Motivations Of Low-Income Students To Enroll In Selective Colleges

Kimberly Denise Hildahl

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MOTIVATIONS OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN SELECTIVE COLLEGES

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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To my father, who instilled in me the importance of hard work and the value of education.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my capstone committee for your invaluable feedback and guidance throughout this project. To my family and Caden and Avery for their support, and to Brian, I love you, always.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Each year, high school seniors must make a decision about their future. Faced with the options of attending college, joining the workforce, or enlisting in the military, millions of students choose to enroll in a postsecondary institution. However, not all colleges are the same, and there is large stratification between family income levels and the type of institution students subsequently enroll in. Low-income students, in general, are being left behind in terms of college enrollment and college graduation (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2016). In fact, for children born between 1984-1989, the gap in college attendance rates between students from the lowest- and highest-income families was found to be 74.5 percent (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014, p. 144). Furthermore, once enrolled in college, low-income students earn baccalaureate degrees at a rate less than half of their wealthier peers (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2016).

When making college application decisions, the majority of low-income students choose to apply to less selective colleges and send out fewer applications than middle- and upper-income students (Berg, 2010, p. 25). In light of these statistics, low-income students who attend selective colleges have higher college retention and graduation rates, which even rival those of students from higher-income families (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005, p. 119). Although it is apparent that low-income students fare much better at selective postsecondary institutions, which typically cost them less to attend, they do not apply or matriculate to them nearly as often as students from higher-income families.
(Hoxby & Avery, 2013, p.1; White House Report, 2014). The enrollment disparity at selective institutions between low- and high-income students is disconcerting and prompted this capstone project, which seeks to investigate the question: *what motivates low-income students to enroll in selective colleges?* While exploring motivations in the decision-making processes of low-income students who choose to attend selective colleges, this project will build upon the existing literature and provide strategies to improve recruitment practices of low-income students who have the academic potential to attend selective postsecondary institutions.

**Researcher Background**

Growing up, I always knew I would go to college. College was never a question of “if,” but “where.” Although no one in my family had ever attended college, my father instilled the value of a postsecondary education in both my sister and me. Although he was intelligent, and always informed on current events, he told us about his struggles of being considered traditionally “uneducated.” “Once you have an education,” he would remind us, “no one can take it away from you.” These memories continue to stick with me, more than 20 years later.

In high school, I challenged myself to earn good grades, with the assumption that I would be fully prepared for college. When it was time to apply to college, I felt confused and lost, but in my own stubborn way, I navigated the application system on my own and completed my Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). I only applied to two colleges, with no real understanding of what I was looking for or why I had chosen those two institutions.
In 2005, the question of “where” I would go to college was answered when I enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin. At that time, the University implemented an early enrollment program as an effort to reduce class sizes in first-year courses. Through a lottery system, I was chosen to attend starting immediately during the summer session. Within a matter of a few short weeks, I graduated from high school, turned 18, and began college. As the first in my family to ever attend college, I had a great responsibility riding on my shoulders, but I felt confident I would make my family proud. I had always been a good student in high school, so I made the naïve assumption that college would come easy to me.

I struggled through the summer sessions, but did not want my family to know I was having any troubles. I felt lost in the huge university system and did not know whom to turn to for help. Meetings with advisors were brief, and I never developed a sense of belonging on campus. It was half way through fall semester, after being placed on academic probation, that I realized I lacked the study skills needed to be a successful college student. I knew I needed a change, so I transferred to St. Olaf College in Minnesota.

St. Olaf was a much better fit for me due to the smaller class sizes and individualized support and I am grateful I made the change. However, I encountered many challenges that low-income students face at a private, highly selective institution. Although I looked like the other students, I had a difficult time relating to them because my socioeconomic background and the challenges I faced as a first generation student were different. Many of my peers never understood why I worked so many hours outside
of school and questioned why I could not simply ask my parents for extra money for books.

By the beginning of my sophomore year, I was feeling more comfortable about school, and was looking into declaring my major. I loved psychology, but was not exactly sure what I would do with a psychology degree. A friend suggested that I become an education major and I reflected on my own experiences with school and learning. I realized my father’s lessons about being a lifelong learner had motivated me to continue with my studies, and I wanted to share my love of learning with others. In 2009, I graduated with a double major in psychology and social studies education, as well as my 5-12 social studies teaching license.

After college, I spent some time working as a substitute teacher, before landing a full-time position as 6-12th grade English language arts teacher. I loved teaching, and in the summer of 2012, I was hired as a teacher for a TRIO Upward Bound program. What I thought would just be a summer job turned into a career for which I have a great passion. Upward Bound (UB) is a federally funded college access program for low-income, first generation high school students. I was excited to work for the program again the following summer, and when I discovered there was a full-time position available, I jumped at the opportunity to apply.

I have worked with the UB program for the past four years, and love seeing my students grow from timid high school freshmen, to confident, college-bound seniors. During this time, I have listened to my students as they question whether they should apply to selective colleges. Although their grades and standardized tests scores are strong,
they feel as though they are not smart enough nor deserving enough to attend a more prestigious school. In addition to sharing my own narrative as a low-income, first generation college student, it is during these conversations that I try to reassure my students that they are smart enough and they do deserve to go to a good college. These are the experiences that have shaped my research question and the basis of this capstone project.

**Research Rationale**

A college degree is becoming more of a necessity in our society and changing economy. In 1973, workers with a postsecondary education held only 28 percent of jobs, while it is estimated that by the year 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education and training beyond a high school diploma (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 4). Today’s high school students are facing a much different workforce than their predecessors, and need to be prepared to enroll in higher education programs that will qualify them for these careers.

Education is often regarded as a means to end the cycle of poverty. In fact, when a child born into a family in the lowest fifth of income distribution earns a college degree, their chances of moving to the top fifth almost quadruple, and their chances of moving out of the bottom are increased by more than 50 percent (White House Report, 2014, p. 3).

It is well documented that a college degree will greatly enhance the lives of low-income students, however, these students face substantial barriers in matriculating to and graduating from college (Giani, 2016; Griffith & Rothstein, 2009; White House Report,
Low-income students are more often less prepared for the rigor of college, and have worse outcomes when compared to their wealthier peers: they drop out prior to earning a degree, they take much longer than the standard time it takes to graduate, or attend institutions that do not have the resources needed to support them, thus later earning a lower salary than the median college graduate (Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

**Who is Attending College?**

It is well known that wealthier students are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their low-income peers, with statistics remaining somewhat stagnant over the past 25 years. The U.S. Department of Commerce, as reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2016), found that in each year from 1990 to 2014, the immediate college enrollment rate for high school graduates from high-income families was higher than the rates for their low-income peers. In 2014, the immediate college enrollment rate for high school graduates from high-income families was 81 percent, compared to 52 percent of their low-income peers (p. 202).

Moreover, in 2014, the gap between the immediate college enrollment rates of high school graduates from high- and low-income families, were not measurably different from the corresponding gaps in 1990 and 2000 (NCES, 2016, p. 202). Although there has been a great push to increase college enrollment for all students, these gaps demonstrate that not enough is being done to assist low-income students with overcoming the obstacles they face in attending and graduating from college at the same rates as their higher-income peers.
Why Selective Colleges?

I decided to focus my research on selective colleges (as defined by the 2016 *Barron’s Profile of Colleges Selectivity Index*, see Appendix A), because they have much higher six-year graduation rates than non-selective institutions, thus low-income students have much better odds of graduating. NCES reported:

six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree in fall 2008 varied according to institutional selectivity. In particular, 6-year graduation rates were highest at postsecondary degree-granting institutions that were the most selective (i.e., had the lowest admissions acceptance rates), and were lowest at institutions that were the least selective (i.e., had open admissions policies). (p. 236)

Furthermore, selective colleges offer richer academic and financial resources than non-selective colleges and have been empirically linked to after-college outcomes such as higher income, greater social status, and increased civic engagement (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014, pp. 71-72). These benefits have been found to have even stronger effects for low-income students (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Hearn & Rosinger, 2014). In an effort to understand what can be done to work towards narrowing the postsecondary enrollment gap in selective colleges, it is necessary to examine the motivations of low-income students to attend these institutions.

Summary

This chapter gave a brief synopsis for the rationale of this project and delved into my personal experiences as a low-income, first generation college student. As the
necessity for a college degree has risen, low-income students have fallen behind in attaining a postsecondary degree. Economically disadvantaged students enroll in and graduate from college at much lower rates than students from higher-income backgrounds, but these inequities narrow at selective institutions. Thus, this capstone project will investigate low-income student motivations in applying to and enrolling in selective colleges.

Looking Forward

Chapter two reviews the current literature pertaining to the research question of what motivates low-income students to enroll in selective colleges. There will be four main topics explored, outlined as follows: 1) the present state of educational inequity for low-income students in the United States, including common stereotypes of low-income students and trends of low-income students in higher education; 2) a definition of the college selectivity index and low-income student participation in selective colleges; 3) the extent and causes of academic undermatch; and 4) a general overview of student motivation to attend postsecondary education. Evaluating the literature on this topic will help to guide my research and determine appropriate methodology for my study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to the research question: what motivates low-income students to enroll in selective colleges? Four central ideas related to the research question are examined. First, the current state of educational opportunity inequities for low-income students is outlined. Second, it defines college selectivity measures and the advantages of attending selective institutions are discussed. Third, the causes, prevalence and consequences of academic undermatch, which occurs when a student enrolls in a less selective institution than their academic achievements reflect, are examined. Finally, general trends in motivations of students to attend college are explored. Analyzing the literature will increase my understanding of the obstacles low-income students face in considering college options and identify potential motivations for low-income students to enroll in selective postsecondary institutions.

Educational Inequity for Low-Income Students

Postsecondary education has recently been in the national spotlight, as the need to hold a college degree is now more important for economic success than ever (White House Report, 2014, p. 2). A college degree is widely equated with social mobility and is viewed as a means to end the cycle of poverty. Although one mission of the U.S. Department of Education is to “strengthen the Federal commitment to assuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 2), low-income students have historically faced countless challenges and
inequities in comparison to their wealthier peers in achieving a college degree (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Included in the obstacles that low-income students face are stereotypes and lack of opportunities afforded to them. Furthermore, the gaps in educational equity across family income groups at the postsecondary education level are higher now than they have ever been (Pell Institute, 2016, p. 7). This section reviews some educational beliefs held about low-income students, discusses the educational opportunity gap, and examines overall trends of low-income students in higher education.

**Stereotypes of Low-Income Students**

Many Americans hold negative views about the poor (Woods, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2005) and every day, low-income students face scrutiny in the realm of education due to stereotypes regarding their social class. Gorski (2013) argued that low-income students must work against the ideas that “poor people do not value education,” “poor people are lazy,” “poor people are substance abusers,” “poor people are linguistically deficient and poor communicators,” and “poor people are inefficient and ineffective parents” (pp. 59-67). Of course, these statements are myths based on typecast, but the dangers of believing them can misguide educators and lead to unequal treatment and lower expectations of low-income students (p. 68).

Unfortunately, it is not only adults who hold these views. Woods, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley (2005) studied the stereotypical beliefs that children hold of age, race, and income in respect to sports, academics, and musical abilities. A sample of 438 fourth, sixth, and eighth grade students was surveyed, and findings were consistent with overall
social stereotypes in the United States: low-income students were reported to be thought of as less academically competent than wealthy students (p. 442). Even more unsettling is that “youths who recognize that they are from disadvantaged backgrounds may come to believe that poor individuals are not as capable academically as rich individuals” (p. 444). It would be reasonable to surmise that these stereotypes negatively affect the self-esteem of low-income students, particularly in academic settings.

Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Students

For years, there has been an enormous focus on the “achievement gap” paradigm in the United States. However, Darling-Hammond (2010) argued that much more energy should be devoted to the “opportunity gap,” or the “accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful informational resources—that support learning at home and at school” (p. 28). Moreover, the Saguaro Seminar (2016) found that schools in the United States are sites of widening inequality; poorer schools are increasingly unsafe, offer fewer extracurricular activities, lack rigorous academic culture and quality counseling services, and are more often staffed by less experienced teachers (p. 4).

Access to cognitive enrichment opportunities is much narrower for students from families with limited economic means. Gorski (2013) discussed the fact that working class and low-income families often cannot afford expenses related to cognitive ability that are most often rewarded in our educational system, such as academic tutoring, music lessons, athletics, and other extracurricular activities (p. 81). Involvement in such
activities indoctrinates highly valued soft skills, such as grit and teamwork, but more recent privatization (i.e. “pay to play”) of these types of activities means that fewer low-income students are able to engage in them (the Saguaro Seminar, 2016, p. 5). These inequities to access are further compounded with the findings that participation in such activities has been correlated to higher academic achievement and lower levels of truancy (Gorski, 2013, pp. 80-81).

Inequitable resources between high schools can greatly influence postsecondary school choice for students. Klugman (2012) reviewed the programmatic, social, and pedagogical resources available to over 10,000 students in 710 high schools, and compared them with the selectivity of the colleges in which graduates subsequently enrolled. Results found that private high schools and schools serving wealthier students not only increased students’ odds of enrolling in more selective colleges, but also increased students’ own sense of worthiness of attending selective colleges (p. 824). Klugman (2012) hypothesized that low-income families are less likely to be able to take advantage of opportunities at higher achieving schools because they are probably more “constrained in their ability to choose schools” (p. 825).

In addition to Klugman’s study, Bergerson, (2009) discussed the idea that high-poverty schools have limited infrastructure to provide college counseling services and information to students who want to explore their college options (p. 18). The White House Report (2014) shared rates of inequalities in high school student’s access to college counseling for low-income students: high schools serving populations of predominantly low-income and minority students have extremely high counselor-to-
student ratios—1,000 students per counselor, compared to 470 students per counselor nationally. These findings are important because Avery (2010) estimated that 22 percent of students who apply to competitive colleges receive private college counseling beyond what is offered at their school. Of course, private college counseling services come at a cost; average prices varied between $25 and $125 per hour, and some families spent thousands of dollars on premium counseling (p. 5). It is obvious that families with limited economic means are not able to afford such amenities to help their children learn about and apply to college.

The presumption that equal educational opportunity exists only reinforces the discussion of the achievement gap, and makes the assumption that low academic achievement is an intrinsic characteristic of low-income students (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 30). As well, Darling-Hammond (2010) made the vehement argument, “students who have no control of the quality of education they receive are the ones held most accountable—and punished most severely and repeatedly—for the failures of the system in which they are trapped” (p.79). As the opportunity gap widens, it is imperative that educators hone in on what can be done to find solutions that will level the playing field for low-income students.

**Trends of Low-Income Students in Higher Education**

Today, only one out of every ten low-income kindergartners in the United States will become a college graduate (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 3). Of the 45 percent of low-income students who do matriculate to college, almost 75 percent will not complete their degree within six years of enrollment (Pell Institute, 2016, p. 65). These statistics
are due in part to the fact that low-income students are more likely to attend schools that do not adequately support their needs, such as community colleges, private, for-profit institutions and noncompetitive schools (Pell Institute, 2016; Putnam, 2015).

Low-income students are more likely to attend private, for-profit institutions than wealthier students. In fact, in 2013, more than two-thirds of undergraduate students attending for-profit colleges received Federal Pell Grants (Pell Institute, 2016, p. 33). This is a cause for concern, because for-profit colleges have been found to have aggressive and predatory recruitment tactics with little regard for student success (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions, 2012) and have 6-year graduation rates as low as 27 percent (NCES, 2016, p. 235). Furthermore, students who attend for-profit institutions are much more likely to default on student loans, with data from 2009 demonstrating a 47 percent default rate, compared to 10 percent of students who attend selective, four-year institutions (Stratford, 2015). Given these practices and lack of regard for student achievement, for-profit institutions actually perpetuate the cycle of poverty for their enrollees.

In recent months, the Department of Education has called on college accrediting agencies to improve their reviewing processes of colleges and universities and even voted to shut down the largest for-profit accrediting agency (Camera, 2016). Although closing for-profit colleges is one way to improve educational attainment in the long run, many students who were enrolled in these schools must deal with adverse effects. For example, after one of the nation’s largest for-profit colleges, ITT Tech, was closed in 2016, the 40,000 students that had been enrolled were left with student loan debt and no degree.
The U.S. government agreed to cancel their federal student loan debt, however, many low-income students had also taken out private loans, which may not be eligible for cancellation (Vasel & Lobosco, 2016).

Low-income students are more likely to begin their postsecondary education at a two-year college than high-income students (30 percent versus 18 percent) due to lower tuition rates and the option to save money by living at home (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009, p. 138). Although community colleges are a means of closing the opportunity gap, they have many deficiencies that disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds. Putnam (2015) noted that many community colleges face budget cuts and are forced to do more with less funding. As a result, financial aid can be limited, tuition is raised, and student services such as counseling and instructional quality are reduced (p. 257).

Proponents of community colleges have long been divided on their initial intended purpose; some argued that these institutions are a conduit to transfer to a four-year institution, while others maintained they are an alternative for vocational education (Putnam, 2015, p. 256). Regardless of their intended purpose, the number of two-year institutions has grown, and today, roughly half of all undergraduates nationwide are enrolled in community colleges (Pell Institute, 2016; Putnam, 2015). Although more than 80 percent of these students hope to eventually earn a bachelor’s degree, only a small portion will attain one (Putnam, 2015, p. 257).

Finally, noncompetitive schools (including four-year institutions) often do not fare as well as their more competitive counterparts. On average, noncompetitive schools
graduate only 35 percent of their students, compared to 88 percent at the most competitive institutions (American Enterprise Institute, 2009). In fact, these findings are supported by a study conducted at Georgetown University (2016) which determined that the “average” student, (one with an SAT score of around 1000) has a much better chance of graduating when attending one of the top 468 universities than when they attend open-access schools (77 percent versus 51 percent, respectively).

Overall, low-income students face many challenges in both college access and college completion. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are scrutinized and stereotyped (Gorski, 2013; Woods, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2005), cannot afford to participate in highly-valued extracurricular activities (Gorski, 2013) or pay for college preparation and admission counseling (Avery, 2010), and are more likely to attend schools that do not have the resources available to prepare them to meet the admissions requirements of selective colleges (Bergerson, 2009, Darling-Hammond, 2010; Klugman, 2012).

Once low-income students matriculate to college, they are more likely to attend institutions with fewer intervention and support services (Pell Institute, 2016; Putnam, 2015). It is evident that more resources need to be aimed at not only closing the opportunity gap, but also at supporting low-income students at the college level to ensure they reach degree attainment.

**Selective Colleges and Low-Income Students**

Colleges throughout the United States are ranked according to admission selectivity, and there is a clear connection between selectivity level and graduation
outcomes (American Enterprise Institute, 2009). Although selective colleges offer a number of advantages over their non-selective counterparts, there is a discernable gap in the socioeconomic statuses of the students who attend them (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014; Pell Institute, 2016). Furthermore, the majority of well-qualified low-income students do not apply to selective institutions (Hoxby & Avery, 2013, p. 46).

Overall, students who are born into low-income households are much less likely than their wealthier peers to attend a selective college (Giani, 2016). This section delves into the benefits of attending a selective college and the challenges low-income students face in matriculating to them.

Defining Selectivity

*Barron’s Admissions Competitive Index* is the standard measure used to determine college selectivity levels within the reviewed literature. *The Barron’s Index* takes into account many factors to determine selectivity, including median SAT/ACT scores for entering freshman, high school grades and class rank, minimum grade point average (if any) required for admission, and percentage of total applicants who are admitted to the freshman class. It is important to note *Barron’s* statement that this index “is not a rating of colleges by academic standards or quality of education; it is rather an attempt to describe, in general terms, the situation a prospective student will meet when applying for admission” (p. 257).

The 2016 *Barron’s Profile of American Colleges* used information derived from the 2014-2015 college freshman class and defined these categories as “noncompetitive,” “less competitive,” “competitive,” “very competitive,” “highly competitive,” “most
competitive,” and “special” (pp. 257-268). These selectivity categories are further described and outlined in Appendix A.

**Advantages of Attending Selective Colleges**

Selective colleges are commonly perceived as the institutions that will provide the best education to its students. Although selectivity should not be the only attribute considered in measuring the quality of education that a student will receive, more competitive colleges offer substantially more opportunities and better resources and student outcomes than their less competitive counterparts. For example, students attending more selective colleges have higher retention and graduation rates, and are more likely to enroll in graduate school (Pell Institute, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Carnevale and Rose (2004) enumerated the benefits of attending selective institutions. First, economically speaking, selective colleges will spend up to four times as much per student, and subsidize student spending by up to $24,000, compared to subsidies as small as $2,000 at less competitive schools (p. 107). This could lead to higher-quality academic support programs and increased student satisfaction in college.

Second, there is a clear difference in graduation rates according to college selectivity. Of students who were initially enrolled in “highly” and “most” competitive colleges, 86 percent graduated with a bachelor’s degree. By contrast, graduation rates drop to 71 percent, 61 percent, and 54 percent for institutions classified as “very competitive,” “competitive,” and “less competitive/non-competitive,” respectively. Although Carnevale and Rose (2004) discussed that it is empirically difficult to
determine why selective colleges have better graduation rates, they suggest that it could be due to the fact that more selective colleges have higher graduation expectations, and thus are more likely to identify and intervene with struggling students (p. 108).

Third, more selective colleges provide better access to postgraduate studies (Heil, Reisel, & Attewell, 2014, p. 914). Nationally, 21 percent of those who attend four-year colleges will matriculate to graduate school, however, 35 percent of students from “highly” and “most” competitive schools will complete post-baccalaureate work. As with graduation rates, when selectivity decreases, so do the number of students who will continue on to postgraduate studies. Twenty-five percent of students from “very competitive” schools will attend graduate school, while only 15 percent from “competitive,” “less competitive,” and “non-competitive” schools will continue on to graduate school (Carnevale & Rose, 2004, pp. 109-110).

Finally, college attendance is a strong predictor of future earnings (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014, p. 144) and a degree from selective colleges can lead to higher wages after graduation (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hearn & Rosinger 2014). Although there are many limitations to these findings, among similarly qualified students, the added effect of attending a highly selective college was found to be between 5 and 20 percent in labor market outcomes (Carnevale & Rose, 2004, p. 111). Giani (2016) added that students who graduate from a more selective school have roughly equivalent levels of academic capital, despite social upbringing, which results in only small disparities in their labor outcomes (p. 438).
Arguments against selectivity ratings. Alternatively, Kuh and Pascarella (2004) argued that institutional selectivity does not equate with collegiate quality, specifically student exposure to effective educational practices. Using two independent data sets, the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Kuh and Pascaella found that institutional selectivity is a weak indicator of student exposure to good practices in undergraduate education (p. 56).

Furthermore, Kuh and Pascarella (2004) stressed that selectivity rankings do not fairly represent many other educational variables, such as faculty ability to articulate course objectives, or other student experiences, such as participation in learning communities, service learning, or study abroad programs. Overall “quality,” whether perceived or inherent in the institution, is largely associated with selectivity, and there is a generally “positive relationship between selectivity and institutional effects” (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009, p. 198).

Who Attends Selective Institutions?

Although the prestigious “highly competitive” and “most competitive” colleges and universities, such as Stanford, Harvard, and Yale, often overshadow less competitive schools, when it comes to the perceived quality of education, only 14 percent of all postsecondary institutions fall into these two categories (American Enterprise Institute, 2009, p. 6). In 2012, enrollment in “highly competitive” and “most competitive” institutions made up only five percent of total undergraduate enrollment as designated by Barron’s Admissions Competitiveness Index for 2004 (Pell Institute, 2016, p. 15). Broken down even further, 33 percent of undergraduate students were enrolled in a college or
university considered to have selective admissions processes. Of those 33 percent, 19 percent were enrolled in “competitive” colleges, 9 percent were enrolled in “very competitive,” 3 percent in “highly competitive,” and the remaining 2 percent were enrolled in “most competitive” institutions (p. 14).

There is a significant gap in the socioeconomic strata of students enrolled in competitive institutions. The Pell Institute (2016) found across four longitudinal studies that of the students enrolling in the “most competitive” institutions, only 4 to 5 percent were from the bottom quartile of family incomes, compared to 67 to 78 percent from families from the top quartile (p. 35).

Students from the middle and upper socioeconomic strata make up a disproportionate percentage of enrollments at all selective institutions, largely due to higher tuition in both the public and private sectors. Private institutions may offer more need-based financial aid to offset costs for low-income students; however, low-income students enroll at substantially lower rates than their wealthier peers (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014, pp. 72-73).

When deciding which postsecondary institution to attend, familial ties to selective institutions can make a difference. Hurwitz (2011) studied the influence of legacy status (students related to alumni) on college admissions decisions. He analyzed over 300,000 applications to 30 highly selective private colleges and universities, and found that students with legacy status did have an advantage in admissions over their non-legacy peers. Although this can seem inequitable to first-generation students, he noted that
readers should consider the importance of alumni donations to growing endowment funds, which can provide financial aid for low-income students.

Proximity to selective universities can also influence enrollment. Do (2004) found that “the presence of a first tier public university can increase the quality of the college attended for low-SES individuals” (p. 257). As a result, students who have lived near selective colleges are more likely to attend one. Given the findings of these studies, it is apparent that wealthier students with legacy status and proximity to top-ranked schools are more likely to enroll in selective institutions than first-generation, low-income students.

Furthermore, López Turley (2009) discussed that students are significantly more likely to apply to an institution if they live near it (p. 127). Proximity to a college also affected students’ likelihood to enroll; wealthier students are more likely to apply and enroll in any college, while economically disadvantaged students are more likely to enroll in a nearby college (López Turley, 2009, p. 139). This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that many colleges were founded in wealthier communities, due to their extensive resources (López Turley, 2009, p. 142), thus limiting access to low-income students.

**Low-Income Students in Selective Colleges**

Data from the Pell Institute (2016) highlighted just how large the economic stratification is for enrollment in selective colleges. In 2005, they reported that students from the bottom quartile of family income made up five percent and four percent of enrollment at “highly competitive” and “most competitive” colleges, respectively (p. 35). These enrollment patterns continue to persist while controlling for other variables. Giani
(2016) discussed, “being raised in a socioeconomically disadvantaged household significantly decreases the odds that a student will attend a selective college even when controlling for academic ability and other demographic characteristics” (p. 436). This further demonstrates the educational inequities faced by low-income students.

Once enrolled however, the benefits of attending selective institutions are especially strong for low-income students (Hearn & Rosinger, 2014, p. 72). Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) argued that it is important to consider what can be done to increase the number of low-income students who earn bachelor’s degrees, as there is relatively no difference in graduation rates of low-income students compared to high-income students at highly selective institutions. Moreover, there is evidence that demonstrates little to no difference in other outcomes, such as grades and earnings later in life (p. 217).

Although there are significant advantages for low-income students to attend selective colleges, Hoxby and Avery (2013) asserted that the majority of well-qualified, economically disadvantaged students do not even apply to selective colleges (p. 46). Furthermore, for every high-achieving, low-income student who applies to a selective college, there are from 8 to 15 high-achieving, high-income students to compete with for admission (p. 9). Most often, low-income students apply to non-selective community colleges or four-year institutions with much fewer resources per student and lower graduation rates.
Selective Colleges Summary

The *Barron’s Admissions Competitive Index* is the standard measure used to evaluate college admission selectivity. There are clear advantages to attending selective colleges, including higher graduation rates, better access to postgraduate studies, and higher overall after-college outcomes (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Pell Institute, 2016). Although a limited portion of the literature argued that college selectivity does not equate with college quality (Kuh & Pascarella, 2004), the majority of the literature confirmed that there is an empirical link between college selectivity and positive institutional effects (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Hearn & Rosinger 2014; Pell Institute, 2016).

Even though the outcomes of attending a selective college are clear, there is a serious gap between the numbers of low- and high-income students who matriculate to them. Economically advantaged students who live near selective colleges or have family members who have graduated from them are much more likely to attend a selective postsecondary institution than their lower-income counterparts (Do, 2004; Hurwitz, 2011). The current research on selective colleges provides substantive evidence that more must be done to ensure low-income students are matched to an appropriate college that has the resources to support their needs.

Academic Undermatch

As high school students complete the college application process, the goal is to be accepted to a college that will both challenge them and support their needs. Students are “matched” to a college when their academic abilities correspond to the selectivity of the
college they attend. Academic undermatch is the phenomenon that occurs when a student chooses to enroll in a less selective college than their academic achievements and credentials reflect (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013, p. 247; Tiboris, M, 2014, p. 646). Although any student could potentially be undermatched to the institution they attend, the phenomenon for low-income students is particularly concerning, because undermatched students are not afforded the benefits that a more selective college may offer them (Heil, Reisel, & Attewell, 2014, p. 914). This section will outline data on the tendencies of low-income students to academically undermatch to their college, review the literature on the causes of undermatch, discuss the impacts of academic undermatch, and assess the motives of students who undermatch.

The Extent of Academic Undermatch for Low-Income Students

Academic undermatch is pervasive among college students. In fact, data from a Georgetown University (2016) study demonstrated that three times more students are qualified to attend the top 468 universities in the United States than actually enroll in them. Moreover, Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013) found that 16 percent of students attend a college that is at least two selectivity levels below what they should have access to, based on ability (p. 253).

Although academic undermatch is widespread, it disproportionately affects students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Tiboris, 2014, p. 648). Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) found that among students with high school GPAs above 3.0, low-income students are more than twice as likely to start at a two-year college than high-income students (p. 193). To that end, Smith, Pender and Howell
(2013) presented data that suggests students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) have higher rates of undermatch at each selectivity level; lower-SES students undermatch 49.6 percent of the time, compared to only 34 percent of their higher-SES peers. In regard to substantial undermatch, (enrolling at a college two or more selectivity levels below what they could have access to), 22.7 percent of lower-SES students undermatch, compared to 13.6 percent of higher-SES students who substantially undermatch (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013, p. 254).

Although there are many reasons students may choose the college they enroll in, the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2012) discussed that SES is one of the key factors associated with undermatch (p. 7). This data suggests that academic undermatch is yet another aspect of educational inequity that disproportionately affects low-income students.

**Causes of Academic Undermatch for Low-Income Students**

Due to the pervasiveness of undermatch for disadvantaged students, researchers have recently taken an interest in exploring its root causes. The literature has identified the following as foundations of undermatch for low-income students: the absence of college preparation and support in high schools, misunderstandings of the college application and financial aid processes, and recruitment practices that are biased against low-income students in certain geographical areas (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Hill & Winston, 2010; Hoxby & Turner, 2015).

**High school preparation.** A lack of college preparation in high school is one cause of academic undermatch. Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) argued that high
schools have a dual role when it comes to the college admissions process. They not only need to afford students ample preparation to be successful in college, but they also need to provide students with information and support so that they can use their skills at the postsecondary institutions that “will allow them to take the fullest advantage of their talents” (p. 99). As previously discussed, high schools that serve predominately low-income students are more often under-resourced and have higher counselor-to-student ratios (White House Report, 2014). It would therefore be reasonable to assume that these high schools are less likely to assist students with the college “match” process.

In conjunction with Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009), Hoxby and Turner (2015) addressed the lack of information that high achieving, low-income students have about college. They reasoned that these students want to attend schools that can provide intense instruction and curricula that align with their preparation, however, they do not know which schools these are (p. 516). Furthermore, low-income students have many misimpressions of colleges. For example, they misunderstand the definition of liberal arts colleges, assuming the term “liberal arts” literally means focused on “humanities” or “arts” (Hoxby & Turner, 2015, p. 517).

The financial aid process. Misunderstanding the financial aid process can also contribute to academic undermatch. The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2012) reported that one reason low-income students do not enroll in selective colleges is due to the perceived high tuition rates (p. 7). To support this claim, Grodsky and Jones (2007) found that “disadvantaged parents are more prone to error in their estimates of the costs of college than advantaged parents” (p. 763). The most unfortunate part of this
inaccuracy is that low-income students can often attend selective colleges for less than they would pay at a nonselective college, due to generous financial aid. (Hill & Winston, 2010, p. 495; Hoxby & Turner, 2015, p. 515). This is because the net price is not made obvious to a student until a financial aid offer has been made, which occurs after the student has applied and been admitted (Hoxby & Turner, 2015, p. 515).

Although the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is now online and has become more user-friendly, there remains a support gap for low-income students on how to navigate these online tools and processes (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012, p. 8). It is clear that more support and counseling is needed to help low-income students and parents navigate the financial aid process and understand net college prices.

**College recruitment practices.** Finally, the recruitment practices and geography of colleges can affect low-income students’ chances of enrolling in selective institutions. Hill and Winston (2010) studied student data and recruitment practices from 28 of the most selective colleges and universities in the United States, and suggested that inadequate attention was being paid to the geographical locations of low-income students, resulting in enrollment biases. They recommended that more visits by admissions officers in locations identified to have a large number of high-ability, low-income students and efforts of local alumni could help contribute to better recruitment practices (pp. 501-502).

**Consequences of Academic Undermatch**

The aforementioned benefits of attending selective institutions are clear; students have higher graduation rates, access to higher-quality support programs, and better
student outcomes (Carnevale and Rose, 2014; Pell Institute, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, undermatching can have serious effects on students, including increasing the chances of dropping out while also raising the cost of the degree and extending the time it takes to graduate (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010; Tiboris, 2014, p. 647).

Additionally, Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) suggested there is a high long-term personal and societal cost associated with students who undermatch (pp. 109-110). Although long-term data in undermatch outcomes is difficult to acquire (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009, p. 109), the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2012) suggested that students who graduate from college have higher wages, lower unemployment rates, better health insurance and healthier lifestyles (p. 9). These outcomes are compounded with findings from Tiboris (2014), which noted that undermatching not only predicts lower welfare outcomes, but also disproportionately affects the poor (p. 648).

Howell and Pender (2016) analyzed data to estimate the impact of improving academic match in low-income students. Their results found that, on average, low-income students would experience a 13.5 percent boost in the probability of completing a bachelor’s degree if they attended a college that matched their academic credentials (p. 152). These findings clearly demonstrate that helping low-income students find the appropriate academic match must be a priority during the college application process.
The Decision to Undermatch

Although postsecondary choices are guided by the applicant’s knowledge about the college and financial aid packages, college location, recruiting practices and many personal preferences, Tiboris (2014) argued that undermatching for low-SES students should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and personal autonomy and choice should be a factor in the overall assessment of undermatching. Furthermore, we should not draw conclusions on how to respond to undermatch solely based on the inequities it creates (p. 660). For example, a low-income student’s decision to undermatch may be morally acceptable if they have come to their conclusion autonomously, and they are in line with the student’s cultural commitments and values (Tiboris, 2014, p. 648). Unfortunately, the literature demonstrates that many low-income students do not fully understand the college application process, which leads to their decisions to undermatch (College Board, 2012; Hoxby & Turner, 2015).

Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) suggested that students need to be fully aware of the higher educational opportunities available to them, based on their credentials and then be encouraged to attend the school that will be the most challenging and realistic option that has the resources to support them (p. 101). This, of course, cannot occur for students if they do not have a complete understanding of their own academic potential and information on the colleges that will be the best fit for them.

Motivations to Attend College

The desire to attend college has greatly increased in the last three decades. From 1980 to 2002, the percentage of high school sophomores who aspired to attain a
bachelor’s degree or higher increased from 41 to 80 percent, with low-income students representing the largest increase in aspirations (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011, p. 202). Although there are many reasons students would decide to pursue a postsecondary education, the reviewed literature identifies expectations of parents, college preparation, and social mobility as the main motivational factors.

**Parental Expectations**

Berg (2010) discussed that it is typical of students who do not go to college to express that their parents had minimal educational ambition for them. Moreover, parental expectations can be clearly linked to family income (p. 25). Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) surveyed 242 high school seniors about their postsecondary plans, and found a strong relationship between the fathers’ occupations and the decision to attend college. A greater proportion of students whose fathers had professional occupations planned on attending college, while the majority of students not pursuing college had fathers who were unemployed, unskilled, or semiskilled (p. 7).

Parental expectations have an overwhelming effect on both first-generation and non-first-generation students. In fact, in 2005, 47 percent of first-generation students and 43 percent of non-first-generation students noted parental encouragement as a “very important” reason for attending college (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007, p. 15). Unfortunately, low-income students often receive mixed messages from family members when they attend college. Many students reported feeling great pressure from parents to succeed and envy from other relatives who insist the student will end up failing (Berg, 2010, p. 25).
Although familial expectations are often cited as a significant stimulus to enroll in college, students also tend to heavily rely on other sources of motivation. Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011) cited that prior to senior year, students are primarily influenced by their parents, however, during senior year, there is a shift to rely more heavily on peers, counselors and teachers during the college application process (p. 191).

**College Preparation and Application Assistance**

The high school environment can play a tremendous role when it comes to college choice (Griffith & Rothstein, 2009, 625). Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) discussed that college bound students are more often “groomed” for postsecondary education from early on. Students’ decisions to attend college were strongly associated with their high school GPA and college preparatory curriculum, as well as their individual perceptions of their own intelligence and readiness for college (p. 10). These findings are not surprising, but alarming when considered with Woods, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley’s (2005) aforementioned study on stereotypical beliefs in children that found low-income students may deem themselves less academically competent than their wealthier peers (p. 444).

Berg (2010) discussed the role of teachers and counselors as instrumental in supporting low-income students both emotionally and practically through the college application process (p. 25) and Saenz et al. (2007) found that 11.4 percent of first-generation college students indicated a high school guidance counselor as a main reason of enrolling in a particular college (p. 17). However, higher-income students have more access to information about college earlier in the process, and report having more satisfying conversations with teachers and counselors than low-income students (p. 25).
This could be, in part due to the fact that lower-income schools allocate fewer resources to college counseling services (Gorski, 2013, p. 96).

**Social Mobility**

A college degree is considered a means of social promotion for many disadvantaged groups in the United States. Given that 65 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education and training beyond a high school diploma by the year 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 4), obtaining a college degree seems to be an obvious incentive to attend college. Saenz et al. (2007) found that most first-generation students noted financial stability by earning more money and obtaining a better job after graduating college as a “very important” reason to enroll in college (p. 18).

Trends in social mobility as a college motivator have remained somewhat stable over the last 40 years in both first-generation and non-first-generation students. In 1976, 70.6 percent of first-generation students cited career motivations (“to get a better job”) as a “very important” reason to attend college, compared with 77.3 percent of first-generation students in 2005 (Saenz et al., 2007, p. 19). Furthermore, Saenz (2007) noted that college students today are much more driven by both personal and economic priorities than they have been in the past (p. 19).

**Conclusion**

In summary, there is extensive literature discussing the state of educational opportunity inequity in our country. Low-income students are being left behind from an early age and are not “groomed” for collegiate success like their wealthier peers (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004, p. 10). Economically disadvantaged students have the
desire, more than ever, to attend college, but are unsure of how to navigate the system and have fewer adequate resources to guide them through the process of applying for college and financial aid. In addition, they misinterpret which schools will be the best fit for them, and do not have a clear understanding of the net prices of schools.

The literature also highlights the advantages of attending selective colleges. Low-income students would reap the benefits of higher spending per student, higher-quality support programs, higher graduation rates, and higher overall satisfaction in school (Carnevale and Rose, 2004). However, there is a significant gap in the socioeconomic strata of students who choose to apply to selective colleges. More work must be done to increase low-income students’ perspectives of selective colleges to improve access to schools that are an academic “match” for their abilities.

Finally, the literature examined general motivations for students to attend college. Familial expectations, college preparation in high school, and social mobility were most often cited as reasons students decide to matriculate to postsecondary institutions. This literature review will serve as a framework to guide my research and methodology to understand the decision-making processes of low-income students who enroll in selective colleges, which will be further described in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction

Students have various motivations for choosing to attend postsecondary education, including parental, peer, and teacher expectations, social mobility, and personal priorities (Berg, 2010; Saenz et al., 2007). However, low-income students face many obstacles in matriculating to college (Gorski, 2013; Saguaro Seminar, 2016; Woods, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2005) and the lack of college preparation in high school, misunderstandings of the college application processes, and biased recruitment practices exacerbate these challenges (Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Hill & Winston, 2010; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). As a result, low-income students enroll in colleges that match their academic credentials much less often than their wealthier peers (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013; Tiboris, 2014).

This chapter details the methodology used to investigate my research question: what motivates low-income students to enroll in selective colleges? First, it reviews the mixed-methods approach of surveys and interviews utilized in an attempt to better understand low-income student motivation in college choice. Second, it outlines the research setting, including demographic information of the institution participants attend and discusses background information on the Federal Pell Grant, as students’ Pell Grant recipient status determined their eligibility to participate in the study. Third, it identifies the Barron's Selectivity designation of The College participants attend, and outlines financial considerations, including current tuition rates. Finally, it discusses the research methods, survey and interview tools, and incentives used to collect data.
Research Paradigm

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014) by gathering both qualitative and quantitative data from participants. I chose this method because I believe it provided a broader understanding of the findings. Furthermore, by collecting more than one type of data, the mixed-methods design helped to neutralize biases and weaknesses found in either the qualitative or quantitative data (Creswell, 2014, pp. 14-15).

Qualitative data was collected and analyzed from open-ended questions during formal, structured interviews and a survey. Quantitative data from surveys completed by participants were also analyzed.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data derived from structured participant interviews provided details that supplemented responses gathered through the surveys. Interviews consisted of open-ended (divergent) questions (Mills, 2007, p. 64) and followed protocol guidelines outlined by Creswell (2014). Questions and procedures were standardized to ensure consistency in each interview (Creswell, 2014, p. 194). Interviews were conducted in a private room located on The College campus and were audio-recorded. Notes were taken by the researcher throughout the interview to document participants’ responses and to “capture the essence of the conversation” (Mills, 2007, p. 65). Notes were reviewed after the completion of the interviews, and served as a reminder to reconstruct the interview (Mills, 2007, p. 65).
Quantitative Data

Participant surveys provided the quantitative data analyzed in the study. The cross-sectional surveys provided a numeric interpretation of the trends, opinions and attitudes of the sample population (Creswell, 2014, pp. 155-157). Google Forms was used to collect survey responses, as it is secure, easily distributed, and accessible to all participants. Google Forms also made the process of data collection and analysis more efficient.

Participants responded to multiple choice, open-ended, and Likert scale questions. The use of Likert scales provided both descriptive and quantitative data; the numerical data was analyzed, and then further supported by open-ended responses (Mills, 2007, p. 75).

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a small, rural, private college in the upper Midwest. The College is approximately 35 miles from the nearest metropolitan area with a full-time enrollment of 3,005 undergraduate students during the 2015-2016 school year. Approximately 75 percent of the students are white, 17 percent identify with a specific minority group and the remaining seven percent are considered “non-resident alien.” The background of the 17 percent of students who identify with a specific minority group is comprised as follows: five percent Hispanic/Latino, six percent Asian, two percent black/African American, and four percent identify as two or more races. The average age of all students is 20 years old (College Board, 2016).
**Socioeconomic levels.** The institution has low socioeconomic stratification. Although 88 percent of students received some form of financial aid during the 2013-2014 school year, only 14 percent of students received a Federal Pell Grant (National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Data Center, 2016). This is important to note, since all participants in the study will be Pell recipients.

**Federal Pell Grant.** The Federal Pell Grant is considered the “foundational” federal student aid program (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2015, p. 2). Pell Grants are distributed to students who demonstrate financial need, as determined by a complex formula constructed when students complete the FAFSA. This formula considers family income, assets, family size, and other factors (Baum, 2015, p. 26). On average, the family adjusted gross income for Pell recipients is 123% of the federal poverty line (Fastweb LLC., 2011, p. 1) and 84.7 percent of recipients are from families with annual incomes of less than $40,000 (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2015, p. 4). Thus, Pell Grant recipient status can be used as an effective measure to determine whether participants were considered “low-income” for the intentions of this project.

**Barron’s selectivity designation.** For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that The College has a Barron’s Selectivity designation of “Highly Competitive +” and accepted 36 percent of 2015-2016 applicants. The ACT scores of accepted applicants were as follows: 12 percent between 18 and 23, 41 percent between 24 and 29, and 47 percent above 30. Seventy percent of the current freshmen were in the top fifth of their class; 93 percent were in the top two-fifths and 43 freshmen graduated first in their class
(Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2016). The college is ranked ninth nationally among Highly Competitive colleges for its six-year graduation rate of 86 percent (American Enterprise Institute, 2009).

**Financial considerations.** As discussed in the literature review, understanding the financial aid process can be one of the determining factors in college choice (College Board, 2012; Hill & Winston, 2010, p. 495; Hoxby & Turner, 2015, p. 515). Thus, it is important to include financial considerations as a part of this study. The 2015-2016 tuition at the selected institution was $42,940 and room and board was $9,790, for a total comprehensive fee of $52,730.

Ninety-five percent of all full-time freshmen received some form of financial aid, and 68 percent of all full-time students received need-based aid. The average freshman financial aid award was $33,935. Finally, the average financial indebtedness of a 2015 graduate was $29,950 (Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2016).

**Methods and Tools**

After proper permissions were granted, I recruited and surveyed participants. Participants’ eligibility for the study was determined by the college administration prior to being contacted. Emails were sent to eligible students that explained the study, included a link to the survey, and recruited interview participants (see Appendix B).

**Human subjects research and permissions.** Prior to collecting data, this research project was approved by the Hamline School of Education Human Subjects Committee (HSC), and permission to complete the study was received from the college
that the participants attend. To ensure confidentiality and participant protection, I followed the procedures outlined by the Hamline HSE.

Permission to conduct the study was requested in the form of a letter from the college administration. In addition, participants agreeing to complete the online survey were required to read and acknowledge the informed consent letter (see Appendix C) prior to completing the survey or participating in an interview.

**Eligibility.** Due to the small percentage (14 percent) of low-income students enrolled at the institution, a nonprobability (convenience) sample of the population was taken (Creswell, 2014). For the purposes of this study, students were classified as “low-income” if they were recipients of a Federal Pell Grant. After receiving IRB approval, The College agreed to create a blind email alias of all enrolled students who received a Pell Grant. To ensure participant anonymity, I did not have access to participant names nor contact information unless the participant provided it on the survey for the lottery incentive (see Incentives).

**Interviews.** Structured interviews were conducted throughout the duration of the study. Individual interviews were held with seven participants. In the interview, we discussed their thoughts, motivations, and experiences that occurred when applying to and choosing to attend college. Interview questions (see Appendix D) were carefully selected to elicit the desired information from students (Mills, 2007, p. 64) and Creswell’s (2014) interview protocol was followed.

The interview questions were related to the information gleaned from the literature review, including information on the college application process, familial
expectations to attend college, college recruiting processes, college location, and other motivations to attend college (see Appendix D). Interview questions were sent to participants one week prior to their interview to give them time to review the questions and reflect upon their answers. Responses from the structured interviews helped to more thoroughly understand the survey responses. The use of open-ended questions during the structured interviews allowed the participants to consider their experiences and elaborate on the interview questions (Mills, 2007, p. 64).

**Surveys.** The survey was sent via email to the blind alias created by The College in late January, and two reminder emails were sent over the following three weeks. The survey was designed to collect information from low-income students on motivations and reasons for selecting to attend the institution (see Appendix E).

The survey included a variety of questions regarding participants’ motivations to attend The College and the assistance that the participant received when completing the college application and financial aid processes (see Appendix E). The survey also had participants review a variety of attitudes and statements about applying to college and to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed, using a Likert scale (Mills, 2007). Finally, participants were asked to rank their overall motivations for attending the college, and were then given space to describe what they believe was their most compelling reason for choosing the college they attend. The wide variety of questions on the survey provided a large amount of data regarding low-income student motivations to attend college in a relatively short amount of time (Mills, 2007, p. 67).
**Incentives.** In conjunction with sending reminder emails to participants, incentivizing participation in online surveys in the form of prizes awarded through a lottery system has been found to be an effective method to boost online survey response rates (Nulty, 2008, p. 303). Therefore, in an effort to achieve the maximum response rate on the survey, participants had the option to provide their email address to be entered into a lottery for a $10 gift card to the campus bookstore. Additionally, interview participants were offered a $10 bookstore gift card to acknowledge appreciation for their time. I personally purchased all incentives, and no outside funding was used for this study.

**Conclusion**

Chapter three outlined several aspects of this study. First, I discussed the research methodology and the reasoning behind it. I utilized a mixed-methods approach of surveys and interviews to examine the motivations of low-income students who enroll in a selective college and to determine which motivations were the most influential to their college decision-making process. Next, I described the institution where the study was conducted, including demographic and socioeconomic information, as well as the *Barron’s* selectivity measure of “Highly Competitive +”. Finally, I outlined my research methods, including obtaining permission, participant eligibility, and the timeline for completing the research and analyzing the data.

**Looking Forward**

Chapter four will review the results and principal findings of my surveys and interviews. The data, along with major themes and generalizations will be presented, in addition to the interpretation and discussion of the results.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

This research study used a mixed-methods approach of survey and interview to answer the question: *What motivates low-income students to enroll in selective colleges?* The research setting (“The College”) was a small, rural, private college in the Midwest that has a *Barron’s Selectivity Index* designation of “Highly Competitive +”. The goal of this study was to better understand the motivations, attitudes, and beliefs of low-income students during the college application process to improve recruitment practices of economically disadvantaged students at highly selective postsecondary institutions. This chapter presents the data collected through online surveys and structured interviews.

Results

For this project, I collected quantitative data through an online survey and collected qualitative data through both the online survey and formal, structured interviews. The survey provided insight into overall motivations, attitudes, and experiences low-income students had during the college application and financial aid processes and revealed trends that both support and refute findings from the literature review. Furthermore, interviews allowed me to more thoroughly evaluate an array of individual experiences that supported the survey data.

Survey Results

A 20-question survey was sent via email to all 471 Federal Pell Grant recipients at The College. The survey was presented through Google Forms (see Appendix E) and was open for three weeks. Two follow-up emails were sent (see Appendix B) as a reminder to
complete the survey during the three-week period. Participants had the option to provide their email address to be entered into a drawing for a $10 gift card to the campus bookstore as an incentive to complete the survey. One hundred fifty-four students completed the survey, which was a response rate of 32.6 percent.

This methodology allowed me to collect both qualitative and quantitative data about low-income students motivations and experiences with the college and financial aid application processes. The survey used both open- and close-ended questions, and asked for responses on a Likert scale. Questions were formulated based on information gleaned from the literature review to collect data about the following: experiences, understandings of, and assistance with the college application and financial aid processes; other colleges participants applied to; the location of The College with respect to participants’ homes; expectations of others for the participant to attend college; and overall motivations to attend and enroll in college.

Experiences with the College Application and Financial Aid Processes. Berg (2010) highlighted the role high school teachers and counselors play during the college application and financial aid processes for economically disadvantaged students, “The psychological and social preparation of low-income students for college is informed by the lack of family knowledge of university life and in how parents, teachers, and counselors emotionally support college-going students” (p. 24). The survey results found trends which support these findings: 50.3 percent of respondents stated they received assistance with college application from a counselor, while 30.7 percent reported receiving help from a teacher. However, the survey results indicated drastic differences in
regards to financial aid application assistance; only 19.5 percent and 5.8 percent of participants reported having assistance with these processes from counselors and teachers, respectively.

Although Grodsky and Jones (2007) argued that parents of disadvantaged students may be less likely to act in ways that assist their children in pursuing college due to lack of information about college costs (p. 761), 54.9 percent of participants received assistance with the college application process from parents/guardians, while an overwhelming 65.6 percent stated their parents assisted with completing the FAFSA and other financial aid applications. The findings that far more participants received assistance with financial aid processes from parents than teachers and counselors is alarming, as the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2012) reported that low-income students have substantially better outcomes when receiving assistance on the FAFSA (pp. 7-8).

Understandings of College and Financial Aid Application Processes. The survey asked respondents to indicate the extent in which they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding the college and financial aid applications processes to evaluate low-income students’ confidence levels and experiences. The results followed similar aforementioned trends with respect to having a better understanding of the college application process, rather than the FASFA.

When asked to respond to the statement, “As a high school senior, I fully understood the college application process” on a Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree), 40.3 percent of respondents rated their understanding as a “4” and the
average was 3.61. Although these results were higher than expected, only 20.8 percent of respondents rated their understanding as a “5”, indicating that much more work needs to be done to ensure that all students are aware of the application process.

While the majority of low-income students felt somewhat confident about the college application process, only 8.4 percent “strongly agreed” (rated a “5” on a 1-5 Likert scale) with the statement, “As a high school senior, I fully understood the financial aid application process (i.e. completing the FAFSA and CSS Profile)”. The majority of students (31.8 percent) responded to this question with a “3” and the average response fell just below that, at 2.83. Furthermore, only 23.4 percent of participants “strongly agreed” with the statement, “I felt confident that I fully understood my financial aid package from [The College]”.

The majority of participants also greatly underestimated the competitiveness of The College. When asked, “In terms of admission acceptance rates, how competitive would you rate [The College] in comparison to other colleges in the U.S.?”, 86.3 percent of students ranked The College as “Very Competitive” or below (see Figure 1). Only 13 percent of respondents accurately rated The College as “Highly Competitive” and 0.6 percent of participants overestimated, ranking The College as “Most Competitive”. This may further indicate low-income students’ misunderstandings of the differences between colleges and the misassumption that “college is college” (Hoxby & Turner, 2015, p. 515).
Colleges Applied to. In total, 149 participants submitted 769 college applications, with the average participant submitting approximately five. Each college applied to was matched with its respective Barron’s Selectivity rating (See Appendix F) to determine the average selectivity designation of all applications submitted by participants.

The highest number of applications were submitted to “Most Competitive” institutions (see Figure 2), and the average selectivity ranking was “Highly Competitive”. This result was found by assigning each selectivity designation a numerical value (i.e., “Noncompetitive” institutions =1, “Most Competitive” institutions =9; “Special” institutions were not included). It is important to keep in mind that The College is designated as “Highly Competitive+”, which is only one ranking higher than the average school applied to.

![Figure 1. Participants’ estimation of selectivity of The College](image)
These results differ from Hoxby and Avery’s (2013) study, which found the majority of high-achieving, low-income students do not apply to selective colleges (p. 2). However, there are limitations to these results that will be discussed in Chapter Five. Furthermore, five participants did not answer this question correctly, (i.e. “I applied to a few other universities” rather than listing all institutions they applied to) and Barron’s Selectivity data was unavailable for eight institutions, so they were excluded from this data.

Alarmingy, 6.7 percent of participants reported they did not submit any additional applications. The standard recommendation followed by their high-income counterparts is to apply to at least one “peer” college (an academic match to their
abilities), at least one “safety” college, and no nonselective colleges (Hoxby & Avery, 2013, p. 26). Although this could be due, in part, to early decision applications, further investigation on this question could provide more details on application behaviors of low-income students.

**College Location.** Contrary to the literature, college location was not ranked as important as was expected. Although 30.5 percent of respondents’ homes were located between 0-50 miles away from The College, over half (53.2 percent) were from more than 200 miles away.

The survey asked participants the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “The location of [The College] was very important to me in making my decision to enroll” on a one-five Likert scale (a score of one indicated “strongly disagree”, while a score of five indicated “strongly agree”). Only 16.2 percent of respondents strongly agreed with the statement (scored a “five”), while 16.2 percent strongly disagreed (scored a “one”). The average Likert score was 3.11, demonstrating that most participants only slightly took college location into consideration when making their decision to enroll.

**Expectations to Attend College.** The findings from the survey questions regarding expectations from parents, peers, and high school faculty and staff to attend college mirrored those outlined in the literature review (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Overall, 63 percent of participants “strongly agreed” with the statement: “my parent(s)/guardian(s) had high expectations for me to attend college” and only 0.6 percent “strongly disagreed.” Furthermore, responses to the open-ended statement, “please briefly describe why you decided to attend college”
provided additional support for these findings. Responses included: “My parents expected me to. They instilled the belief that if I didn't go, I would end up flipping burgers or mopping floors. I believed them.” “My parents expected me to and it became my expectation because I was good at school and good jobs come after receiving an education”, and “All my peers were going, and my parents expected it of me as well.”

Although the results found parental expectations to be the highest, 58.8 percent of participants “strongly agreed” that their high school teachers had high expectations for them to matriculate to college. Furthermore, 56.2 percent and 55.8 percent “strongly agreed” that their high school counselors and friends/peers held high expectations for them, respectively.

**Overall Motivations to Attend and Enroll in College.** The survey found social mobility to be a driving motivator to attend college. When asked, “why did you choose to attend college?” 84.4 percent of participants responded, “to get a good job/make more money.” For this question, it is important to note that participants were able to select as many answers as they felt were applicable to their situation.

Social mobility was also a common trend when participants were asked to respond to the open-ended statement, “Briefly describe why you decided to attend college.” For example, participants stated, “I was looking for an opportunity for upward social and financial mobility”, “to make enough money to live well and pay back loans in a timely manner”, “I wanted more career opportunities”, and “to make a better future for myself”.
When it came to deciding which college to enroll in, the survey results demonstrated that the financial aid award offered by The College was the most significant factor for matriculating. When asked to “select your top three overall motivations for attending [The College]” 82.5 percent cited their financial aid award. When given the opportunity to provide an open-ended response, many students noted that their financial aid award was the most important factor in going to college. Responses included: “I was very comfortable in the environment and my financial aid package was among the best that I was offered”; “I wanted to go to a small liberal arts college out of state, and I liked the campus’s values, amenities, and financial aid package”; and “mostly because of financial aid, but also because of the Biology program.”

**Overall Survey Findings.** Overall, the survey demonstrated trends that both support and contradict previous research discussed in the literature review. The majority of low-income students felt confident about understanding the college application process, and had the assistance of parents, counselors, and teachers while completing applications. On the other hand, students felt much less confident about the financial aid application process, and fewer than 20 percent received assistance from a counselor when completing the FAFSA.

Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011) discussed that the complexity of the FAFSA and federal student aid system poses a barrier to low-income students (p. 188). Moreover, Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka (2011) reported results from Bettinger et al. (2009), which stated that low- and moderate-income students are more likely to enroll in college and receive financial aid when they are provided with support when completing the FAFSA.
Furthermore, students from low-income families who receive personalized assistance with FAFSA submission are more likely to stay enrolled in college longer (Baum, 2015, 28). The survey data illustrates that providing low-income students with financial aid application assistance could be an area of improvement for high schools and counselors.

Participants’ application behavior did not follow what was expected of low-income students, who tend to fall into the phenomenon of academic undermatch. The majority (43 percent) of applications were submitted to Highly Competitive+ and Most Competitive institutions. These results, however, are limited due to the fact that all participants attend a Highly Competitive+ college.

College location was not as large of an influencing factor for enrollment as anticipated. Surprisingly, more than half of respondents were from more than 200 miles away from The College, which counters findings from López Turley (2009), who argued that low-income students are more likely to enroll in a college close in proximity to their homes, due to factors such as convenience (p. 139).

The majority of low-income students stated that their parents, teachers, and counselors had high expectations for them to continue on to post-secondary education, and social mobility was found to be the most influential motivator to attend college. Although low-income students cited many factors that were influential in determining which institution to enroll in, such as campus visits and parental expectations, financial aid awards proved to be the most significant.
Interview Results

Seven students were interviewed during the course of this study. All participants were Federal Pell Grant recipients and were recruited via email, in the same message that was sent out with the survey (see Appendix B). Interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes, and participants were offered a $10 gift card to the on campus bookstore as an incentive to participate. After scheduling an interview, the interview questions (see Appendix D) were sent to participants to preview. This gave participants time to fully consider the questions so they could provide more thoughtful answers. All participants signed the informed consent letter (see Appendix C); interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken throughout the duration of each meeting.

Overall, interviews offered further insight into the survey results, and provided unique perspectives that could not be determined solely from the survey questions. Trends in motivation regarding social mobility, parental expectations, college location, and obstacles encountered during the college and financial aid application processes emerged and overall findings are outlined below.

Social Mobility. Five out of the seven students interviewed cited social mobility as one of the main motivations to enroll in postsecondary education. Participant 1 recalled the struggles of growing up in a low-income household in which her parents did not have the opportunity to attend school and stated that she “wanted to improve [her] family’s financial situation.” Although Participant 4 said he had multiple reasons for wanting to attend college, he was keenly aware that “you can’t do much without a college degree…you are limited in what you can and cannot do without it.” Participant 7 thought
about how his education would affect his future, “I want to start a family so I want to have a college career to help support them.”

**Parental Expectations.** As with the survey results, most interview participants felt their parents had high expectations for them to attend college. When asked, “Who, if anyone, had high expectations for you to attend college?” four of the seven students reported they felt their parents wanted them to enroll in college, and some even felt pressured to do so. Participant 1 noted that her mother specifically wanted her to enroll and she said everyone she interacted with expected her to go to college, “Everyone had high expectations. School thought I had to go, especially with my grades… but my mom especially. I felt pressure from everyone, even my pastor.”

On the other hand, it is important to note that one participant who did not cite familial expectations expressed the financial constraints that her college attendance might put on her family. Participant 2 stated, “I think it was probably myself [that had high expectations], in my family, no one told me I had to, but it was assumed I would go. Only my dad provides income for my family, but I didn’t want to be a burden on them. He wants to help and pay for it.” These are valid concerns many economically disadvantaged students face and it would be worth further investigation to better understand how these feelings may affect low-income student postsecondary matriculation.

**College location.** All students were asked, “How important was the location of the college you attended to you?” and, contrary to the literature, but inline with the survey results, four of the seven did not feel it was very important. The interviews, however, did provide background on why location was not as important. Participants 4
and 5 were looking for a change of scenery and new experiences during college. Participant 4 said, “I knew I didn’t want to stay in state. I wanted to go somewhere else and see other views” while Participant 5 responded, “I wanted to be somewhere with trees and water, but I really didn’t matter which area of the country I was in. I applied to schools in the Midwest because they were most accessible to me. The location is nice because I can still go home when I want to, but it wasn’t a huge factor.” Participant 7 did not have a location preference, but said, “There were pros and cons to both leaving and staying. If I left, it was more a new place to explore, if I stayed I wouldn’t know other parts of the US.”

Of those who felt location was important, family and finances came into play when considering college location. Both Participants 1 and 2 wanted to make sure they could stay close to home, however, both are from cities more than 200 miles away. Participant 1 stated that location was “important back then… but not as big of a deal as I thought. My mom was happy when I left, but it was bittersweet since I went far away and we have a very close relationship.” Participant 2 expressed that he did not think he would end up at a college that was not close to his home and family, “I thought it would be important to stay close to home, my family is really close to me, so it's weird that I chose [The College].”

Participant 3 considered the added cost of travelling to and from The College. She stated, “I think the location was relatively important, but if something happened and I loved a school that was further away, I would have gone. I would feel bad because it is
more expensive to travel. I was hoping to go to a school closer to home because it would be easier for my mom.”

**Challenges With the College and Financial Aid Application Processes.** The reviewed literature found that low-income students face more extensive barriers while completing college and financial aid applications than their wealthier peers. For example, Saenz et al (2009) found that low-income students have less access to information about college during the application process than higher-income students (p. 25), and there continues to be a support gap to assist students with limited economic means with completing the FAFSA (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2012, p. 8).

To better understand the challenges that low-income students faced throughout this process, interview participants were asked the following questions: “Did you encounter any obstacles when you were applying to college? If so, how did you overcome them?” “Did you have any help with the college application or financial aid process? Who assisted you with the processes?”, and “How did you feel about the college application process in high school?” Each participant expressed a unique experience. Their responses are summarized below.

**Participant 1.** Participant 1 only considered attending community college until she joined a college access program and a counselor saw her potential. The college access program helped her to ensure that she was meeting application deadlines, assisted her with completing the FAFSA, and edited her personal statement. Initially, she thought the application process would be easy, because she assumed she would go to community college. Once she participated in the college access program, she noted, “going to a four
year [college] was more stress… then there was the anticipation of getting in or not. Without [the college access program] I would have gone to community college, but later transferred. During senior year they gave me more experiences and exposure to other colleges and helped me find a fit that didn’t cost a lot."

**Participant 2.** Participant 2 had difficulties navigating the college application process, as her family is from Mexico and the educational system is vastly different. She is both low-income and a first-generation student, so she wanted to “break the cycle” and continue on to post-secondary education. The biggest challenge she faced was completing the FAFSA and CSS Profile. Her parents are undocumented, so they could not provide social security numbers, and she was concerned about the number of fields in which she had to enter “0” or leave blank on the FAFSA. She mentioned that The College was the only selective institution she applied to. She was not confident she would be accepted, because it seemed like a school that would only be accessible to wealthier students.

Participant 2 did have assistance to overcome these barriers through her involvement in two college access programs, and she received help from her school counselor. She mentioned that she was grateful for all of the help she received throughout the process, however, she said, “I just felt like it was less stressful with the help, but still stressful.” While discussing the significance of this study with Participant 2, she expressed further concern about the current state of economically disadvantaged students in selective colleges, “I really hope that low income students find a way to think better of themselves and that they don’t think they can’t get in to these schools.”
**Participant 3.** Participant 3 considered music as a major while in high school and wanted to apply to schools that could offer a great music education. She noted that, “There are schools everywhere, but I couldn’t afford to travel to others. I applied to one other [school with a music program], but didn’t pass the prescreening, but that was ok.” Since she couldn’t afford to travel to other schools, she asked friends that were able to tour other campuses what they thought about their visits and made her decisions accordingly.

Although Participant 3 had a good understanding of the application process, she struggled with completing the FAFSA. She sought out answers from her counselors, and then would confer with her mother on how to complete it. She continues to have concerns about financial aid and expressed, “I didn’t really know what to expect about financial aid and was unsure about the process. I still feel like it's not enough. Some of it is in loans, and I am sad that I know [paying them off] is my future. My mom told me to read all the loans and make sure I understood everything. I read it, but I didn’t feel like I understood it. I couldn’t tell you right now what's going to happen, I don’t know what will happen.” Participant 3’s uncertainty with her financial aid package is distressing, as many low-income students have a particularly difficult time understanding the net cost of college (Hoxby & Turner, 2015, p. 515).

**Participant 4.** Participant 4 did not feel like the application process was a burden, as her high school had many resources to help support students while applying to college. In addition to having two counselors supporting her, she was in a TRIO Upward Bound program and participated in another college access program. She said that her parents
were unable to help her, “because they didn’t know how.” Although her sister attended college, she did not ask her for help because she felt she had plenty of resources at school. Furthermore, she stated, “I felt like everything ran smoothly and for everyone in Upward Bound (UB)… students I knew who weren’t in UB had questions and I could help them. I am really thankful for that.”

**Participant 5.** Participant 5 cited three different challenges during the application process. First, she struggled to find a teacher to write a letter of recommendation, as she did not feel she had a close connection with any teachers during high school. She said she was not able to stay after school or participate in extracurricular activities because she often worked, so she did not have the opportunity to get to know her teachers as well as other students.

Second, Participant 5 based her decision on which schools to apply to on whether she would have to pay the application fee. She stated, “I didn’t apply to ones that I didn’t think I would get into because I couldn’t pay. I got fee waivers from schools that were interested in me… but I didn’t apply to some ‘reach’ schools because I didn’t want to pay for it.”

Finally, along with 10.4 percent of survey respondents, Participant 5 completed the FAFSA without assistance. She stated, “I did the FAFSA by myself. My parents didn’t know how.” These findings are troubling when analyzed with previous research. The White House Report (2014) found that low-income students “generally lack the support needed to determine how to apply for financial aid” (p. 36). Furthermore, additional research has revealed, “FAFSA application assistance alone can increase
college enrollment and persistence and lead to larger financial aid packages (White House Report, 2014, p. 39). These findings are concerning, as the students who are in need of the most financial aid are provided with the least amount of support in completing the financial aid process.

**Participant 6.** Participant 6 offered a much different perspective to this research since his background and upbringing were atypical compared with others surveyed and interviewed. First, he is a transfer student. The College has a low transfer student population, with only 36 transfer students enrolled during the 2014-2015 academic year (Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2016). Neither the survey nor the interview questions were focused on the experiences of transfer students, so the interview with Participant 6 added an alternative point of view.

Second, Participant 6 has educated parents; his father graduated from college and his mother received her master’s degree. Having parents with this level of education is not typical of low-income students, however, it helps further demonstrate that we must continue to shift our mindsets from thinking all low-income students fit the same mold. Gorski, (2013) questioned, “I wonder how so many of us have bought into a most preposterous assumption: that we can assume anything at all about somebody’s values, dispositions, or behaviors based on knowing a single dimension of her identity” (p. 52). Economically disadvantaged students each have their own challenges and successes, which cannot all be attributed to their family income level. Therefore, as educators, we must refuse to believe stereotypes and make presumptions about the needs and motivations of low-income students.
Next, Participant 6 was homeschooled, which contributed to some significant barriers during the college application process. At the age of 16, Participant 6 surpassed his homeschool curriculum and was ready to enroll in college. He had not taken the ACT, so he enrolled in a local community college since a standardized test score was not required. After attending community college for two years, he felt he was not being challenged enough and believed that he could excel at a more rigorous school. He stated, “I was tired of the culture of the school and I was ready to go do something else.”

After taking some time off to travel, he decided to apply to selective four-year institutions. He applied to other Competitive+ and Highly Competitive colleges, but decided The College was his first choice. From there, he felt “the process wasn’t complicated, but frustrating.” He explained some of the difficulties he experienced during the application process due to not having taken the ACT. “When submitting [the application] I had to write something in for ACT scores… since it was online, I couldn’t call in and talk about the ACT or fee waivers.” Although Participant 6’s parents were able to assist him with parts of the application, access to information was difficult. He was, however, able to attend college fairs, both in-person and online to find answers to questions and statistics that were not easily accessible on The College’s website.

**Participant 7.** The final interviewee, Participant 7, felt “the college applications were more straightforward” and he had school counselors that “proofread things for us, then gave us the green light [to submit applications].” He did, however, encounter obstacles when completing the FAFSA; his social security number was entered incorrectly and he was unsure how to answer some of the questions that related to
income. Fortunately, his counselors were able to help resolve the issues by directly contacting the FAFSA helpline.

Furthermore, Participant 7 was only able to visit nearby, in-state, colleges. The College is located more than 200 miles away from his home, so he was unable to visit until after he was enrolled. He recalled, “move-in day was my first day on campus, so that was scary. I didn’t know how to pronounce the building names, so it was overwhelming.”

Participant 7’s experience correlated with the 13.6 percent of survey respondents who did not make a campus visit to The College prior to enrolling. In comparison to wealthier students, White House Report (2014) found that students who attend low-income serving high schools are much less likely to engage in college preparation activities, such as college counseling and campus visits. As a result they were, “were far less likely to ultimately enroll – leaving a large gap between college aspirations and college outcomes” (p. 30). Furthermore, Nurnburg, Schapiro and Zimmerman (2012) found that admissions recruiting efforts have a statistically significant relationship with the probability of a student matriculating. Through a study at Williams College (a “Most Competitive” institution), they found that “a student who visits the admissions office is 12% more likely to attend Williams than a student who does not” (p. 6). Although this study was based solely at one institution, researchers felt it could “easily be applied elsewhere” (Nurnburg, Schapiro and Zimmerman, 2012, p. 7). From this, it would be reasonable to surmise that low-income students who do not have access to college visits are less likely to matriculate to college than their wealthier peers that have access.
Summary of Results

Overall, the results of this study corresponded with outcomes of previous studies of low-income students and factors contributing to postsecondary matriculation, with a few discrepancies. First, both the financial aid application process, and later, understanding financial aid awards, were two of the principal challenges faced by low-income students. The majority of participants did not have assistance with this process, other than from their parents; only 8.4 percent of students “strongly agreed” that they felt confident that they understood the financial aid application process as a high school senior, and only 23.4 percent “strongly agreed” that they felt confident in understanding their financial aid award from The College. Although this process seemed overwhelming for some, the generous financial aid package awarded by The College was by far the most significant reason cited by students to enroll.

Second, as expected, the prospect of social mobility arose as a significant factor in the overall motivation to attend college. In light of the fact that the majority of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education in the near future (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 4), low-income students are hopeful they can break through social class barriers by attending college.

Next, academic undermatch was not prevalent for the majority of students. The largest numbers of applications were submitted to Most Competitive institutions, and relatively few were submitted to colleges designated as Competitive or below. Again, these results must be understood with limitations, as the entire population of this study currently attends a Highly Competitive+ institution. Further surveying of low-income
students outside of this population would yield more interesting results.

Fourth, negating the stereotype that “poor people do not value education” (Gorski, 2013, p. 59), the majority of low-income students surveyed and interviewed believed that their parents had high expectations for them to continue their education by attending college. These results demonstrate that further work must be done to combat the misperception about who values education, since it can lead to unequal treatment of low-income students in the classroom.

Finally, this study found that college location was not a significant factor in college enrollment, although it was as indicated by the literature review. Surprisingly, more than half of students surveyed lived more than 200 miles away from The College. Although more than 10 percent of students either could not afford or did not have access to a visit to The College prior to enrolling, low-income students enrolled due to their generous financial aid awards. It would be advantageous to study the effects of college location on matriculation to other college campuses, since according to the students surveyed, the substantial financial aid award offered by The College may have outweighed the effects of location.

Looking Forward

Chapter five will further address the overall findings from this study. In addition to discussing my experiences throughout the research process, it will outline the limitations of the data and reflect upon adjustments that can be made for future research. Finally, it will conclude with my recommendations on what can be done to further increase low-income student matriculation to selective postsecondary institutions.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Introduction

This capstone project was designed to answer the research question: What motivates low-income students to enroll in selective colleges? This question was shaped through both my personal experiences as a low-income, first-generation college student, as well my current work in a college access program for students from similar backgrounds. In the previous chapters, I discussed my interest in the topic, reviewed the relevant literature, outlined my research methodology and summarized the data I collected through online surveys and structured interviews.

Research Implications

The major findings of this study both supported and negated research that had been conducted in the reviewed literature. Assistance with college and financial aid applications is an effective way to increase low-income students’ access to college. However, these students must also be aware of their academic potential as well as the benefits of attending selective institutions, so that they have higher odds of graduating from college, with less debt than they may accumulate at a non-selective institution.

College and Financial Aid Applications

Low-income students do aspire to attend college, but are not always supported through the difficult-to-navigate college application and financial aid processes. The data revealed that students had more assistance and felt more confident with the college application process than they did completing the FAFSA and other financial aid applications.
Numerous studies have shown that economically disadvantaged schools do not have the resources to help direct students through these processes (Gorski, 2013; Klugman, 2012; the Saguaro Seminar, 2016). The findings of my research further support the need for better access to assistance with these processes for low-income students, as it will lead to increased chances of subsequent college enrollment.

**Academic Match**

If we, as educators, strive to close the opportunity gap, low-income students need to be made more aware of how their college choice should match their academic potential. The literature review discussed the overwhelming benefits of attending a selective college over a less selective institution: increased academic support, higher retention and graduation rates, and more often, better financial aid for low-income students (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Pell Institute, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Although the application behavior of the students in this study were atypical (they applied to more Highly Competitive+ and Most Competitive institutions), it was clear that they did not have a good understanding of just how selective the college they attend is. When I consider that 86.3 percent of survey participants underestimated how competitive The College is in comparison to other schools, I am reminded of the Woods, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley (2005) study on stereotypical beliefs held by children. Their findings that “youths who recognize that they are from disadvantaged backgrounds may come to believe that poor individuals are not as capable academically as rich individuals” (p. 444), further establishes the need to not only make sure that low-income students
understand their potential to be successful in college, but also to ensure that they feel welcomed and connected on their respective campuses.

**College Location**

The survey data collected regarding college location did not support findings from the reviewed literature. López Turley (2009) found that proximity to an institution increases the chances that a student will apply, particularly for low-income individuals (p. 139). Although the results of my study did not find location to be as large of an influence as expected, further studies may be able to determine if these findings are an outlier. Based upon student interviews, survey results and financial aid data, I suspect that the generous financial aid awards provided by The College outweighed the importance of proximity for the low-income students enrolled.

**Other Motivating Factors**

In addition to the aforementioned factors that contribute to college enrollment, trends arose in other intrinsic, less tangible forms. Low-income students strive to improve their social status and family income. They also feel they have parental expectations to enroll in postsecondary education.

**Social Mobility.** Social mobility arose as a key factor for the majority of low-income students. Young adults, in general, are aware of the importance of a college degree in today’s society and work force. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are no different; they look forward to a future with a well-paying job so they can take care of their families without the additional stress of worrying about finances.
The reviewed literature stressed that higher education is a means to be successful in the job market. Given that the majority of careers in the near future will require some form of education post-high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 4), educators must promote and encourage college enrollment to intrinsically motivate students who attend their schools.

**Parental Expectations.** Much of the literature reviewed regarding parental and familial expectations for students to attend college focused on stereotypes of low-income parents and their views on education, as well as low-income students’ self-worth (Gorski, 2013; Klugman, 2012). Although wealthier students have more access to activities that will help them earn “marks of distinction” that are highly valued in a college application (Klugman, 2012, p. 4, Saguaro Seminar, 2016), the results of this project suggests that low-income parents hold high expectations for their children to further their education, regardless of limitations to access to college preparatory activities.

**Interviews**

The seven student interviews brought the data to life and helped to make the survey results more personal. Although all of the interviewees were low-income students enrolled in a Highly Competitive+ institution, each student had a different upbringing and different rationale for attending college. While the interview findings all supported the survey results, this mix-methods approach offered additional insights that were not fully encapsulated by the survey questions.

Open-ended questions gave participants the opportunity to share their own experiences and provided feedback that would be valuable to consider in further research.
For example, low-income transfer students at selective institutions were not widely addressed in the literature, so I did not give consideration to them when developing the survey questions. It would be worthwhile to collect data on this population in future research to determine if the subset of the low-income transfer student population has motivations that differ from those who enroll directly in a four-year institution, rather than a less selective, community college.

Although the interviewees were all from families with low-socioeconomic status, they had many different experiences and unique perspectives, which is a reminder that we cannot stereotype students based upon their financial situation. All students were working hard to be successful in school and their resilience to face their challenges while in our educational system was apparent.

**Limitations**

The results from this study do not come without limitations. First, the surveys and interviews were not offered to more affluent students on campus, therefore there was no data for comparison. Although the low-income student data offered a wealth of information and answered my research question, comparing data from higher-income students from the same selective institution would have been interesting to determine if there were significant differences in overall motivations to enroll in college.

Second, The College awards better-than-average financial aid packages (The Princeton Review, 2017). For many low-income students, the difference in award money through institutional grants and scholarships can be the determining factor in deciding which school to attend. The fact that The College is able to gift such generous awards
may have influenced many of the low-income students to enroll, even if they did not think that The College was the best fit for them. The financial incentive alone could have taken precedence over other motivations. Expanding this research to other colleges that offer a range of financial aid awards could help determine just how strong the financial aid effects are on student motivations to attend different institutions.

Third, as previously mentioned, the survey did not include any questions that inquired if students had previously been enrolled in another institution prior to attending The College. Although this subset of students would be relatively small, collecting data from them may provide important information that college admissions counselors and advisors could use to encourage high achieving, low-income students to transfer to an institution that would be a better academic match. It would also ensure that low-income transfer students would be able to reap the benefits of attending a more selective college.

Finally, data was only collected on one, Highly Competitive+ college campus. It can be assumed that all students who participated in the survey or interview are high achieving (since they were all accepted to this highly selective institution). Expanding the research to other institutions (both selective and nonselective) would provide additional data that could be used for comparison.

**Reflections on the Capstone Process**

Throughout completing this capstone project, I have grown both personally and professionally. On a personal level, I have given more consideration to not only the barriers that low-income students face, but also the public policies that both support and impede their path to higher education. On a professional level, I have already used what I
have learned about college selectivity to help guide my students during their college application processes and continue to strive to increase their understandings of financial aid awards. Although selective, four-year institutions may not be the best choice for all students, I will continue to use these findings to help my students understand their potential and avoid academic undermatch.

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

There have been major changes in our government during the course of completing this project that unfortunately may redirect the higher education goals of some low-income students. While completing the literature review, many for-profit institutions were cited, or shut down all together, after the government stripped them of federal funding (Vasel & Lobosco, 2016). With the new presidential administration, however, for-profit institutions may have a second chance. Since Donald Trump was elected president, stocks for for-profit colleges have soared and his administration has delayed the enforcement of rules for these schools set forth by the Obama administration (Mitchell, 2017).

Subsequently, further reports have shed light on the predatory recruiting practices of for-profit institutions. These colleges rely on tuition for revenue, and many “focus their recruiting on students who qualify for the maximum amount of student aid” (Cottom, 2017), therefore targeting the poorest students to enroll in programs that are often 30 to 40 percent more expensive than the same credentials offered at nonprofit institutions (Cottom, 2017).
Furthermore, President Trump’s proposed budget for 2018 includes a 13.5 percent cut to the Department of Education, including reductions to the Federal Pell Grant, the Federal Work-Study programs, and Federal TRIO programs (Alvarez-Boyd, 2017; Douglas-Gabriel, 2017). Low-income students have relied on these programs for decades to gain access to college, have support throughout college, and finance their educations, and now they are at risk of being reduced or discontinued.

In addition to these cuts, the IRS data retrieval tool, an online addition to the FAFSA that has simplified the completion process, has been taken down just weeks before the FAFSA completion deadline, due to concerns about identity theft (Alvarez-Boyd, 2017). This may be devastating to low-income students who are often discouraged to apply for federal aid due to the complexity of the FAFSA, as discussed in the findings of this research.

Moving forward, we must continue to listen to the concerns of low-income students and advocate on behalf of their best interests. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have the same abilities to succeed as their wealthier peers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gorski 2013), thus it is essential that educators and the U.S. government commit to providing equitable resources close the opportunity gap.

As this capstone project has demonstrated, we can do this by assisting and encouraging low-income students throughout high school so that they understand their potential and matriculate to colleges that are an academic match. Although assistance with the college application process is effective, this research also suggests that help with navigating the FAFSA and explaining financial aid awards is of utmost importance to
increase low-income student enrollment in selective colleges. Once enrolled in a selective institution, students reap the benefits of better support services, financial aid, and increased graduation rates that are more often enjoyed by wealthier students.
References


American Enterprise Institute (2009). *Diplomas and dropouts: Which colleges actually graduate their students (and which don’t)*. Washington, DC: Hess, F., Schneider, M., Carey, K., & Kelly, A.


http://www.nber.org/papers/w15892


Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2016, June 21). *Average student has better chance (77%) of graduating at selective universities compared to open access schools (51%), Georgetown University analysis finds.* [Press release]. Retrieved from http://www.prweb.com/releases/2016/06/prweb13504022.htm


APPENDIX A: Summary of Barron’s Profile of American Colleges

The 2016 Barron’s Profile of American Colleges uses information derived from the 2014-2015 college freshman class and defines these categories as:

- **“Noncompetitive”:** these schools typically only require incoming freshmen to have evidence of graduation from an accredited high school, and accept 98 percent or more of applicants.

- **“Less competitive”:** colleges in this category accept students with SAT scores below 500 and ACT scores below 21, and most incoming students graduated in the top 65 percent of their class, with a C grade average. Eighty-five percent or more applicants are admitted to these schools.

- **“Competitive”:** Barron’s describes this category as “very broad” (pg. 261) and notes that the minimum grade average is C to C+, with average scores on the SAT from 500 to 572, and 21 to 23 on the ACT. Generally, these schools admit students in the top 50 to 65th percentile of their graduating class, and accept between 75 and 85 percent of their applicants.

- **“Very Competitive”:** these colleges generally accept students with no less than a B- grade average and admit students from the top 35 to 50 percent of their graduating class. The median SAT score ranges from 573 to 619 and 24 to 26 on the ACT. These schools accept between one half and three quarters of applicants.

- **“Highly Competitive”:** these schools look for students with a B to B+ grade average and accept students from the top 20 to 35 percent of their graduating
class. The median SAT score for incoming freshmen is 620 to 654 and a 27 to 28 on the ACT. Between one third and one half of applicants are accepted.

- “Most Competitive”: these colleges require students to be in the top ten to fifteen percent of their graduating class and maintain B+ to A grade averages. Median incoming freshmen score between 655 and 800 on the SAT and 29 or above on the ACT. Less than one third of applicants are admitted (pgs. 257-267).

- “Special”: These colleges offer specialized programs of study. In general, admissions requirements are based on evidence of talent or special interest in the field, rather than solely on academic criteria. Schools oriented towards working adults are also given the “special” designation (p. 268).
APPENDIX B: Emails Sent to Eligible Participants

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well! I am currently working on a graduate level research project and you were identified as an eligible student to participate in my study. My master’s capstone focuses on motivations of students who attend selective colleges.

I have included a link to a brief survey (below) that asks students about their feelings and behaviors regarding the college application process. The survey will take less than five minutes and will be open for three weeks.

At the end of the survey, participants have the opportunity to submit their email address to be entered into a drawing for a $10 bookstore gift card.

More information can be found in the attached “Informed Consent Letter”.

Please click the link below to participate in this BRIEF survey:

[LINK TO SURVEY]

I will also be conducting interviews on this topic, and students who participate will receive a $10 bookstore gift card. If you are interested in participating in a 30-45 minute interview, please respond to this email.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions and thank you for your help in this valuable research!

Best,
Kim Hildahl

REMINDER EXAMPLE EMAIL

Hello,

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this important research. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey to be entered into a drawing for a $10 bookstore gift card by February 28, 2017.

[LINK TO SURVEY]

Thanks!
Kim Hildahl
APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Letter

December 13, 2016

Dear Student,

I am a graduate student working on an advanced degree in education at Hamline University, in St. Paul, Minnesota. As part of my graduate work, I am conducting research with students who have been identified as Pell Grant recipients during the 2016-2017 school year.

The topic of my master’s thesis is motivations of low-income students to attend selective colleges. I plan to survey and interview eligible students about their perspectives and experiences during the college application experience. Your participation in this research is invaluable, as this project will provide strategies to improve recruitment practices of low-income students who have the academic potential to attend selective postsecondary institutions.

The survey will be sent electronically and should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Participants who complete the survey will also be entered into a lottery drawing for one a $10 bookstore gift card. The survey will be conducted over a three-week window, so participants will have ample time to fit it into their schedule. In addition to the survey, I will also be conducting structured interviews with volunteer participants.

There is little to no risk for you to participate in either the survey or interview. All results will be confidential and anonymous, and pseudonyms will be used. All data collected will be securely stored and I will not record information about individuals, such as their names, nor report identifying information or characteristics in the paper. Results may also be summarized and shared with [redacted].

Participation is voluntary and you may decide at any time to withdraw from the study without negative consequences. In this case, information about you will not be included in the paper.

I have received approval for my study from the School of Education at Hamline University and [redacted]. This project is public scholarship, and the capstone will be catalogued in Hamline’s Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. My results may also be included in an article for publication in a professional journal or in a report at a professional conference.

In all cases, your identity and participation in this study will be confidential. If you agree to participate, please keep this page for your records. Completing the electronic survey will indicate your willingness to participate in this research.

Please contact me with any questions. Additionally, you may contact the Hamline Institutional Review Board at mholson@hamline.edu.

Sincerely,
Kim Hildahl
[redacted]
I have received your letter about the study you plan to conduct in which you will interview low-income students on their motivations to attend selective colleges. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me and that my identity will be protected, as all results will be confidential and anonymous, and pseudonyms will be used. My participation in this research will be 30-45 minutes in duration and I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any time without negative consequences.

By participating in this survey, I am authorizing the use of the information provided to be used in this research project.

___________________________   _________
Signature                      Date
APPENDIX D: Structured Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about why you chose to attend college.

2. Did you encounter any obstacles when you were applying to college? How did you overcome them?

3. Did you have any help with the college application or financial aid process? Who assisted you with the processes?

4. Can you tell me about any campus visits you made? (To St. Olaf or to other colleges).

5. Do you recall if a St. Olaf admissions representative visited your high school?

6. What was your experience with the St. Olaf admissions office and their recruiting process?

7. How important was the location of the college you attended to you?

8. How did you feel about the college application process in high school?

9. Who, if anyone, had high expectations for you to attend college?

10. What were your main reasons for choosing to attend St. Olaf?
APPENDIX E: Survey Instrument

Survey on Motivations to Attend College

1. Why did you choose to attend college? (Check all that apply.)
   - To get a good job/make more money.
   - I was unsure about what I wanted to do with my future.
   - My parents expected me to go.
   - My high school teachers/counselors expected me to go.
   - My friends/peer group were going to college.
   - Other: __________________________

2. Who assisted you with the college application process? (Check all that apply.)
   - N/A, I completed the college application process without assistance.
   - My parent(s)/guardian(s)
   - My high school teacher(s)
   - My school counselor(s)
   - My sibling(s)
   - My college access program advisor (i.e. TRIO Upward Bound/Educational Talent Search advisor, College Possible Coach, etc.)
   - Other: __________________________

3. Which other colleges did you apply to?
   Your answer
4. Did you visit the [REDACTED] campus prior to enrolling?
   - Yes
   - No

5. How many other colleges did you visit prior to enrolling at [REDACTED]?
   - 0- I did not visit any other colleges prior to enrolling at [REDACTED]
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5+

6. Who was the most influential person in your decision to enroll at [REDACTED]? (Please select only one.)
   - N/A- I decided to enroll at [REDACTED] on my own/no one influenced my decision.
   - My parent(s)/guardian(s)
   - My teacher(s)
   - My school counselor(s)
   - My sibling(s)
   - My college access program advisor (i.e. TRIO Upward Bound/Educational Talent Search advisor, College Possible Coach, etc.)
   - [REDACTED] admissions staff member
7. Who assisted you with the financial aid application process? (i.e. FAFSA and CSS Profile) Check all that apply.

☐ N/A, I completed the FAFSA and CSS Profile without assistance.

☐ My parent(s)/guardian(s)

☐ My high school teacher(s)

☐ My school counselor(s)

☐ My sibling(s)

☐ My college access program advisor (i.e. TRIO Upward Bound/Educational Talent Search advisor, College Possible Coach, etc.)

☐ Other: __________________________

8. How far is [redacted] from your home?

☐ 0-50 miles

☐ 50-100 miles

☐ 100-150 miles

☐ 150-200 miles

☐ 200+ miles
Below are statements regarding the college application process. Please read each one and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree.

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

9. As a high school senior, I fully understood the college application process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. As a high school senior, I fully understood the financial aid application process (i.e. completing the FAFSA and CSS Profile).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. I felt confident that I would be accepted to [Redacted].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. I felt confident that I fully understood my financial aid award from [Redacted].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. The location of [redacted] was very important to me in making my decision to enroll.

14. My parent(s)/guardian(s) had high expectations for me to attend college.

15. My high school teachers had high expectations for me to attend college.

16. My high school counselor(s) had high expectations for me to attend college.

17. My friends/peers had high expectations for me to attend college.
18. Please select your TOP THREE overall motivations for attending:

☐ Campus visit

☐ College access program, if applicable (i.e., College Possible, POSSE, AVID, TRIO Upward Bound, TRIO Educational Talent Search)

☐ Friend/Peer Expectations

☐ Location

☐ My financial aid award

☐ Parental expectations

☐ High school counselor expectations

☐ High school teacher expectations

☐ Visit from admissions representative at your high school.

☐ Someone on campus encouraged me (i.e. counselor, professor, admissions officer, SSS staff member, student, etc.)

☐ The TRIO Student Support Services program

☐ Campus resources (i.e. Academic Support Center, etc.)

☐ Other: __________________________
19. In terms of admission acceptance rates, how competitive would you rate [ ] in comparison to other colleges in the U.S.?

- Non-competitive
- Less competitive
- Competitive
- Very competitive
- Highly competitive
- Most competitive

20. Please briefly describe why you decided to attend college: *

Your answer

(OPTIONAL) If you would like to be entered into a drawing for a $10 bookstore gift card, please enter your email address below:

Your answer
## APPENDIX F: Colleges Applied to by Selectivity Rating

### Additional Applications Submitted by Selectivity Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NONCOMPETITIVE</th>
<th>VERY COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>HIGHLY COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>MOST COMPETITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>Submitted</td>
<td>Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Oregon Community College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis &amp; Clark College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Oregon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL NONCOMPETITIVE</td>
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<td>141</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LESS COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>VARYING COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>HIGHLY COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>MOST COMPETITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>Submitted</td>
<td>Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California State University - San Marcos</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin-River Falls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL LESS COMPETITIVE</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>VARYING COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>HIGHLY COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>MOST COMPETITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>Submitted</td>
<td>Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carroll College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carroll College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas State University</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL COMPETITIVE</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL</th>
<th>VARYING COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>HIGHLY COMPETITIVE</th>
<th>MOST COMPETITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>Submitted</td>
<td>Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wisconsin - Madison</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL INSTITUTIONAL</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECIAL</th>
<th>MOST COMPETITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterling College</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams College</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale College</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SPECIAL</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECIAL</th>
<th>MOST COMPETITIVE</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>University of Notre Dame</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL SPECIAL</td>
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</table>

### SELECTIVITY DATA NOT AVAILABLE

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Minnesota</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SELECTIVITY DATA NOT AVAILABLE</td>
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<td>2</td>
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