noted in her interview that all students should work with the career coach while in high school. She stated,

If you [students] don’t have a career coach, you’re not going to have someone that helps guide you in the right direction to college; you’re going to be lost. If you have that college/career coach, it’ll help you get in the right direction.

Two participants were unclear about college options or the various post-secondary routes they could take after high school. Participant 03 said that he thought the only option for college was to attend a four-year program. In his statement, the real name of the career coach has been changed to protect her privacy. “My whole option was to go to a four-year school before I went to Mrs. H but she gave me a variety of things that I can choose from. It isn’t just one.” He further responded with,

It [the college/career center] helped me find out that I didn’t have to go right to a four-year college first. I figured it would be better off for me to go to the community college for two years then transfer to a four-year college.

Participant 05 credits the college/career coach for opening his eyes to the possibility of going to college. “If I didn’t have the career center, it would have been possible I probably wouldn’t have gone to college because I wouldn’t have no idea what to do.” Since he began frequenting the college/career center, he added, “I’m finding out everything I know about cause I knew nothing.”

Two students who were interviewed were primarily exploring military options when they sought the college/career center’s resources. During their visit to the college/career center, they learned that the college/career coach is a veteran who has strong relationships
with local military recruiters as well as the school’s Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corp (ROTC) program. Participant 04 noted he was thinking about enlisting after high school but the college/career coach knew the student was very intelligent and was holding leadership roles in the Junior ROTC program. Instead of looking only at enlistment opportunities, the college/career coach spoke to him about exploring the military officer training programs at colleges because they would help finance a college education, and it may support his long-term goal of pursuing leadership roles in the military, attending law school, or his dream of going into politics once he left the military. He said, “Mrs. H is a vet and she talked to me about joining [Virginia Military Institute] which has military training. She went over becoming an officer in the military while in college and this is actually a good idea.”

Furthermore, participant 04 stated,

My friend talked to Mrs. H pretty much every day for a week and they got a meeting with the Naval Academy. My friend now has an interview with them. Before she wasn’t certain about the Navy but now she is certain that’s what she wants to do.

Participant 02 originally met with the college/career coach about joining the Army but after she learned of the military’s physical requirements, she was ineligible to join the military. Participant 02 was not deterred by the news because she than began exploring college options with the college/career coach.

Not only did the college/career coach assist students who were exploring college-going options and alternatives such as attending a community college or pursuing a career in the military, the coach assisted two student athletes who were unsure about the
application process and collegiate admissions policies for student athletics. The college/career coach assisted them in finding colleges and universities which offered athletic scholarships and guided them through the application and recruitment process. Participant 06 stated in his interview that the college/career coach assisted him in sending letters of interest to coaches, as well as completing the student athletic forms most Division II and III schools required applicants to complete. He said the following:

I would talk to her about my progress on college applications and she would help me send emails to coaches. I would also use her office computers. I use the College/Career Center a lot because I want to play college basketball and Mrs. H talked to me about the athlete forms that I needed to send out.

Participant 13 mentioned that he was just beginning to explore the collegiate athletic process but had put it off earlier in the school year due to a football injury. Since his recovery in December, he was ready to investigate the option with the college/career coach.

**Theme #2: Financial Aid and Scholarship Advice Were Appreciated by First-Generation Students**

One of the biggest hurdles that many first-generation students face is finding the financial resources to pay for college (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008). Many first-generation participants of the study and their families were unaware of the financial aid process that goes with applying to college. Prior to their visits with the college/career center, participants were unclear how they would even be able to afford college tuition on fixed incomes and many were feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of having to find money for college tuition. Participant 07 was one of these
students who felt lost in figuring out the financial aid process until she met with the college/career coach. She said that the coach gave her scholarship applications and helped her with the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA) document to complete in order to be eligible for college financial aid, scholarships, and student loans.

Participant 07 said,

She helped me complete the FAFSA and gave me advice on how to transfer credits from the community college. If my grades were good at the community college, I could then go to a four-year school.

Participant 04 commented,

I know a girl who is on the computer at the career center every day doing scholarships. She is talking to Mrs. H about getting specific things on her applications. I don’t feel the career center is going to be like some empty shell. I’m going to be using the information I’ve got. I will use the skills that I used in the career center for future things.

Even when students were not ambitious about completing financial aid paperwork, the career coach encouraged them to complete the process because of its long-term benefits. In fact, one participant freely remarked that the coach had been “kinda pushing me to complete the FAFSA.”

**Sub-Theme: Community College is the First Stop in the College-Going Journey**

Because of the high cost of four-year colleges and universities, 8 of the 13 of the first-generation students shared in the interviews that attending a community college was their best option when pursuing a post-secondary education, or it would be the first step in obtaining a four-year degree. The researcher learned from speaking to the
College/Career Coach that she encourages first-generation, college bound students to explore attending a community college because for many students, it is financially and academically obtainable for them. Moreover, the College/Career Readiness program is partially funded by the local community college; therefore, the institution and the coach made students aware of the community college’s educational resources, career programs, and financial aid opportunities which in turn, had some influence in some students’ decision to attend a community college before going to a four-year institution.

Secondly, many of the participants of the study planned on living at home and working part-time in the area so they could reduce their living and school expenses while taking college coursework for a reasonable amount of money. Finally, two of the participants were happy to learn that the community college had flexible admissions requirements and that the courses were transferable to state colleges and universities because they were not ready to pursue a post-secondary education at a traditional institution of higher learning.

Theme #3: Lack of Accessibility to the College/Career Center and Guidance Department

There were mixed opinions about the effectiveness of the College/Career Center from some participants of the study. The primary reason why some of the participants interviewed did not use the College/Career Center as often or even at all was due to its limited accessibility by students during the school day and after-school, as well as its remote location within the school building. The College/Career Center’s coach is a part-time employee who frequently works four days a week with limited availability to meet with students after school and in the evenings. Participant 12 noted that she had not used
An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program

the College/Career Center very often because it was difficult for her to work around her class schedule to accommodate the coach’s office hours. Furthermore, Participant 12 said she believed students did not utilize the center’s services because it lacked visibility around the school.

Participant 05 echoed Participant 12’s statement about lack of visibility around school by saying, “The College/Career Center is not well publicized. There’s only two signs around the school about it and the Guidance Department only talks about it sometimes. I didn’t know it existed until this year.” Participant 01 stated the location of the College/Career Center office is in a remote area of the school building. “It’s in the very back of the building so not many people go to the back of the school. If they [school] put the Career Center somewhere near the Guidance Office, I think it would be well known.”

Participant 04 believed student accessibility and knowledge of the College/Career Center was dependent upon what classes students were enrolled in at school. He said the following:

Yeah, ROTC is right next to the Career Center. I don’t even think ROTC kids need a pass to see her [College/Career Center coach]. They go next door. The carpentry class, small engine, agriculture, CTE classes—all the career tech activities are all right there. For people who do band or theater arts, they are on the other side of the school. Most programs, like the band program doesn’t know about it. I didn’t hear about it [College/Career Center] ever. I know a lot of friends who’s in band and they have no idea that a Career Center existed.

Finally, Participant 07 believed guidance counselors meeting with students who are not passing their classes were important, but the counselors should make an effort to talk
to the students about careers and introduce them to the Career Center. She said, “A lot of students don’t know exactly where the Career Center is. I think it would be a better for them if they were pulled in one by one to talk to her.”

The high school Guidance Department faces many organizational challenges that have the potential to affect an adequate level of service to its student body. First, the student to counselor ratio is very large. The high school Guidance Department currently has four counselors and one secretary in the office. There are 1,181 students enrolled in the high school. This equates to 292 students on each counselor’s case load. Within that group of students, each counselor is responsible for 62 seniors. Secondly, the department has experienced an above average turn-over rate. The position of Director has been held by three different individuals in three years. At the time of the study, the Director of the department was on family medical leave for half of the school year and a replacement was not provided. The remaining counselors assisted students who were assigned to the Director. In addition to the turn-over of a Department Head, a few of the students interviewed remarked that they switched counselors more than once during their high school experience due to a high turnover rate of counseling faculty. This posed challenges of establishing a trusting relationship with a counselor and hindered students’ desire to seek career advice and college admissions assistance.

One participant who is scheduled to attend a four-year university believed the guidance counselors were overwhelmed with their case loads and because of the work demands could not adequately help students with financial aid questions, scholarship information, and the college admissions processes. Participant 07 recalled in eleventh grade that she expressed interest to her guidance counselor that she wanted to begin
An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program

discussing potential college options. She said, “My old counselor said to wait until it’s crunch time and not to worry about it [college] because the guidance office was already dealing with all of the seniors.” Participant 05 stated, “Guidance focuses on a certain camp. Those who are more likely to go on to college are those who they talk to more, at least that is what it looks like.” He believed that students who do not express an interest in attending college to their guidance counselors are less likely to be called in for a conference with their counselor. Participant 11 got the impression the school and the guidance department’s plan was to have students graduate on time, and then they would worry about what the students were going to do after they graduate. However, in the past, Participant 11 recalled the guidance office sponsored a college fair in the auditorium which was very helpful for students who were exploring colleges, but she was unsure if the college fair was an event that was held every year.

Theme #4: Lack of Communication about College/Career Center Related Events

Two participants believed lack of advertisement and promotion of the College/Career Center by the school faculty and the college/career coach were reasons why a lot of students in the school did not utilize the center’s services. Participant 08 said, “The school doesn’t advertise the College/Career Center or college readiness activities. When the school does publicize [an event], it might be the day of. They don’t constantly talk about it.”

The researcher asked students if teachers in the school or the administration promoted the College/Career Center. Participant 11 was frustrated by the lack of communication about events such as those sponsored by the College/Career Center and the Guidance Department. She perceived the school did not support career readiness activities because
she does not hear them advertised during the announcements. Furthermore, she believed there was a “disconnect” between the school and students who were participating in the academic Governor’s School programs. They were physically out of the building for half a day, which meant they missed critical pieces of communication about college/career readiness activities that would be announced by the office, Career Center, and Guidance Department. She found this to be disappointing because this population of students were taking college preparation classes already in high school and likely would be attending college.

**Sub-Theme: Lack of Encouragement from Teachers about College/Career Readiness**

When some of the responses from participants negatively portrayed school faculty as not allowing students to make appointments with the Career Center during the school day, the researcher asked a follow up question about teachers’ support of college/career readiness and if they encouraged students to think about their future. Participant 04 replied:

> It depends on what kind of teacher you have. My Spanish teacher believes in getting you prepared for college as soon as possible. He knows you need to be ready for it [college] but one of the math teachers-its hard getting out of his class to see the Career Coach.

The researcher asked if teachers were reluctant to allow students out of class due to lost instructional time. He said it was not due to lost class time. He further stated, “If you get the right teachers, you can get on the right track. If you get the wrong teachers, you are pulled away pretty quickly.”
Participants 01 and 02 both expressed their discouragement that teachers were not promoting the College/Career Center and its activities. For example, Participant 02 said, “It’s kind of upsetting because some kids do want to go to college but some teachers don’t let them [students] go to the Career Center for college admissions visits.” Finally, Participant 08 believed the school’s focus was just having students pass their classes and graduate from high school. She believed they were not focusing their efforts beyond the high school diploma. She stated, “It appears that the school just wants you to graduate. Passing is fine but colleges are not going to accept D’s.”

**Theme #5: Encourage College/Career Readiness for All Students**

Not all participants interviewed by the researcher were critical of the guidance department’s level of service. In fact, five preferred working with their guidance counselor over college and career readiness services from the college/career coach for several reasons. Participants in this category sought regular college and career assistance from their guidance counselors because of the relationships they established with their counselors and the limited access they had with the college/career coach. Interestingly enough, of the participants who sought out advice and additional resources from their guidance counselors, four participants are planning on attending a four-year college and one of the participants is planning on attending a community college before transferring to a university in the state. Three of the participants have been accepted to four-year schools which are in the state and one participant has been accepted to a Division I university in the Midwest among other top post-secondary institutions.

Participant 11 was described by the researcher as gifted and attended a selective college preparatory program the high school provided to students in grades 10-12. Based
on her mannerisms and the interview, she is educationally driven and is very anxious to
begin college in August. She stated that her guidance counselor helped her make college
application decisions more than her teachers. She had only used the College/Career
Center when she needed to register for dual enrollment courses and when she attended an
evening scholarship seminar that was sponsored by the College/Career Center. Her visits
to the Guidance Office were more frequent. She said the following:

Before this year I didn’t go into the guidance office a lot. But this year, I am
trying to get scholarships and like I do a lot of stuff like that. I guess I go in [the
guidance office] once a week, and then sometimes I go like four or five times in a week.

Participant 08 shared similar experiences as Participant 11. During the beginning of
her twelfth grade year, she visited with her guidance counselor weekly in order to “stay
on top of college applications,” but since her applications are submitted to the colleges,
she does not visit the Guidance Department as often. Participant 08 praised her guidance
counselor for setting up college visits for interested students and the Guidance
Department arranged an evening financial aid seminar for families who wanted assistance
in completing the FAFSA application or had questions about college financial aid. She
and her mother took advantage of the seminar but only approximately 40 individuals
were in attendance. The low turnout of seniors surprised her because the workshop was a
valuable service. The researcher investigated the attendance further and determined that
less than 10% of the number of students in the 2015 graduating class participated in the
workshop.
The Guidance Department was noted by one participant as being helpful in career exploration. Participant 10 has used the Guidance Department’s college events for college exploration but sought specific career advice from her counselor. She is interested in majoring in psychology and wanted advice on course requirements and selecting a college that would be suitable for her major. Moreover, she sought help in completing college applications, as well as getting the application fees waived due to her financial circumstances.

Although Participant 01 used the College/Career Center often, she commented, “I had lots of different guidance counselors here. But each one of them was really good to me, giving their input on what they think is better for me to do. And I really thank them for it.”

Participant 06 had similar positive remarks to share about his guidance counselor. He recalled that the Guidance Department held an assembly for the seniors which focused on different career options. The counselors discussed military service requirements as well as requirements for community colleges and universities. “A lot of people [in the audience] really didn’t know about the information beforehand.” Participant 06 later remarked that his counselor from the previous year was very supportive of his interests and this year’s guidance experience remained positive.

In eleventh grade, my guidance counselor met with me a couple of times, telling me what classes I needed to graduate. She wrote me a reference letter for a culinary competition. This year, my new counselor helped me with the college applications and got the fees waived for the applications.
Participant 03 commented about the same college/career assembly as Participant 06. He said that the counselors emphasized the importance of goal setting but Participant 10 recalled a college/career assembly in eleventh grade hosted by the Guidance Department. The meeting focused on graduation requirements, diploma options, and some discussion about career pathways for students interested in going to college.

**Sub-Theme: Athletic Coaches and Specialized Programs Support Student Goals**

The researcher wanted to know if first-generation students sought other school professionals for college and career advice. Several of the participants remarked their athletic coaches, JROTC leaders, and elective teachers showed a genuine interest in their career or college goals but only a few found classroom teachers demonstrating encouragement to them and their peers. Participant 12 remarked that her athletic coach was very influential in the choices she made and once said to her, “You have this ability to lead.” Participant 06 also referenced his athletic coach as an influential person in the school. Not only did his coach help him improve his athletic skills so he could try out for a college athletic team, but he assisted him with his classes so his grades could improve. Additionally, the participant’s high school basketball coach contacted Division II and III athletic scouts and athletic directors to see if they would like to meet with the student.

Participant 08 did not reference her athletic coach when discussing career goals or college plans. Rather, she stated that her athletic trainer had mentored her when she was making career decisions. Participant 08 expressed interest in becoming an athletic trainer or pursuing a sports medicine field. The athletic trainer immediately provided her hands-on opportunities with some of the school’s athletic teams so she could experience what athletic training and sports medicine entailed.
The JROTC program gave one participant career advice in addition to incorporating career readiness activities into their military leadership curriculum. Participant 04 recalled that in ninth grade the JROTC program directed students to develop a portfolio of their high school courses, extra-curricular activities, and awards in addition to setting yearly college and career goals. He said, “I figured out in ninth grade who I was, who I wanted to be, and what I wanted to do.” Later Participant 04 recalled that the Colonel of the program gave him “tough love” talks which encouraged him even more to strive toward excellence in the JROTC program and toward his future goals.

Three students shared during the interview that the Governor’s School program influenced their decisions to pursue college and particular career fields. The Governor’s School program is a state and locally funded academic program for gifted, talented, and high achieving students. The Governor’s School coursework comprises honors and college preparation courses. Participant 04 specifically enrolled in the Governor’s School program because he wanted to be ready for college. Participant 11 also believed the Governor’s School academically prepared her for the rigors of college more than classes that were not taught in the Governor’s School; however, she found her guidance counselor was more of an influence in the college decision making process instead of her Governor’s School teachers.

Praise, positive reinforcement, and individualized attention which were noted by participants, can be driving forces for many students who may not have encouragement from traditional classroom teachers, family members, or peers. Moreover, reassurance can boost the confidence levels of students who may not have otherwise taken the next step in applying to a post-secondary institute.
Sub-Theme: Teachers’ Influence

Although several participants referenced athletic coaches, non-teaching personnel, and special programs as influential forces in their college or career journey, some teachers at the high school were influential persons in students’ lives. Two participants shared with the researcher that their English teachers helped them complete college applications, edit college application essays, and one of the teachers was even willing to provide the participant feedback on schoolwork when they attend college. Participant 03 remarked,

Certain teachers have influenced me. They will say, ‘Oh, what are you going to do when you get out of high school’? I always had a close relationship with my teachers. They have given me ideas on what to do.

Participant 04 complimented one particular teacher.

Mrs. P is a great advocate when it comes to being college prepared and she has a good attitude towards students. She makes us feel like adults. She treats us the way she would want to be treated. When we get into the real world, we will be treated like adults and we will understand what it’s like.

Finally, Participant 10 said that her college prep teachers have been the most supportive in reaching her college goal. In fact, one of her college prep teachers even gave her specific information about a college because she graduated from the institution.

Sub-Theme: Family Support is Critical to First-Generation Students

One of the facets of this study was to determine if first-generation participants had positive examples of human capital in their lives as they explored careers, work force education programs, or college. Positive human capital could be attributed to
encouraging family members, positive friendships, and/or a network of supportive community members who mentored them.

Eleven of the thirteen participants credited their families as supporting their goals to pursue a college education and/or a particular career field after high school. Five participants stated that their immediate family members were supportive of their college-going plans primarily because they did not have the same opportunities when they were young. They genuinely wanted their children and siblings to be more successful after high school than they had been when they graduated.

During the interviews, some participants noted that a few of their family members had tried to attend college but were not successful and eventually quit. Two participants specifically shared with the researcher that their parents wanted them to have a better life than they did. Participant 01 said, “My parents always have been there right beside me, you know, guiding me in which step I should take.” Participant 05 was emotional about sharing her personal story about family support and making the decision to go to college. Participant 05 said,

My mom is desperate for me to go to college. She would always tell me that she could have made more money if she had gone to college. She doesn’t even care if I only do 2 years of college but to just go.

Participant 08 remarked that the family support network for her extends to her mother, two older brothers, relatives out of state, and her grandma who had recently passed away. She recalled her grandmother always telling her to go to college and her brothers telling her to “make us proud” because they were unable to attend college. She is grateful for her mother’s support because her mother “stays on top of application deadlines and
financial aid paperwork.” She also checks her grades and gives her advice. Participant 08 revealed that one of the reasons why she applied to a major university out-of-state was because she had family that lived near the campus and said, “Whatever I needed, they will be there to help me.”

Another participant also commended his grandparent for being supportive all through school. Participant 09 said, “My grandfather raised me and he’s been my motivation to do everything. He wants me to go to college and he would even help pay for it.”

**Sub-Theme: Family Members Influence Career Goals**

Five participants remarked that immediate family members persuaded them to explore certain career paths, praised their career decisions, or directly demonstrated their support by setting up a job shadowing experience or meetings with professionals who were currently in the career field they were interested in. Participant 05 and 11 had the opportunity to meet with individuals who were presently in the career fields they wanted to pursue. Participant 05 wants a career in law enforcement. His cousin is a Florida State Trooper and has called him several times to discuss his college and career plans. Participant 04 has looked for guidance in choosing a military career from his brother who is currently in the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division. Participant 07 was influenced in choosing a career in graphic design from her brother because he recognized her artistic talent and he convinced her that a career in graphic design could open doors for her to be self-employed some day.

Some participants discovered that networking with individuals close to their relatives could be beneficial when choosing colleges or careers. For example, Participant 11 discovered that her father’s boss was a graduate of the college she was interested in
attending in the fall. When she was narrowing her college choices, their conversations about campus life and his college experiences helped her realize the college she chose would be a “good fit” for her. One participant shared that her church and immediate family were giving her lots of advice on college selections. Participant 12 remarked that immediate family members and their friends have tried to persuade her to enroll in a college that was affiliated with their religious faith, but she discovered in her research of post-secondary programs and career pathways that she wanted to take a different educational route. The researcher asked her if it was going to pose a problem with her parents, and she did not believe so because they were overall supportive of her college and career choices thus far.

Sub-Theme: Friends and Peers Can Influence College and Career Decision-Making

When the researcher asked the participants if friends and school peers influenced their decisions to pursue a college or technical school, seven participants said their friends were supportive of their long-term goals but they did not directly influence what path they were going to take after high school graduation. The remaining six participants noted they were not influenced by peers or friends but said that some of their classmates are influenced by others when making decisions about attending college or pursuing a particular career. Participant 12 strongly believed that teenagers would probably take the advice of their friends more readily than they would take advice from their parents. She commented, “Most teenagers aren’t going to listen to their parents but friends, especially close friends that you’ve been with for your entire life-you’re going to listen to them.”
Participant 03 had a similar remark but it was on a personal level. He said, “I’m closer to my friends than my own family.”

**Sub-Theme: Positive Relationships with Peers Sustain Goal-Setting**

Positive relationships with peers who have similar college and career goals can help sustain a first-generation student’s ability to continue to reach toward his/her goal to attend college, a technical program, or pursue a career. For many first-generation, college bound students, their network of friends, teammates, or homogeneous peers can motivate them, can encourage them to utilize resources about the college application process, and can provide advice they may not receive from school personnel or family members.

Participant 10 expressed, “I try to surround myself with people that are upbeat, happier, and driven to keep me on track. I believe that people you hang out with can influence you.” Participant 01 had a similar opinion about friends influencing one’s goals. “That’s a good thing to have a group of friends that’s in the same path as you, instead of having someone that’s behind and doesn’t know what they want to do.” Participant 06 believes that friends push each other to reach goals and succeed. He commented, “We really want to see each other get better and get somewhere after high school instead of staying here.”

**Sub-Theme: Friends and Peers Assist in Reaching Goals**

Four participants credit their friends and peers for being supportive of their goals and sharing opportunities with them. Participant 02 desires to play Division II college basketball at a nearby institution and get her degree in counseling but not all of her fellow athletes have the same goal in mind to further their education. She, on the other hand,
received advice from a fellow athlete to start playing basketball at a smaller school and then eventually get drafted to play at a larger university. Participant 02 recalled the exchange of advice,

A Senior told me last year that if I want to go to a community college and stuff and you don’t feel like you don’t want to start off at a big college, go there and start something. Then get your associates degree, and after, go to a big college.”

At the time of the interview, Participant 02 was exploring athletic opportunities at the community college level as well as larger schools because she was unsure if she was prepared to compete in a larger educational and athletic arena.

Participant 09 was able to pursue a cosmetology license while in high school because of coursework advice her friends gave her when she was in eleventh grade. Some friends convinced her to sign up for the cosmetology classes in high school and pursue her license because it would pay more than working at McDonalds. Participant 09 believes and is encouraged that her ability to work at a hair salon while she attends high school and eventually when she enrolls in college will provide her the financial resources to earn a college degree in nursing.

Participant 06 stated that his peers who attend his church youth group have influenced and motivated him in addition to the positive environment his church has provided him while he has been in middle and high school. He recalled,

The church praises those who were on the honor roll. One of the ministers would praise and publicly recognize us. He encouraged the congregation to steer kids in the right direction. We would also have guest speakers come to our youth group to talk about our future plans.”
He further remarked that his teammates on the basketball court have motivated him to be a better student athlete and that they influence each other on and off the court. Participant 06 said, “Because if you have a group of people around you that really want to get better and really learn a lot, it influences your decisions and it makes you want to think about the end.”

Participant 05 noted in his interview that he had a clear career goal to be in law enforcement but he was not sure as to how to pursue the goal. The career coach was helpful in the career planning but his parents have not been strong influencers in college planning. He credits two of his friends in helping him with the college planning process. They helped him apply to a community college in the region, as well as suggest that they all share an apartment together while they all attend the community college. Because Participant 05 has clearly established short-term college goals and has secured his living arrangements while attending the community college, he feels prepared to begin exploring four-year state university programs so he can complete a criminal justice degree.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influenced economically disadvantaged, first-generation, college bound high school students in a Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Within the study, there were three research questions the researcher intended to answer:
1) Did the college and career readiness program influence first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students to develop future educational or workforce participation goals beyond high school?

2) Were there societal influences which affected first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decision to pursue college or a workforce program after high school?

3) Was the college readiness program effective in assisting first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students in applying to college or workforce programs after high school graduation?

Participant interview responses, existing literature, and identified themes generated the above research questions and provided the summarized results as visible in Figure 1.
Summary of Findings

Figure 1

College/Career Readiness Program’s Influence

The first question the researcher investigated was the college/career readiness program’s influence on first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students as they developed future long-range college and career goals. At the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, California State University Chancellor Charles Reed stated it was necessary for government and educational leaders to take an aggressive stance on closing the college accessibility gap for minority and low-socioeconomic high school
graduates (Morino, 2005). According to Chancellor Reed, one-third of graduates are successfully transitioning to college after high school but two-thirds, many of whom are students living in poverty, are not prepared or able to apply to a post-secondary institution.

Eleven out of thirteen participants met with the college/career coach while in high school. Eight of the participants began using the college/career center’s services in eleventh grade and three began visiting the center when they entered twelfth grade. Yampolskaya, Massey, and Greenbaum (2006) found that students who have a high participation rate of targeted college readiness programs demonstrate significant improvements in their academic achievement and are more likely to pursue future academic and career goals. Moreover, participation in college-going activities such as those sponsored by the targeted college/career readiness program will promote educational attainment and increase cultural capital of first-generation, low socioeconomic students (Walpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kamau, & Toliver, 2005). Five of the thirteen participants’ level of participation concurred with the Yampolskaya et al. and Walpole et al. research. The interviewees found the college/career coach and the program to be invaluable; they were utilizing the services two times per week during their last year in high school. Several of the respondents believed the college/career readiness program made them aware of many post-secondary possibilities, whether it was applying to a 4-year college right after high school, serving in the military as a means to pay for college, or beginning their college education at a community college. One respondent remarked that every high school student should be
required by the school to use the college/career readiness program before he or she graduate.

A majority of the participants found the college/career readiness program to be influential when they set long-term college or career goals; however, some believed the program’s limited hours of operation and remote access in the building deterred many of their peers from taking advantage of the program’s services. Some respondents who preferred to use their guidance counselor as a college/career resource believed the college/career readiness coach was disconnected from the student body due to the program’s location in the building, as well as its lack of communication about college or career activities it was sponsoring in the school. It was suggested by many interviewees the school should relocate the college/career center to the guidance department and improve the publicity of program sponsored events so more students would take advantage of it.

**Guidance Counselor Influence**

The focus of the research study was the effectiveness of the college and career readiness program for first-generation, low socioeconomic students at a high school; however, five participants in the study referenced the guidance counseling department when discussing college/career readiness influences in their lives. In spite of personnel turnover and the high caseload of guidance counselors at the school, the participants found their guidance counselor to positively influence them as they went through the college/career decision-making process. They preferred going to their counselor for post-secondary advice instead of the college/career coach because of the trusting relationships they had established over time with their counselor. Two participants noted that their
counselors spent a considerable amount of time researching colleges or looking for specific scholarships for them. One participant was impressed the guidance department coordinated college fairs and financial aid workshops for students and their families. Finally, four out of five students found their counselor more influential to them than the college/career readiness program while they applied to 4-year colleges. They believed the counselors gave excellent advice on college planning, assisted with college applications, and were available to them on a frequent basis. Although five of the participants had positive experiences with their guidance counselors, a few students who were interviewed cautioned that not all of the students in the high school had similar encounters with their counselor. One participant perceived that some counselors only focused their attention on academically strong students who were planning on going to college. Another participant believed some counselors were only concerned about getting students to pass high school and graduate. A third participant recalled a time when her counselor dismissed her questions about college because she was not a senior yet.

High school guidance departments play an integral role in college and career readiness for students; therefore, it was important to analyze the positive influences and negative perceptions participants raised about their guidance counselors. The extent of influence a counselor played on students varied based on their goals for the future and the amount of interaction they had with their counselor.

**Societal Influences**

Research shows that low aspiration to attend college was a primary barrier for many first-generation students (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). Research question two
focused on societal influences and how they positively or negatively affected first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decision to pursue college or a workforce program after high school. School environment, teachers, and academic experiences play pivotal roles in the educational direction of high school students; however, they are also influenced by family members, neighbors, friends, and their community. Bourdieu believed cultural capital such as understanding educational and career related norms is “acquired over time, mainly through the socialization process at home and through parental investment” (Bourdieu, 1987). Social and human capital heavily relies on developing interpersonal relationships and social networking in order to accomplish a common goal (Coleman, 1987).

The researcher found that twelve participants credited their immediate family members such as parents, grandparents, and siblings as positive influences in their lives who encouraged them throughout high school to pursue their career and educational goals. Several commented that family members were not critical of their career goals or desire to go to college. Rather, some family members such as brothers and grandparents were credited for inquiring about certain career choices or checking up on the participants to see if they were on-track when completing college applications and earning good grades. McDonough (1997) found that many low socioeconomic family members lacked cultural capital and did not know how they could provide academic assistance to their first-generation student. Secondly, family members of first-generation students were generally supportive of their children’s goal to attend to college, but they were unable to financially support them while they attended college.
Responses from participants corroborated McDonough’s findings. Due to personal economic constraints, financial support for college tuition was difficult for many family members to give; however, some participants said their families were helping in other ways. Some families were allowing their students to continue to live at home while attending a local community college. One parent was assisting with transportation and apartment rent so his son could attend a college away from their community. Two girls remarked their mothers attended financial aid workshops and sought help from the college/career coach so they could appropriately complete financial aid applications.

Students are more likely to be committed to their career and academic goals if they have personal connections to adults in their school and community who encourage them to pursue their goals (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). Six participants commented in their interviews that athletic coaches, extra-curricular advisors, classroom teachers, specialized program teachers, and church mentors played an active role in assisting them with college and career goals because they recognized the students’ talents and career interests. Based on interview comments and non-verbal mannerisms from the participants, it was apparent they were appreciative of the emotional support they received from the non-family members as they pursued their goals to attend college or seek a career field.

Based on existing literature (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000), peer engagement with learning and a level of importance peers placed on education can influence first-generation students’ educational and career pursuits beyond high school. Seven participants believed their classmates that took similar courses or participated in the same activities were supportive of their college and career goals because they shared similar
pursuits. They also credited their friends for being supportive persons in their lives and commented that their friends planned on attending college, too. When asked if other high school students had similar support systems, the participants believed students who socialized with peers with negative attitudes about education or did not have career/college ambitions would probably be in jeopardy of not being academically successful after high school or have long-term college or career goals. Two participants reflected that when they were in middle school and in the first two years of high school, their peers had aspirations to pursue a particular career or go to college but that desire diminished with time. Participant 09 remarked, “In the beginning of high school, we were all talking about it [going to college]. But now, they like don’t know if they want to go to college.”

Apathy toward future career or educational goals was a characteristic some of the participants described their school peers of having because they were not active in high school or did not take advantage of the school’s college and career readiness program. Participant 04 explained, “I feel like those [peers] don’t have drive, there’s no connection to school. For example, we made a resume in English class. It will help me apply for a job but they don’t make the real connection”. Similarly Participant 06 stated, “The school tells students about the Career Center but most kids don’t really hear the information or they don’t pay attention. They don’t make the connection”. Participant 10 said, “They [peers] haven’t applied to colleges. They’re not even thinking about college.” But Participant 03 believed the reason behind the lack of preparation is probably due to trying to survive family, school, and general life challenges. He said, “They [peers] are just going day by day.” Participant 08 predicted that the lack of motivation to pursue college
could stem from students’ lack of financial resources or their lack of academic confidence.

**Effectiveness of the College/Career Readiness Program**

**Financial Aid Advice.** Several participants identified financial advice and assistance with completing FAFSA paperwork as a primary service the college/career coach provided to first-generation students. Not only did students feel comfortable discussing financial aid alternatives with the coach, but two participants remarked their parents sought advice from her. One participant stated that she knew peers who would use the computers in the college/career center to access scholarship information and financial aid paperwork because they did not have internet or computer access at home. The college/career center was an inviting atmosphere to them and the coach was happy to assist them with application questions. Although the college/career center was utilized by many participants, two participants believed a lot of students in the school were unaware of the financial aid services the college/career center provided or their peers chose not to ask for assistance from the college/career coach.

**Scholarship Research and Application Completion.** Programs which support the college enrollment process and assist low-socioeconomic students with scholarship applications have the potential to improve college enrollment rates of this population (Choy et al., 2000, Gullatt & Jan, 2003). The college/career readiness program’s scholarship and college application objectives uphold the research literature. Participants felt their concerns about the college application process were alleviated by the college/career coach. Several participants found the college/career coach’s advice about
athletic and military scholarships to be invaluable when reaching their post-secondary goals.

**Arranged Athletic Recruitment Meetings.** Two participants noted in their interviews that the college/career coach was influential in arranging athletic scouts from state colleges and universities to come to the high school and visit with them about playing for their institution. Moreover, the participants said that with the help from the school’s athletic department and the college/career coach, they were able to submit athletic portfolios to the colleges. At the time of the interviews, both were waiting to hear if they would be awarded full or partial athletic scholarships from the institutions.

**College Admissions and Career Visits.** The college/career coach arranged for college admissions representatives to visit with students about college admissions. The visits were held in the college/career center office and open to first-generation students who wanted individualized meetings with the admissions representative to discuss financial aid options, the campus environments, and courses of study. Two participants noted in their interview that they were curious about careers in law enforcement. The college/career coach arranged for them to meet the school resource officer to discuss the police academy admissions process, learn about different criminal justice fields, and have an opportunity to ride along with police officers during their patrol.

**Summary**

Chapter Four presented the study’s methodology, data analysis procedures, participants’ demographics, explained themes found in the data analysis, and provided categorical summations to the research questions. A majority of participants found the college/career readiness program to be beneficial. Analysis of interview responses
revealed that a majority of participants utilized the services of the College/Career Center because they sought its technical resources, appreciated the individualized attention, and found the coach’s advice to be valuable when applying to a college, researching scholarship opportunities, or navigating the financial aid process. Some participants who had specific career and post-secondary goals in mind found the school’s Guidance Office to be a valuable resource. There were some participants who were not as complimentary of school stakeholders’ support and demonstration of career or college readiness to high school students. Participants’ remarks revealed that all educational entities, including the College/Career Center, needed to be more visible and accessible to students in the school.

Human, social, and cultural capital characteristics are pivotal in influencing a student’s ability to be accepted into college. The researcher discovered through the open coding process that the human, social, and cultural capital of participants was very strong. A majority of participants remarked their families, teachers, friends, and mentors were positive influences who encouraged them to seek their educational and career goals. A majority of participants believed in the importance of surrounding oneself with individuals who share similar future aspirations. They remarked that their network of family, mentors, community members, and friends placed education as a valuable resource to have in life. The researcher provided a summary of existing research and literature which supported the findings of the research questions. The information was conveyed in an objective, non-biased format to the reader. All of the findings help the reader understand the effectiveness of the college and career readiness program for first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

College and career readiness are central themes among secondary educational objectives and college enrollment numbers continue to increase across the United States. It is important for educators and policy makers to determine if first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students are part of the growing trend of college-going individuals. There are many state and federally sponsored college and career readiness programs for first-generation, low socioeconomic students, but few produce sustained results in raising college admissions among the demographic. Little research has been completed on the effectiveness of a college and career readiness program in a specific high school. Additionally, there has been little research on how first-generation, economically disadvantaged students’ social, cultural, and human capital influences their college and career decisions after high school graduation.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influenced economically disadvantaged, first-generation, college bound high school students in a Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This study adds to the existing literature about how a high school college and career readiness program influenced first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decisions in applying to college, workforce programs, or setting career goals. It also provided local policy makers an evaluative measure to determine if the college and career readiness program is effectively meeting the goals and expectations of the school
district when serving first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students. Secondly, school administration and the school board of the participating school district may use the results of the study to determine if the school system should continue to financially support the college and career readiness program in the future. Finally, the findings of the research from the participating school district may encourage other school districts, community agencies, and policy makers to improve college and workforce readiness practices as well as instructional programming procedures which address specific academic and sociological needs of first-generation, college bound students. The study was based around the following research questions:

1. Was the college readiness program effective in assisting first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students in applying to college or workforce programs after high school graduation?
2. Did the college and career readiness program influence first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students to develop future educational or workforce participation goals beyond high school?
3. Were there societal influences that affected first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ decision to pursue college or a workforce program after high school?

**Review of Data Collection and Analysis**

This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach. It allowed the researcher to analyze qualitative data in order to determine if the results were related and possessed common themes. Furthermore the grounded theory approach determined if the results were independent from one another. In order to have maximum variation, the
college/career coach and one of the guidance counselors employed at the participating high school randomly selected twenty-seven students from diverse backgrounds, academic pursuits, and differing academic or career goals after high school to participate in the study. All of the high school students attended the same high school and met the qualifications of the study. Thirteen participants were interviewed with a saturation rate of responses reaching eleven participants.

The researcher digitally recorded each interview and maintained the transcripts in a 256-bit encrypted zip file. A journal was used to note personal observations and comments made by the participants. Transcripts were developed by a professional transcriptionist, and the transcripts were maintained in word format in a similar encrypted file and were password protected by the transcriptionist and the researcher. Once transcripts were completed, participants were given a copy of the transcript as a way to member check and to ensure their responses, opinions, and personal experiences were appropriately conveyed before the researcher began analyzing the responses. The transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher and the participants. Once the transcriptions were reviewed, the audio recordings were erased. Participants were told in writing that they could retract or add information to their responses.

The researcher used open and axial coding procedures to generate themes, labels, and categories derived from the participant interviews. The researcher analyzed the participant remarks using the open and axial coding properties of the grounded theory. During the analysis of the qualitative data, the participants’ direct remarks and general responses to the questions were noted with their corresponding participant code number.
Major Findings

Upon analysis of the data, the researcher found relationships and commonalities among participant responses, which aided in the development of five salient themes.

1) Individualized attention about college and career readiness was invaluable
2) Financial aid advice and scholarship information were important
3) Lack of accessibility to coach and guidance counselor can hinder students’ college/career decision-making
4) Lack of communication about college/career related events can deter college/career readiness among first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students
5) Family, community members, and school personnel can positively influence college/career readiness for all students

These themes enabled the researcher to categorize participant responses in order to discern participant perceptions and opinions that helped answer the research questions.

Of the participants interviewed, students either preferred to use the college/career readiness program or meet with their designated guidance counselor for college and career advice. Eleven out of thirteen participants utilized the college/career readiness program. Four students with clear college and career plans regularly met with their guidance counselor, but one also met with the college and career coach. Five of the participants were using the college and career readiness program’s services at least twice a week during their senior year of high school. The researcher did not see any evidence of gender influence among the college/career coach or the guidance counselors.
Students who used the college/career program found the individualized attention the college/career coach gave to be invaluable in their post-secondary decision making process. The researcher found that the college/career coach played a significant role in assisting first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students to reach their post-secondary aspirations. The coach exposed first-generation students to career opportunities if they were undecided in pursuing career fields, provided tools to students who lacked access to college application resources, sought college application waivers for students, and guided students and their families through the college application process.

Financial aid and scholarship advice were significant to the participants because all needed financial support and would have to find ways of paying for college tuition or a workforce program themselves. Because students were the first in their families to pursue a post-secondary education, their families were unaware of the financial aid process. Financial aid workshops and individualized meetings with the college/career coach alleviated many uncertainties parents and students had about completing financial aid paperwork and scholarship applications. Although the College/Career Center and the Guidance Department sponsored financial aid workshops for students and families during the school year, attendance was sparse. Many participants attributed the low turn-out to lack of publicity about the events, lack of encouragement from school faculty to attend the events, limited accessibility to the college/career readiness resources, and student apathy.

Participants who used the College/Career Center or their guidance counselor for college and career planning were grateful for their services; however, they believed
limited accessibility to the coach and to counselors hindered the effectiveness of college and career readiness programs and their ability to reach more students in the high school. A remote location in the high school, lack of program advertisement, and limited hours of operations hindered many students from seeking assistance from the college/career coach. Large caseloads, frequent counselor turnover, and organizational responsibilities of the guidance department have overshadowed the focus on college and career readiness in recent years. The perception by many participants of the study was that their guidance counselor gave little attention to students about college/career readiness unless students frequently visited their counselor for college advice. Moreover, some participants criticized school faculty for not focusing on college/career readiness in their classes, as well as not allowing students to meet with the college/career coach during the school day.

School environment, academic achievement, and self-motivation influenced participants’ college and career readiness, but many participants of the study credited outside influences for their success in school and long-term goal setting. These influences include family members, church members, coaches, friends, and community mentors as important persons who positively supported and influenced them in the college and career decision-making process. Participants believed peers without future college and career plans would be more successful in this area if they had more positive support from school and community stakeholders.

The three research questions focused on college and career readiness influences of first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students and the effectiveness of the college/career readiness program at the participating high school. In conclusion, the
college/career readiness program was effective for the participating students, but they also credited other individuals in their lives for supporting their college and career goals.

**Findings Related to Literature**

This study’s findings confirm previous literature on the importance of targeted college and career readiness programs for first-generation, economically disadvantaged high school students. Targeted college and career programs foster college and career readiness, increase human and cultural capital, and positively influence students to apply to college or a workforce program. Most studies in the existing literature focused on private or federally sponsored programs in larger educational settings, but this research investigated a targeted program at a rural high school that was sponsored by a school system and a local community college. Researchers Gandara and Bial (2001) found that many research investigations lack information and data analysis on the effectiveness and sustainability of college readiness programs. Furthermore, many college readiness programs catering to first-generation, college bound students lack longitudinal research, fail to demonstrate program outcomes, and do not address program effectiveness. Finally, Perna and Swail (2002) concluded that many programs which serve low socioeconomic, first-generation students only collected participation and enrollment data, not program evaluation information or the amount of time students were actively engaged in a college readiness program. In 2012, researchers Harvill, Maynard, Nguyen, Robertson-Kraft, and Tognatta, reviewed twelve college access and preparation programs in the United States that specifically examined college readiness programs for first-generation and economically disadvantaged high school students. Four program components were evaluated and addressed students’ human, social, and cultural capital
characteristics. They included: counseling programs, social interaction and skill building, academic enrichment such as field trips to colleges, and mentoring opportunities. Only two of the twelve programs provided all four program components. First, this research investigated the number of participants who used the college and career readiness program. Secondly, this research reviewed the frequency of visits participants utilized the college and career readiness program since they entered high school. Finally, this research examined participants’ academic and personal influences that continued to human, social, and cultural characteristics. Additionally, the research explored positive and negative participant outcomes of the program (Harvill et al., 2012).

Despite the differences in research questions, participant demographics, and location of the program compared to previously researched programs from existing studies, similar conclusions could be substantiated. Positive school engagement, high parental involvement in student learning, positive peer reactions to school, and a social network emphasizing a college ready culture increased a first-generation high school student’s likelihood of enrolling and attending a four-year post-secondary institution (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Additionally, low income high school students would most likely overcome the barriers of pursuing a post-secondary education if they are exposed to college-going activities and college readiness learning environments (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999) as well as seeing first-hand the benefits of earning a college degree (Perna, 2000). A majority of participants attributed their academic success and confidence in pursuing college to their support system at home and in the community, as well as the individualized attention they received from the high school’s college/career readiness coach.
Observations

All of the participants interviewed were eager to learn about the college-going process while in high school; however, some participants preferred to work with the College/Career coach and some chose to work with the Guidance Department when exploring careers or seeking advice about college. The researcher determined that students’ comfort level in working with persons in either the College/Career Center or the Guidance Department played a significant role in their choice of services. Moreover, students’ access to individuals in each office was a factor. The researcher observed during the course of the interviews that many students with clear career or college goals turned toward their guidance counselor for assistance, but students who were unsure about which career or college path more than likely used the college/career coach for help.

The analysis of the responses does not suggest that all members of the Class of 2015 have the same sentiments about the College/Career Center, Guidance Department, and overall school faculty; however, it implies that school stakeholders should examine the collaborative efforts and partnerships of faculty who teach content and faculty who provide student services such as the guidance and career readiness programs. Additionally, the school stakeholders should determine if they are satisfactorily supporting the human capital and cultural capital of its first-generation students.

Some comments from interviewed participants intimated there were stumbling blocks that curtailed students’ college and career exploration and application routine. For example, a lack of personal engagement between some school faculty members and students, as well as weak communication about college readiness activities, financial aid
protocols, and the college admissions process were noted by several participants. Finally, limited accessibility to the College/Career coach and the Guidance Department faculty members were pervasive barriers for several participants.

**A Framework of Understanding and Research Considerations**

This study addresses specific organizational structures that previous literature did not address such as the importance of students’ building trusting, on-going relationships with a college/career readiness coach or guidance counselor who has expertise in working with first-generation, low socioeconomic students. This study examines first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students’ human, social, and cultural capital and how they correlate with college and career readiness. Based on literature findings, participant responses provided during the interviews, and the researcher’s observations of the educational organization and its school stakeholders, the college and career readiness program is a valuable resource to the high school; however, it is a resource that is not utilized enough by students, faculty members, and families. The researcher provides a college/career readiness framework, visible in Figure 4, for the school system to consider in the future. When implemented, the framework may increase the student interest level in college/career readiness activities, the participation rates of first-generation students and families to the college/career center, and the incorporation of college/career readiness skills into content curriculum. Finally, the framework will address ways in which the school stakeholders can play a pivotal role in increasing the human, social, and cultural capital of its students who are identified as first-generation and economically disadvantaged.
For many participants, college and career exploration was a daunting prospect because they did not have family members, neighbors, or friends who had gone to college or who could assist them when they had questions about the college application process. Visiting a college was an unknown venture for many first-generation students, and a majority of participants interviewed had never visited a college campus while they were in high school. Several participants had not visited the campuses they had applied to and some were unaware that their chosen college had multiple campuses.

When asked about choosing career fields or picking majors, a preponderance of participants knew what field of study they were going to pursue, but several were unclear
about the amount of education they would need or the level of preparation that was required in order to reach their career goals. Because of an inadequate level of social capital in their home and school lives, as well an abundance of uncertainty about their future goals, many participants were grateful for the individualized attention they received from the College/Career coach throughout their high school experience and particularly during their senior year of high school.

Interviewees not only suggested that the school system prepare students to pass the state graduation requirements, but they also believed the school system needed to prepare students for future careers, as well as increase courses offerings which supported certain career fields such as business, criminal justice, and health science careers. Several participants believed the school system should develop college and career readiness programs for students in elementary and middle school because it would spark career interest, motivate young people to set goals for themselves, as well as encourage them to excel in school. While college and career readiness activities for students in grades K-8 may not be a priority for many high school educators, the researcher suggests the school system should consider college/career readiness skills and objectives in all grade levels when reviewing or adopting new school curriculum and objectives. Because many students in the school system are identified as economically disadvantaged and several lack human, social, and cultural capital characteristics, embedding college/career readiness skills has the potential to raise student achievement and possibly increase the participation rate of college prep or workforce training courses of the community’s high school students. Furthermore, it may increase the number of graduates who apply to college and workforce programs.
Secondly, some participants in the investigation believed there needed to be an equal representation of required courses and electives in the student high school course catalog. Due to the limited number of qualified faculty and the school’s attempt at fulfilling state curriculum requirements, multiple sections of required or remedial courses were provided, but as a consequence a variety of electives, advanced subjects, and college preparation courses were not available to students. Some participants believed if the school system would offer more classes in particular fields of study such as criminal justice, finance, or health science, the curriculum could potentially steer students toward a career field or prepare them for independent living after high school.

The research data and recommendations made by students in the study may encourage the school’s leadership, the guidance department, and the curriculum specialists to examine the relevancy of current high school course offerings and continue to prepare students for college and careers. Moreover, the school system should solicit input from the student body, recent graduates, the local community college, and community groups about the criticality of elective course offerings and determine if they have career applications.

- **Personalized Learning Opportunities Will Increase Academic Achievement**

Many participants emphasized in their interview the importance of experiencing personal engagement in the classroom and establishing on-going academic relationships between school personnel and students. Building students’ human capital in the context of learning would increase student participation in advanced or career-related courses,
An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program

improve student attendance, bolster academic engagement in class, and increase overall student achievement in the high school.

First-generation students need to see first-hand and hear from trusted adults how their class performance, academic achievement, and curricular concepts correlate with future career or academic opportunities. Participant 05 recommended that career pathways and college-readiness skills be “embedded” more into the curriculum. He said that even required courses such as social studies and English need to be personalized so students could see connections between subjects and their relevance in the world.

Personalizing instruction and embedding skills within course content areas can naturally align with college and career readiness programs. Moreover, they can engage student learning as well as strengthen a student’s desire to succeed in school. Additionally, attention to career fields in a classroom environment, as well as conducting on-going academic progress conferences led by school stakeholders (i.e. the College/Career coach, guidance counselors, and teachers), could increase students’ perspectives about course content objectives, careers, and possible college majors. Students would realize the value-added benefits of a high school and post-secondary education, which in turn would motivate them to pursue college or a workforce program after high school graduation.

- **Develop a College/Career Readiness Culture in the School**

  Of the participants interviewed, a majority possessed a high degree of human, social, and cultural capital. A majority of the participants were self-motivated, desired to leave their community in hopes of receiving a college degree or workforce education, and were
optimistic about future career prospects which could give them personal satisfaction as well as financially support themselves and their family members. Many of the participants interviewed had a strong network of motivated friends like themselves who were first-generation students who desired to pursue college or a workforce program. Many of the participants noted their relatives and mentors in the community were unfamiliar with the college admissions process and/or had limited knowledge about the college admissions process; however, their family and friends encouraged them to pursue their college and career aspirations.

During high school, a majority of the study’s participants developed a personal relationship with the school’s College/Career coach, their guidance counselor, or a teacher in the building who could help them navigate through the societal and educational norms in order to reach long-term academic or career goals. Their daily interactions with trusted adults in the school enabled them to successfully master the cultural capital competencies that are found on a college campus or in a career field.

Unfortunately, many of the participants interviewed remarked that similar support networks, attitudes, or competencies were not as prevalent for a number of their peers in the Class of 2015, nor was it a school-wide trend for students in the lower grade levels to have long-term college or career goals. Rather, numerous first-generation students once had dreams of pursuing particular career fields or had discussed when they were younger future academic goals, but as they grew older, the career dreams faded or their academic goals did not seem obtainable. For example, Participant 09 reflected on how the attitudes of her peers changed with time, “When you’re younger, you want to be this or that. And now, it’s like I don’t know what I want to do anymore.”
Several participants remarked that modeling academic excellence and encouraging career goal-setting activities should be accessible to all students in the high school and not exclusive to the achieving and goal-driven students. Participant 04 explained that many teachers and school faculty members were supportive in helping motivated students with school work and college applications but he perceived that little academic or career-readiness support was given to students who appeared reticent about their future or indifferent about their academic performance. He surmised, “If you get the right teachers, you can get on the right track. If you get the wrong teachers, you are pulled away pretty quickly from what you want to do.” Such comments juxtapose the beliefs of developing human, social, and cultural capital in order to reach an individual’s educational and career goals.

- **Maximize Human, Social, and Cultural Capital Potential to Students**

Increasing human, social, and cultural capital of students will transform the attitudes of an entire learning community and maximize the potential for many students to succeed in college and careers. Many of the participants believed that if their peers received ongoing academic and emotional support from their family members or school officials, they would have an academic or career plan after high school graduation. Only five of the thirteen participants interviewed believed their grade level peers utilized the academic or career services of the College/Career Center coach. Additionally, none of the participants interviewed believed their grade level peers sought career or college advice from their guidance counselor, and five participants surmised that lack of family support was the primary reason for their peers’ challenges in setting long-term career or academic goals.
Personalized relationships between school faculty and students can be established through the development of mentoring programs between teachers and students or for the school leadership to incorporate advisor/advisee meetings for all students within the master schedule. In addition to one-on-one encounters, the high school should partner with community groups to establish ongoing career and college readiness activities. These activities may include career fairs and career demonstrations for students and their parents to attend, mock job interview workshops, career-oriented field trips to various industries and local businesses, and college campus visits in the region. Such career/college readiness activities have the potential to raise an awareness about careers, workforce programs, as well as increase the interest of attending college for many first-generation students who were once undecided about their future. More importantly, the activities recommended have the potential to elevate academic achievement, encourage students to set long-term academic goals, and develop student potential.

Increased student engagement in school, meaningful academic lessons which cater to the interests of students, and the development of long-term goals for all students will tear down the barriers of academic apathy and raise the human capital of first-generation students. As a result of such innovative measures, the talents and future potential of many disenfranchised, first-generation students will be unlocked and opportunities will be discovered that were once unavailable to this population.

- Increase Accessibility and Collaboration of the College/Career Center

Eight of the thirteen participants in the study regularly met with the College/Career coach and utilized the center’s services; however, many attributed their first encounter
and follow-up visits to the College/Career Center office to its proximity to the classrooms
they were housed in during the school day. For example, Participant 03 and Participant
04 were enrolled in the culinary arts courses and the ROTC program. Both fields of
study are located next to the College/Career Center. Conversely, Participants 05, 11, and
12 did not utilize the College/Career Center’s services because the courses they primarily
were enrolled in were on the opposite side of the building or their schedule did not mesh
with the operating hours of the College/Career Center. Specifically, the College/Career
Center’s office was in a remote part of the building and not in good proximity to the
majority of students in the school building. Furthermore, the career coach’s work
schedule and some school personnel’s inflexibility to allow students to visit the
College/Career Center during the school day were significant factors in the frequency of
certain first-generation students’ ability to utilize the college and workforce resources.

Presently, the high school is in the midst of remodeling its facilities and increasing
the number of instructional areas in the building. It is recommended by the researcher
that the school system consider consolidating the College/Career Center into the
Guidance Department area as part of the reconstruction plan. Streamlining the physical
space of both offices will enable students to access the services of the College/Career
couch and the guidance counselors more readily, as well as increase the potential for
more college/career readiness activities to be implemented by the personnel. Because all
of the students in the high school meet with their guidance counselors at least twice a
year for course scheduling meetings, the consolidation of office space will ensure that
more students in the school will become aware of the College/Career Center’s services
and its sponsored events.
Not only did participants in the study express their frustration over the location of the College/Career Center, but many found the office’s hours of operation to be a hindrance for them and their families. Due to inadequate state and local funds, the College/Career coach only worked at the school on a part-time basis. Office hours did not accommodate students who would be available to meet after-school. Limited hours of operation potentially restrict the number of students who would seek college or career advice from the coach. Additionally, family members who have questions about financial aid, college planning, and careers would have limited opportunities to meet with the College/Career coach. In defense of the College/Career coach, she did make special arrangements to meet with students and families outside of scheduled work hours, but these opportunities may not be realized for those who do not know about the program or do not currently have a professional relationship with the coach.

It is probable that funding sources will not increase in the upcoming year for the College/Career coach to increase her hours at the College/Career Center; however, the researcher suggests that the hours of operation be reviewed by administration to determine if they need to be adjusted to meet the time schedules of students and parents. For example, instead of opening the center from 8:00 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily, the school system should consider having the center open one evening a week so students and families could take advantage of the services after evening extra-curricular activities and parents could visit the College/Career Center after their workday.

A second recommendation would be to coordinate college/career readiness events prior to extra-curricular activities. For example, the Career Center could host a Financial Aid Help Desk, sponsor student athlete seminars, or college admissions guest speakers
before school-wide events such as an honor roll breakfast, band concert, basketball games, and parent/teachers conferences. It is likely the College/Career Center and the Guidance Department would see an increase in attendance to their regularly scheduled events if they were held during the same night as another highly attended event, and it may heighten the promotion of future college and career readiness events to the high school community.

- **Provide Financial Aid and College Planning Advice**

  Uncertainty and fear about financing a college education were as forbidding for many first-generation participant interviewed as beginning the college application process. Six participants identified financial limitations as a reason for making certain college and career decisions. For example, Participant 01 said that her parents encouraged her to attend a community college first to complete required courses and then transfer to a state university for her degree requirements. They believe this would significantly decrease the cost of a post-secondary education and ease her financial aid burden. Participant 05 had similar reasons for attending a community college before continuing his education at a university. He believed he could save money by taking courses at a community college while living and working close to home.

  Limited financial resources, as well as lack of college financial aid knowledge by family members and peers, motivated many students to seek help from the College/Career coach or the guidance department. For example, Participant 12 primarily used the College/Career Center when she had to complete FAFSA paperwork or scholarship applications. Participant 11 lamented that her parents were not assisting in
the financial aid process nor were they financially able to help her with college expenses so she was dependent upon financial aid workshops sponsored by the school to help her navigate through the required paperwork for financial aid contributions. Although the workshops were helpful to her, Participant 11 was having a difficult time finding scholarships that she was eligible for, and she believed there was not enough support in this area at school.

The level of interest in financial aid assistance by participants of the study was unusual compared to the rest of the graduating class. Participants 08 and 11 recalled that the FAFSA workshop sponsored by school was poorly attended by their peers and parents of seniors. They recollected that less than 50 individuals attended the workshop. In similar conversations about the lack of peer interest in college attendance, Participants 05 and 11 believed that more students would show an interest in going to college if the high school provided more outreach opportunities in the areas of college financial aid and scholarships, but they believed it needed to be part of the curriculum or graduation requirements. They suggested such topics could be mandatory workshops for seniors or if financial aid information was covered in a required class, more students would be engaged in the process.

Although a few participants blamed student and parent apathy toward seeking college financial aid advice, several participants criticized the school for not advertising events well enough such as upcoming scholarship opportunities or FAFSA workshops. Moreover, there was criticism that the school did not emphasize the importance of the financial aid workshops to families so they would feel obliged to attend the meetings.
Currently, the high school holds two to three student assemblies each year which address upcoming courses that will be offered, College Board exam information, and graduation-related business such as ordering caps and gowns. Many of the participants remarked in their interview that the assemblies were loud with little direct engagement by the students and faculty. It is recommended by the researcher that the college/career coach and guidance counselors split the grade levels into small class sizes (i.e. 25 students per class) and review various topics which lead up to high school graduation. The meetings would be 30 minutes in length and held twice per month. Topics covered may include: explaining to underclassmen the difference between a cumulative grade point average and a quarterly grade point average and preparing for the SAT or the ACT exam. Additionally, the faculty or a community expert could present to juniors and seniors the college search and financial aid process.

In addition to facilitating small group discussions with all of the students in the high school, the College/Career coach could conduct mini-seminars with the help from local colleges, retired guidance counselors, banks, and post-secondary athletic programs. Such topics may include: college athletic recruiting, scholarship searches, and FAFSA application support. The mini-seminars could be held during school lunch periods, after-school, weekends, and in the evenings for students and their families who are seeking individualized help from experts or have an interest in a specific topic.

**Recommendations for Program Modifications**

This qualitative study found that a designated college/career readiness coach at a high school is a beneficial resource for first-generation, low socioeconomic high school
students. Additionally, students’ academic success and college/career goal setting are attributed to positive social, human, and cultural capital. These characteristics are reinforced by supportive family members, engaging school personnel, like-minded friends, and community members who care about them. Many of the participants are appreciative of the college/career coach’s individualized attention and the program’s services. Moreover, some of the participants found their guidance counselor or teachers to be valuable resources as they made long-term decisions about their future.

The researcher has three recommendations for improvement in the area of college/career readiness for first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students. Based on participants’ interviews, first-hand observations, and discussions with members of the guidance department and the college/career coach, the researcher recommends that in order for the college/career readiness program to be more effective to all students in the school, the program needs to be promoted better by school stakeholders and more accessible in the building. School leadership, school faculty, Guidance Department, and College/Career Center need to increase their promotion of career and college readiness opportunities in the school to the student body. This may include frequent advertisements on the school website, school district social media sites, and on the school announcements about college and career readiness events. Furthermore, it is important for faculty to personally invite students and their families to the events who may not find it important to attend or unaware of the events. The second recommendation by the researcher is to relocate the College/Career Center to the Guidance Department office. Consolidating offices could potentially increase the number of students who take advantage of the career and college readiness services and programs that are offered by
the College/Career Center and the Guidance Department. Students who are unfamiliar with the services of the College/Career Center would likely find out about them when they have appointments with their guidance counselor. Finally, collaboration among the Guidance Department, the College/Career coach, and school faculty on school-wide college/career readiness program development and curriculum design has the potential to increase the number of first-generation, low socioeconomic students’ participation in school sponsored work force programs, college preparation courses, college/career readiness activities, and possibly college or workforce applications.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The researcher found several studies on college and career readiness for first-generation students enrolled in college as well as college transition and mentoring programs for low socioeconomic college students; however, recent research on targeted college and career readiness programs for first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students is limited. The researcher suggests that more studies on targeted high school college/career readiness programs be conducted throughout the country in order to determine if there are similar or different findings regarding first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students. Moreover, recent studies on human, social, and cultural capital influences among first-generation, low socioeconomic high school students have the potential to reveal findings in the areas of student achievement, high school graduation rates, and students’ post-secondary plans.

It is suggested by the researcher that future research correlate with the study’s college and career readiness frameworks. A study could examine high school stakeholders’
perceptions of college and career readiness programs in order to determine if stakeholders are supportive of the program. A second research recommendation would be a comparative study of College/Career Center participation rates of students of low, middle, and upper-class backgrounds in order to ascertain if all economic groups seek the same amount and/or level of college and career readiness assistance. A third research recommendation would be to investigate schools that have full-time college/career coaches and determine if student accessibility and participation rates of college and career readiness activities change among first-generation, low socioeconomic students. Finally, a comparison study of other college/career readiness programs in the state and their effectiveness with students should be considered. The study could examine the participation rates, funding sources, level of visibility, and awareness of the college/career coach with a similar subgroup, and the level of interaction coaches from comparative schools have with faculty members, other subgroups, and families. This similar study design could be implemented in other school districts and would add to the existing literature on the study of college/career readiness programs in high schools.

Summary

The researcher found many positive examples and listened to several encouraging stories of first-generation, high school students fulfilling their educational goal to attend college and later pursue a career they are passionate about. The students interviewed during this study were all enthusiastic about graduating from high school and motivated to reach the next pinnacle in their lives. For many, the next step in their life journey would be leaving home and going to a college hundreds of miles away, attending a local
community college, entering military service, or pursuing a workforce program with the intention of entering a career they enjoyed.

One common theme that intertwined in many of the participants’ lives was having a trusted person or persons who encouraged them to pursue their educational and career goals. Several students attributed their perseverance and goal-driven nature to the support of family members, their church, a mentor, and their friends. Additionally, the human, social, and cultural capital of many of the participants increased during their high school experience because of the assistance from the school’s College/Career coach or their guidance counselor. For some students, their educational relationship with one of these individuals began as a chance encounter in the hallway, at an assembly, or because they needed college or career advice. After establishing a cordial relationship with the coach or a guidance counselor, several participants relied upon these educators to help them navigate the uncertain waters of the college application process, scholarship protocols, and the financial aid procedures. During the researcher’s interviews, a few participants reflected that they had no sense of direction beyond high school graduation because of unforeseen circumstances in their lives. Specifically, some of the participants commended the College/Career coach for helping them overcome disappointment or adversity in their lives. The coach’s reassuring presence and positive outlook on life beyond high school enabled the students to be encouraged about their future and to readjust their academic and career goals.

Although, a majority of the participants in the study had a clear educational or career pathway they were going to take after high school graduation, several participants believed their classmates were not as focused or certain about what they wanted to pursue
after high school. Moreover, many of the participants believed the school system needed to make college and career readiness as much of a priority in school as assisting students in passing graduation course requirements or the state mandated assessments.

While the demands of reaching educational excellence in K-12 schools continues to be the focus for many school systems across the United States, it is imperative that educational stakeholders not lose sight of the importance for students, particularly first-generation students, to be college and career ready. School systems, such as the high school the researcher investigated, need to expand their scope of educational preparation and raise the level of understanding about human, social, and cultural capital so student achievement can increase for all children. Moreover, school systems need to develop learner objectives which address career readiness applications within content areas, as well as increase personnel in grades K-12 who specialize in career readiness skills.

Many first-generation students, their families, and the community at-large rely upon the school system to provide young people an education that will prepare them to be independent and productive citizens; furthermore, it is also the responsibility of K-12 educational organizations to continue to help first-generation students unlock their potential and open doors to future educational endeavors and careers.
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Appendix A

Participant Interview Guiding Questions

1. How long have you worked with the college and career coach? Can you describe how you have used the college and career preparatory program in your high school?

2. Did you find the college and career preparatory program beneficial or not beneficial to you when you have explored colleges or a workforce programs that you may want to attend after you graduate from high school?

3. How helpful or not helpful have the meetings with the college/career counselor been for you as you decide what to do after you graduate from high school? Why?

4. How is the information or activities provided by the college and career counselor different or the same from information or activities the high school guidance counselors provide high school students in your school?

5. What aspects of the college and career preparatory program helped students like you, in developing future educational or workforce goals beyond high school?

6. Has your understanding and confidence in yourself been affected or have they remained the same during the period you have been applying to college or workforce programs?

7. Were there any college or workforce activities that persuaded you to pursue a career goal or were there college or career readiness activities that were not of importance or value to you this year?
8. What program activities aided you in understanding the college or workforce admissions process?

9. How do family members, friends, educators, or mentors influence your decision to apply to a college or workforce program after high school?

10. Recall a time that you were confused, hindered or frustrated this year about making future school or career decisions after high school graduation. Who assisted you during this period?

11. Is there anything or anyone that has most prepared you to reach your career goals?
Appendix B

District/School Letter of Agreement

April 25, 2014

To the Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB):

I am familiar with Merri Kae VanderPloeg’s dissertation research study entitled *An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program and Its Influence on First-Generation, High School Students*. I understand County Public School’s involvement to be allowing County High School students to be interviewed by Mrs. VanderPloeg and for her to interact with the High School Guidance Department and the school’s career coach on matters which relate to her dissertation research study.

As Mrs. Merri Kae VanderPloeg conducts the dissertation research study I understand and agree that:

- This research will be carried out following sound ethical principles and that it has been approved by Merri Kae VanderPloeg’s dissertation committee and the IRB at Creighton University.
- Employee participation in this project is strictly voluntary and not a condition of their employment at County Public Schools. There are no contingencies for employees who choose to participate or decline to participate in the research study. There will be no adverse employment consequences as a result of an employee’s participation in this study.
- Student participation in this project is strictly voluntary and approved by the parents or guardians of the students. There are not contingencies for students to choose to participate or decline to participate in the research study. There will be no adverse academic consequences as a result of a student’s participation in this study.
- To the extent of confidentiality may be protected under State and Federal law, the data collected will remain confidential, as described in the protocol. The name of the school system, names of the employees who provided student information, and the students who are interviewed will not be reported in the results of the study.

Therefore, as a representative of County Public Schools, I agree that Merri Kae VanderPloeg’s dissertation research study may be conducted at High School, and that Merri Kae VanderPloeg may assure participants that they may participate in interviews and provide responsive information without adverse employment consequences or academic standing.

Sincerely,

[Name]
Superintendent of Schools
[Name] Public Schools
Appendix C

Participant Assent

Protocol Title: An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program and Its Influence on First-Generation, High School Students

Creighton University IRB Number: 14-17079

Principal Investigator’s Name: Merri Kae VanderPloeg

Principal Investigator’s Address and Telephone Number: Caroline County Public Schools, 16261 Richmond Turnpike, Bowling Green, VA 22427   (540) 216-4592

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT (INVITATION)

Many research studies have examined targeted college and workforce readiness programs but very few studies have focused on the level of academic or emotional support high schools give to assist students in making future college or career choices upon high school graduation. I am currently conducting a dissertation research study entitled, An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program and Its Influence on First-Generation, High School Students. You are invited to participate in the research study I am conducting about the Career/College readiness program. The research study is part of my doctoral dissertation that I am writing for Creighton University.

Explanation of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influences first-generation, college bound high school students in a high school. This is an unfunded research study as part
of my doctoral dissertation requirements from Creighton University. During the study, I will be interviewing High School seniors to learn about their experiences with the Career/College Readiness Program in high school, what their goals are after they graduate from high school, and what activities or persons helped them determine what they want to do after they graduate from high school. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you indicated to the school that you may be the first person in your immediate family to attend college or a workforce program after high school. In addition to contacting you, I will be informing your parents or guardian about the study and will ask their permission for you to participate in the study.

If you agree to participate, I will contact you and arrange to meet with you at High School during the day for the interview or during another time at your convenience. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The meetings will be held in the Guidance Department conference room or office which is located in the College/Career Department area of the high school.

**Benefits of Participating in the Study**

Your opinions on college and career readiness may assist High School and other high schools in future planning of similar college or career readiness programs. More importantly, the results of the study may help school administration and policy makers in determining whether the high school career and college readiness program needs to continue, be expanded, or modified in the future.
Risks of Participating in the Study

The risks of participating in the research study are minimal. A possible risk involved in this study involves the potential social and psychological risks associated with accidental disclosure of confidential information from the data collected throughout the study. Security procedures will be in place to avoid disclosure of confidential information from data collected.

Confidentiality

The interviews will be audio-taped and your identity will be anonymous. Your identity and your comments during the interview will remain confidential. Information gathered will remain in a secure file until the study is complete. You will have the opportunity to listen to the audio-tapes or read the transcription of the interviews after the interviews are completed. Once the research study is complete the audio-tapes and the transcriptions will be destroyed. At any point you have questions about the interview process, I will be happy to answer them. If you are uncomfortable at any time during the interview, you may stop answering questions.

Both records that identify you and this assent form signed by you may be looked at by others. The list of people who may look at your student’s research records are: The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other internal departments that provide support and oversight at Creighton University. I may present the research findings at professional meetings or publish the results of this research study in relevant journals. However, I will always keep your name, address, or other identifying information private.
Compensation for Participation

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect you or your relationship with Caroline High School faculty or the school division. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. To express my appreciation for your participation in the research study interview, you will receive a $10 gift card to a local convenience store after the interview is complete.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at 540-216-4592 or email me at mvanderploeg@creighton.edu. You are also free to contact my advisor Dr. Barbara Brock at bbrock@creighton.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate in the interview process of the study. If you decide to participate, you may return the assent form to the College/Career Coach at Caroline High School and she will give them to me. Thank you for your cooperation.

SIGNATURE CLAUSE

You do not have to be in this study. You can stop being in the study at any time and no one will be mad at you and your relationship with County Public Schools will not be impacted.

My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.

_________________________________________  ___________
An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program

Printed Name of Adolescent  Date of Birth

_____________________________  ____________

Signature of Adolescent  Date Signed

_____________________________  ____________________

Name(s) of Parent(s)/Legal Guardian(s) (Print)  Relationship to Child

I have discussed with the subject the procedure(s) described above and the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the assent document.

A copy of this form has been given to me.

_____________Subject’s Initials

For the Research Investigator-I have discussed with this subject the procedure(s) described above the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the assent document.

_____________________________

Investigator’s Signature

We would appreciate your feedback on your experience as a research participant at Creighton University; please fill out our survey at http://www.creighton.edu/participantsurvey
INTRODUCTION

Many research studies have examined targeted college and workforce readiness programs but very few studies have focused on the level of academic or emotional support high schools give to assist students in making future college or career choices upon high school graduation. Your child is invited to participate in a dissertation research study entitled, *An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program and Its Influence on First-Generation, High School Students*. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because they have indicated that they may be the first person in their immediate family to attend college or a workforce program after high school. If you have any questions relating to the research study, please contact me (Merri Kae VanderPloeg), the principal investigator of the study. My email is mvanderploeg@creighton.edu or she may be reached at 540-216-4592.

Study Purpose and Procedures

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the effectiveness of a high school college and career preparation program and how it influences economically
disadvantaged, first-generation, college bound high school students in a high school. This is an unfunded research study as part of my doctoral dissertation requirements from Creighton University. During the study, I will be interviewing High School seniors to learn about their experiences with the Career & College Readiness High School Program which is sponsored by High School. I will ask participating students’ about their goals after they graduate from high school, and what activities or persons helped them determine what they want to do after they graduate from high school.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because they have indicated that they may be the first person in their immediate family to attend college or a workforce program after high school. If you allow your child to participate, I will contact them and arrange to meet with them at High School during the day for the interview or during another time at their convenience. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The meetings will be held in the Guidance Department conference room or office which is located in the College/Career Department area of the high school.

**Benefits of Participating in the Study**

Your student’s opinions on college and career readiness may assist High School and other high schools in future planning of similar college or career readiness programs. More importantly, the results of the study may help school administration and policy makers in determining whether the high school career and college readiness program needs to continue, be expanded, or modified in the future.
Risks of Participating in the Study

The risks of participating in the research study are minimal. A possible risk involved in this study involves the potential social and psychological risks associated with accidental disclosure of confidential information from the data collected throughout the study. Several procedures will be in place to prevent such an occurrence. The interviews will be audio-taped and the students’ identities will be anonymous.

Confidentiality

Student identities and comments during the interview will remain confidential. Information gathered will remain in a secure file until the study is complete. Students will have the opportunity to listen to the audio-tapes or read the transcription of the interviews after the interviews are completed. Once the research study is complete the audio-tapes and the transcriptions will be destroyed. Both records that identify you and this consent form signed by you may be looked at by others. The list of people who may look at your student’s research records are: The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other internal departments that provide support and oversight at Creighton University. I may present the research findings at professional meetings or publish the results of this research study in relevant journals. However, I will always keep your name, your child’s name, address, or other identifying information private.

Compensation for Participation

Your child’s participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect you or your child’s relationship with High School or the school division. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you and/or your
child are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time. To express my appreciation for student participation of the research study interview, students will receive a $10 gift card to a local convenience store after the interviews are complete.

When it is anticipated that significant new findings are likely to develop during the course of the research that would be pertinent to the subject’s continued participation, student participants will be notified by letter or by phone of such significant new findings.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at 540-216-4592 or email me at mvanderploeg@creighton.edu. You are also free to contact my advisor Dr. Barbara Brock at bbrock@creighton.edu. If you have questions regarding your student’s rights as a research subject, please contact the Creighton University Institutional Review Board at 402-280-2126. An enclosed copy of the Bill of Rights for Research Participation has been made available to you if you have any concerns about the research process.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to allow your child to participate in the interview process of the study. You also understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. Your student may return the consent form to [name], the College/Career Coach at [school name] High School and she will give them to me. Thank you for your consideration.
SIGNATURE CLAUSE

You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time.

My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to allow my child to participate in the project as described above.

_____________________________________
Printed Name of Student’s Parent or Guardian

_____________________________________  __________
Signature of Student’s Parent or Guardian   Date Signed

The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) offers you an opportunity (anonymously if you so choose) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; or offer input about this project with an IRB administrator who is not associated with this particular research project. You may call or write to the Institutional Review Board at (402) 280-2126; address the letter to the Institutional Review Board, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178 or by email to irb@creighton.edu.

A copy of this form has been given to me. ______________ Parent/Guardian’s Initials

For the Research Investigator-I have discussed with this subject (and, if required, the subject’s guardian) the procedure(s) described above the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the consent document and it competent to give legally effective and informed consent.

__________________________________________  ___________
We would appreciate your feedback on your experience as a research participant at Creighton University; please fill out our survey at http://www.creighton.edu/participantsurvey

*Bill of Rights for Research Participants*

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without pressure from the people who are conducting the research.

2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.

3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.

4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.

5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.

6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.

7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.

8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.

9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
   a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.
Appendix E

IRB Approval Documentation

DATE: July 25, 2014

TO: Merri Kae VanderPlow, BS, MA
FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [630484-1] An Investigation of a College and Career Preparatory Program and Its Influence on First-Generation, High School Students

REFERENCE #: 14-17079

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: June 9, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: June 8, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited category # 9

The IRB office has received the following documents:

- Application Form - Response Application (UPDATED: 07/25/2014)
- Revised Assent Form (UPDATED: 07/25/2014)
- Revised Parental Permission Form (UPDATED: 07/25/2014)