COLLEGE-BOUND OR COLLEGE-ABANDONED:

STUDENT STORIES FROM THE PLACE BETWEEN

A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education
in Professional Leadership

by

Ann B. Stiles

May, 2011

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To the staff of Project GRAD Houston, I am inspired by your commitment to our shared vision of what is possible for the children, families, and communities served by this organization.

To the founders of Project GRAD, your vision and constancy have helped many thousands of families from underserved communities achieve their dreams of a college education. Your legacy is made manifest in these stories and will continue to be played out in the countless stories yet to be lived.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates barriers limiting successful access to higher education for high

school graduates from low-income communities who have demonstrated aspirations for

college and achieved a level of college-readiness. The students included in this study are

the 1,345 students from high school graduating classes of 2009 and 2010 who

successfully completed college access program requirements in order to qualify for the

scholarship offer of a local non-profit organization, Project GRAD Houston. The

participants include a balance of the following criteria, in line with program participation:

70 percent Hispanic and 30 percent African American; at least 90 percent from

households considered low-income. Most students are among the first generation in their

families to attend college. Project GRAD Houston, a collaborative initiative in the

Houston Independent School District, has a mission of improving high school and college

graduation rates for students historically under-represented in higher education. This

study illuminates the differences in experiences and perspectives associated with those

students who successfully enroll in college following high school graduation compared to

those who do not. Using a mixed methods design, which included an analysis of

archival data and narrative analysis of field texts in the form of student and family

narratives, this doctoral thesis research contributes to the existing knowledge concerning

college access and college success of underserved populations historically

underrepresented in higher education. Findings from the study include the positive

correlations between specific program experiences and college enrollment. The journey of access to college is presented through stories of students and parents, an essential element in understanding and evaluating both practice and policy, as they are lived, told, re-lived, and re-told, in the field. Narrative texts were explored, yielding common strands, which have been organized around the three-dimensional framework of narrative inquiry: relational, place, and time. Examination of the common strands emerging from the collected stories has provided deeper insight to inform policy and practice.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Jefferson Davis High School, one of 23 comprehensive high schools in the Houston Independent School District, is situated just north of downtown Houston. Davis and its associated middle school and elementary schools combine to create the Davis feeder pattern, a group of schools organized to promote students from elementary to middle school and finally to Davis High School. This particular community is referred to by Houstonians as the Near North Side. Together, these schools enroll a population of 5,345 students, who are 91 percent Hispanic and 9 percent African American. At least 93 percent of the students come from households categorized as low-income, where family incomes meet the federal guidelines for either free lunch or reduced-price lunch (Texas Education Agency, 2010a). For a family of four, maximum earnings for low-income status would be $40,793 (Federal Register, 2009).

A Community's Journey

With the central business district as its neighbor, the Near North Side community - those who live, those who learn, and those who teach there - have a view of downtown Houston's skyline, a constant symbol of power and wealth just beyond the boundaries of their neighborhood. No less symbolic is the building that occupies the place between, the University of Houston Downtown (UHD), whose presence and place represent the institutional bridge connecting the two communities. With a policy of open enrollment, the University stands as the best of Houston's intentions, providing access and opportunity to many students who will play a significant role in Houston's economic future.

The University of Houston Downtown opened in 1974. In the fall semester of 2009, the University enrolled 12,742 students, 37 percent of whom were Hispanic and 29 percent African American (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2011). Many of the students are among the first generation in their families to attend college. Others are the first to have graduated from high school. Many work at least part-time while in college. All of these students commute to campus. The University of Houston Downtown provides access to the possibilities imbedded in the promise of higher education for many students from Houston's Near North Side.

On staff at Davis High School is Leticia, the school's college access coordinator. Leticia is a first-generation college graduate who attended Davis High School and spent her early college years attending the University of Houston Downtown. Leticia is soft-spoken, but her academic experiences tell a powerful story of the complicating factors at play when students choose their next steps after high school graduation. The story of her journey is a testament to the power of her own aspirations when linked to the support network available to students from the Near North Side. Now she is guiding many more to focus their aspirations on achieving a college education.

The journey required to realize the possibilities promised by better employment needs more than a high school diploma. The currency of access will be some form of credential from higher education. Many of the young adults from the Near North Side and other low-income communities will be the first in their families to begin this journey. The way will be unfamiliar, directions and signals unclear. These young men and women have need of new paths, different from the pathways used by those who came before them. This study examines the journey of access to college for recent high school

graduates and their families from five of Houston's low-income communities through their lived stories from the place between.

<div align="center">**Problem, Rationale, and Purpose**</div>

United States Ranking

President Obama, in his February 24, 2009 address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, spoke to the importance of educational attainment, not just to the individual but to America's economic viability:

> Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish.
>
> This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education – from the day they are born to the day they begin a career.
>
> …by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. (Obama, 2009, education section, ¶ 3, 4, 7)

At the time of President Obama's speech, nine other nations had surpassed the United States' rate of college degree attainment (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). More specific data for adults aged from 25 through 34 years from the College Board (Lee & Rawls, 2010) ranks the U.S. in twelfth position. The overall United States' college attainment rate has remained flat for almost 40 years (Lumina Foundation, 2009). Other

nations, however, have not remained static. With increased educational requirements of today's best jobs, it is difficult to imagine any nation would ignore the importance of the education of its people in achieving strength and economic stability. Canada, Japan, and Korea lead developed nations in college completion, with rates in excess of 50 percent, according to data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and virtually all industrialized nations report growth in their rates of college completion, with the exception of the United States (Lumina Foundation, 2009).

Regaining the lead for the United States is not simply a matter of repeating an historic achievement. The past holds no answers to this challenge, as today's underlying realities are vastly different from those in place when the U.S. led the world in college completion. Achieving this goal will require that an additional five million Americans must be graduated from degree-granting colleges and universities in the next 10 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). During the next 10 years, 82 percent of the United States' population growth will be from within minority populations of students, who have been historically underserved by U.S. education systems and underrepresented in higher education (Lumina Foundation, 2009, p.3). The American Council on Education, in their annual report of minority participation in higher education, included a special section of analysis of the Hispanic population (Ryu, 2010). The recommendations include the need to address the distinct barriers to success in education for the immigrant segment of the Hispanic population, including the simultaneous support of adults in their own educational attainment so that younger dependents will benefit from a strengthened household and be more likely to succeed (Ryu, 2010).

Accurate measures and available data related to high school graduation, college access, and college graduation for all students have never been more important, particularly for the historically underserved students of color, first-generation, and low-income students and their families. These are often the students who have aspirations, but lack the resources to make informed decisions for their futures. "When students do not complete their educational goals, there are substantial losses to the student, the state, and the nation—in terms of lost opportunity and lower standards of living" (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010, p.5).

Educational Attainment

The educational attainment of growing populations of different minority groups in the United States will play a significant role in determining its future strength. The growing number of students from low-income families adds another degree of complexity to the challenge. The Lumina Foundation (2009) summarizes the need as follows:

> Rates of college attainment among the United States' underserved students — first-generation students, low-income students and students of color — are significantly lower than those of other students. These achievement gaps have endured for decades, and they're now *widening* — an ominous sign when one considers current demographic and economic trends. More than 30 percent of white, non-Hispanic American adults have at least four years of college, but only 18 percent of African Americans and 12 percent of Hispanics have reached the same level of attainment. (p. 3)

National data provide an alarming set of statistics about U.S. college-completion rates for low-income students as well. Only one in seven low-income high school graduates, 14 percent, will eventually earn a bachelor's degree by age twenty-six (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006).

In the next 20 years, the combined population of minority students will outnumber white students in U.S. public schools (Dillon, 2006). The seven-county region of the greater Houston area already serves a combined student population that is 46 percent Hispanic and 21 percent African American, while 58 percent of the students are from low-income households. The Houston Independent School District's majority population of youth is Hispanic (62 percent), and 80 percent of the district's students come from low-income households (Texas Education Agency, 2010b). At a time when public schools are expected to produce college-ready high school graduates, and college degrees have replaced high school diplomas as legal tender in the domestic and world job markets, these demographics pose great challenges. Houston's demographic landscape represents the rapidly developing reality for many other communities throughout the U.S. Houston's response to the educational needs of its new majority will determine not just the future well-being of Houston, but provide examples of success, or failure, for other urban school systems and indeed for the nation.

Global Landscape

As global competition and technology have redefined who has access to the best jobs, a nation's leadership position among other nations and its economic future will be determined by how well its educational institutions and the students they serve respond to the challenge. China, with the largest education system in the world, has surpassed the

U.S. in graduating greater numbers of engineers from its universities (Zhao, 2009). The

Chinese hope to amplify their success in higher education by becoming a world leader in

innovation and technology. Rapid reform is underway to adopt the best practices from

the United States and other Western nations, further enhancing the creative potential of

their university graduates (Hennock, 2010).

No longer can communities strive only for high school graduation, still a

formidable challenge in many areas. Students enter the workforce facing a global playing

field where the college degree is replacing the high school diploma as the price of

admission. Employment opportunities for the high school dropout are increasingly

limited. Choices are narrowing for those with only a high school diploma, as jobs that

will lead to the middle class call for higher levels of educational attainment (Lumina

Foundation, 2009). The promising news is that aspirations are high. The Phi Delta

Kappa annual Gallup poll reports that over 90 percent of parents express their

expectations of a college education for their children in 2010 (up from 57 percent in

1982), and 75 percent believe that a college education is very important (compared to 58

percent in 1983) (Bushaw & Lopez, 2010).

Aspirations alone are not enough to change the current reality. Better academic

preparation is essential, but still only a part of the solution. For those who do graduate

from high school, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance estimates that

approximately 1.4 million college-ready students will not attain a bachelor's degree

(Hahn & Price, 2008). Adequate solutions that will address the needs of this diverse

population and support the schools serving them must reach far enough to inform policy

at the federal level and reach close enough to support the parent and student living in the poorest community.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the barriers limiting successful access to higher education for high school graduates who have demonstrated aspirations for a college education and are considered college-ready. These students are members of groups typically underrepresented in higher education: Hispanic and African American students, students from low-income households, and students among the first generation in their families to attend college. The study includes an analysis of archival program and survey data, identifying common program experiences associated with those who do not successfully enroll in college following high school graduation compared to those who do. An additional analysis of field texts in the form of student and family narratives has resulted in recommendations for both policy and practice in order to improve the successful access of underrepresented students to higher education. The particular population of students included in this study is comprised of the 2009 and 2010 high schools graduates who qualified to receive the Project GRAD Houston scholarship offer. The resulting recommendations are expected to inform future modifications of the Project GRAD model, an eighteen-year initiative founded in Houston, Texas, focused on improving high school graduation, college access, and college graduation for low-income students enrolled in urban public school systems.

Background of the Project GRAD Houston Scholarship Program

The Project GRAD Houston scholarship program, a part of the overall Project GRAD model, offers a non-competitive scholarship totaling $4,000 ($500 per semester)

to students from partnering Houston Independent School District high schools who meet the following criteria at the time of their graduation from high school: (a) graduate in four years or less, (b) graduate with an accumulated grade point average of 2.5 or higher, (c) graduate under the recommended graduation plan of the State of Texas which is the default curriculum for Houston ISD, (d) take the PSAT as a sophomore or junior, and (e) attend two College Institutes during their high school years.

In an annual community-wide event, volunteers from the community (the feeder system of elementary, middle, and high schools, and the foundations and businesses supporting this program) visit the homes of the new ninth-grade students. During this visit, the terms of the scholarship offer are explained, information related to planning for college is shared, and the student and their parent or guardian sign a pledge to agree to work toward earning the scholarship by the time the student graduates from high school. The scholarship award is paid directly to colleges and universities for the qualifying students. Once students are enrolled in college, they must successfully complete 12 credit hours per semester and maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average in order to maintain their scholarship.

Project GRAD Houston's model focuses on ensuring college readiness, access, and success by providing added resources of staff, programs, and funding to the school, the students, their families, and the community. A core program element of the scholarship offer is the College Institute. College Institutes, developed in partnership with area universities and corporations, are designed to connect students' high school academic experiences with the way this knowledge is applied through theme-based programs such as financial literacy, nano-chemistry, advanced biology, business and

entrepreneurship, advanced mathematics, engineering, technology, digital communication and gaming/simulation, and bio-technology and bio-fuels. College Institutes take place during the summer months, typically one-half day for three weeks, and provide academic reinforcement with links between postsecondary studies and potential careers. Participating students are able to become acclimated to a university setting, experience rigorous coursework to be better prepared for the coming school year, and enhance their personal understanding of potential fields of study in higher education. Students receive a cash stipend, typically $150, for successful completion of each College Institute and are provided with daily transportation between their high school and the college campus.

Project GRAD Houston provides a comprehensive parent engagement program designed to build parent capacity to support college-bound aspirations. Parent University, workshops held in the community throughout the year, and an annual Parent College Convention located on a university campus provide educational training and access to resources for parents, such as college financial aid and the college application processes. Social workers are staffed on high school campuses to help the schools address non-academic needs by connecting students and families to available social services.

The recent enhancement of programming related to college success is an illustration of the dynamic nature of Project GRAD. Guided by research from the Pell Institute's recommendations for support of low-income, first-generation college students, the following elements have been incorporated into the program design:

- Focusing on the first year in order to build successful habits and support productive choices;

- Providing additional support for students to increase student persistence;

- Monitoring student progress with systems to collect data, run reports, and share results with team members and with students;

- Increasing student engagement by encouraging students to find study groups, interact with faculty, participate in extracurricular activities, and use academic support services. (Engle & Tinto, 2008, pp. 25-26)

College transitional workshops provide support after high school graduation, as students prepare for their freshman year. Once enrolled in college, Project GRAD provides on-site weekly support services at local colleges and universities to help students make effective decisions and access campus resources. The college success team supports students each year with scholarship maintenance. An email mentoring program connects new college freshmen with volunteer mentors from business and community partners to increase students' chances of persisting to their sophomore year, and ultimately degree attainment.

The School

Schools are often identified as the vehicle for social change and the place where social conflict will find resolution (Cuban, 1990). Looking to schools to address the challenges of the day is a part of United States public school history. In his preface to *A History of Education in American Culture* (Butts & Cremin, 1953), Cremin wrote:

In recent years more and more people have become vitally concerned about the future of American education….differences of attitude and opinion have arisen….education has become a paramount matter of public interest that range in scope from the private discussion between parent and teacher in a local school to

the widely publicized debates in the legislative halls and public forums of the

state and nation (p. v).

These thoughts, from almost 60 years ago, could serve as an accurate description of the

climate surrounding education today. Much of the national narrative is built on the belief

that Americans, individually and collectively, educate themselves out of limited

possibilities and into prosperity. Americans hold faith in the capacity of education to

deliver (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). When held to such high purpose, education can also be

blamed for any problems that surface, often problems resulting from conditions beyond

the reach or influence of the school (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). American education,

schools, and even teachers are sometimes savior, sometimes scapegoat.

Reform

By the late 1950s, schools in general were blamed for the United States''s sideline

position at the Russian launch of Sputnik (Bracey, 2007). Critics sought a return to a

more traditional education. Schools faced frustrations over social challenges within

American culture, issues far outside of the control of the school (Ravitch, 2000). With

both parents working, students faced more time on their own. Schools were assumed to

be the understudy for teaching values and socialization. With the powerful and

sometimes negative influences of television and the internet, community norms eroded,

parents felt helpless, children became confused over right and wrong, and schools no

longer focused on teaching and learning (Ravitch, 2000). As a result, the principal

assumed many new roles, but lost the identity of "principal teacher" within the school

(Ravitch, 2000).

At different times, national reports on education have been used to create a sense of alarm from the general population, to place blame, or to pave the way for greater or lesser involvement from the federal government. With the release of the National Defense Education Act in 1958, even the title of the report linked education to national security. The report was in response to fear of Soviet superiority, and funding followed in support of greater mathematics and science achievement (Zhao, 2009). In contrast, retired Harvard president James Conant published *The American High School Today* in 1959, advocating for larger comprehensive high schools (Ravitch, 2000). He believed in counseling to direct what he believed should be a relatively small population of students truly capable of rigorous academic pursuits toward appropriately designed courses of study. Other students, the majority according to Conant, could then be relegated to learning marketable skills (Ravitch, 2000). He supported policy to restrict access to the rigorous classes in high school and similar admissions policies in higher education in order to protect universities from the watering down effects of heterogeneity (Cremin, 1990).

In the 1960s, President Johnson named education as the solution to the problems of inequity and poverty. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 included resources to address access to educational opportunity for the poor, for minorities, and for the disabled (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In contrast, James Coleman authored a 1966 federal study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity,* commonly called *the Coleman Report*, discounting the effect of schools in shaping a student's chance for attainment. Rather, his work supported the idea that family and social networks had the greater influence (Ravitch, 2000).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education released a landmark report in 1983, addressed to both the Secretary of Education and to the American people. With a title that left no room for ambiguity, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* again linked education to national security and to economic strength. Within its text, the report equated the status of the quality of the educational system with the result of an act of war (Zhao, 2009). *A Nation at Risk* was not legislation. Instead it served as a statement of policy to capture the attention of the American people and frame the rhetoric and dialogue related to education. The report paved the way for the reform movement that followed and still exists today (Zhao, 2009).

A Nation at Risk became a tool of the Reagan administration to create the impression of ownership of the education agenda, even though he had campaigned on the idea of eliminating the Department of Education and federal funding for education declined in 1984 (Zhao, 2009). With this inflammatory report, his administration was able to redirect attention away from any areas of criticism, and set the tone for a stronger reform agenda to follow (Zhao, 2009). Political leaders could affix blame on the schools rather than engaging in the much harder task of addressing inequity resulting from racial discrimination or poverty (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

A Nation at Risk reduced the public discourse surrounding education policy and practice and oversimplified the issues at play in public education by ignoring the social issues and the complications related to poverty (Ravitch, 2010). Much like the rhetoric of today, the report promoted ideas that no one could debate: quality education for all, higher academic standards, more time for teaching, higher standards for teaching, and even higher teacher salaries (Ravitch). The report supported the idea of rich curriculum,

and served to set the stage for the standards movement (Ravitch, 2010). Its central flaw, according to Ravitch, was its focus on the high school as the locus of all problems and the place for all solutions.

By 1993, the emphasis of reform shifted to school choice and school accountability (Ravitch, 2010). Low-performing schools were blamed on the lax standards at the state levels. The accountability agenda advocated for quality state standards with quality tests, and incentives for states requiring teachers to pass subject-matter examinations. At the same time, alternative forms of schools gained support with charters and contract management. A belief in privatization was promoted in other areas of public work. The public education system, believed to be deeply entrenched in timeworn methods, was seen as an ancient structure impeding progress and innovation.

What followed from the Bush administration was the U.S. Department of Education's 2002 legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Legislators were united in their dissatisfaction with schools and in their hope for elevating educational outcomes for all children. With an unprecedented level of federal involvement in public education reform, schools would, in theory, be accountable for the academic achievement of all children. Failure to make annual benchmarked progress, for all groups and income levels, toward the ultimate goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014 would be subject to harsh sanctions and even closure (Ravitch, 2010).

NCLB lacked any common definition for proficiency (Bracey, 2007). Individual states were able to set proficiency levels for themselves, resulting in some states avoiding sanctions by lowering their standards and the rigor of their assessments (Ravitch, 2010). With the advent of NCLB's accountability came an assessment driven culture.

Educational effectiveness was reduced to the score of a single test administered on a

single day. The purpose of learning was reduced to test scores. Students were labeled

and openly discussed as either liabilities or assets to the school's accountability rating

(McNeil, 2000). A new vocabulary emerged to refer to students most likely to benefit

from additional test preparation sessions, "bubble kids." Teachers were told to focus their

efforts exclusively on these students, ignoring those above and below. The floor that a

state established as its minimum standard of proficiency for achieving a passing score on

the annual accountability assessments inadvertently became the ultimate goal to which

everyone aspired.

Test practice for short-term gains replaced both curriculum and pedagogy. An

entire industry emerged to respond to the schools' needs for test preparation. Preparation

for testing required the financial resources and time that was previously devoted to the

arts and other areas of broad curriculum that were not tested (Ravitch, 2010). Students

used the language of their state accountability system to describe their own learning,

rating their knowledge as "exemplary, recognized, acceptable, and low-performing," the

same categories used by the states to rank their schools.

One aspect of the legacy of NCLB today is that assessment defines the

educational culture. The more complex and enduring concept of producing highly

engaged students who excel in rigorous courses has all but disappeared from the national

dialogue. Testing has replaced curriculum, and any subjects or content not assessed have

been sacrificed for more time to prepare for testing. Test results are expected to identify

all deficits, in teaching, in learning, and in systems for effectively running schools. Any

desire to develop better tools for diagnosing student learning has been undercut by

unintended outcomes of orchestrated efforts to game the system and increase scores. When test scores are lacking, schools and teachers are labeled as failures, students are identified as the reason for the failure, and harsh sanctions ensue. Ravitch, in an ongoing exchange of ideas published by *Education Week,* posted the following:

> I now freely concede that I was wrong to support the expansion of testing and accountability. I believe that this approach has created a major national fraud, as the more we rely on testing, and the more we emphasize accountability, the less interest there is in anything that you or I would recognize as good education. I am reminded that at the end of *Experience and Education*, John Dewey said that we need to think less about "progressive education" and "traditional education," and think instead about good education. Who today even talks about "good" education? Instead, we are entrapped in empty discourse about meaningless data, and more and more children go through their schooling without any real engagement in the arts, science, history, projects, activities, or anything else that does not raise their scores in reading and math (Ravitch, November 2, 2010, ¶ 4).

A principal living in the midst of the accountability movement expressed his school's dilemma through a description of two separate systems: one system accountable for producing annual test scores, and the other accountable to the student with instructional practice aligned with the school's mission (Craig, 2004). The teachers had to find ways to manage the conflict of these two opposing systems. He and the teachers questioned the validity of testing when it becomes the main idea of education and the main source of determining human value (Craig, 2004).

School choice, in the form of charters, has been promoted to foster improvement through competition. The competition, however, is based on a false dichotomy. The public school system, already under stress to deliver more with an ever-increasing percentage of disadvantaged students, has seen its financially-resourced students depart for private schools and its family-resourced students for the charter schools. Meanwhile, public school teachers have been hired away, left the profession, or remained to shoulder the blame for only isolated improvements. It is hard to imagine how legislation that ignores the complex issues associated with inequity and poverty and drives an agenda of accountability motivated by fear of sanctions will create new possibilities for success.

National and local education policy is built on beliefs of who is to be educated, for what purpose, and what content and skills students are to learn. Policy makers define how school administrators and teachers are to know if students are succeeding, how the public will be informed, and the associated rewards or sanctions that will result. Those who have the opportunity to inform national policy bear the responsibility of working with transparency, remaining free from an entrenched ideology, the status quo, the needs of a special interest, the agenda of the powerful, and the temptation to support popular innovations that lack a foundation of solid research. Ravitch (2000) makes the point that a time may have existed in history when a nation might not have suffered greatly for offering a lesser education to portions of its population, but that time has ended. "Education, today more than at any time in the past, is the key to successful participation in society" (p. 466).

Often, the attempted solutions to public education's problems of one generation produce unintended outcomes, creating a new set of challenges to be faced by those who

follow. Evidence began to emerge in 2006 demonstrating that NCLB, with its system of

assessments, sanctions, and remedies, was not working (Ravitch, 2010). Analysis of

eighth grade reading results from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress

showed that students had made little progress during the NCLB years, despite the annual

results reported by less demanding state assessments, with 30 states showing no

significant change from 2005 to 2007 in either grade four or grade six (Lee, Grigg, &

Donahue, 2007). The NCLB toolkit offered little to address student achievement gaps or

a school's low performance (Ravitch, 2010). Students who did manage to graduate from

high school did so with only a limited knowledge of the world and in need of remediation

if they were enrolling in college. Diane Ravitch, who had served as Assistant Secretary

of Education from 1991 to 1993 and whose ideas helped to shape the policy that

eventually led to the development of the NCLB, publicly reversed her support for this

policy (Ravitch, 2010). She has recommended a different direction to improve the

quality of education for all of America's children. She advocates for the development of

a core coherent curriculum, teacher preparation aligned to this content, and the

strengthening of community schools. Ravitch (2010) addressed the importance of

schools being engaged with their communities as follows:

> If our schools had an excellent curriculum, appropriate assessments, and well-
> educated teachers, we would be way ahead of where we are now in renewing our
> school system. But even that would not be enough to make our schools all that
> they should be. Schools do not exist in isolation. They are part of the larger
> society. Schools require the active participation of many, including students,
> families, public officials, local organizations, and the larger community (p. 239).

On the whole, under NCLB, children have not been doing any better (Ravitch, 2010). The threat of sanctions and closing schools has not resulted in the needed changes, but made accountability synonymous with punishment. One school principal of a large urban high school within a large urban district, whose school was facing sanctions, attended the district's annual meeting with the community. He was seated at a table next to his most significant community partner. The room was filled to capacity. All of the local media outlets were present. His superintendent spoke of the new initiatives planned for the coming year. She recounted the significant achievements realized in the prior year. Then, with a somber tone, she announced to her board and to the whole community that two schools were to be reconstituted, their principals fired, and a majority of their teachers released. She then named the schools and the principals. This principal was named, and this was the first that he had heard of the plan. Now, six years later, the need for sanctions has reoccurred. No logic exists in the idea that closing down schools or firing teachers will result in positive changes (Ravitch, 2010).

The idea of a model successful school, ready for replication, is similar to the idea that there exists a single answer or "silver bullet." NCLB spawned reform that lacked solid research and produced conflicting results (Hirsch, 2010). The promises hoped for from school choice did not materialize (Ravitch, 2010). The common belief was that competition from charters would drive school improvement. Parents, with a choice of alternative schools, would push the neighborhood schools to change for the better. None of this has produced the expected results.

Charters, on the whole, have not demonstrated any better performance than public schools, and serve only three percent of the nation's children (Ravitch, 2010). Their cost

and their need for zealous teachers limit their ability to achieve on any significant scale

(Hirsch, 2010). Attention and resources are more properly focused on improving the

system that enrolls the other 97 percent of the students. Ongoing support of charters

threatens the sustainability of public education, and drains resources from the community

schools (Ravitch, 2010).

Next Steps in U.S. Education Policy

The proposed agenda for federal reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act currently supported by the Obama administration continues to support

many of the failed policies of NCLB (Ravitch, 2010). The U.S. Department of

Education's *Blueprint for Reform* (2010) identifies the key priorities of: (1) college and

career-ready standards; (2) great teachers and great leaders in every school; (3) equity

and opportunity for all students; (4) raise the bar and reward excellence; and (5) promote

innovation and continuous improvement. Included within these lofty priorities are some

improvements to NCLB ideas of reform, but elements remain having no evidence of

positive change (Ravitch, 2010). Within the context of the school, complex issues and

multiple variables exist. With limited resources, support can only be directed to reform

that promises large, unambiguous results (Hirsch, 2010).

The threat of sanctions and school closure remains in Obama's *Blueprint* (2010).

Also continuing is the commitment to universal testing and the expansion of charter

schools (Hirsch, 2010). Evidence of the potential negative effects is found in Assistant

Secretary of Education Martin's response to a question about how the lowest performing

schools will be supported to improve, "So they have to provide services to … students

who are causing the gap. And if after three years they still show no improvement the

school will lose control of its Title 1 funding," (Duncan, 2010, p.13). Making reference to the students as the "cause" of the gaps in academic performance provides dramatic emphasis for how an educator's language for referring to children has changed as a result of the testing culture. In this example, children are not only the "cause" of the gap, the children will also potentially "cause" the school to lose funding.

Poverty

Poverty remains the greatest cause of low levels of academic achievement (Ravitch, 2010). The Brookings Institute's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from 2009 found 14.3 percent of Americans were living in poverty and the Institute's expectations are that by 2014, this rate will increase to 16 percent overall and to 26 percent for children (up from 18 percent), an additional ten million people and six million children living in poverty (Monea & Sawhill, 2010). Included in the *Broader, Bolder Approach to Education* statement of position (Fiske & Rosenberg, 2008) is a declaration of the empirical evidence linking low achievement with social and economic disadvantage. The paper calls for an end to the overly simplistic idea that schools alone can make up for the impact of social and economic disadvantage on learning by focusing on test-based accountability. Insufficient policy is cited as the reason for the persisting impact of social and economic disadvantage on learning. With attention focused on the whole child and with an expanded view of the purpose and place of education, the aurhors propose a broader approach to improvement of education including early childhood education, health services, and attention to out-of-school factors (Fiske & Rosenberg, 2008).

Berliner (2009) shares this view of the inadequacy of policy focused solely on the school to address all gaps in achievement. He identifies six out-of-school factors to be addressed, in order to support improved learning opportunities for poor children: 1) low birth weight and non- genetic prenatal influences; 2) inadequate healthcare resulting from inadequate or no medical insurance; 3) food insecurity; 4) environmental pollutants; 5) family relations and family stress; and 6) neighborhood characteristics. Berliner describes the effects of NCLB as "outcomes-oriented, input-ignoring philosophy" (p. 6) that calls for gaps to be eliminated by 2014, but does nothing to address the inequity of poverty other than leave the schools responsible for somehow eliminating its effects. Research supports the association of much of the achievement gap in learning to out-of-school factors. These are factors that schools are not in a position to change. Schools face unrealistic expectations with the obsessive measurement of outcome gaps with no consideration of the conditions surrounding inputs, resulting in persisting achievement gaps and missed opportunities for policy development. Resources that could be targeted to address out-of-school problems are wasted on problems that become more costly over time by feeding demands for greater social services in the future.

The Influence of Philanthropy

Well-funded philanthropy has established a highly visible presence in the recommended policy of the reform agenda (Hirsch, 2010). The Gates Foundation has demonstrated their ability to direct the attention of other philanthropic leaders and the public to their own understandings of the ills and solutions of public education. After disappointing results from their enormous investment in the creation of small high schools, the Gates Foundation has shifted direction to a focus on teacher quality. A

similar focus is mirrored by the Department of Education's *Blueprint for Reform* (2010).

Houston billionaire John Arnold is directing his philanthropy to the expansion of charter

schools (Ackerman, 2010), and is able to influence the direction of other philanthropy to

follow. With so much money at stake at a time when resources for public education are

scarce, many school leaders and policy makers are willing to mirror the agenda of

powerful philanthropy. Even the recent U.S. Department of Education's grant

competition focused on innovation, the "i3" grants, was matched by a group of large

philanthropic foundations.

American educational systems have a long history of support from philanthropy.

The access to resources and the collaboration that sometimes accompanies investment

sharpen the tools of innovation and illustrate the real strengths associated with

philanthropy. However, an underlying weakness emerges from the inevitable urge to

shape changes according to one very influential view.

A former executive of the Gates Foundation, Tom Vander Ark, describes the main

camps of educational philanthropy in a *New York Times* interview (Tough, 2008):

> There are two main camps: the "fix the system" people and the "replace the
>
> system" people. There are philanthropists who only want to help the system get
>
> better and they only invest through public-school districts. And then there is a
>
> group of philanthropists who don't believe the system can be fixed or should be
>
> fixed, and they only invest in alternatives to the system, like voucher programs or
>
> charter schools. There are a few, like the Gates Foundation, that attempt to be a
>
> bridge. …If you want to make real impact, you have to work inside the system,
>
> too (¶ 24).

In the same interview, American Enterprise Institute director Frederick Hess identifies the strength of philanthropy in education as being able to intervene from the outside when complications and politics are too dogmatic (Tough, 2008).

Valerie Strauss (2010), from the *Washington Post,* writes critically of the growing influence of the extremely wealthy philanthropists associated with education reform. She interprets their control over the use of their money as taking choice away from the communities where these schools are located. The lack of research behind some of the ideas that receive support is misguided, she feels. Ravitch (2010) refers to this group as "the billionaire boys' club" (p. 195), and identifies key shifts in recent years in the way philanthropy is conducted. The combined influence of the extreme wealth of Gates, Walton, Broad, Arnold, and others is now shaping federal education policy to align with their agenda. These foundations make investments in educational reform. They tend to avoid funding grants designed by those who live and work within a school or a system of schools because funding of this type implies the relinquishing of control. Neighborhood schools will decline as this new brand of philanthropy imposes a privatized model for education while simultaneously shaping the policy of the U.S. Department of Education (Ravitch, 2010).

Community Partners

In all of the efforts to reform or transform our schools, an essential truth has escaped those who shape policy and reform. Schools are not just situated within the community, they are of the community. Schools are composed of people: students, teachers, staff, and faculty, who, individually and collectively, intersect with each other and with a larger network of others within the community. The network includes

representatives from business, the university, other schools serving the community, and the new family moving to the neighborhood to access the school. The synergistic relationship between a community and its schools is both subtle and profound. The challenges to the school are the challenges to the community, and vice versa.

Schools respond to the needs of their communities by assuming additional roles that their stakeholders define for them (Cuban, 1990). Schools keep the narrative of the histories, aspirations, and achievements of their communities and communicate this binding narrative back to the students (Ravitch, 2010). Some of the recommended policy encourages school and non-profit partnerships. Community organizations can play a significant role in education reform, particularly for addressing the needs of low-income children (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006).

Project GRAD Houston

Project GRAD Houston is a non-profit college access initiative, with a stated mission of assuring a quality public education for low-income students so that high school and college graduation rates increase. The organization's approach is to partner with the school district and to add value to the existing system. By working directly with community organizations and the neighborhood's feeder pattern of schools, Project GRAD provides additional resources and focused support to improve the educational attainment of the students in the communities served.

Project GRAD's stated goal is to see at least 80 percent of entering new ninth-grade students graduate on time from high school, at least 50 percent of those graduates attend college, and at least 60 percent of those who enroll in college graduate from college. The organization identifies two central areas for the focus of their work in

improving educational advancement of historically underrepresented students: academic preparation and cultural expectations (Opuni & Ochoa, 2004).

The Project GRAD initiative is broadly divided into four main categories: college awareness, college readiness, college access, and college success. The model grew from a business partnership between the Tenneco Corporation and Houston Independent School District's Jefferson Davis High School (Holland, 2005), then one of Houston's lowest performing high schools. Tenneco, led by chief executive James L. Ketelsen, was a global oil and gas corporation headquartered in downtown Houston. The business partnership was initiated in the early 1980s, focusing resources exclusively on the high school, including mentoring, internships, and financial support. Then CEO Ketelsen, who saw the growing need for an educated workforce and a growing population in Houston poorly served by the existing educational system, saw that without change, the majority of the children would be unprepared for employment. The status quo was unsustainable, both economically and morally.

Unfortunately, the business partnership model alone did not yield the desired results of increasing the overall high school graduation rates or reducing the drop-out rate (Holland, 2005). The lack of impact from these early efforts was interpreted by Ketelsen as a need for greater involvement (Holland, 2005). The Tenneco Scholarship Program was introduced to the new ninth grade class of 1989, offering college scholarships to all students who would graduate in four years with at least a 2.5 cumulative grade point average.

To help the high school prepare students both academically and socially for college, the scholarship program included the requirement that students attend two

"summer institutes" while still in high school. These summer programs were arranged with partnering universities and included month-long academic courses located at the university. A scholarship coordinator was housed at the high school to track student progress and to keep the mission of the initiative in focus. Some scholarships were immediately awarded to college-bound students ahead of the ninth grade class, in order to provide examples to the rest of the student body, the school, and the community of the possibility of college access (Holland, 2005).

The first official scholarships were awarded to 82 qualifying students from the graduating class of 1992. According to Project GRAD program data, prior to the partnership, only about twenty Davis graduates actually entered higher education each year. The possibility of seeing transformational change for the Davis community drew attention to the need to begin support before students entered high school (Holland, 2005). With the collaborative effort of the principals, teachers, business leaders, community members, and university partners, the Project GRAD Houston initiative was formed.

The fully developed Project GRAD Houston model began implementation in 1994, and has since grown in Houston to serve approximately 45,000 students from five high schools and their neighboring feeder elementary and middle schools. As of 2010, the Project GRAD initiative is national in scope, partnering with twelve school districts across the United States and serving approximately 130,000 students and their families. Each Project GRAD site is an independent non-profit organization, governed by its own local board of directors.

The Houston organization's board of directors is still led by its co-founders, Kathryn and James Ketelsen. The program that started in 1992 with scholarship awards to 82 students has continued to expand and in the fall of 2010 enrolled the 5,000th scholar into college. The scholarship component is the cornerstone and culmination of a complex model of support. Other elements of the program have changed over time, and continue to be aligned to add value to the local district, always with a focus on overcoming the barriers that impede students' successful access to and through higher education. Project GRAD's core theory of systemic change requires the involvement of the entire community. Through engagement of all the schools in a feeder pattern, the larger community is brought into the stakeholder process.

For this study, the term *feeder pattern* refers to the neighborhood high school and the associated middle and elementary schools that are located in the same geographic area and typically send children to that high school. In the Houston area, a feeder pattern of schools typically serves a community with a similar demographic of students. The overall framework is based upon a philosophy that promoting college access must begin as early as students enter the public school system, must work with the parents as well as within the schools, and must focus on an entire community of schools in order to make college access a reality for these low-income, underrepresented populations.

The Project GRAD Houston model is built upon the theoretical framework that in order to have educational advancement and college success for historically under-served students, both academic preparation and cultural expectations must be addressed. Because of the United States' history of inattention to the academic prospects of low-income students, and tolerance of low achievement from those schools serving their

communities, a culture of low expectations has thrived. Not only are schools in poor urban communities often the most under-resourced, they are the schools typically staffed by the least qualified teachers and principals (Education Trust, 2008). Policy from all levels has contributed to public school systems where families who possess prerequisite attentiveness and social capital must leave their communities to access better resourced schools in more affluent neighborhoods. What remains are community schools with dwindling community engagement, a declining student population, scarcer resources, and students who have the greatest needs, both socially and academically. This is the place where my work begins.

Personal Background

The desire to understand my own motivations for this work brings me to an inquiry into my own family and our college-going history. The students with whom I work are today's new majority, but my siblings and I represent the old majority, the end of America's baby boom generation and perhaps the end of an era of white dominance, given that states like Texas now are majority Hispanics and major cities like Houston are comprised of majority-minority (i.e., non-White) populations. What were the influences that fueled our assumptions about education and college-going? When was going to college a departure from the norm? Who was our first?

My mother and father both graduated from Houston's Lamar High School in the 1940s. My mother comes from a family that, in her words, "never stressed education," yet she cannot remember a time when going to college was not a part of the plan. College for her was an opportunity to leave Texas and live in Virginia with other high

school friends before she married her high school sweetheart, my father. "Everyone I knew had college plans, and so did I. But I had absolutely no goals or direction."

Interestingly, both of her parents were college educated. Born in 1905 and 1906, they met as students at Rice University. My grandmother must have been one of very few women there - studying Latin. My grandfather studied engineering. From the small town of Eagle Lake, Texas, my grandfather and three of his four brothers graduated from Rice. His father, my great-grandfather, was college educated but died at an early age. His mother, my great-grandmother, held a degree in music, her sister a degree in mathematics, both from Baylor's college for women, Baylor Female College. Her formal music education sustained a family income after her husband's early death. She taught piano lessons. Her story is one that persists for my family: her strength and independence, her determination to see that all four sons completed their education. I am named for her.

My father's story is a different one. Both of his parents were born in the early years of the 1900s. I know far fewer details of his family's education, most likely because it was not anything that they considered worthy of weaving into the family narrative. His mother moved to Houston from Kentucky as a young girl and finished high school. His father was born in Austin, Texas and came to Houston as a young child. In 1923, he left school at the age of 14 to take a job at the *Houston Chronicle*, setting type. He had a hard life, but after 50 years of work during what was described as the "trombone and whiskey days of Houston's history," he retired as a senior editor at the newspaper. He had his own weekly sports column and his writing had been honored with a Pulitzer nomination. His career was mentioned in a recent *Houston Chronicle* article:

Freeman's top man during the 1940s and '50s was Doyle Beard, who joined the

newspaper as a 14-year-old copy boy and stayed for a half-century. While

Freeman and Beard linked the department to the days when Houston was, in the

words of longtime outdoors editor Bob Brister, a "whiskey and trombone town"

(Barron, 2001, ¶ 23).

My father worked to help support his family from a very young age. He also

played virtually all sports in high school. His love was baseball. He remembers

distinctly the moment when college was the choice that was made for him. Recruiters

from two major league teams made offers when he was finishing high school. Both were

refused by my grandfather. My father remembers his father's response to the scouts,

"My son is going to college." The decision was made. Rice University was his

destination, and two engineering degrees resulted. He and my mother married while he

was still in college. Within months of his second college graduation my brother was

born. The rest of the family soon followed. Dad says, "I graduated, your brother was

born, I needed to earn a living."

American culture is built in part on the idea that we educate our way out of a

limited future into the promise of the middle class and beyond. Today's national rhetoric

makes much use of this ideal as policy is directed toward making college the destination

for more Americans. The rewards of education are exemplified by countless prominent

leaders, most obviously by our own president. The promise was realized for my own

family as well. There were no decisive moments about going to college for me and my

siblings. All of us went. Some finished with degrees, some did not, but our lives were

far removed from the struggles known by earlier generations, in large part because of the

education of our parents and then of ourselves. We promote the same path to opportunity and economic security for our own children. We see the choice and freedom that education makes possible for them.

Two of the family stories, for me, represent turning points in college-going expectations. From my mother's side, I see my great-grandmother. Not just her going to college or her studying music. It is the telling of her story within the family that had greater impact. I heard not simply a story of going to college or of formal study stemming from a love of music. Instead, I learned a defining narrative of independence and strength, and of education as the empowering catalyst making everything else possible. Her education resulted in an independent means to support her children at a time when women were expected to rely on the providence of their husbands. Growing up, I found her story an illustration of the power of an education, providing a single mother with options for independence and not forcing her to rely on a man through remarriage in order to provide for her family.

The other influence comes from my father's father. He set aside the offer of a sports career for my father and insisted instead on an academic path. This must have been a difficult and certainly unpopular decision. I can only imagine the comments from other sports writers at the newspaper. But in my father's reflections, there was no ambiguity or debate. There really was only one choice, and the offers from professional teams were just a well-deserved recognition for my father's talent, nothing more. As I was pursuing my first college degree and working in the afternoons, it was this grandfather who came to see me every day on his way home from the grocery store. At my college graduation, as I was walking across the stage to receive the obligatory

handshake from the college president, I remember seeing, from the corner of my eye, my grandfather, not seated in the audience but standing backstage. While long since retired from the newspaper, he had managed to obtain a press pass. This remains one of my favorite moments. I know he delighted in seeing the achievements of me and my siblings. I think he enjoyed seeing how much we could take for granted, including our education. I think he knew what good work he had started.

Every year the Project GRAD program culminates in the awarding of college scholarships. I get to shake their hands, hear their future plans, meet their parents and share in the joy of the atmosphere of hope and promise. I get to know this new majority of Houston just a little more closely. Like my grandfather, I delight in their potential and the possibilities that exist for them. I know that many of them are the first in their families to go on to higher education and their next steps will change the expectations for younger siblings and eventually their own children. It is this moment when I get to feel that I, too, am playing a part in the beginning of a new story, one that will become theirs to tell.

History of Expectations

As a nation, the United States is beginning to acknowledge that the systems of support for college access have been built to serve a mostly white, middle- and upper-class demographic. The combination of factors - shifting demographics, under-served populations in the poorest performing public school systems, and the need for a more highly educated pool for employment in order to sustain our urban economies - creates a complex problem (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007). Historically, the expectation did not exist for minority populations to be educated at the college level.

Statements like, "All children can learn," have little validity when considered next to the current college access and graduation statistics. If this belief were manifested in the U.S. educational system, all children would be learning at adequate levels to access and succeed in college. The changes in demographics are undeniable, the evidence is clear, yet educational institutions are slow to respond with meaningful changes. Even now, in the research literature, minority, low-income college students are still referred to as "non-traditional."

Project GRAD Houston has a reputation for success with improving both high school graduation rates (Chan, Rodriguez, Story, & Hoppe, 2006) and college access for underrepresented minorities and low-income students (Snipes, Holton, Doolittle, & Sztejnberg, 2006). The model relies on direct involvement of the Houston business and philanthropic communities. Corporate sponsorship of the funding for the scholarships and the corporations' need to access a competent, educated workforce create an immediate and accessible resource. The Project GRAD Houston infrastructure and the organization's historical relationship with Houston's universities provide an open line of access to information and communication between the organization, the school district, and the universities. It seems a natural next step to leverage this potential in order to study and strengthen program elements built on existing relationships. Not only can a community organization create awareness that a problem exists, it can convey viable solutions to the community (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006). The organization can leverage partnerships to bring the community together and dedicate resources toward effective solutions. The organization can provide the necessary pressure to accelerate the

changes required for the benefit of society. Lumina describes the necessity for collaboration in light of the enormous complexity in the following statement:

> In short, there are concrete steps we can take in every state to boost the number of Americans who earn college degrees. These are steps we must take, and we must take them together. … It will require broad-based strategies that address issues of college affordability, educational quality, student support and social equity. These strategies can only be successful if committed partners work in concert to improve both public policy and institutional practice (Lumina Foundation, 2009, p.7)

Benefits of this Study

This study has practical significance to the Project GRAD program in Houston and the other Project GRAD programs across the country. By refining existing program elements or adding new programs to extend the reach of their effectiveness, more children from underrepresented low-income populations will enroll in and graduate from colleges and universities. The program must first identify and respond to the barriers impeding those who qualify for the scholarship from actually using it. If successful, enhanced interventions can be replicated in Houston and provided to other Project GRAD sites across the country.

The study identifies the barriers persisting for college-ready students in their successful access to higher education, both community college and university, and their continuing persistence through certificate or degree completion. Students included in this study are the 2009 and 2010 high school graduates qualified to receive the scholarship offer from Project GRAD Houston.   By qualifying for the scholarship, all students have

earned at least a 2.5 grade point average and graduated from high school in four years or

less and completed the Texas Recommended Plan for graduation. Also, these students

have participated in two of the program's college institutes. The study includes an

analysis of archival survey data, identifying common program experiences associated

with those who do not successfully enroll in college following high school graduation

compared to those who do.

Specific elements of program participation have been examined to determine if

differences emerge in program experiences of students and parents or in perceptions

associated with success, or lack of success, in college enrollment. Following this

analysis, field texts in the form of specific student and family narratives have been

gathered. These narrative stories inform this study and shed light on the barriers

persisting in successful access to higher education and the degree to which the different

elements of the GRAD program actually address the needs of the students served.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to investigate the barriers limiting successful access to higher education for high school graduates who are considered college-ready and members of groups typically underrepresented in higher education. These high school graduates include Hispanic and African American students, students who live in low-income households, students who would be among the first generation in their families to attend college. Two specific groups of students are the focus of this study: the May 2009 and May 2010 high school graduates who qualified to be recipients of the Project GRAD Houston scholarship offer. These students will have experienced the college access programming offered by Project GRAD Houston and met all prerequisite conditions for scholarship qualification. Their parents or guardians will also have had access to the parent-related portions of the program. Eliciting common and contrasting program experiences from those who enroll in college and those who don't will inform the efforts of those working with historically students who have been historically underserved by society.

Most studies associated with improving educational outcomes consider student achievement, institutional outcomes, and educational attainment data within one of two educational systems: 1) elementary and secondary schools, from early childhood through high school graduation, or 2) students enrolled in postsecondary or higher education. This study is primarily concerned with understanding more about students at the moment when they are, in essence, situated in the place between the two systems. Identifying the conditions that either enhance or hinder their participation in higher education will result

in a deeper understanding of their perceptions and the influences on their decision making. That understanding will affect future programming of the organization.

Definition of Terms

In this review of the literature, the term *underrepresented* describes the students whose demographics have historically not been common on the college or university campus and who have been found to encounter difficulty in persisting from one year to the next: students from low-income families, first-generation students, Hispanic and African American students. *Hispanic* includes any populations also designated as Latino, and *African-American* includes any populations also designated as Black. The term *minority* is avoided because the underrepresented population of Hispanic students is now the majority population enrolled in some school districts, including the Houston Independent School District.

Low-income describes students whose family income meets the federal guidelines for either free lunch or reduced-price lunch. The maximum earnings are contingent on family size, but as an example, students from a family of four qualify for free lunch if combined household earnings do not exceed $28,665 and reduced-price lunch if family earnings do not exceed $40,793 (Federal Register, 2009). Federal poverty levels, used to define *poor*, are also adjusted based on family size, and low-income describes families whose income typically falls at or below 185 percent of federal poverty levels. For a family of four, maximum earnings at the poverty level are $22,050, and for low-income would then be $40,793 (Federal Register, 2009).

First-generation describes students whose parents did not enroll in college. They and their siblings will be the first generation from within their families to enroll in

college. *Higher education* refers to degree-granting colleges and universities, private, public, non-profit, or for-profit. *Postsecondary* refers more broadly to any certificate- or degree-granting program that might follow high school graduation. The terms *associate's* and *bachelor's* are used to describe degrees that often are referred to as two- or four-year, respectively. Given that most students require greater time to complete both types of degrees than these numerical nomenclatures convey, and the data regarding degree attainment are reported over a longer period of time, the numerical terminology can be confusing. However, because the terms *two-year* and *four-year* are ubiquitously used to differentiate one type of institution from another, usually the community college and university, these designations are used. Degree *attainment* provides information about degree completion for specific segments of the population but does not measure the graduation performance of degree-granting institutions. The term *K-12* refers to the educational system of elementary, middle, and high schools, from the earliest of grades through the end of high school, which usually consists of kindergarten through twelfth-grade.

Graduation rates related to both high schools and higher education are complex. Measures associated with higher education, in particular, do not take into account the different paths that students travel to reach college completion (Adelman, 2006).

The Status of College Access and Success

The United States Ranking

During the forty years following World War II, the U.S. led the world with 39 percent of the adult population completing an associate's or bachelor's degree (Lumina Foundation, 2009). This attainment rate has remained relatively flat, while other nations

have achieved postsecondary degree attainment for more than half of their young adult populations. The Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (OECD) provides annual comparative data, ranking the position of the U.S. relative to other industrialized nations in degree attainment, associate's degrees or higher (OECD, 2009 & 2010). When comparing all adult populations aged 25- to 64-years, the U.S. ranks sixth (40.3 percent), for the oldest group alone, those 55- to 64-years, the U.S. ranks fourth (38.5 percent), but when comparing the youngest adults aged 25- to 34-years, the U.S. drops in ranking (40.4 percent) to twelfth position (Lee & Rawls, 2010).

The United States has lost ground in educational attainment while almost all other developed nations (i.e., Canada, Japan, Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, Norway, and Korea) have gained ground, and the United States is one of only a few nations where more young adults coming into the workforce are less educated than the generation preceding them. If current trends for degree completion remain unchanged, by 2025, higher education attainment will reach 46.6 percent, a shortfall of almost 23 million college graduates needed in order to meet the anticipated workforce demand (Lumina Foundation, 2010). Unfortunately, the U.S. now stands fifth in the world, not first, as it did in 1983, in sending high school graduates on to higher education. Also, less than 70 percent of U.S. high school students graduate from high school, a figure down more than 5 percent from 75 percent in 1983. Furthermore, not only have advances prior to the 1984 release of *A Nation at Risk* withered away, the U.S. now has a disproportionate share of low-performing students in studies of international comparisons (Fiske, 2008, p. 3).

The desire for increased postsecondary educational attainment in the United States has been framed in different ways by different stakeholders. The heightened

awareness of the status of educational attainment within the United States, the comparative data from other developed and developing countries, and the economic implications associated with maintaining the status quo amidst demographic changes have resulted in leaders from both public and private sectors to express their own calls to action.

President Obama engaged the American public with a vision of regaining global leadership and substantiated his view with data related to workforce demand, calling for the United States to regain its position as first among industrialized nations in college degree attainment by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). To achieve this vision, an additional five million Americans must be graduated from colleges and universities over the next ten years. The College Board (Lee & Rawls, 2010) has framed the goal slightly differently, seeking to achieve a 55 percent increase in the attainment of associate's degrees or higher for young adults, aged 25- to 34-years, by the year 2025. The Access to Success Initiative, consisting of the National Association of System Heads, a membership group of executives from higher education whose four-year institutions enroll 70 percent of the U.S. undergraduate population, has articulated goals for increasing the number of graduates from higher education, but with a focus on both excellence and equity (Engle & Lynch, 2009). Working with the Education Trust, their goal is to halve the gaps in college enrollment and college success by 2015. The gaps to which they refer are those existing between the racial groups and socioeconomic groups represented in their states' high school graduates compared to those that access higher education and those that reach postsecondary degree attainment. Their commitment is

accompanied by carefully defined metrics, with independent and transparent reporting

from the Education Trust (Engle & Lynch, 2009).

Philanthropic foundations with a history of support for educational initiatives

have articulated goals for improved success in higher education. The Lumina Foundation

(2009) has called for increasing U.S. educational attainment rates of high quality degrees

and credentials from 39 percent to 60 percent by the year 2025. Their goal includes

engaging leaders from higher education to enroll and graduate more students from quality

programs that are linked to employment, workforce readiness, and access to further

education (Lumina Foundation, 2010). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2009)

has expressed its support for reaching high school graduation and college readiness rates

of 80 percent, particularly for low-income and underrepresented students, while doubling

the number of low-income adults who by age 26 have successfully earned either a

postsecondary degree or meaningful credential for entry into the workforce. Regardless

of how the goal for a more educated American workforce is articulated, the challenge

facing the United States is great and the need for viable solutions is immediate.

Degrees Awarded

The increases in the absolute number of degrees awarded over the past ten years

can appear encouraging. According to the Nation Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

publication, *The Condition of Education 2010* (Aud et al., 2010), the number of

undergraduate degrees earned increased by 35 percent between the years 1998 and 2008

Overall increases in the numbers of bachelor's degrees awarded in this ten-year period

include an increase for Hispanic students of 86 percent, and African Americans of 55

percent (Aud et al., 2010). However, other considerations provide important context for

evaluating the meaning of these numbers. Despite these increases, only 8 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded in 2008 went to Hispanics, and only 10 percent to African Americans (Aud et al., 2010). The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (2007) reports that only two states award more than twenty degrees for every 100 full-time students enrolled in public two-year institutions, and only eight states award more than twenty degrees for every 100 full-time students enrolled in public four-year institutions.

Graduation Rates

Increasingly, policy is placing greater emphasis on the accountability of higher education for student-level outcomes. The American Council on Education has published a report providing a comparison of the existing databases most often used in studies of postsecondary success (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). It includes the following among its main points: the Department of Education only began collecting graduation rate data in 1996; there is no single database providing an accounting of all students; most data reporting six-year graduation rates fail to account for students still enrolled (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). The existing databases were created for different purposes. Many were designed around the idea of a typical student, one that enrolls as a freshman immediately after high school graduation, attends college full-time, does not transfer between schools on the path to attaining a bachelor's degree in four years. This is not the path of many, if not most, of the students of today.

Another important distinction exists in the difference between graduation rates and attainment rates. "Graduation rates are the share of the students who enter college and graduate within a certain number of years. Educational attainment rates are a

measure of the share of the U.S. population that has earned a postsecondary degree"

(Cook & Pullaro, 2010, p.1). The two measures are certainly connected, but attainment

rates do not report the performance of an institution. Attainment rates report the status of

education of a segment of the population. From an analysis of attainment rates,

comparisons can be made not only state to state, but also between countries. From these

most recent comparisons the United States has been able to attract attention to the

challenges that must be addressed. Just as K-12 systems have hidden behind the cover of

poorly designed metrics for reporting outcomes, like graduation rates and drop-out rates,

so too does higher education. Student-level tracking of college enrollment and college

graduation, as well as any progress along the way, is certainly possible. The data

systems, however, do not yet exist. Rather than create better systems, representatives

from state and federal agencies become mired in arguments over privacy issues and

federal control. Some institutions will suffer from accurate depictions of enrollment,

persistence, and degree attainment. With the importance of educating more students to

higher levels, this level of transparency is, no doubt, on its way.

Levels of Educational Attainment

The National Center for Education Statistics publication, *The Condition of*

Education 2010, defines attainment rates as the percentage of a particular population

having achieved the level of education being considered (Aud et al., 2010). Between

1971 and 2009, the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds completing at least a bachelor's

degree increased from 17 to 29 percent; however, the rate in 2009 was about the same as

the rate in 2000 (Aud et al., 2010). The attainment rate for white students increased from

19 to 37 percent, for African American students from seven to 19 percent, and from five

to 12 percent for Hispanic students. While growth has been achieved for all groups of students, the gaps in bachelor's degree attainment between white students and others have increased, by 50 percent for African Americans (from 12 to 18 percentage points) and almost 80 percent for Hispanics (from 14 to 25 percentage points) (Aud et al., 2010).

The Lumina Foundation (2010) cites U.S. Census Bureau data regarding the 2008 higher education bachelor's degree attainment rates. For U.S. adults aged 25- to 64-years the degree attainment rate reported is 37.9 percent (33 percent in Texas). When disaggregated by population groups, underrepresented students achieved attainment at much lower rates: 26.2 percent for African American populations (27.1 percent in Texas), 18.6 percent for Hispanics (16.2 percent in Texas), compared to 42.2 percent for white populations (43.4 percent in Texas) (Lumina Foundation, 2010).

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education provides data to support the goal of increasing U.S. degree attainment not just in the aggregate, and provides a juxtaposition of the current status alongside the shifting demographics in the United States. Their research gives emphasis to the need for examining and improving the educational outcomes of the rapidly growing but historically underrepresented populations (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Included in the report, *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students,* is an analysis of low-income students' bachelor's degree attainment rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). By 2005, low-income students reached a 12 percent rate for bachelor's degree attainment, twice the 6 percent rate achieved in 1970 (Mortenson, 2007). In contrast, the attainment rate for high-income students for the same year was 73 percent, up from 40 percent (Mortenson, 2007). While each group demonstrates growth over prior years, the gap between the two

groups has almost doubled in the last 35 years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research from the Education Trust illustrates similar disparities (Engle & Lynch, 2009). Comparing bachelor's degree attainment from the years 1975 and 2007, all groups demonstrate growth, but the gaps between African American and Hispanic students in comparison to white students has widened, and the differences between low-income and high-income students has doubled by 2007 (Engle & Lynch, 2009).

Postsecondary Education Opportunity (Mortenson, 2010) has published educational attainment measures by family income quartiles over 20 years. The report attributes any gains in bachelor's degree attainment rates over the last five years exclusively to students from families in the top half of income distribution, while attainment rates for students in the lower half have declined (Mortenson, 2010). Mortenson (2010) attributes these losses to policy shifts beginning in the 1980s resulting in benefits to the students and families who need them the least. Specifically, he cites federal policy shifting from grant aid to loans and tax credits, state policy shifting costs of higher education away from taxpayers to students, and institutional policy shifting resources to attract more affluent students. In 2009, bachelor's degree attainments rates of the top quartile (82.4 percent) stand in sharp contrast to those at the bottom (8.3 percent). In 1980, a student from a family in the top income quartile was five times more likely to reach degree attainment; in 2009 the difference has risen to ten times (Mortenson, 2010).

With shifting demographics, if current gaps are allowed to persist, U.S. educational attainment overall, already trailing other developed nations, will decline in the coming years (Kelly, 2005). Because these gaps between populations have increased

at the same time that student populations have grown among those at the lower levels of attainment, a focus on more than increasing overall numbers becomes essential. Narrowing the gaps in degree attainment of underrepresented African American and Hispanic students by half would supply 50 percent of the additional college graduates needed by the United States in order to regain global leadership in postsecondary degree attainment (National Center for Higher Education Management, 2007). Estimations predict that if nothing changes, The United States will produce 48 million new undergraduates who earn degrees between the years 2005 and 2025. Demand, however, is currently predicted to be 64 million, in order to keep pace with other nations and to have the necessary supply to meet workforce demand. This gap would mean that 16 million jobs would go unfilled (National Center for Higher Education Management, 2007). The U.S. cannot make up this gap by reaching more white and Asian students. The greatest growth in population will be concentrated in the Hispanic population, and because both African Americans and Hispanics have been underserved and underrepresented in higher education, a larger population is available, that if well served, can make up a considerable distance in meeting this need (National Center for Higher Education Management, 2007). These same trends are even more valid for Texas. New degrees and supports to make attainment possible will focus on the existing concentration of Hispanics and the anticipated growth from this population.

Participation Rates in Higher Education

In the last 35 years, undergraduate enrollment in the United States has more than doubled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). During the1970s, the rate of growth in enrollment was higher, 42 percent, than in more recent periods (Aud et al.,

2010). In 2008, undergraduate enrollment reached 16.4 million, an increase of 32 percent in the last ten years, and all historically underrepresented populations show growth within their own ranks (Selingo, 2010). Yet even with demonstrated growth, the status of underrepresentation remains. The Chronicle of Education Higher Education's *Almanac Issue 2010–2011* (Selingo, 2010) reports that in 2008, Hispanics made up only 12 percent of all college enrollments and Black populations only 13.5 percent, compared to White populations at 63.3 percent

The measurement of a specific group's representation within the overall enrollment in higher education provides an indication of how well that group is represented within the specific population of enrolled students. This is not, however, a measure of the participation rate of the available pool of a group of students. Participation is measured by enrollment in the semester following high school graduation and reveals to what degree a population of available students is successfully accessing higher education. Hispanic and African American students and students from low-income families are traditionally underrepresented in enrollment in higher education. They are also less likely to reach enrolled status, to participate in college.

Similar trends are reported by research from the Education Trust (Engle & Lynch, 2009). An analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Digest of Educational Statistics shows that over the past 35 years, from 1972 to 2007, the participation rate in higher education, as measured by percentage of students enrolling in college immediately following high school graduation, has grown for all populations. Despite significant growth (low-income enrollment rates have more than doubled), low-income students in 2007 have not yet reached the participation rate of high-income

students from 35 years ago (Engle & Lynch, 2009). Hispanic and African American students have trailed their white peers in participation rates for all years measured, but the gaps over this 35- year period have widened between white students and both Hispanic and African Americans (Engle & Lynch, 2009).

The U.S. Department of Education includes in its report, *The Conditions of Education 2010,* a special section concerning the conditions surrounding high poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010). When comparing college enrollment rates following high school graduation, students from low-income households have lagged behind students from high income households by at least 20 percentage points, a gap that has persisted since 1972 (Aud et al., 2010).

An even greater gap in college enrollment exists when considering the concentration of poverty within the high school. In 2008, approximately 28 percent of high school graduates from high-poverty schools attended a four-year institution after graduation, compared with 52 percent of high school graduates from low-poverty schools. Since 2000, the average percentage of graduates from high-poverty schools enrolling in college has shown no measurable change, while the college enrollment rate from low-poverty high schools increased over the same period by eight percentage points (Aud et al., 2010).

The Chronicle of Higher Education (Selingo, 2010) illustrates the enrollment trends in higher education of the proportion of U.S. 18- to 24- year old high school graduates participating in higher education over the ten year period from 1998 to 2008. The overall participation of this young adult population increased from 45.3 percent to 46.7 percent (Selingo, 2010). The greatest increases were reported from Hispanic and

white students: Hispanics increased participation from 34.1 percent to 37 percent, while white students increased from 45.2 to 47.3 percent (Selingo, 2010). African American high school graduate participation rates actually fell slightly, from 40.6 percent to 40 percent, over the same 10-year period (Selingo, 2010). These data indicate that in 2008 an estimated 53 percent of all U.S. high school graduates in the 18- to 24- year old population were not continuing their education into higher education. Hispanic and African American students are overrepresented in the group opting out of higher education, with 63 percent of Hispanic high school graduates, 60 percent of African American high school graduates, and 53 percent of white high school graduates. This report is an illustration of the gaps persisting between populations, as well as the size of the available population of high school graduates who are choosing a path other than college.

Population Growth Forecast

Population growth is projected for the historically underrepresented Hispanic and African American populations as well as from populations living in low-income households. According to U.S. Census data, 12.4 percent of the United States population lived in poverty in the year 2000 (Dalaker, 2001). That rate has risen to 14.3 percent in 2009 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). According to the Brookings Institute, the U.S. poverty rate is expected to rise to 16 percent by 2014 (Monea & Sawhill, 2010). Alarming numbers of children are included in these statistics. Over 15 million U.S. children, 20.7 percent of the population, live in poverty, with the majority from underrepresented groups (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). Half of all infants and toddlers in the United States are living in low-income households, and the majority

of these children, 88 percent, have other risk factors in addition to poverty (Edelman, 2010). The Brookings Institute's projections forecast child poverty rates reaching 25.8 percent by the year 2014, nearly 20 million U.S. children (Monea & Sawhill, 2010).

Data of postsecondary enrollment and participation rates based on the income levels of students' families provide another perspective on the gaps that threaten sustainable improvement. Since 1970, students from low-income households have increased enrollment in higher education by more than 60 percent (Mortenson, 2007). However, only one in seven low-income high school graduates earns a bachelor's degree by age twenty-six (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006).

Over the past twenty years, the majority of bachelor's degrees have been awarded disproportionately to students from the wealthiest families (54 percent in 2008, 51 percent in 1988), those who fall in the top quarter of income distribution. Students from the lowest quarter of income received 9 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded in 2008, 8 percent in 1988 (Selingo, 2010). The Pell Institute (Engle & Tinto, 2008) reports that students who are both first-generation and from low-income households are four times more likely to leave college after the first year, and only 11 percent earn a bachelor's degrees after six years, compared to 55 percent of more advantaged students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Over the next ten years, 82 percent of the population growth will be from within minority populations, the groups of students most likely to have been historically underserved by U.S. education and underrepresented in higher education (Lumina Foundation, 2009). In Texas, one of every four children lives in poverty and more than half (57 percent) of the 4.7 million children in the public schools are considered

economically disadvantaged (Center for Public Policy Priorities, 2010). In Houston, as in the United States, the poorest are overrepresented by Hispanic and African Americans. Houston's Hispanic and African American populations each are reported to have near 25 percent living below the poverty level, compared to 13 percent of white Houstonians (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

In the 2009-2010 school year, Houston ISD enrolled a majority (62 percent) Hispanic population, with 80 percent of the total enrollment classified as economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2010a). Hispanics are the fastest growing population group in Houston, have the highest concentration of poverty (25.3 percent), and the lowest population (16.2 percent) of adults aged 25 to 64 years who have attained a two- or four-year degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Following a Cohort to Degree Attainment

According to a report presented in 2007 by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 178,000 students graduated from Texas public high schools in 2001. This graduating class represented 61 percent of their seventh grade cohort, just five years earlier. At this juncture, Texas has lost nearly 40 percent of this particular cohort, but the attrition is greater from the Hispanic population within the cohort (a loss of 46 percent) and the African American population (a loss of 44 percent). From the high school graduates, roughly 71 percent enrolled in higher education. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2007) represents this data as incomplete because of insufficient data management systems between states and institutions. The trend, however, is illustrative of the challenges to be addressed in improving both access to postsecondary education and degree attainment. Just under 43 percent of the total cohort from seventh grade

enrolled in higher education (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2007). The remaining 57 percent of the students were lost. The loss from the original cohort of Hispanics is approximately 67 percent, 64 percent of the African American, and 47 percent of the white cohort. By 2006, 42 percent of the students who participated in higher education actually received a degree or certificate, or 49.6 percent for white students, 29 percent for African Americans, and 28 percent for Hispanics. The failure to attain a college degree from the seventh grade cohort is 82 percent, with the African American attrition of almost 90 percent, just over 90 percent for Hispanics, and 74 percent of white students (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2007).

The Lumina Foundation (Pulley, 2010) illustrates this incremental loss of students at the national level in their presentation of data from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. According to their report, for every 100 students entering ninth grade in the United States, only 69 graduate from high school on time. The following semester, only 38 students enter college or 55 percent of the pool of high school graduates. Another 10 students are lost between year one and year three of college enrollment, and only 20 students will graduate from college within six years, which is 29 percent of the high school graduates and 53 percent of the students who entered college (Pulley, 2010).

In order to increase postsecondary degree attainment, more students must obviously complete their course of study and receive a college degree. Greater rates of completion will result in improved percentages of the adult population attaining postsecondary degrees, provided we continue to improve high school graduation rates, and greater percentages of high school graduates are enrolling in postsecondary schools.

The disproportionate population growth among the underserved will apply

ever-increasing degrees of pressure to "bridge the gap" lest colleges and universities be

overwhelmed by ever-increasing need for remedial classes. As indicated by the cohort

analyses from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2007) and the Lumina

Foundation (Pulley, 2010), significant numbers of students leave the educational system

at different points along the K-12 and higher education continuum: before high school

graduation, between high school graduation and college, and within higher education.

Along the continuum, the losses accumulate and possibilities end.

The Need for Transformation

The combined influence of global competition, rapidly shifting demographics,

and a workforce demand for a more highly educated population have redefined the

expectations of K-12 education in America. These same realities, when considered

against the current trends of access to higher education and successful postsecondary

degree attainment, call for more than re-shaping or reform of separate segments of the

educational system. A transformed educational system of both K-12 and higher

education, aligned in purpose, will result in greater knowledge of student success through

the whole of the educational process.

K-12 and higher education are interdependent, but distinct. Dramatic differences

exist between the two systems: who they serve, how students gain access, and how

success is measured, as well as their purpose or mission. K-12 education is compulsory;

higher education voluntary. K-12 public schools serve virtually all students, are funded

with public dollars, and are free for those living within their designated boundaries of

service. Most colleges and universities have entrance criteria, an application process, and

charge tuition to students. K-12 public schools and their governing systems have for

many years been operating under the scrutiny of complex state and federal accountability

measures linked to student outcomes and harsh school sanctions imposed for

underperformance. At the same time, however, greater value has been placed on the

awarding of high school diplomas than on the rigor of academic preparation associated

with high school graduation (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). K-12 has been

challenged to re-shape itself, to reform or to be reformed, to respond to the vast needs of

every student. Higher education has, for the most part, remained distinctly distanced

from the same level of scrutiny, with students shouldering accountability for their own

success or failure. University of Arizona president Michael Crow described his

perspective of resistance to change within higher education in his keynote address to the

College Board Forum:

> Our institutions of higher education remain entrenched in the organizational
>
> structures and bureaucratic practices of the past, making the concept of
>
> "university innovation" an oxymoron. While our universities produce
>
> extraordinary human capital, most are terrible at objective institutional self-
>
> assessment and rethinking how they do what they do… (November 6, 2008,
>
> paragraph 1).

Recommended actions from The Education Trust (1999) include creating transparency

around existing requirements from both systems, providing all students with a rigorous,

college-preparatory core curriculum, aligning expectations so that one assessment can

measure student achievement for both high school graduation and college entrance, and

allowing advanced students to access college-level work earlier.

Remediation

Without connected systems, aligned standards, and shared accountability, the level of a student's academic readiness to graduate from high school remains limited to scores on state-developed exit-level assessments (Lee & Rawls, 2010). What follows for many as they seek college admission is another set of assessments administered by colleges and universities, even those with open enrollment policies, to determine a student's academic readiness for college level courses. When students gain access to college, but their admission requires remedial courses, the high school diploma conveys little meaning (Education Trust, 1999).

Nationally, 28 percent of students enrolled in college in 2000 were taking one or more remedial courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). As many as 53 percent of college students have been found to take one remedial math or English class (NCES). These courses are costly, students receive no college credit for completing them, and most financial aid does not their cover the cost.

While some studies show that remedial courses assist the under-prepared student in eventually accessing college level material (Bettinger & Long, 2008), the added cost and time create delayed attainment of credits toward degree requirements (Adelman, 2004). Hispanic and African American students are more likely to be enrolled in these courses than their white peers, as are students from low-income households compared to high-income (Strong American Schools, 2008). Degree attainment drops off significantly as the need for remediation increases. Bachelor's degrees are completed at a 57 percent rate within eight years for students with no remediation, compared to only 29 percent who take one or two remedial courses, and 19 percent who must take four courses

(Strong American Schools, 2008). Working to promote higher standards, the American

Diploma Project, a network organization led by Achieve, Inc., The Education Trust, and

the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, has published recommendations for both policy and

practice. The introduction to this document provides the following description of the

value of the high school diploma as it exists today:

> The diploma has lost its value because what it takes to earn one is disconnected
>
> from what it takes for graduates to compete successfully beyond high school –
>
> either in the classroom or in the workplace. Re-establishing the value of the
>
> diploma will require the creation of an inextricable link between high school exit
>
> expectations and the intellectual challenge that graduates invariably will face in
>
> credit-bearing college courses or in high-performance, high-growth jobs.
>
> (Achieve, Inc., 2004, p.1)

Educators and employers agree that the qualities necessary for success in college are the

same as those needed for the workforce (Quint, Thompson, & Bald, 2008; ACT, 2006;

Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003).

College Readiness

College readiness is often narrowly defined in academic terms, based on scores

from college entrance tests or high school exit assessments. College readiness includes

academic readiness, as well as having the skills to persist through the unfamiliar. To

provide a broader scope of what college readiness means, Conley (2007) offers the

following expanded definition:

> College readiness can be defined operationally as the level of preparation a
>
> student needs in order to enroll and succeed – without remediation – in a credit-

bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a

baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program….

The college-ready student envisioned by this definition is able to understand what

is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge that is

presented, and can take away from the course the key intellectual lessons and

dispositions the course was designed to convey and develop. In addition, the

student is prepared to get the most out of the college experience by understanding

the culture and structure of postsecondary education and the ways of knowing and

the intellectual norms of this academic and social environment. The student has

both the mindset and disposition necessary to enable this to happen. (pp. 5-6)

Conley's research further expands the definition of college readiness with the

identification of four components: 1) habits of mind – the skills needed to engage in

college-level learning; 2) key content knowledge; 3) academic behaviors; and 4)

contextual skills – the practical skills for the college application process as well as

student knowledge of the careers and associated college requirements (Coney, 2007,

pp. 12-17). A comprehensive system of measurement for any expanded conception of

college readiness does not exist, and data and accountability systems have not been

organized to address students' needs across systems (Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003).

Access to multi-dimensional and continuous information at the student level would

enhance the knowledge related to the existing gaps and the programs most effective for

addressing or eliminating specific gaps, and enable students to better prepare themselves

(Conley, 2007).

Student Readiness

In an interview regarding the status of success of higher education, Soares (2008) recommended the following considerations for improving higher education's institutional readiness to meet the needs of students: modify institutional practice to provide for student counseling; align secondary schools, postsecondary schools, and workforce training programs to target degree completion; and develop measures to monitor the quality of student-level learning experience in colleges. The Gates Foundation describes student readiness and the need for support to address their needs in this way:

> Despite an increasing number of public and private providers entering the postsecondary education system, there has been very little change in how these institutions design their programs and create support systems to meet the needs of their students, many of whom enter college without the necessary skills to perform college-level work. (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009, p. 6)

Between Two Systems

Between high school graduation and college enrollment, students encounter the full measure of the meaning of two ideals: college-ready high school graduates and student-ready institutions of higher education. This place between high school and college necessitates a journey of its own. Student lives are not static from May's graduation to August's enrollment, nor is the world around them. The students whose journeys are supported by the experiences of family and friends, and their own preparation born from high expectations, are more likely to see themselves and their potential from a perspective of abundance, as their next steps are planned. Without resources and accurate information, students' perceptions are more likely to be framed by

scarcity as they find themselves situated in the place between high school and college, lacking sufficient connections for successful navigation between the two. Competing priorities, particularly for students from low-income or first-generation households, eventually turn students' attention in one direction instead of another, and in that turning they may miss the signals. They may miss potential encounters with other worlds of possibility. The American Diploma Project has described the need to bridge the worlds of K-12 and higher education as follows:

> In almost every state, K–12 and postsecondary education systems operate as
> separate entities. They are governed, financed and operated independently. As a
> result, young people face needless obstacles in moving from one system to the
> next. They face different expectations, different standards and different
> assessments to complete high school and then to enter college. Many students,
> particularly those with little access to help in negotiating their way, find their
> college aspirations needlessly frustrated by conflicting signals about "necessary"
> academic preparation. (Achieve, Inc., 2004, pp. 14-15)

The place between high school and college is a gap primarily in expectations between educational systems (Education Trust, 1999). There is no accountability for alignment between K-12 and higher education or for the next educational steps that students take following high school graduation and before college enrollment (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). One recommendation from research intended to address the need for alignment between higher education and K-12 is the creation of K-16 collaborations (Education Trust, 1999). K-16 is illustrated as both a way of working and a way of thinking, so that the academic goal associated with the ending of high school is

on par with the academic expectation for the beginning of college (Education Trust, 1999). Education Trust president Kati Haycock promotes the development and implementation of standards as the way to bring the two systems together (Education Trust, 1999). K-16 collaborations among committed partners working in the field is a beginning, but as long as state governance of K-12 and higher education remain separate, there will likely be little progress in terms of real change to close the distance between these two worlds. Conley (2010) believes this lack of shared governance is the result of deliberate omission from the historical expectation that only a few would be entering higher education.

Pipeline or Network

The Center for American Progress warns against an overlay of linear input-output models often used in studies of educational systems (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008). The common metaphor of a pipeline does not account for the many ways students access education, particularly the growing populations of historically underrepresented students and the new demands for access to higher education associated with working, transferring between institutions, access to technology, part-time enrollment, etc. (Adelman, 2006). Continuing to view the system of educational attainment through the pipeline image perpetuates the problem of access and success (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008). A network, rather than pipeline, provides a more relevant conception to address the orchestration of the delivery of education based on student needs from decentralized and wide-ranging institutions (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008). The Center for American Progress (CAP) articulates their vision of how this system would operate according to the needs of students, in the following way:

Investing in college-ready students and student-ready colleges to increase degree

completion is a long-term endeavor, requiring student empowerment and systems

change. With this paper, CAP seeks to lay the initial foundations for policies that

will empower students to design customized learning experiences and for

universities to expand their capabilities to deliver these experiences. (Soares &

Mazzeo, 2008, p.5)

College Access

The National College Access Network was organized in 1995 as a membership

organization working to increase access and success in higher education. Their stated

mission is, "To build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access

and success so that all students, especially those underrepresented in postsecondary

education, can achieve their educational dreams" (National College Access Network,

2010). Their growing enrollment of member organizations is evidence of the interest and

participation in this field of work.

Many studies exist to expand the knowledge and improve the practice of

increasing educational outcomes of students within the K-12 system or higher education,

to more completely describe the profile of a college-ready student, and to identify the

challenges associated with different groups of students. Most studies of educational

outcomes spanning K-12 through college completion devote little or no attention to the

conditions or events taking place between the two systems. Research findings related to

differences between high school graduation and college enrollment often illuminate

conditions prior to high school graduation or after college enrollment. Scholarship

programs typically report outcomes of students once college enrollment occurs, the point

when students activate the scholarship offer. There is little research related to conditions

occurring between high school graduation and college enrollment contributing to

different choices made by students sharing common characteristics and experiences

through participation in a college access program and scholarship program.

This study involves students from vulnerable populations historically

underrepresented in higher education: low-income families, Hispanics and African

Americans. Any existing research associated with investigating influences on college

readiness, access, and success with these populations may be informative; however, the

characteristics of the participants or the timing of the events under investigation may

limit the relevance of the findings.   For instance, studies including only subjects who

have successfully completed a bachelor's degree or studies investigating the effects of

transfers between different colleges will be of little relevance to this proposed study of

college-ready students, comparing the differences in program experiences taking place

during their high school years between those who enroll in higher education and those

who do not.

Navigating the System

Coles (2002) reported a variety of reasons that underserved children and their

families have difficulty connecting to the environment of the college campus. Moving

from the homogeneous environment of the high school to the dramatically different world

of the college or university is a difficult transition (Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, &

Lynch, 2003). Effective support systems from high school do not necessarily translate to

the college context. The college student navigates a far more diverse and complex

environment compared to the shared student expectations of the high school (Lee &

Gladieux, 2003).

Students often operate under the misconception that meeting requirements for

high school graduation is an indication of college readiness (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio,

2003). The distribution of information about preparation for college and access to

college preparatory classes and counseling is stratified by income levels, leaving the most

fragile populations with the most incomplete and fractured information (Venezia et al.,

2003). The Education Trust (1999) places emphasis on two important ideas. The first is

that more rigorous standards aligned with both high school and college, by themselves,

will not change the results of inequity of resources and low expectations, particularly for

students from low-income households and students of color. The second is the

importance of recognizing that higher education and the workforce have the same

expectations, and therefore, all teaching should occur within the common expectation of

college and workforce as the planned destination for all students (Education Trust, 1999).

First-generation

A population of students with particular vulnerability in achieving successful

access to college is the first-generation college goers. Parents who have not attended

college are reported as less likely to have college aspirations for their children (55

percent) than those who have some college (71 percent) or those with a bachelor's degree

(91 percent) (Choy, 2001). The same trends follow for the students' access to college-

level academic preparation, including the likelihood that they will take college entrance

tests in high school (Choy, 2001).

A National Center for Educational Statistics report focused exclusively on addressing the needs of first-generation students (Choy, 2001), identifies five steps as a logical sequence leading to college access and an approximate time is associated with each. The first step is for the students to have an aspiration for college in tenth grade. Second, students prepare themselves academically for college level work. Third, students take the SAT or ACT test. Fourth, students make applications to one or more universities. Finally, students are accepted, arrange for financial aid, and enroll (Choy, 2001, p. 9). While these steps may seem overly simplistic, and certainly there is much complexity embedded within each step, the gap in completion of each is dramatic, when measured by the students' parents' level of education. Only 25 percent of students whose parents were educated through high school or less actually took either the SAT or ACT, compared with 73 percent of the students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001).

In Conley's work related to college readiness, he has expressed concern that the first-generation college going students are not well served. In a recent interview, he explained that the United States does not have a generation to wait while this large population gathers the information and experience they need (Richardson, 2010). If students do not have access to this knowledge, Conley believes it is the school's job to make sure they get it.

A focus group study of first-generation students, made up of 135 Texas college-enrolled students, investigated student aspirations, support, and academic readiness that contributed to or hindered their successful access to college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). The original study was designed to include students with similar backgrounds

who had not enrolled in college, but these students proved difficult to reach. Those who were contacted had conflicting work schedules, limiting their ability to participate (Engle et al., 2006), which signaled at least one barrier such students were facing. This helps to underscore the need to incorporate ways of working that align with the reality of the students, rather than the preferences of others.

The students identify three important factors that enhance successful college enrollment: higher aspirations for themselves, greater support through the admissions process, and greater support in the transition into the world of college (Engle et al., 2006). An important resource for these students is the trusting relationships that they and their families were able to develop with special college-access program staff and the existence of the college-access program itself. Students developed a desire for a college education once they understood the connection between a college education, careers, and increased opportunity. Similarly, these first-generation students report that the program experiences provided them with the ability to view themselves as potential for college (Engle et al., 2006). Associated recommendations for the development of the process serving these students include the need for early and frequent communication, following a plan of incremental steps, and inclusion of the family who share in the student's lack of knowledge. The students also expressed the need for extended support to persist in college, as family issues and conflicting priorities develop that can threaten their ability to remain enrolled (Engle et al., 2006).

Aspirations to Applications

The aspirations of students and their families for success in college are high, but the disconnected systems and the lack of clear messages related to the expectations of

college serve to reduce aspirations to the level of passive assumption (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). A study from the Consortium on Chicago School Research investigates students with high aspirations and how they participate in the process of selecting and applying to college (Roderick et al., 2008). This study identifies barriers that students encounter and looks for effective practice that will lead to college enrollment. The students included in this study are primarily from low-income households and first-generation college-going students. The quantitative analysis included in this study involved the use of existing survey data, with sample sizes ranging from 3,138 students to 5,194 students. Subsequent tracking of college enrollments was accomplished through access to data from the National Student Clearinghouse (Roderick et al., 2008). Key findings related to the college application and college enrollment processes of students include the following:

- Only 50 percent of the students enrolled in a four-year college after graduation, only 41 percent of the students took the necessary steps for enrollment, and only 59 percent of students aspiring to attain a four-year degree applied to a four-year college;

- Latino students were the least likely to plan to attend a four-year college and the least likely to apply;

- Only 38 percent of students aspire to enroll in four-year colleges that match their qualifications, and not all students who have academic qualifications sufficient to be accepted to selective colleges expect to attend or apply to those colleges;

- A strong college-going climate at the school was the most significant factor to predict the students' taking steps toward college enrollment, and participating in conversations with teachers. Having discussions about postsecondary plans shapes the likelihood of a better college match to the student's qualifications;

- Applying for federal financial aid (FAFSA) and applying to multiple colleges shape the likelihood that students will be accepted to four-year colleges and enroll.

(Roderick et al., 2008, pp. 3-11)

The Consortium on Chicago School Research study includes an accompanying qualitative analysis, taken from 105 cases studies, each from five student interviews, all of which were subjected to intensive coding and verification processes. The case studies provide rich details of the many complicating factors surrounding students' lives and the choices they make that result in narrowing possibilities over time, beginning in their junior year of high school when aspirations are high (Roderick et al., 2008). A consistent theme is a lack of connection between the aspirations for college and the knowledge of the necessary steps to get there; a strong link to a well-defined plan for college studies; the knowledge of the steps required for application and acceptance to universities and access to financial aid; and the lack of a personal commitment for taking action. Many factors were at play in these students' lives. Many barriers were associated with financial issues, how to access financial aid, a clear plan for how to methodically go about applying for federal aid and scholarships. Underlying the lack of appropriate steps taken by the students is also a lack of conversations with teachers or other adults about these

processes (Roderick et al., 2008). The accompanying interpretive summary from this study highlights the need for the following supports: a structured college search and applications process, the engagement of school staff and faculty in creating a strong culture for college-going expectations so that students seek the best match of college for their level of readiness; place greater emphasis on students' access to information about costs of college, access to financial aid, and the FAFSA process (Roderick et al., 2008, pp. 99-103).

Academic Preparation

A student's high school academic preparation consistently ranks ahead of everything else in association with successful college completion (Adelman, 2006; Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006; Cabrera, Burkum, & LaNasa, 2003). In *The Toolbox Revisited,* a study of a national representation of a cohort of students including only those who attended a four-year college at some point, Adelman (2006) follows students from high school into postsecondary education. Key high school indicators associated with college success include completing a mathematics course above Algebra 2, and grades, as represented by class ranking and grade point average (Adelman, 2006). An important distinction is that this is a study not of college access but of completion, or "…the culmination of opportunity, advisement, choice, effort and commitment" (Adelman, 2006, p. 9). As such, the student population for this study includes only those from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) who at some point enrolled in a   four-year college, resulting in a contraction to 41 percent of the beginning NELS eighth-grade population (Adelman, 2006). Also, because of the selected population, the cohort includes lesser representations of students from the lower-income

quintiles and underrepresented minority populations. Adelman's *Toolbox* study provides

a description of the educational experiences of students who sought a bachelor's degree

and at some point successfully enrolled in a four-year college, associating experiences

with successful degree attainment. The clear message for high schools and for students is

the importance of providing and participating in more academically challenging courses,

with emphasis on the importance of completing mathematics beyond Algebra II

(Adelman, 2006).

Often access to more rigorous courses is difficult. According to the Center for

American Progress (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008), only 28 percent of students from

low-income households are enrolled in college-preparatory courses, compared with 65

percent of students from high-income backgrounds. African Americans access these

courses at a 28 percent rate, Hispanics at 23 percent, while 34 percent of white students

are enrolled (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008). Part of what frustrates progress toward a goal of

all students accessing rigorous courses is the narrowing of the curriculum and by

assessment-driven accountability. Teachers are afraid to give up test preparation, and

students have become accustomed to this norm. Teachers and principals would have to

be willing to possibly lose their jobs in order to take the bold steps to realize this goal.

Adelman (2006) concludes the study by writing directly to the high school

student, emphasizing the students' responsibility for active participation in activities that

will contribute to their educational success including the importance of taking

challenging courses in high school, the importance of reading well enough to

comprehend college-level material in all content areas, and the heightened importance of

mathematics and completing levels of mathematics beyond Algebra 2. He encourages

students to act on their own initiative and conduct a thorough investigation of college-level expectations. He recommends completing at least six hours of dual credit courses either through school or on their own through summer enrollment at a community college.

Ranking of Supports

The Bridgespan Group emphasizes academic preparation, including rigorous courses, as highest ranking for college success outcomes, particularly for students from low-income families (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006). The importance of completion of mathematics courses beyond Algebra II is also cited. Adelman (2006) places the importance of mathematics in the context of its power as an indicator of success for getting to college, but also as a very real need for employment opportunity in the following elaboration he has provided regarding the importance of rigorous curriculum:

The highest level of mathematics reached in high school continues to be a key marker in precollegiate momentum, with the tipping point of momentum toward a bachelor's degree now firmly above Algebra 2. But in order for that momentum to pay off, earning credits in truly college-level mathematics on the postsecondary side is *de rigeur*. The world has gone quantitative: business, geography, criminal justice, history, allied health fields—a full range of disciplines and job tasks tells students why math requirements are not just some abstract school exercise. By the end of the second calendar year of enrollment, the gap in credit generation in college-level mathematics between those who eventually earned bachelor's

degrees and those who didn't is 71 to 38 percent . …The math gap is something

we definitely have to fix. (p. xix)

The Bridgespan Group's research provides a ranking of supports associated with

college access and success for students from low-income families. The study is based on

the dataset from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), but the

sample is limited to include only students identified as low-income and only those who

graduated from high school academically prepared (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006).

The definition and level of academic preparation is, "…a classification of 'somewhat

qualified' or better on the NELS college qualification index. This threshold is a

composite variable, which uses a student's single highest score on one of five

assessments to determine preparation: class rank, GPA, SAT, ACT, or NELS twelfth

grade test score" (Bedsworth et al., 2006, p. 27). Four categories of college supports

were identified: expectations, culture and support, information and awareness, and

perception of affordability. Within each category, four to six variables were assigned to

represent the different support, and each variable was separated into two groups,

affirmative answers and negative answers (Bedsworth, et al., 2006, p. 9).

To determine what supports help low-income students access and complete

college and which of these supports are more highly associated with success, an analysis

of the progression for each group through college completion provided the data for

determining the incremental effect of each support as it correlates to college enrollment

and completion (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006, p. 9). To determine the prevalence

of supports available to low-income students, the control for academic preparation was

removed so that the population of students from low-income households could be

examined in total (Bedsworth et al., 2006, p. 9). The final question included in this study relates to the investigation of the supports with positive effects and any interaction they may have with high school academic preparation (Bedsworth et al., 2006, p. 16).

From the combined analyses, The Bridgespan Group study provides a listing of supports ranked most important to least important for increasing both college enrollment and college success for students from low-income families (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006, p.18). Germane to this proposed study are the findings associated with college enrollment. Least important supports include parental involvement without a clear link to college, and providing students with procedural assistance in isolation of other supports. At the other end of the spectrum, academic preparation leads the list of most important, followed by the need for college-going expectations linked to the perceived need for a college degree. The high ranking of importance of the expectation of a college preparatory curriculum supports the idea that aspirations for college are not connected to an understanding of the expectations of college. Also high in this ranking is support related to making college more affordable. Still important are the college-going expectations of peers and adults of influence, as well as the presence of parental involvement that is directly connected to college (Bedsworth et al., 2006, p.18).

The Bridgespan Group ends this study with recommendations including one related to the engagement of community-based organizations. To help in creating greater awareness of the problem and the potential for solutions, to assist in mobilizing community and other resources to accelerate change, and to provide demonstration models of effective practice, community-based organizations are recommended as an

effective way to begin immediate action for areas with great need (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006).

Promise Lost

Fiske (2008), when learning the dismal status of the United States in leaving almost one-third of its citizens out of the ranks of college degree attainment, describes the situation as a broken covenant with the nation's young people who will not have education needed for success in today's economy. Hahn and Price (2008) describe a promise that is lost in their report of the many students who are college-qualified, yet who do not take advantage of higher education. Their analysis is based on two surveys of national scope. Both surveys were conducted by the Institute of Higher Education Policy, one from a sample of 1,830 students and another from high school counselors. Combined with their analysis are perspectives from a roundtable discussion of experts on higher education. The resulting report pulls multiple perspectives together to shed light on the complex needs of a specific category of students, those who graduate from high schools having achieved at a level indicating readiness for college, but who do not take the next step to enroll in college. The operational definition of college readiness in this study required that the respondents had to meet a minimum of all of the following criteria: high school GPAs of 2.5 or higher; completion of at least a college preparatory, honors, AP, or IB curriculum (self-reported by students); and completion of at least Algebra I and Algebra 2. One-third of the students were from low-income households.

Hahn and Price (2008) recommend the need for further study, framing new questions that emerge from their analysis, including the following:

- Why do so many college-qualified students fail to take the steps necessary for college enrollment?

- Why are high achievers more likely to be skeptical of the benefits of college?

- What are the curricular offerings that would connect to college enrollment and then better inform policy development? (p. 31)

Also recommended by Hahn and Price is enhanced policy in five areas related to college access and success: cost and financial aid, ease of access to financial information, the college enrollment process, the opportunity cost of going to college, and economic mobility.

Important issues facing the college-qualified student emerge from the Hahn and Price (2008) study. Over two-thirds of the participating college-ready students reported a belief in the fact that college is important, yet few of these students actually applied to college, took the SAT or ACT, or took the steps necessary for applying for financial aid. The need to work and earn wages remains very important to students as they make their decisions about college. The findings directly related to the students' needs are tied to addressing students' knowledge and beliefs of the immediate real costs of attending college, affordability and sources available for support, and the opportunity cost of opting for low-wage work over a college education (Hahn & Price, 2008).

Delayed Enrollment

One group of students included in the population caught between high school and higher education is the group who eventually seek enrollment in postsecondary education, but whose enrollment occurs at least one year beyond the date of high school

graduation. Students delay their enrollment for different reasons, including financial

obligations and other work requirements, military duty, lack of academic readiness, and

family (Horn, Cataldi, & Sikora, 2005). Their eventual enrollment may take place

because of later needs for continuing their education. These students have considerable

risk of not completing postsecondary credentials (Adelman, 2006; Horn et al., 2005).

These students are more often from low-income families, either Hispanic or African

American, and first-generation potential college students (Horn et al., 2005). They are

also more likely to enroll as part-time students in associate degree or vocational

programs, or attend community college or for-profit institutions, while working in excess

of 30 hours per week (Horn et al., 2005). Their chances of enrolling in a bachelor's

degree program decreases as the length of the delay increases, even though 60 percent of

the participants report aspirations at the time of high school graduation for higher degree

attainment (Horn et al., 2005). While less likely to complete a degree than those who

enroll immediately, 43 percent of participants included in this study with a delay of no

more than one year completed postsecondary credentials, with 20 percent completing a

bachelor's degree within six years (Horn et al., 2005).

     Academic preparations associated with students who delay enrollment in

postsecondary studies match more closely with preparations of high school dropouts than

with their peers who enrolled immediately after graduation. These students rank behind

their peers in high school mathematics courses completed, rigor of high school program,

and general college readiness (Horn, Cataldi, & Sikora, 2005).

Affordability and Access to Aid

The most obvious factor contributing to college success is academic preparation, but it is not the only factor. Hahn and Price (2008) have provided an expanded view that supports what others have stressed. The Education Trust (Haycock, 2006) revealed that the highest performing low-income students access college at the same rate as the lowest performing high-income students.

Affordability is the most common reason given by students for not attending college, but many who make this claim lack accurate information, sufficient preparation, or personal and social capital for college readiness (Lee & Rawls, 2010). The issue of affordability is more than a perception. Tuition costs have risen while family incomes have declined. Low-income families are facing prohibitive costs for education (Lee & Rawls, 2010; National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2009). Tuition increases have not been matched with grant aid, hurting the students most who have the greatest need (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2009). States have dedicated resources toward merit-based scholarships, and while these programs may positively affect college enrollments, the College Board (Lee & Rawls, 2010) reports that these programs benefit those who are more likely to be able to afford college without the scholarship. At the same time, merit-based awards lessen the available funding for low-income students, students who are most likely to be from the underrepresented populations whose access and success are essential in order to reach national goals for educational attainment.

While most low-income undergraduate students received some form of financial aid (approximately 91 percent), 65 percent of the wealthiest students also received aid;

however, for aid awarded based on factors other than need, both upper and middle income undergraduate students' distribution has doubled in the past fifteen years, from 12 percent for each of these groups enrolled in 1992 to 23 percent for middle income and 25 percent for upper income students in 2007. Over the same time, the lower income undergraduate students' share of merit-based aid has risen only from 10 percent to 17 percent (Selingo, 2010).

Above all else, the resounding message for practitioners and for policy that directly responds to the students' needs is tied to addressing students' knowledge and beliefs related to both the immediate real costs of attending college, affordability and sources available for support, as well as the ultimate cost of opting for low wage work over a college education (Hahn & Price, 2008). The College Board (Lee & Rawls, 2010) makes the point that financial aid systems are outdated, based on typical students and college attendance patterns that no longer exist, and many students who are eligible for aid are unaware of their eligibility or do not know how to access the resources.

Access to Information

Accurate and available college-access information for all students has never been more important, particularly for the historically underserved, first-generation, and low-income students and their families. These are often the students who have aspirations, but lack the resources to make the best decisions for their futures. "When students do not complete their educational goals, there are substantial losses to the student, the state, and the nation—in terms of lost opportunity and lower standards of living" (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010, p.5).

Lindholm (2006) interviewed high school graduates who had made the choice not to pursue college following high school graduation to learn the factors that influenced their decisions. Following an analysis of the dynamics of the educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment, the study considers the effects of any interaction of individual and environmental factors (Lindholm, 2006, p. 581). Students expressed a continuing aspiration for going to college, but their lives were already situated in challenging circumstances of an adult world. Students who expressed opinions of their access to guidance while in high school were resentful over the lack of support they felt they had received at school, as well as the limited encouragement from parents at home. School personnel were described negatively for not providing access to college-going courses. Many blamed teachers as instrumental in their decision not to go to college. Interestingly, these students spoke of the importance of school personnel and teachers in helping to shape students' aspirations (Lindhohm, 2006). This study demonstrates the perspectives of students whose low self-efficacy and limited resources at home left them without means to make college their destination. Yet beyond their resentment for the lack of support from the school staff, these students invested in the school and the school staff school all the responsibility and potential to provide for students what they cannot access on their own (Lindholm, 2006).

Other studies of student perceptions of schools as their source of social capital confirm this finding. The potential exists to support students in their desire to reach college through adequate staffing of trained school personnel (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Students from communities lacking experiences to support college planning have expressed value in the following support from their schools: college experiences, college

talk, support in the college choice process, and guidance related to their individual needs (Farmer-Hinton, 2008, p. 138).

Counseling

The College Board (Lee & Rawls, 2010) includes improving the quality of counseling in its ten-point plan for reaching educational attainment goals, making specific reference to the importance of counselors to first-generation and low-income students. College enrollment is improved through two main efforts: 1) fostering a college-going culture and 2) providing adequate support and guidance. Counselors who focus on these efforts are more likely to achieve desired outcomes (Roderick et al., 2008). This focus is less likely to occur in high-need, low-income schools, where it is needed most. Professional norms for counseling recommend rations of one counselor for every 250 students (American Counselor Association, 2010), yet low-income and urban schools average 1,056 students per counselor (Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998). In 2008, public school counselors reported spending only 22.8 percent of their time on work related to postsecondary admissions, compared to 54.4 percent of time spent by private school counselors (Lee & Rawls, 2010).

Students and their families encounter unfamiliar territory when considering access to higher education, and the process for college admission remains complex (Lee & Rawls, 2010). Information that students and their families receive in orientation programs is ordinarily delivered all at once, overwhelming these students. The college admission process is complex and for many first-generation and underrepresented students, the process itself is a barrier to access (Lee & Rawls, 2010). Hispanic and Black populations are overrepresented in for-profit institutions (Hispanic and Black

enrollments combined were 40 percent of the total for-profit enrollment in 2008) as well

as two-year public institutions, with a combined 31 percent of the same populations

(Selingo, 2010).

Connecting College Decisions to Opportunity Cost

Hahn and Price (2008) provide insight into the world of the college-ready students

who do not enroll in higher education. Their findings illustrate the gap between the

students' value of a college education, their understanding of the importance of degree

attainment for higher wage jobs, and the decisions that the students eventually make for

themselves. Their study calls for a closer alignment of counseling services to address

both the perceived and real barriers of the students, particularly low-income and

first-generation students (Hahn & Price, 2008). As the importance of an education

grows, and students are only prepared for higher education by a more assessment based

curriculum, the opportunity gap is expanded (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Guidance

In order to understand the role of the guidance counselor from the perspective of

the student, Public Agenda has published their second report based on surveys of a

nationally representative sample of 614 young adults aged 22 to 30, all of whom had

experienced some level of postsecondary education (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont,

2010). Their report is organized into four key findings:

- A majority of students rated their high school guidance counselors as fair
  or poor, and almost half felt anonymous to their counselors;

- Students who do not complete college are most likely from low-income
  families having low levels of education. Poorly counseled students

      received less financial aid and made more questionable decisions about

      their education;

- Teachers and coaches provided more helpful support;

- Counseling in higher education is rated more favorably (pp. 5-13).

Within each finding is greater detail from the survey as well as recommendations for further research, providing a transparent representation of the students' criticisms. They speak directly of the quality of the guidance they received. While sometimes harsh, the study balances this with an examination of the factors contributing to the problems (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010). Counselors face changing roles, with less emphasis on providing guidance and more on managing discipline, testing, and scheduling. The professional development needs of guidance counselors are often unaddressed. Counseling assignments have been stretched well beyond the recommended 100 to one ratio of students to counselor, with California as high as 1,000 students for each counselor (Johnson et al., 2010).

Further complicating matters, the world of higher education is in flux as these systems try to support greater demand to serve a more diverse population. The approach to higher education and preparation for success within its system is more complicated for the first-generation college-bound student. Similarly, providing guidance to access adequate financial resources is complex. Careers, programs of study, and choices of colleges are constantly changing (Johnson et al., 2010). Many counselors lack access to current information for the wide array of college choices and for the information that will adequately inform the less traditional student.

Public Agenda examines the practices of counselors, those professionals who are expected to provide information and guidance to help students become informed consumers of their own education. Linking an individual student's college aspirations to the actual guidance and counseling services received provides insight into the breakdown between student and counselor. Sophisticated educational institutions are expected to adapt more responsively to students who are most in need of information and support as they strive for access to higher education (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010). Students need access to information that is both relevant and timely to plan their next steps. Better systems are necessary to facilitate ease of access to this information. Public Agenda calls for schools to develop new resources to link students with schools most suited to their needs. Continuing to deliver guidance counseling through an outdated system or overburdened staff will not accomplish what is needed. Every student needs to be linked to relevant information in order to make the best decisions for their educational futures.

Belief in Relevance of Higher Education

The Bridgespan study found evidence of effectiveness through creating a link for the students between their specific career interests and the student's expectation that a bachelor's degree is necessary (Bedsworth, Colby, & Doctor, 2006). Further supporting this idea is the finding that revealed the importance of professional socialization and student access to professional experiences outside of the class (McKinney, Saxe, & Cobb, 1998). College-qualified students need to see a direct link to the resources, and a compelling personal reason to delay work and its immediate rewards for a better future (Hahn & Price, 2008). In describing Brand and Xie's study on disadvantaged students'

benefit from college, Glen (2010) writes that their study questions the notion that students rely only on rational choice when considering college. Such a model is too simple, they contend, and complex sociological factors are a part of college decisions.

Other Supports

Early College Experiences

Early college experiences will not remove economic barriers or make up for years of inadequate academic preparation. Colleges and universities have developed summer transition programs and other support systems on campus to respond to these needs, but students must be aware of these resources in order to take advantage of them. Careful examination of these support systems is needed to ensure that they are designed to be relevant to students.

Tierney and Jun (2001) provide a way of classifying college preparation programs, defined in their study as "enhancement programs aimed at increasing access to college for low-income youths who attend public schools" (p. 206). Four types of programs are identified. The first two are providers of test preparation services and programs promoting science and mathematics. A third type of programming includes those focused on adding counseling and academic skill development to better prepare students for college. While the first two program types typically serve students who are most likely already planning on college, the third reaches a variety of students, often first-generation students, but typically has some method for identifying students who will best be served by their program design. In these three models, according to Tierney and Jun (2001), the culture and background of the student remains largely irrelevant.

The fourth model, in contrast, intentionally builds from the cultural integrity of the students served. In this case, the focus enables students to affirm their culture as they learn to know the cultural capital for success in college (Tierney & Jun, 2001). Students, teachers, families, and administrators then work together in a more positive manner. "Schooling is linked, not separate from, the out of school contexts in which children live" (Tierney & Jun, 2001, p. 215). This type of program adds value to the existing school and includes experiences with the university and other constituencies. The specific program from this study includes some distinct differences in comparison to Project GRAD; however, the theoretical framework on which it is built, the affirmation of culture and the inclusion of community, is a common and important element in line with the design of Project GRAD.

Scholarship Programs

The promise of a scholarship or elevated expectations from the school or community cannot change preexisting conditions that influence a child's life; however, an organized program with relevant resources can help students adjust and eliminate some of the barriers that result from these conditions. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2009) includes a significant commitment of scholarship funding directed toward high achieving minority students from low-income households, focused on promoting the development of leadership and public service. Affordability is an issue for most, but particularly for low-income families. According to the Gates report (2009), 4.5 million qualified students will not attend four-year colleges because of the costs of higher education.

Most scholarship programs that are designed to encourage underrepresented students' pursuit of a college education are organized around a process: identifying high achieving students, student application to the organization, and an award letter sent to the student. Once enrolled, the awarding organization may have supports in place or other opportunities available to the recipients. The comprehensive nature of the Project GRAD Houston program and the lack of selectivity associated with how students are able to participate in its programs, other than enrollment in one of the partnering schools, make comparisons with other scholarship programs difficult.

Assets versus Deficits

All young people, including the students participating at any point along the continuum of the educational system, represent the future of a community. The success of these individuals plays significantly in determining the success of the community (Lumina Foundation, 2010). Davies, Safarik, and Banning (2003) cautioned against developing support models for underrepresented students that only address what is lacking or only identify deficits. With all good intentions directed to support underrepresented population, the result is to isolate further or marginalize these students (Davies et al., 2003). Student support systems designed around student strengths or asset based models, honor their ambitions, talents and aspirations, and their parents' desire for their success (Coles, 2002). Following a similar line of thought, Aldeman (2007) recommends the use of terms to describe educational outcomes and measures that are associated with desired goals for students. Reporting students' persistence, academic pathways, or degree attainment convey active student participation instead of the

inference of students' passivity associated with institutional retention, pipeline metaphors, or attrition (Adelman, 2007).

The Research Summary

Heightened interest in the outcomes achieved by K-12 school systems has been focused on the public schools, where the vast majority of American children are educated and where the lowest levels of success, typically understood by test scores, have been achieved. School districts have been slow to respond adequately to a new demand for all children to graduate high school ready for college-level academic work. The College Board (Lee & Rawls, 2010), through their Commission on Access, Admissions, and Success in Higher Education Policy, has established a plan consisting of ten recommendations to improve educational outcomes related ultimately to postsecondary degree attainment. These recommendations include the need to align the K-12 education system with college admission expectations; to clarify and simplify the admission process, to provide more need-based grant aid while simplifying and making financial aid process more transparent, and to keep college affordable (Lee & Rawls, 2010).

The Place Between

Many efforts to understand and to address the lack of educational attainment in America, particularly for low-income students and students of color, focus attention on addressing the gaps in academic performance overall and between different groups of students, at the critical junctures in high school and college. Over the last decade, an abundance of programs and organizations have emerged to address the new challenges facing the educational systems. A surfeit of data is available to measure student success,

or lack of it, at the end of the K-12 continuum, with disaggregation at every level, so that the differences in performance can be known and practice can be changed.

More recently, college readiness, enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment are among the junctures where student progress and institutional success are increasingly measured. As K-12 and higher education move toward each other, the expectation of one begins to look more familiar to the other. Without alignment and a focus on the process of transition for the students, a gap will persist where students can become less visible. In this place, populations of successful high school graduates, for whatever reason, do not take the necessary next steps to enroll in higher education with their peers. This is the place between the two worlds of complex educational systems.

Every barrier to college access and success is in play with the students identified for this study. Most of them are from low-income families and are Hispanic or African American. Many students, although considered college-ready at the time of their graduation, learn that they must enroll in remedial or developmental courses in their freshman year. Many are the first in their family's history or are among the first generation from their family to attend college or even to graduate from high school. These qualities may come with an incomplete conception of the world of higher education (Choy, 2001). Many face the added pressure of needing to work at least part-time, supporting themselves or contributing to the support of their families. They also hold the self-concept of wage earner first, student second (Correll, 2005), which mirrors the historical legacy they have received from their parents.

Reid and Moore (2008), in their collection of oral histories of 13 first-generation college students, organize their study to provide the students with a way of understanding

their high school experiences as these experiences relate to their actions in the present and their plans for the future. With social capital as the theoretical framework, the study was based on the interrelationship of family, school, and support network. Their research questions involved gathering the students' perceptions of their high school preparations and the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Data collection protocols were survey and individual interviews (Reid & Moore, 2008).

Advanced Placement courses and other rigorous courses, specific teacher or administrator relationships, support from other programs focused on college-access, and leadership development were all included as helpful. In contrast, lack of academic readiness, poor writing skills, study skills, and time management skills to balance the need to work while in college were listed as deficits the students felt (Reid & Moore, 2008). The study's findings are organized into different sets of recommendations for the consideration of teachers, administrators, school counselors, and even postsecondary educators. Reid and Moore chose to conclude their written record of this research with the following:

> The voices missing in this study are those who planned to attend college and did not go and those who started and then left. The participants in this study expressed their concern for those former classmates with equal or better academic skills who are not attending college. Of concern to educators and parents of potential first-generation urban college students must be the answer to this question: "What prevented them from accessing postsecondary education?"(Reid & Moore, 2008, p.260)

Reid and Moore (2008) have ended their study with the story of those not present, those who did not make it and left the community. The researchers allow the story to be told in the only way it can, with the power of silent voices because of the students' absence. We are able to experience the diminished text and know the final question can only be answered by these students.

Context

This inquiry is taking form in the midst of much noise surrounding public education. Everyone participating in the conversation on education seems to agree on one thing; we need to do a better job for our children. Beyond this narrow bit of common ground, the landscape quickly becomes filled with an array of questions, answers, statistics, programs, policies, theories, test scores, and even superheroes joining the fray. The supply of ideas to solve someone else's conception of the challenge facing our schools is seemingly unlimited. In the cacophony of competing solutions, our communities are no longer heard.

The United States has lost its position as the best educated nation in the world. While other nations like Canada, Japan, Korea, and Norway are reaching new heights in educating their young adults, the U.S. has fallen to a 12th place ranking, but not because of reduced achievement. The United States has remained the same while eleven other nations improved. The reality is that since the 1980s and when *A Nation at Risk* was released, U.S. efforts have been busy directed toward fixing, reforming, transforming, and overhauling the schools to ensure that young adults are able to achieve a college level education. Globalization places new pressures on U.S. educational leaders to rethink next steps in order to produce a workforce capable of innovation, collaboration, and

leadership in the future, flatter world. The rush of new technology and the international scale of business operations force countries to re-examine education policy.

The need for greater numbers of people reaching higher levels of education than ever before creates challenge enough, but the nation, and particularly Texas, is in the midst of an unprecedented shift in demographics. The populations that our educational systems must serve are those who have been least likely to succeed. In Houston's public school system, enrollment is over 60 percent Hispanic and over 80 percent low-income. These are the same groups who are most underrepresented in higher education. Today, one in seven children in the U.S. is living in poverty, and nearly one in four in Texas. This fact alone places stress on the education system to address many complications that are associated with factors well outside of their control.

This is our landscape for inquiry. Because of the nature of the work and the knowledge community, there is no place more appropriate than Houston. The work is directly linked as an effort to respond to the challenges that have been mentioned, but always within the context and recognition of community. The inquiry will consist of two phases: 1) an analysis of archival Project GRAD Houston program and survey data, and 2) the collection and study of personal narratives.

Phase One

Student data used in this study is existing archival data received and maintained by the Project GRAD Houston program in conjunction with their scholarship program and scholarship offer. The survey data is collected annually by the program. Collection of survey data is an existing, ongoing element of the Project GRAD Houston program and participating in the survey is voluntary. The survey is open to all students who

qualify for the scholarship offer. For the graduating classes of 2009 and 2010, a combined total of 1,369 students qualified for the scholarship offer and were asked to respond to this survey. These respondents, an estimated population of 200 students, represent a convenience sample of the original population of scholarship qualifiers. The program's archival survey data used in this study will not include any identifier data.

The descriptive report results from an analysis of archival Project GRAD Houston program and survey data, adapted from the Institute for Higher Education Policy National Survey of College Qualified Students (Hahn & Price, 2008).

An analysis of their responses describes the program experiences (college institutes attended, counseling from college access coordinator, assistance with finding additional financial resources for college) and the academic and other indicators (high school attended, GPA, highest level of mathematics course completed in high school, gender, ethnicity, beliefs concerning importance of higher education for attaining personal goals, educational attainment of mother or father or older siblings, expectations of teachers or friends or school counselors, other perceived barriers, other factors influencing choices, etc.) associated with successful scholarship use and college enrollment. Archival program survey data includes choices made after high school graduation, recollected experiences from high school regarding college preparation and counseling, participation in the college application process, perceived reasons for decision to enroll/not enroll, level of educational attainment of parents and siblings, financial obligations and familial considerations, and the perceived importance of college education for personal goals.

Phase One seeks to answer the following questions:

a) For students who qualify for the scholarship offer, what program elements increase the likelihood of college enrollment for students with certain characteristics? For instance, for students whose parents did not enroll in college, is there an increased likelihood of college enrollment if they participated in one form of college institute over another? For students who graduated from a specific high school, is there an increased likelihood of college enrollment linked to the expectations of support from the school counselors or their conversations with their college access coordinator?

b) For students from each of the five participating high schools, what differences in program support or other academic, environmental, or school-based factors exist between those who enroll in college and those who do not?

Phase Two

Field texts in the form of specific student and family narratives were gathered. Participation is voluntary.

Phase Two of this study consists of the collection of field texts from personal narratives of students and their parents/guardians who of their free will agree to participate. These narratives are studied in order to delve more deeply into underlying choices concerning continuing or ending academic pursuits. A purposive sample of a maximum of ten voluntary students and their parents or guardians participated in the narrative data collection. Participants include representatives from each of the five high schools.

The participants include a balance of the following criteria in line with program participation: 70 percent Hispanic and 30 percent African American; at least 90 percent

are from households considered low-income as defined by their eligibility to participate in federal free or reduced-price lunch program. Because this study seeks to gain knowledge of differences between those who make use of the scholarship offer to enroll in college and those who do not, intensity sampling was used to select a balance of participants from each of these groups.

The problems faced by our public schools are intrinsically related to the problems faced by our communities. Community consists of a complex and interconnected web of relationships where accountability is intrinsic and shared, not imposed. That which is good for the community school is good for the local businesses. The homeowner is as invested in the neighborhood as his retirement. Community is about continuity, it is a quality of life-support system for its members. From the network of the community, sustainable systems for improvement will emerge.

As the executive director of Project GRAD Houston, my work is centered on college access and success for low-income public school students. My career in education began in 1993 as a second career. I began teaching fifth grade in Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, part of the Jefferson Davis High School community. The year that I began teaching in this community was the same school-year that Project GRAD Houston was officially formed, seeking to address the needs of this same community. As a direct result of the collaborative nature of the organization of Project GRAD, I have engaged with this work from the time I entered the education profession. As a teacher, I worked in an advisory capacity during the early days of the program's design. Later, through the initial partnership and its later expansion, I was able to act as a

peer coach with other teachers and to travel to other school districts in support of new site development.

Most recently I have been placed in a position of influence, returning to the Houston ISD collaboration, able to direct resources toward supporting educational aspiration of youth and their ability to access higher education, a chief means of vaulting one's socio-economic condition. This opportunity has situated me in the middle of the vicious cycle of reform, within and without school systems. I hope to learn from this inquiry how better to position myself and the organization so that the most impact can be achieved from the limited funds available and where to shift focus and resources to continue this important work. Understanding more about the experiences and situations surrounding these students will contribute to the extant knowledge available to educators from the worlds on either side of the place between.

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

In the early years of the Project GRAD program, a participating student was asked to help explain why some of her peers did not take up the GRAD scholarship offer and enroll in college. After successfully completing her baccalaureate degree and becoming the first member of her family to reach both high school and college graduation, she was puzzled by the question. "Why," she responded, "would you ask me? The only way to know the answer would be to ask those students." That female graduate's candid response planted the seed for the researcher gathering data from the field where the story had been lived, to find the voice that speaks directly from the experience. Accessing this voice is only the beginning of the process. The researcher is equally challenged to create an environment where the voice can be heard and can contribute to the formation of new or more complete knowledge of social, practical, and personal value.   Maxine Greene (2007) describes the importance of learning from those whose voices have been historically silenced with the following:

> So I have to not only try to expand my own consciousness as much as I can, I
> have to listen harder than maybe I have listened in the past, and realize how many
> voices there are, and realize how much credibility I have to give to voices that are
> different than mine (p. 1).

Both women, the GRAD scholar and Maxine Greene, address the value of coupling outcome data with the very real voices of whose stories are expected to be represented by the data.

Comprehensive inquiry includes the responses from those who hold the story. When the story belongs to underserved low-income populations, the data gathering necessitates careful tuning to allow the responses to pass unchanged through any filter of bias, culture, and the dissonance of statistical information. Both number and story can combine to contribute new knowledge (Eisner, 1997), with quantitative data describing participant groups and program outcomes, and qualitative data illuminating context, process, and human experience (Caracelli & Greene, 1993).

This study investigates the barriers limiting successful access to higher education of Hispanic and African American students from low-income communities, who have qualified to receive a college scholarship offer. Based on the prerequisite conditions for scholarship qualification, the students are considered to have met a definition of college readiness. This study illuminates the differences in experiences and perspectives associated with those who successfully enroll in college and those who do not.

The Research Summary

The vast majority of American children are educated in public schools, and the school is seen as the place where the American dream is realized or lost. With the 1983 publication of the federal report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education), fear of international competition influenced how Americans began to assess the quality of their K-12 educational systems. *A Nation at Risk* was followed by the 2002 legislation, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), adding high-stakes accountability systems tied to sanctions for underperforming schools. The call for school reform remains strong as schools operate under an array of state and federal mandates. Teachers and principals share in accountability with compensation and

continued employment tied to outcomes on standardized tests. Little attention is given to address growing poverty and the impact of social and economic disadvantage on learning (Berliner, 2009; Fiske & Rosenberg, 2008; Ravitch, 2010).

Global competition, rapidly shifting demographics, and a workforce demand for a more highly educated population have redefined expectations for educational outcomes. After eight years of the mandates of NCLB, quantitative measures abound while achievement remains flat. The desire for reform and higher accountability has spread into higher education. A greater understanding exists within the education community of the need to provide not only quality academic preparation, but also support for students and families in addressing non-academic factors. Affordability, personal and community expectations, and navigating the unfamiliar world of higher education are additional factors that can limit the success of students. A transformed educational system of both K-12 and higher education, aligned in purpose, will result in greater knowledge of student success through the whole of the educational process.

Justification for Inquiry

Significance

Most studies associated with improving educational outcomes consider student achievement, institutional outcomes, and educational attainment data in either K-12 or higher education systems. Rarely do such studies attempt to assess educational outcomes for both systems viewed as part of a broader continuum, and rarer still is the focus on the experiences of students post K-12 and pre-higher education. This study is primarily concerned with what takes place after high school graduation but before college

enrollment, between the two systems, for Hispanic and African American students from low-income communities.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge concerning college access and college success of underserved and underrepresented populations participating in higher education through an examination of the experiences and perspectives of students who have qualified for and been awarded scholarships, but do not capitalize on the offer. The study has practical significance to the Project GRAD program in Houston and other Project GRAD programs across the country and other college access programs serving similar populations of students. The community working in the field of improving college access and success of underserved and underrepresented populations benefit from the knowledge gained from this study, which includes the identification of factors either facilitating or hindering successful navigation from K-12 to higher education for scholarship qualified students, as well as providing additional insight gained from the perspectives of these students and their parents.

Social Purpose

Human behavior is complex. Outcome data alone provide an incomplete and potentially inaccurate representation when the participant voices are absent. The inclusion of the perspectives of students and their families, in their own language, as they want to tell it, is an essential and fundamental contribution to understanding. Their perspective is their story, rather than data gathered and filtered through another's perspective and their agendas, which may not be in the individual's best interests (Dewey, 1938). What are the stories of Houston's low-income "college-ready" students who make choices other than higher education? What factors do they consider in order to

select one alternative over another? What barriers remain unaddressed or even unintentionally created by program or policy? What policy should be reconsidered to better support the educational goals of these students? The existing K-12 accountability systems do nothing to ensure and are not intended to address student readiness to enter even the community college levels of higher education.

The school in American society has been the place where achieving the American dream is played out, the place where potential and effort combine to triumph over any inequities associated with economic conditions or historic wrongs or an absence of social capital. Education is America's great equalizer. The school is a place of amazing power and possibility. With so many children in America not achieving anyone's dream, not reaching anyone's ideal of what it is supposed to mean to be educated, the school has become the place where the blame and need for reform are situated. In this sense, the school is the scapegoat, expected to redress the effects of the inequity and imbalance that follow from the concentration of wealth in an ever-decreasing proportion of Americans while the numbers of children living in or near poverty grows at an enormous rate.

Practical Purpose

School districts have been slow to recognize the shifting priorities and unable to respond adequately to the resulting demand for all children to graduate high school ready for college level academic work. An abundance of programs and organizations have emerged to address the perceived problems existing within the K-12 school system. Interested outsiders, often led or funded by a small group of extremely wealthy philanthropists, have become engaged reformers.

The Project GRAD model grew from a business-philanthropic relationship with a single high school in the Houston ISD located on the edge of downtown Houston. GRAD's intent was to increase the high school and college success rates of a low-income Hispanic community. With the support and engagement of then Superintendent Rod Paige, the model developed with a plan for expansion within Houston. From its inception, the model was shaped by the strategic engagement of members from the community and school, as well as other partners, including existing non-profits and area universities. This model includes the unique aspect of engagement of those working within the system in place, creating what is described by Project GRAD as a healthy tension within the collaboration. The arrangement still elicited criticism from some within the schools as a heavy-handed implementation of programs, and from others, including some philanthropic organizations, as too broad in scope. Both groups sometimes agreed that the idea of accountability for the college success of low-income students in urban schools was beyond reach.

The intentional design of simultaneously working both inside and outside the school system provides a way to exert pressure both on the school system for higher student achievement as well as on the non-profit partner to be relevant and responsive to the schools' needs while bringing value to the community. The unique aspect of this relationship has been less understood by subsequent superintendents and other school district leaders, but the GRAD organization is built on the belief that this kind of arrangement is necessary for developing models of reform that are able to achieve results, and sustain them over time while remaining scalable for widespread expansion.

In the fall of 2010, the Project GRAD /HISD collaboration witnessed the 5,000[th]

college-bound student enroll as a new college freshman using the Project GRAD

scholarship. Each year, however, students who have participated in this program

graduate from high school "college ready" and do not take advantage of this scholarship.

This inquiry, by gathering the perspectives of students and families, will result in a

clearer understanding of the perceived relevance of certain aspects of the Project GRAD

program, particularly the work of the staff dedicated to college access and the early

college experiences from the college institutes. Refining these resources to better meet

the needs of students and families will improve Houston's programmatic outcomes and

potentially inform the work of other Project GRAD sites in other cities. The learning that

emerges from this study will benefit any program focused on improving college access

and college success for similar populations of students.

Personal Purpose

As a direct result of the collaborative nature of the organization of Project GRAD,

I have been engaged with this work from the time I entered the education profession. As

a teacher, I worked in an advisory capacity during the early days of the program's design.

Later, through the initial partnership and its expansion, I was able to act as a peer coach

with other teachers and to travel to other school districts in several states in support of

new site development. Most recently I have returned to the Houston ISD collaboration in

a position of influence, able to direct resources toward supporting educational aspiration

of youth and their ability to access higher education, a chief means of vaulting their

socio-economic condition. This opportunity has situated me in the middle of the cycle of

reform characterized by routine changes in senior school district management, the

infusion of competing agendas from the political arena both locally and nationally, increasingly strident positions taken by increasingly threatened stakeholders, the search for blame, and the championing of the latest "magic bullet" of reform, all played out against a backdrop of radically changing demographics, dwindling financial resources, and a steadily growing population of underserved students. I hope to be able to learn from this inquiry how to position myself and the organization so that the most impact can be achieved from the limited funds available and where to shift focus and resources to continue this important work.

The Study

Participants

The particular populations of students included in this study are comprised of the May 2009 and May 2010 high school graduates, and the parents of the graduates, who qualified to receive the Project GRAD Houston scholarship offer. Schools partnering with Project GRAD Houston are Davis, Yates, Wheatley, Reagan, and Sam Houston High Schools in the Houston Independent School District. These were the only high schools participating in the Project GRAD Houston program at the time of this study. These schools are comprehensive urban high schools serving low-income communities. The students enrolled in these schools are virtually all African American or Hispanic. By including all students who, by the time of their 2009 or 2010 high school graduation, qualified to receive the Project GRAD Houston scholarship offer, the subjects of this study had similar college access program experiences, yet only some had successfully enrolled in higher education, making a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives interesting and informative.

Scholarship qualification means that the students met the following program criteria by the time of their high school graduation: enrolled as a ninth grade student in a Project GRAD Houston partnering high school and signed, along with their parents or guardian, an agreement indicating their desire to earn the scholarship offer (Appendix A); taken the PSAT test while in 10th or 11th grade; graduated from high school in four years or less having completed Houston ISD's Recommended Program for high school graduation; earned at least a 2.5 grade point average by the time of graduation; and participated in and successfully completed two Project GRAD Houston College Institute programs prior to high school graduation.

College Institutes were designed to be university-based programs, typically held during June or July of two- to three weeks in duration. These programs have historically been designed collaboratively with the colleges and universities and have been organized around different professional themes and academic content. Each Institute typically has included rigorous and engaging academics, career exploration, and experiences designed to acquaint students with life on a college campus. Daily transportation has been provided for the students to and from their high school. A stipend, ranging from $100 to $150 depending on program duration, has also been paid to each student upon successful completion of the Institute. In recent years because of limited funding, alternative programs have also been designed so that students were able to remain on their high school campuses and receive college-access information through an extended day class or through a special advocacy period within the school day. This alternative institute experience was compared with the university-based experiences to determine efficacy in promoting the likelihood of college enrollments.

Methodology

David Berliner, in 2002, describes the work of educational research as a far more difficult science because of the complex nature of the classroom. The context of the classroom is ever-changing and cannot be controlled. Berliner (2002) writes:

These huge context effects cause scientists great trouble in trying to understand school life. It is the reason that qualitative inquiry has become so important in educational research. It is the hardest-to- do science, educators often need knowledge of the particular - the local - while in the easier-to-do sciences, the aim is for more general knowledge…. Doing science and implementing scientific findings are so difficult in education because humans in schools are embedded in complex and changing networks of social interaction. (p. 19)

Shank and Villella (2004) offer the following metaphor, from Shank's 2002 description, to understand the power of qualitative study: where quantitative analysis provides a view from a window, "a clear and transparent look at things" (p. 48), qualitative studies are more like a lantern, moving forward to illuminate dark corners and angles. Qualitative research is based on the belief that the social reality is continuously constructed by the human beings within it (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005).

Where a quantitative analysis provides a way of knowing causation existing between or among phenomena, a qualitative analysis provides a specific understanding of phenomena within a given context (Seifert, Goodman, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2010). The quantitative phase of this study has provided a view from the window, a way of examining the pathways associated with the journey to college for these students. Informed by the knowledge gained from this analysis, the qualitative phase moved the

inquiry into the landscape, where details of the paths associated with this journey have been illuminated for deeper understanding. With mixed methods research, the broad relationships can be elucidated by context, and an individual's experience can be connected to broader measures (Seifert et al., 2010). Depending upon the data collected, the nature of the study, and the research questions, one method may take priority over the other, or remain equal. The use of a mixed methods design should result in a better understanding than would be possible with only one approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

This study is of mixed methods design. Because the researcher holds a distinct position with respect to advancing the educational outcomes of low-income families, the research included a transformative theoretical framework throughout the research process (Mertens, 2007). In this regard, the study followed a sequential, explanatory, and transformative design in two discrete phases: the initial phase was quantitative, followed by a second qualitative phase (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The initial quantitative phase consisted of an analysis of archival Project GRAD Houston program and survey data. Following this analysis, the qualitative phase of the research plan involved the collection and analysis of personal narratives. This study included a participant-selection variant, placing a priority on the second phase of the research, the qualitative phase (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). It was anticipated that the qualitative phase would provide a deeper understanding, explain any outlier data, or give context to unanticipated outcomes. It was necessary to first perform the quantitative study in order to refine the qualitative questions, data collection protocols, and the sampling to be used for the qualitative phase. It is at this point that mixing took place. The qualitative phase was

built upon and refined by the results from the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase consisted of gathering and analysis of field texts.

Clandinin, Pusher, and Murray Orr (2007) differentiate between the methodology of narrative inquiry and the telling of story. To support the practice, they have organized a list of eight elements for consideration in the design of this form of inquiry:

1. provide justification, why the study is important;

2. name the phenomenon, what is being inquired into;

3. describe the particular methods used to study the phenomenon;

4. describe the analysis and interpretation process;

5. position the study in relation to other research of the phenomenon;

6. understand the uniqueness of the study that could not be known through existing work or other methodologies;

7. be aware of special ethical considerations; and

8. be aware of the process of representation (Clandinin, Pusher, & Murray Orr, 2007, pp. 24-31)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) represent the need to have in mind the questions of social significance and purpose, particularly as story from field text becomes research text. The analysis provides depth and illumination of the quantitative results, expands the knowledge and range of inquiry (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989), and is expected to inform future program development, and facilitate advocacy for change in policy.

Phase One

Student data used in this study was existing archival data received and maintained by the Project GRAD Houston program in conjunction with the scholarship program and

scholarship offer. Additionally, a program survey, a copy of which is included in Appendix B, is an adaptation of the survey used by the Institute for Higher Education Policy National Survey of College Qualified Students (Hahn & Price, 2008). Collection of survey data is an existing, ongoing element of the Project GRAD Houston program and survey participation is voluntary. The survey is open to all students who qualify for the scholarship offer. For the graduating classes of 2009 and 2010, a combined total of 1,345 students qualified for the scholarship offer and were asked to respond. These respondents, an estimated population of up to 300 students, represent a convenience sample of the original population of scholarship qualifiers.

An analysis of the program data has resulted in descriptive data of the population and an analysis of the ways in which the program experiences (college institutes attended) and the academic and other indicators (high school attended, GPA, ethnicity, gender) are associated with successful scholarship use and college enrollment. Archival program survey data includes choices made after high school graduation, recollected experiences from high school regarding college preparation and counseling, participation in the college application process, perceived reasons for decision to enroll/not enroll, level of educational attainment of parents and siblings, financial obligations, familial considerations, and perceived importance of college education in personal goal attainment.

Phase One answes the following questions: a) For students who qualify for the scholarship offer, what program elements increase the likelihood of college enrollment for those students with particular characteristics? For instance, for students whose grade point average falls within a certain range, is there an increased likelihood of college

enrollment if they participated in one form of college institute over another? For students who graduated from a specific high school, is there an increased likelihood of college enrollment?; b) For students from each of the five participating high schools, what differences in program support, academic, environmental, or school-based factors exist between those who enroll in college and those who do not?

Phase One Research Plan

For students whose grade point average falls within a certain range, is there an increased likelihood of college enrollment if they participated in one form of college institute over another? In order to design a response to this inquiry, two primary dependent variables were generated to represent college enrollment for this population of high school graduates. The first dependent variable generated was a dichotomous representation of whether or not students from each cohort, or scholar class 2009 and 2010, were enrolled at a postsecondary institution in the fall semester following their completion of high school. The second dependent variable, also a dichotomous identification, represented whether or not the student was enrolled at a postsecondary institution in either the fall or spring semester following their high school graduation date. The primary independent variables of interest that were expected to be positively correlated with college enrollment were Project GRAD College Institute attendance and high school grade point average (GPA).

Research supports these expectations. Readiness for college is a complex idea, involving academic preparation as well as other types of readiness. Conley (2007) provides research to expand definitions of college readiness to include academic readiness as well as having the skills to persist through the unfamiliar. Beyond readiness,

knowing the other characteristics or supports needed for the student to take action is difficult. The grade point average, while not consistent across schools or even courses, is a common indicator of achievement. Adelman (2006) gives emphasis to the significance of academic readiness for success though degree attainment, stressing the importance of access in high school to more rigorous courses and the successful completion of math courses beyond Algebra 2. Project GRAD's College Institutes are built on the theoretical framework that students need not only exposure and success with rigorous academics, but also exposure and experience creating an identity as students on a college campus.

Each year, Project GRAD staff has worked collaboratively with university partners to create the College Institute experience for students. Each institute varies in design; one may focus on mathematics preparation, another on careers in the medical professions. Independent of the Project GRAD organization, other university-based institutes are available to students. GRAD approves most of these as substitutes for their own in meeting scholarship qualifications. These institutes are referred to as GRAD-endorsed and university-based college institutes.

In recent years, GRAD has responded to funding challenges by allowing other experiences to qualify for one of the two college institute experiences. These alternatives do not provide the same level of exposure to a university setting, nor do they include the same level of academic challenge. Their focus is directed toward communication with students regarding the process of applying to college and other motivational ideas. The programs take place on the high school campus, scheduled either as an after-school program or within the school day as an advisory period and continuing throughout the

semester. Typical requirements are that students successfully complete a college application or attend college fairs.

College Institute attendance was represented by two independent variables—attendance at a GRAD-endorsed and university-based college institute and attendance at a non-university-based college institute. Both college institute variables are count variables that could obtain a value from "0" to "2." A student's combined institute value could be less than "2" if the student appealed attendance from one institute for various reasons or if the student's attendance at one or two sessions was not documented or could not be verified by GRAD staff. High school GPA was obtained directly from the respective high school. Student GPAs were actual values rather than rounded estimates and ranged from 1.53 to 4.5500002.

Four additional independent variables were available in the dataset that could be used as valuable control variables. Specifically, student scholar class, high school affiliation, gender, and ethnicity were available for each student. Student scholar class, or cohort, ranged from 2009 to 2010. This variable is best represented as a dummy variable, so a variable for the class of 2009 was coded as "1" for students from this class and "0" for the remaining students who were all from the 2010 cohort. High school attendance was represented by a dummy variable for the name of the high school where each student graduated. Next, dummy variables for gender and ethnicity were assigned to each student. The variable for female will be included in the logistic regression models and males will serve as the reference category. All students in the database were identified as being a member of only one of the following four ethnic categories: African

American or Black, Asian, Hispanic, or White. White students will serve as the category of reference in the respective calculations.

In determining the impact of college institute attendance and GPA on a student's probability of enrolling in a postsecondary institution the following year, two multivariate logistic regression models were employed. This was necessary since both dependent variables are dichotomous, either holding a value of enrolled (coded as "0") or not enrolled (coded as "1"). Standard OLS regression models were estimated to compare levels of significance found among the relevant independent variables. Levels of statistical significance were found to be equivalent for each variable; however, the results of these models were not included since the assumptions of the ordinary least squares model are seriously violated, coefficient estimates are biased, and post-estimation predictions cannot be generated. Ordinary least squares, or linear, regression assumes that the dependent variable is normally distributed and can hold a positive or negative value. Dichotomous dependent variables cannot fit a normal distribution or be negative, so they must be estimated using an appropriate maximum likelihood model.

Phase Two

Following the completion of the first phase of research, program staff recommended as many as 50 former high school students, all of whom were identified from the larger group of 2009 and 2010 scholarship qualifiers. All recommended students and their parents or guardians were contacted by phone, mail, or email to determine their interest in voluntarily participating in this narrative study. A purposive sample of a maximum of ten voluntary students and their parents or guardians participated in the narrative data collection. Field texts in the form of specific student

and family narratives were gathered. These narratives were studied in order to delve more deeply into underlying choices concerning continuing or ending academic pursuits.

Participants included representatives from each of the five high schools. The participants were a balance of the following criteria, in line with program participation: 70 percent Hispanic and 30 percent African American; at least 90 percent were from households considered low-income as defined by their eligibility to participate in federal free or reduced-price lunch program. Because this study seeks to gain knowledge of differences between those who make use of the scholarship offer to enroll in college and those who do not, intensity sampling was used to select a balance of participants from each of these groups. Personal narratives were collected from participating students and parents/guardians in the context of an interview in order to delve into choices made for continuing or ending academic pursuits. Sample interview questions are included in Appendix C.

Each interview in the narrative data collection lasted no more than two hours, taking place over the telephone, at a setting in the community that is convenient to the participants, or in the offices of Project GRAD Houston. The setting of the interview was the choice of the participant. The inquiry was conducted in a manner that is guided by an established epistemology, embedded in time and place and context. A more nuanced form of knowing was expected to result from the contributions of the participants, whose stories illustrate the innovation as it is experienced, and its effect as it is understood in context. The researcher, or observer, was imbedded in this world, and acted as the instrument of research.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as existing within the three dimensional space of temporality (past, present, future), the personal and social, and place. The inquiry itself moves back and forth with time, inward and outward with feelings and reactions, and the inquiry is situated within place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Reflective practice was used so that students and parents make meaning of their past experiences through the lens of their present situations. Meaning is constructed at intersections along these dimensions, and the researcher was complicit and cannot remain detached (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The model used for the presentation of the narrative accounts and the subsequent organization for their analysis is taken from Clandinin et al. (2010). In the 2010 Clandinin study, narrative accounts of young adults who had left school prior to graduation were collected, resulting in a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of their lives. This deeper understanding of student stories can inform policy, creating the possibility for improved schooling (Clandinin et al., 2010). Field texts in the form of transcripts, field notes, and other observations informed the narrative accounts. In all cases pseudonyms were assigned for the participants, and any reference to the actual names of high schools or universities were omitted to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The research assistants responded to the draft narrative accounts, to support the validity of the representation.

The nine narrative accounts were then examined individually and collectively for key intersections or threads that emerged from across accounts. Broadening techniques were used to bring additional perspectives into the milieu of the students' and parents' stories. This deepens the representation of the complex context in which these students

make decisions about their future plans. Topics that were encountered through broadening include: the focus of resources on the higher achieving students, the impact of accountability systems and the student's role within it, the context of the home environment and the student's place in the family, higher education and the influence of for-profit universities, and a student's sense of self-efficacy and resilience.

From the themes that emerged, the investigator used burrowing techniques, delving more deeply into specific areas. Significant changes have taken place in resource allocation, resulting in a narrowing of some elements of program experiences. Other life events have disrupted the community or the family – fear because of undocumented status of parents, an unexpected pregnancy, and financial insecurity. The ability to examine the minutiae of a situation has provided an illustration with much larger meaning for the study.

The Research and Interpretive Tools

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005) provide the following steps for interpretational analysis: 1) collect all the data from the study into a database; 2) divide the text into meaningful segments, numbering each line sequentially; 3) create categories for coding data; 4) code each segment of data with all related categories; 5) gather all segments related to each category; and 6) generate constructs from data categories (p. 315). The process of analysis can follow an explicit system of precise procedures or rely on the intuition of the investigator (Gall et al., 2005). Interpretivist epistemology relies on three categories of criteria for reliability: 1) reflecting sensitivity to reader's needs, 2) reflecting use of sound research methods, and 3) reflecting thoroughness of data collection and analysis (Gall et al., 2005, pp. 320-322).

Shank and Villella (2004) offer criteria for use in the evaluation of qualitative studies. These are: investigative depth, interpretive adequacy, illuminative fertility, and participatory accountability. They recommend the following suggestions as guidelines: 1) examine research assumptions carefully; 2) move away from a preoccupation over design and return to ethnographic roots by paying attention to the situation at hand and moving forward from that point; and 3) remember that education is a lively process and when it is not, the study needs correcting (Shank & Villella, 2004, pp. 53-54). This study has illustrated policy in play. Indirectly, the personal stories engage readers to imagine better program and policy. Policy as it unfolds in practice and as it is experienced can be very different from its design or intention.

Figure 3.1 provides a summary of the planned research design.

Figure 3.1 Diagram of Research Design

Phase One	Procedure	Product
Collect Quantitative Data	Archival program data N=1,332 multivariate logistic regression models 1,345 population and Archival survey data N=300 estimated size of convenience sample from 1,369 population	Ranges of measures of GPA and College Institute correlated to College Enrollment. Descriptive statistics Demographic data Numerical data Program data
Analysis of Quantitative Data		

Refine Elements of Qualitative Plan:
Interview Protocol
Identify potential population

Phase Two	Procedure	Product
Collect Qualitative Data	Narrative Inquiry N=9 purposive sample	Field text Interview transcripts Research review Photographs
Analysis of Qualitative Data	Convert field text to research text Coding and analysis	Themes and categories Illustrative analysis

Integrate findings from both phases of research
Interpretation
Implications
Explanations

Adapted from Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011, p. 121).

Conclusion

In *The White Album*, Joan Didion reflects upon her own lived experiences in the 1960s from her perspective as writer in 1979. Her reflection begins, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion, 1979, p.1). Didion continues with a description of how we, as humans, "…impose a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience" (p.1). Both researchers and practitioners in the field of education seek answers to complex questions. Today, the answers come fast and sure, with the promise of being research-based and their implementation to be data-driven. Didion's description provides an accurate portrayal of the world of education today, in its own tumultuous time, when heightened rhetoric is a tool to convey an essential truth from a forced collection of disparate and often meaningless pieces of data.

This study follows a sequential, explanatory, and transformative design in two discrete phases: the initial phase is quantitative, followed by a second qualitative phase. The research plan follows a rigorous process of data collection, preparation, exploration, analysis, and representation for both the quantitative and the qualitative sections of the study (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Analysis occurs at multiple points, using the quantitative data results to inform the qualitative design. The qualitative results provide opportunity for increased understanding of the quantitative findings. By shedding light upon the more subtle distinctions of their own lived experience, the collected stories of the participants provide a deeper knowledge to those working within the field of practice.

Chapter IV: Quantitative Study

This study is of mixed methods design, following a sequential, explanatory, and transformative design in two discrete phases: an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative phase of the study has been performed first. The findings from the quantitative analysis have been used to inform the qualitative design.

A View from the Window

This study examines the journey of access to college for high school graduates and their families from five of Houston's low-income communities. The specific student groups included in the study are the 2009 and 2010 high school graduates who have qualified to receive the scholarship offer from Project GRAD Houston. The initial quantitative phase provides a view from the window, looking out to describe these students and to examine their experiences of preparation and support. This phase of the study also provides a snapshot of the success of these students in accessing higher education and their ability to persist toward degree completion.

Student Enrollment and Project GRAD Program Data

Project GRAD Houston serves five low-income communities in Houston, Texas, where a combined total of approximately 44,000 elementary through high school students attend Houston Independent School District schools. Within each community is one comprehensive high school, serving students enrolled in grades nine through twelve. Table 4.1 provides two years of enrollment data, student ethnicity as a percentage of student enrollment, and the percentage of students characterized as economically disadvantaged. The table includes enrollments for ninth through twelfth grades of the

five high schools associated with the Project GRAD Houston partnership, all Houston

ISD, and Texas public schools. A comparison of the data illustrates that the five high

schools whose students are the subject of this study enroll a higher percentage of

Hispanic and African American students than the District or State, and in combination, a

higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

Table 4.1

Student Characteristics as a Percentage of Enrollment

| Location | Student Enrollment grades 9 through 12 | Ethnicity | | | | Economically Disadvantaged |
		African American	Hispanic	African American or Hispanic	Other	
2008-2009 Academic Year						
Davis High School	1,615	10.2%	88.6%	98.8%	1.2%	89.1%
Reagan High School	1,730	8.2%	86.9%	95.1%	4.9%	81.5%
Sam Houston High School	2,363	5.1%	92.4%	97.5%	2.5%	89.1%
Wheatley High School	1,150	64.8%	34.8%	99.6%	0.4%	93.2%
Yates High School	1,252	91.5%	7.6%	99.1%	0.9%	74.0%
Combined	8,110	28.6%	69.2%	97.8%	2.2%	89.0%
Houston Independent School District	47,088	27.8%	61.1%	88.9%	11.1%	81.0%
Texas public schools	1,295,528	14.2%	47.9%	62.1%	37.9%	56.7%
2009-2010 Academic Year						
Davis High School	1,584	10.5%	88.5%	99.0%	1.0%	92.5%
Reagan High School	1,846	8.8%	86.1%	94.9%	5.1%	74.5%
Sam Houston High School	2,545	5.2%	92.8%	98.0%	2.0%	92.0%
Wheatley High School	1,067	61.5%	38.1%	99.6%	0.4%	85.8%
Yates High School	1,213	92.0%	7.3%	99.3%	0.7%	53.1%
Combined	8,255	27.0%	70.8%	97.9%	2.1%	84.3%
Houston Independent School District	48,227	27.1%	61.8%	88.9%	11.1%	79.9%
Texas public schools	1,317,164	14.0%	48.6%	62.6%	37.4%	59.0%

Note. Data are taken from annual reports provided by the Texas Education Agency's
Academic Excellence Indicator System, 2010a.

High School Graduates

Table 4.2 provides a snapshot of the 2009 high school graduates for the participating high schools, Houston ISD, and Texas. These high schools enroll a less affluent population (Table 4.1), yet the graduates from four of the five schools earned diplomas under the recommended program at higher rates than the District or the State. This diploma type is required by the GRAD scholarship offer. Houston ISD includes the recommended program as the default curriculum. Added emphasis for scholarship qualification may contribute to the higher percentages achieved at these schools.

Table 4.2

Student Characteristics as a Percentage of High School Graduates

| Location | Count | Ethnicity | | | Diploma Type |
		African American	Hispanic	Other	Recommended Program or better [a]
Class of 2009					
Davis High School	305	12.1%	86.2%	1.7%	88.5%
Reagan High School	331	5.7%	89.1%	5.2%	93.4%
Sam Houston High School	414	5.3%	92.5%	2.2%	88.2%
Wheatley High School	218	75.7%	24.3%	0.0%	72.0%
Yates High School	223	90.6%	8.5%	0.9%	87.0%
Combined	1,491	29.8%	67.9%	2.2%	86.9%
Houston Independent School District	8,595	30.3%	51.0%	18.7%	86.9%
Texas public schools	264,275	13.6%	39.7%	46.7%	82.5%

Note. Data are taken from annual reports provided by the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System, 2010a.
[a]The Recommended High School Program is designed by the Texas Education Agency as a more rigorous plan for high school graduation. This is the default curriculum of the Houston Independent School District and graduating under this plan is a requirement in order to qualify for the Project GRAD Scholarship offer.

Scholarship Qualifiers

Each year, Project GRAD Houston awards a $4,000 scholarship to qualifying students. Scholarship qualification requires that the students meet the following program criteria by the time of their high school graduation:

- enrolled as a ninth grade student in a Project GRAD Houston partnering high school and signed, along with their parents or guardian, an agreement indicating their desire to earn the scholarship offer (Appendix A);

- took the PSAT test while in 10th or 11th grade;

- graduated from high school in four years or less having completed Houston ISD's Recommended Program for high school graduation;

- earned at least a 2.5 grade point average by the time of graduation; and

- participated in and successfully completed two Project GRAD Houston College Institute programs prior to high school graduation.

The numbers of students meeting these requirements are reported by each of the high schools at the time of high school graduation. Students may submit a request to have one or more conditions waived. Table 4.3 provides the numbers of students from each high school for each graduating class reported as qualifying for the scholarship offer. A summary analysis of their grade point averages is found in Table 4.4. Because of the appeal process, it is not unexpected to see grade point averages below the 2.5 minimum, but further analysis indicated a total of 20 students with GPAs below the minimum in 2009 (a range of 2.32 to 2.49) and a total of 67 students from 2010 (a range of 1.53 to 2.49). Further investigation is recommended at the program level to determine what conditions have caused the increase.

Table 4.3

Students Qualifying for the Project GRAD Houston Scholarship Offer

| | Number of Students | | Percent |
| | High School Graduating | Qualifying for | Qualifying to |
Location	Class	Scholarship	Graduates
Class of 2009			
Davis High School	305	138	45.2%
Reagan High School	331	139	42.0%
Sam Houston High School	414	196	47.3%
Wheatley High School	218	80	36.7%
Yates High School	223	123	55.2%
Combined	1,491	676	45.3%
Class of 2010			
Davis High School	323	116	35.9%
Reagan High School	348	134	38.5%
Sam Houston High School	431	215	49.9%
Wheatley High School	232	81	34.9%
Yates High School	223	123	55.2%
Combined	1,557	669	43.0%
2009 and 2010 Combined	3,048	1,345	44.1%

Note: Qualifying numbers are reported by each high school at the time of graduation. Students must submit documentation and evidence of college enrollment in order to activate scholarship. Scholarship payments are made directly to colleges and universities each semester.

In order to emphasize the importance of academic preparation, and to promote college readiness, grade point average is also monitored. A minimum 2.5 GPA is required for scholarship qualification. This single indicator is reported by schools as the greatest factor limiting scholarship qualification. Table 4.4 provides an analysis of scholarship-qualifying students' GPA from the 2009 and 2010 high school graduating classes. A more detailed analysis including GPA and college enrollment is included in the College Enrollment section that follows.

Table 4.4

*Grade Point Average (GPA) Ranges of Students Qualifying
for the Project GRAD Houston Scholarship Offer*

	GPA		
Location	Min	Max	Mean
Class of 2009			
Davis High School	2.47	4.35	3.15
Reagan High School	2.41	4.21	3.10
Sam Houston High School	2.32	4.34	3.07
Wheatley High School	2.40	4.18	3.16
Yates High School	2.50	4.24	3.14
Class of 2010			
Davis High School	2.21	4.33	3.27
Reagan High School	1.95	4.55	3.05
Sam Houston High School	1.53	4.24	2.89
Wheatley High School	2.30	4.39	3.02
Yates High School	2.06	3.94	3.12
Both Cohorts			
Davis High School			3.21
Reagan High School			3.08
Sam Houston High School			2.98
Wheatley High School			3.09
Yates High School			3.13

Note: Grade Point Averages are reported by high schools at
the time of high school graduation. Students with GPA below
the required 2.5 must apply for a waiver in order to be
awarded the scholarship.

The College Institutes have been considered by students and program staff to be
of importance in motivating students for college and for improved academic performance
in high school. These programs require significant funding. In recent years alternatives
have been offered that, according to program staff, lack the intensity of the university-
based programs, primarily because the alternatives take place on the high school campus
and often occur within the school day. Table 4.5 provides a summary of College Institute

experiences completed by scholarship qualifying students for each high school. As with

any element of qualification, students may request a waiver of this requirement. A more

detailed analysis of the College Institutes follows in the College Enrollment section.

Table 4.5

College Institutes Attended by Students Qualifying for the Project GRAD Houston
Scholarship Offer

	Number of Students Attending					
	University Based		Non-University Based		No Attendance Record	
	at least		at least		at least	
Location	one	two	one	two	one	two
Class of 2009						
Davis High School	49	31	53	25	24	19
Reagan High School	57	44	59	34	2	2
Sam Houston High School	23	0	107	89	84	0
Wheatley High School	22	21	28	29	10	0
Yates High School	60	18	73	32	13	0
Combined	211	114	320	209	133	21
Class of 2010						
Davis High School	39	49	36	15	11	9
Reagan High School	53	43	55	28	2	8
Sam Houston High School	61	9	61	145	0	0
Wheatley High School	17	12	17	50	4	0
Yates High School	47	45	47	31	0	0
Combined	217	158	216	269	17	17
2009 and 2010 Combined	428	272	536	478	150	38

Note: Attendance reported by high schools at time of graduation.

College Enrollment

As stated in Project GRAD's mission and goals, the program strives to increase

both high school and college graduation rates for students from low-income communities.

An essential step in achieving college completion is enrollment. The belief in the

possibility of college also gives greater relevance to the high school experience and,

hopefully, is one of the factors contributing to the increases in these rates. This study

seeks to gain greater knowledge of the complex world between high school graduation

and college enrollment. In pursuit of that understanding, Table 4.6 illustrates the enrollment rates of each graduating class, or cohort, of scholarship qualifiers.

Four of the five high schools scholarship qualifiers increased college enrollment from 2009 to 2010. Also, for the same four high schools, a larger percentage of students enrolled in the fall immediately following high school graduation. Each year, once fall enrollments are completed, Project GRAD program staff begins to work to encourage enrollment of the remaining students from the scholarship qualifying cohort. Evidence of this effort is consistently demonstrated by the increased enrollments in the spring when compared to the fall. Even so, almost 25 percent of the 2010 scholarship qualifiers and just over 30 percent of the previous cohort have not yet enrolled in college. Existing knowledge has resulted in some improvements, but a need for greater understanding is indicated.

Table 4.6

College Enrollment - Students Qualifying for the Project GRAD Houston Scholarship

	A	B	C	C/A
		Enrolled Students Semester(s) After Graduation		%
Location	Qualifying Students	Fall	Fall or Spring	Enrolled/ Qualified
Class of 2009				
Davis High School	138	87	102	73.91%
Reagan High School	139	100	110	79.14%
Sam Houston High School	196	102	117	59.69%
Wheatley High School	80	44	55	68.75%
Yates High School	123	78	86	69.92%
Combined	676	411	470	69.53%
Class of 2010				
Davis High School	116	93	97	83.62%
Reagan High School	134	117	123	91.79%
Sam Houston High School	215	137	148	68.84%
Wheatley High School	81	39	44	54.32%
Yates High School	123	90	92	74.80%
Combined	669	476	504	75.34%
2009 and 2010 Combined	1,345	887	974	72.42%

Note: College enrollment data provided by Project GRAD Houston based on scholarship use.

College Institute Experience

As shown in Model 1 of Table 4.7, the number of each type of College Institute attended is positively correlated with student enrollment at a postsecondary institution in the fall immediately after high school graduation. Thus, the greater the student's participation in Project GRAD's College Institutes, the higher their probability of enrollment in college will be in the fall after they graduate from high school. Model 2 demonstrates that this is also true if college enrollment is defined as attendance of a postsecondary institution in either the subsequent fall or spring semesters. Further,

students who have graduated from one of these five high schools in the Houston Independent School District have a significantly higher probability of enrolling even when controlling for grade point average (GPA), the actual high school attended, cohort, gender, and ethnicity.

Grade Point Average

Nevertheless, as expected, GPA is also positively correlated with student enrollment in college in spite of one's participation in these activities. With respect to the additional controls, the scholar class of 2009 is negatively correlated with enrollment in model 1 but not model 2. This means that students from the 2009 cohort were significantly less likely to enroll in the fall than their 2010 counterparts; however, when spring enrollment is included the 2009 cohort regains statistical equivalence to the 2010 student group.

High School

Four of the five schools studied are significantly more likely to send their students to college than the reference group in the fall, and three are more likely when observing fall and spring enrollment. The reference school regains equivalence to one school from model 1 to model 2.

Gender and Ethnicity

Finally, when examining the gender and ethnicity groupings, there were no significant differences found among the available student populations. In other words, female students were as likely to enroll as males and historical, minorities were as likely to enroll as their White counterparts. White students were only present in the cohort populations of three high schools and each school had a graduating population of less

than five White students. Nevertheless, there were no significant differences among

ethnic categories even when the remaining student groups were utilized as the reference

group.

Table 4.7

Logistic Regression Analysis of GRAD College Institute and GPA on College Enrollment

	Enrolled in Fall after High School Graduation (Model 1)		Enrolled Fall or Spring after High School Graduation (Model 2)	
University Based	1.010	***	1.051	***
College Institute	(0.151)		(0.154)	
Non-University	0.737	***	0.757	***
College Institute	(0.149)		(0.150)	
GPA	1.138	***	1.105	***
	(0.150)		(0.159)	
Class '09	-0.413	**	-0.196	
	(0.130)		(0.137)	
Davis	1.126	***	1.242	***
	(0.270)		(0.288)	
Houston	0.731	**	0.735	**
	(0.254)		(0.262)	
Reagan	1.479	***	1.585	**
	(0.277)		(0.297)	
Yates	0.551	*	0.247	
	(0.226)		(0.235)	
Female	-0.187		-0.174	
	(0.129)		(0.135)	
African American	-0.835		-0.240	
	(1.155)		(1.159)	
Asian	0.153		0.401	
	(1.634)		(1.645)	
Hispanic	-1.060		-0.698	
	(1.135)		(1.136)	
Constant	-3.808	**	-3.948	**
	(1.272)		(1.286)	
N	1,332		1,332	
Log likelihood	-753.113		-696.262	
LR Chi Squared (12)	201.650	***	179.560	***
Pseudo R Squared	0.118		0.114	

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors below in parentheses. * indicates p< 0.05. ** indicates p< 0.01. *** indicates p< 0.001.

College Institute and GPA

Since it has been demonstrated that both types of College Institutes, as well as GPA, have a statistically significant impact on college enrollment, it is necessary to evaluate the real substantive impact of the possible range of participation. In order to determine the relative impact of each type of College Institute and GPA, marginal effects must be computed to provide the predicted probability for a given set of criteria. Doing so will indicate whether or not either type of institute adds more value than the other, and whether the impact of an institute can overcome the effects of having a lower GPA on college attendance. Table 4.8 provides the predicted probabilities of fall college enrollment for students with each possible combination of institutes and GPA at half-point increments. As expected, GPA is responsible for steadily increasing one's probability of enrollment across each individual institute combination. Next, when holding GPA constant, there is a clear trend progression of institute combinations for increasing enrollment probability. Specifically, attending two university-based institutes has the greatest impact, followed by attending one university- based institute and one non-university based institute, two non-university-based institutes, one university based institute only, one non-university based institute, and no record of institute attendance. Thus, it is clear that attending any two institutes is more beneficial than attending a single institute or no institutes, and attending a university based institute is superior to attending a non-university based institute. This finding is also fully supported by the predicted probabilities of fall or spring enrollment presented in Table 4.9.

The largest increase in the predicted probability on fall enrollment that can be attributed to College Institute attendance is a 46.4 percent increase found among students

with a 3.0 GPA and the smallest benefit is experienced with the students with the greatest

probability of enrollment, those with a 4.5 GPA. This impact is always strongest when

comparing students with no record of College Institute attendance to those who have

attended two university-based institutes. However, the relationship between institute

attendance and GPA does not appear to be linear. With respect to GPA, this impact is

lowest at the tails. Students with the lowest GPA (1.5) experience a smaller relative

impact that increases as GPA approaches 3.0 and then declines as GPA peaks out. This is

fairly intuitive in that students with the lowest GPAs are the least likely to attend college

regardless of interventions and students with the highest GPAs are more likely to enroll

in college in spite of interventions they may receive. Therefore, the impact of the

College Institute on fall enrollment is greatest for students with a GPA ranging from 2.5

to 3.5.

Table 4.8

Predicted Probabilities of College Enrollment in Fall after High School Graduation

College Institute Attendance	High School GPA						
	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5
2 University Based	36.8%	50.7%	64.5%	76.2%	85.0%	90.9%	94.6%
1 University, 1 Non University	30.7%	43.9%	58.0%	70.1%	81.2%	88.4%	93.1%
2 Non University	25.2%	37.3%	51.2%	65.0%	76.6%	85.3%	91.1%
1 University only	17.5%	27.2%	39.8%	53.9%	67.3%	78.5%	86.5%
1 Non University only	13.9%	22.2%	33.5%	47.0%	61.1%	73.5%	83.0%
No record of Attendance	7.2%	12.0%	19.4%	29.8%	42.9%	57.0%	70.1%
Maximum Gain	29.6%	38.7%	45.1%	46.4%	42.1%	33.9%	24.5%

Note: Marginal effects were calculated following model 1 above. Cell entries represent predicted probability of college enrollment (fall only) for students with the respective GPA and College Institute combination specified and all values for remaining independent variables set to their mean.

As shown in Table 4.9, the largest increase in the predicted probability on fall or

spring enrollment resulting from College Institute attendance is a 48.1 percent increase

found among students with a 2.5 GPA. Again, the smallest benefit is experienced by the

students with a 4.5 GPA. For fall or spring enrollment, students with the lowest GPA

experience a smaller relative impact that increases as GPA approaches 2.5 and then

declines as GPA peaks out. The biggest impact is experienced by students with a GPA

ranging from 2.0 to 3.0. Since fall or spring enrollments are generally higher than fall

only, the maximum range of impact shifts to lower on the GPA scale. As the percentage

of students with a 4.5 GPA attending college increases in spite of institute attendance, the

ability to observe change as a result of institute attendance is further limited. Since 75

percent of students with a 4.5 GPA attend college and have no institute record, the

maximum gain would inherently be limited to 25 percent if all students in this GPA range

enrolled in college from the most beneficial institute combination.

Table 4.9

Predicted Probabilities of Enrollment in Fall or Spring after High School Graduation

College Institute Attendance	High School GPA						
	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0	4.5
2 University Based	47.2%	60.8%	72.9%	82.4%	89.1%	93.4%	96.1%
1 University, 1 Non University	40.0%	53.6%	66.8%	77.7%	85.8%	91.3%	94.8%
2 Non University	33.1%	46.3%	60.0%	72.2%	81.9%	88.7%	93.2%
1 University only	23.8%	35.2%	48.5%	62.1%	74.0%	83.2%	89.6%
1 Non University only	18.9%	28.8%	41.2%	55.0%	68.0%	78.7%	86.5%
No record of Attendance	9.8%	15.9%	24.8%	36.4%	49.9%	63.3%	75.0%
Maximum Gain	37.4%	44.9%	48.1%	46.0%	39.2%	30.1%	21.1%

Note: Marginal effects were calculated following model 2 above. Cell entries represent predicted probability of college enrollment (fall or spring) for students with the respective GPA and College Institute combination specified and all values for remaining independent variables set to their mean.

Perhaps the best way to assess the substantive impact of institute attendance is to determine whether or not institute attendance elevates one's predicted probability above those of students with a higher GPA. Such a substantive impact is found in these results. Specifically, Table 4.8 shows that for each GPA from 1.5 to 3.0, attending two institutes, one of which must be university based, yields an equivalent or higher probability of college enrollment than students with no record of attendance and a GPA that is 1.5 points higher. For example, a student with a 2.0 GPA and either two university based institutes or one university based on one non-university institute has a higher probability of enrollment than a student with a 3.5 GPA and no record of institute attendance. This finding is also supported by the predicted probabilities presented in Table 4.9. Thus, attending one university based institute and one non-university based institute has a net effect of increasing a student's probability of attending college to the level of students with a much higher GPA, and attending two university based institutes has an even greater effect.

Persistence

Finally, persistence in college to degree attainment is the goal. It is too early to measure completion rates for the students who have enrolled. It is too soon to measure persistence for the 2010 cohort beyond year one (Table 4.6). Table 4.10 provides a status report of the persistence of the 2009 cohort from year one to year two. The data is organized so that any student enrolling in either semester of the year following high school graduation is included as a first year enrollment. If they are enrolled in the second year's fall semester, then are counted as returning for the second year, and if they still are enrolled in the second year's spring semester, they are counted as continuing to persist.

Table 4.10

High School Graduating Class of 2009
Students Qualifying for the Project GRAD Houston Scholarship
College Persistence - First Year to Second Year Fall Semester

	A	B	C	C/B
	First Year Enrollment		Second Year Returned	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	First Year
Location	2009	2010	2010	Persistence
Davis High School	87	102	43	42.16%
Reagan High School	100	110	73	66.36%
Sam Houston High School	102	117	58	49.57%
Wheatley High School	44	55	19	34.55%
Yates High School	78	86	43	50.00%
Combined	411	470	236	50.21%

College Persistence - First Year to Second Year Spring Semester

	A	B	D	D/B
	First Year Enrollment		Second Year Returned	
	Fall	Spring	Spring	Continuing
Location	2009	2010	2011	Persistence
Davis High School	87	102	48	47.06%
Reagan High School	100	110	70	63.64%
Sam Houston High School	102	117	60	51.28%
Wheatley High School	44	55	19	34.55%
Yates High School	78	86	42	48.84%
Combined	411	470	239	50.85%

Note: College enrollment data provided by Project GRAD Houston based on scholarship use. Additional students from the high school graduating class of 2009 were active scholarship recipients in Fall 2010 & Spring 2011, but are not included in the calculations because they did not begin enrollment the Fall or Spring following high school graduation.

Chapter V: Narrative Accounts

The following nine narrative accounts are crafted from survey data, field notes, audio recordings, and transcriptions from interviews. A research assistant coordinated with students and family members to determine their preferences for scheduling each interview. All participants were interviewed between January and March, 2011, and the location for each interview was determined by the participants. Interviews typically included the simultaneous participation of both parent and student; however, two of the ten student interviews occurred as follow-up sessions over the phone following a face-to-face or a telephone conversation with their parent.

In all instances where Spanish language was necessary, a bilingual research assistant was a part of the interview process. The research assistant facilitated the interview by providing ongoing translation back and forth as necessary to facilitate the flow of conversation. In all cases, pseudonyms have been substituted for students and their family members. Other data that could possibly link the identity of a participant to their story have been modified or omitted. All quotations within the narrative accounts are taken from one of the following sources: the field texts, audio recordings, transcriptions, or field notes. In all cases, they are the words of contributing research participants.

In this study, the participants include the students and their family members. The narrative account begins with the telling of lived story. Participants, both student and parent, make meaning from their experiences as they reflect to share their stories. The relationships that exist between the participants shape what and how the stories are told. The researcher and the research assistant are the instruments of the inquiry, collecting

field texts. The processes of telling stories, collecting field texts, and transforming stories

into research texts bring both inquirer and participant together within the storied

landscape of education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Both groups influence aspects of

the relational inquiry, resulting in narrative accounts that are co-authored by the

researcher and the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, student and parent

voices are blended with that of the research (mediated, in some cases, by the bilingual

research assistant). The model used for the presentation of the narrative accounts and the

subsequent organization for their analysis is taken from Clandinin et al. (2010). In the

2010 Clandinin study, narrative accounts of young adults who had left school prior to

graduation were collected, resulting in a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of

their lives. This deeper understanding of student stories can inform policy, creating the

possibility for improved schooling (Clandinin et al., 2010).

The narrative accounts I present as part of my dissertation thesis research include

the stories of nine different students and members of their families. Students from each

of the five high schools participating in the Project GRAD Houston partnership are

represented. All of the participating students are from low-income households. Four of

the students are female, five are male. A total of 12 interviews have taken place between

January and March 2011: four were in the student's homes, five in the Project GRAD

Houston offices, and two over the telephone. In six instances, the parent participants

were represented only by the mothers of the students. In one interview, the father was the

sole parent representative. In one interview, both parents and the younger sister of the

student were present. Finally, in one interview, the grandmother was the sole

representative. Six of the nine families are Hispanic; the remaining three are African

American. All nine students have qualified to receive the Project GRAD Houston

scholarship offer at the time of their high school graduation. Five students are actively

enrolled with the Project GRAD scholarship in colleges and universities. One student is

between universities, but in the process of reinstating her scholarship status. One student

is attending a technical for-profit school that does not qualify for receiving the Project

GRAD scholarship. Two students have encountered circumstances that caused an

indefinite delay to their college-going plans. Eight of the nine students are or will be, if

they enroll, among the first generation of their family to attend college.

The Fifth Daughter Becomes First in the Family

At the request of Mrs. Rangel, Angela's mother, this interview took place in the Rangel family home on January 12, 2011. Angela has become the first in her family to graduate from high school and the first to enroll in college. She has successfully completed her first semester at a large, top-tier state university, one with proud traditions and strong alumni associations. Angela will return for her second semester within a few days following this interview. I was joined by Melissa Martinez, who acted as research assistant and bilingual translator.

The Rangel family immigrated to Houston approximately ten years ago. With no formal education beyond elementary school grades, Mr. and Mrs. Rangel came from Mexico seeking opportunity for themselves, and particularly for their children. They have accomplished a great deal in a relatively short amount of time. Both their home and their story are filled with evidence of the family's determination to create a better life and their willingness to work very hard and to sacrifice much to see this goal realized for their children. The Rangel's success stands in sharp contrast to much of the neighborhood surrounding their home, which includes boarded-up, seemingly abandoned homes, burned-out shells of former homes, a long-ago shuttered bar at the end of the street, and industrial businesses nearby.

Mrs. Rangel and her daughter Angela welcome us warmly into their home. We sit together at the family dining table. A child of less than four years of age, one of Mrs. Rangel's grandchildren, plays in the living room as we talk. The interview is conducted in both Spanish and English. The conversation flows freely back and forth between

languages, with both Melissa and Angela providing ongoing translation to accommodate both Mrs. Rangel (English) and me (Spanish).

Mrs. Rangel is asked to begin by providing some of her own family history. Very quickly, both mother and daughter join together as they readily express their own perspectives, adding to the other's responses, provided missing details from mutual experiences, laughing or expressing sadness together in response to shared stories from the past. Their love and respect for each other is immediately apparent

Family Background

The Rangel family moved to the United States following the births of the first five of their seven children. Angela was a member of this group, and she and her siblings immediately enrolled in school. Angela was of elementary school age. Two more children were born following this move to the U.S., and one is still enrolled in high school today. Mrs. Rangel describes her experience with her children as different from her experiences with her own parents. "My mother was calm and my father was strict. When I was twelve I worked on [the United States] side of the border… I did it to help my mother and father. I told [my own children] that I don't want them to live the same things that I lived. They are here in the U.S. and they have opportunities that I never had." Angela describes her mother's aspirations for her children's education with these words, "She always tells [us] that she is not going to leave us a great fortune or a legacy when she dies, the only thing that she can give us are our studies."

In describing the differences between her children, Mrs. Rangel refers to those who were older as lacking some of the influences to promote education that were later available to the younger siblings. "They weren't given the idea on time." She interprets

the decisions of the older children to leave school, to marry early, and to have their own children as their way of establishing independence for themselves. "They didn't have a child that they were struggling with the way they are now. [Immigrating to the United States] was a great transition because [their father] was 12 or 14 when we got married. Everything was different; [the other daughters] tried to take the easy route as a married person so that things would be better."

Mrs. Rangel has consistently supported all of her children in their efforts to improve their opportunities for better employment. She has provided whatever resources the family can offer. She also cares for her grandchildren while her daughters are working or seeking work. She is proud of what they have accomplished. One daughter has completed her GED and holds certification for work within the health care field. She now works as the manager of a medical office.

Angela has always found motivation from the world around her. She has watched her sisters lives unfold. She knows their ability and their intelligence, and she is aware of their limited opportunities because of their limited education. "[My sisters] pushed me all the time, seeing them with children at a young age and suffering, I saw this and I thought to myself, I'll go to college. I wanted to do it for me so that when my mom is older, I'll be able to help her." As a young student in elementary grades, Angela recalls, "I dreamed of a house full of children; I love children, but I want to get an education." Angela has expanded her dream to include not just a house full of children, but a building full of children. She hopes to become a teacher after college graduation and perhaps an elementary school principal in the future. She says, "I'm going to feel proud of myself, but not accomplished until I become a principal or something higher."

Mrs. Rangel can cite many proud moments as a parent, and stories of her efforts to encourage her children's academic success are numerous. When Angela began making plans for college, both parents thought this might be beyond her reach, but wanted to encourage her. Mrs. Rangel remembers, "She's the only one with that idea, and it takes a lot of effort and desire to want to study. I opened my mouth and I said if you graduate from twelfth grade, I'll give you $1,000 dollars." With her $1,000 award, Angela arranged for her father to buy her a car.

Self-reliance

From every story of her lived experience, Angela tells a story of personal motivation. She interprets challenging situations as inspirational, and she maintains a sense of personal responsibility to advance her goals. In high school, she recalls receiving a failing grade from a teacher who recommended her for classes designed for students who lacked proficiency the English language. Angela remembers, "I was like, oh no! I know English; I know how to write it. From that day on I never got another F on a paper. It was my fault. So yeah, I understand how you feel, like no, never again!"

Mrs. Rangel was not comfortable with Angela's decision to leave home for college. "I begged her to stay," Mrs. Rangel admits. Angela was determined to find the right place where she could achieve academic success. She describes her decision to pursue a college education away from home. She says, "The house was always full of children and it's very difficult because everyone's talking and laughing and I have to go to the kitchen. The university is peaceful and quiet, that way I don't have to worry about not having privacy."

When first arriving at college, away from everything familiar, Angela describes seeing herself through the lens of the other students on campus, and becoming aware of her status as a minority in this new context. Her anxiety was met with unexpected welcome. She explains, "I was afraid. I went over there. I looked at my roommates. I was afraid. I guess we are Spanish-speaking people. Everyone talked to me. The guys would open the door; it was different and I said I like, I like it."

Angela and her mother tell the story of another student who lives in the same neighborhood and had graduated from high school with Angela. He was accepted into the same university. In addition to his Project GRAD scholarship, he had won prestigious academic scholarships. His story, as they tell it, provides a profound contrast to Angela's description of her own initial experiences as a college student. Mrs. Rangel begins, "We took him to school and gave him a ride." Angela adds, "He had a lot of [scholarship] money, but he got the smallest room and he was like, 'We're barely going to fit in the little room, my roommate and I.'" Angela continues, "We were like, let's stay and see what happens and let me call his mother.… His mother said to come back." Mrs. Rangel's thoughts at the time were, "You want this for yourself. You need to stay and try it out for at least a semester." Angela reflects, "There's a difference between our mothers. If his mother would have told him the same thing, I think he would have stayed.… He's really smart. I don't know. He just got culture shock." She quickly adds, "I was shy, but I've finally come out of my shell and I talk to people now. I ask questions, but I was shy as well," as if she feels the need to connect to him and, even though he is not present, to demonstrate what is still possible for him to achieve.

Mrs. Rangel places the blame on the student's mother for his choice to leave the campus. With sadness, Mrs. Rangel remembers, "Later on, we got [to his mother's home] to drop him off since she [had not gone with us to take them to the university]. The house was empty…. There was no one at home to receive him." Angela shares her mother's sadness as she recalls her repeated attempts to change his mind, "I tried so many things. I tried by reminding him about the fights at school and [what] he wanted to become someday…. Supposedly he was going to become a vet, but then he, like, you know, 'I don't like animals. I just said that so people would think I wanted a better future for myself.' He was always doing what other people, you know…" Angela's voice trails off but her concern is evident, as if the event is happening again. After offering her friendship and support to help him, she eventually accepts his decision. She recalls, "I told him that the next morning we could wake up, walk around, we can go eat [at] Domino's or something like that. We went to see where our classes were and he said that he didn't want to be here and I was like okay, its fine." A moment later, with frustration in her voice, Angela continues, "I've told him that he's seen his mom suffer…. He's so self-centered. It's only him. That's what I believe." She pauses, and then continues with renewed frustration, "I'm not sure. I'm lost." Angela does not give up easily, on herself or anyone else.

College Preparation

Angela recalls the moment when she was asked to sign the pledge to earn the Project GRAD scholarship. She was in the ninth grade and in the library of her high school. She recalls the possibility that she imagined, "I thought, they gave me the money now in ninth grade, so I can have more money as the years pass by and more

opportunities to seek for more financial aid." She turns to her mother and asks, "What did you think when I said I was going to get money?" Her mother responds, "You told me hopefully. I couldn't stop her because as I said before, it was my idea since I wasn't able to go to college. I will give my daughter a chance that my older daughters did not have, but at the end, it's if God wants it."

Angela completed the two Project GRAD college institute requirements by attending two different programs offered at Rice University, one focused on mathematics and the other on science. She recalls, "Science was fun, the math was difficult… But every summer I went to Mexico and I told my mom I wanted to go [to the college institutes] for three weeks. She said yes, but I had to get my own money. She helped me and the experience helped me prepare for next year at the University." Beyond academic benefits, Angela credits the college institute experiences with shaping her expectations of college life by giving her opportunities to socialize with other students on the Rice campus.

Angela credits the work of Project GRAD staff members who were assigned to her high school campus as having a great impact on her thinking about college. She does not, however, believe that the high school provided much in the way of preparation for college, particularly for developing successful habits and routines. "The first time I took interest in college was when I was taking a regular class and then switched to Advanced [Placement] classes. They are good because they remind you about going to college all the time, but [college] was still hard. [High school teachers] told us to be in class and take notes, and didn't show [students] how to study. I didn't know how to study, but now I know how to study," she recalls. Further, she faults the high school for limiting their

expectations for college access and readiness to only the highest achieving students. She explains, "I think the bad thing about high school was that they only focus on the top 10 percent. I think they should focus not that they only pay attention to us, but they should try to pay attention to the other students as well. I saw that they were left out, and it was because of their grades. But I think most of us went to college, the ones in Advanced Placement classes. I noticed that the ones who weren't [in AP classes] didn't go to college. They should also focus on them and not only the AP students. I don't think is fair, and they should give them advice as well so that they can go far in life."

Angela feels that more students would benefit from having greater access to information about career possibilities. She adds, "They need more field trips to the colleges so that they have a sense of how the university will be. They took me like three times to [my university]. I was like wow, I want to come here, and they're caring about me. They brought me over here on field trips." These influences, in Angela's view, had a great impact on her ability to make informed decisions for herself.

She expresses the need for her high school to change, and feels this will only happen with the right kind of leadership in place. She says, "I hope that the new principal is strict and puts the kids in their place because they're very bad. I never skipped…. I want someone who will keep them in class and not let them walk around school. I went yesterday and I saw people still walking around campus outside and I was like, they need someone who will be strict enough to keep them in their classes."

College Experience

Angela describes her first semester in college with this reflection, "It was hard; it was different. High school really didn't get me ready for college. I didn't know classes

were going to be that much…. I thought that classes would run from August all the way to May, like in High school, but I was like, 'Oh my God! These are so many classes. How am I supposed to finish in four years?' But now I know that one semester is like one school year…. I'm going to take classes in the summer and I can finish in four years." She continues with a story of conflict, associated with her lack of preparation for college level work in science, the apparent lack of support from her professor, and her own ability to access the resources available from the university. She recalls, "The professor told me to give up. 'You can't even get a C is this class anymore.' Because I had got a fifty on my first exam, a sixty- two on my second exam and so she told me to give up. I was like, no! I'm not going to give up! I don't care if I fail the class, I'm just going to try my best and on the last exam. I got a hundred and three, because I learned how to study and it helped me a lot. It's just me, just knowing how to study and you learn how to do better in your classes."

Angela has successfully completed 13 hours and has an additional 13 hours scheduled for her second semester. She has a 2.8 grade point average, which she feels is not a measure of her full potential and hopes to improve. In contrast, other friends have fared far worse. She feels that they lack the discipline to focus on their studies and are too easily distracted by the freedom of college. When asked if she feels a part of a community on campus, she replies, "I already have my friends, but [they] start to talk about different stuff, so I rather study by myself. I study by myself and my roommates don't stay with me, so it's better to study alone. I concentrate more and I know how to study now…. There was a girl in my room and I asked her to leave because I couldn't study with her there, but I couldn't get her to leave…. We started talking about stuff and

it went on and on until two in the morning. I cannot study with other people. I would rather not even try."

I asked Angela if her parents had been to see her at the college campus. She quickly replies, "I got mad at my mom because she doesn't go to visit me to walk around campus. I wanted her to go." Her mother explains that caring for nine of her ten grandchildren takes up most of her time; however, she has wanted to visit the campus. Angela and her mother then recall with amusement a time when Angela had forgotten her ID card, and Mrs. Rangel drove to the university to bring her the card. She recalls, "When she needed me to take a paper, I took it to her. I hadn't told my husband because he didn't have his cellular phone." Angela adds, "I needed my ID card so I could get in the building and get my meals and time was running out, so I called my Mother." They share a laugh over the panic they both felt at the time, caused by the different situations that each encountered. Angela was facing the challenges imposed by the yet unknown systems of daily life on a college campus. Her mother faced the challenge of driving from Houston to the university, unable to reach her husband for guidance or perhaps even permission. They laughed together as they considered the incident that had caused such disruption and now, in hindsight, was regarded as trivial.

The telling of this story brings the focus of the conversation back to the accomplishments of the family. Angela says, "It's surprising because my dad was with a company for twenty years…. They paid him $11.00 an hour. We would ask my dad how he did it with seven girls he had to take care of. They get paid more. They don't have a house." Angela describes one older sister who has managed to accomplish more than her wages and employment status would indicate possible, but then continues, "The others,

they want a better future, but they don't know how to start from the bottom and get to the top. They want to start…." Mrs. Rangel adds as explanation, "If you see the second house across the street, we bought the house and lived there for four years. Then, we bought this property and built the house. We stopped moving around. We were asked how we did it. You have to learn how to be organized." She finishes her account by adding, "Our home is not luxurious, but it's ours and we're not living under a bridge." Her last words are unexpected. Mrs. Rangel tells this story as an illustration of the significant differences between the generations of her family, yet this final image of contrast between her home and homelessness is speaking to something else. Perhaps this is Mrs. Rangel's way of signaling the misfortune of many other Mexican immigrants who come to metropolitan areas and are not as fortunate as she and her spouse.

Perspective on the Future

When asked about the community, Angela and Mrs. Rangel share in their assessment of the area. Angela says, "It's very bad. Men live across from us, and there is much violence. I said to my dad, 'Imagine we were men. We would not be the same; we would probably be in prison.' Many people have no work, so I'd say that the community does not help me in any way…. The younger generation is doing the same. They're always hanging in the corners, behaving badly, drinking; I think it will not change. I don't see myself there in the future." Mrs. Rangel adds in agreement, "If it's bad now, it will be worse in 10 years." Angela attributes many of the problems to the easy access that children have to the influences of media. She explains, "So now we have computers, the way to express ourselves, we are more influenced by the media. Now my nieces want to wear makeup and play in a different way than when I was their age.

They're different now. They think differently and more maturely than we did at their age."

When asked to describe her expectations regarding Angela's future college graduation, Mrs. Rangel's enthusiasm is visible. She finds words to describe her thoughts from the family's shared story of Angela's high school successes. She explains, "I'm going to be proud. The way I was proud when she graduated high school and when she was [recognized as a leader by the student body] at her high school. We try to do everything we can for her and for the others. When she won [this recognition] we took her out to out to eat and when she graduated, we had her party here." Angela remembers her father's admission that he expected her to marry at a young age, as her sisters had done. At her graduation, Angela says, "My dad was like, I never cry. I only cry for you. When I graduated, he told me that he had only cried for me." When her plans expanded to include college, they worried that this goal was beyond reach. Mr. and Mrs. Rangel's lives are a testament to their own ability to persist and to achieve what is beyond the imagination of many. Their fifth-born daughter is continuing to live her family's stories of strength, resilience, and persistence, yet she is also creating new stories as the family's first.

Plans Delayed

This interview took place on February 9, 2011, at the apartment home of Mrs. Williams. The apartment is a part of a large complex visible from a major Houston freeway, just a few miles east of the downtown business community. The complex is made up of separate two-story multi-unit sections, but many of the sections are vacant, their windows and doors shuttered with boards nailed across them. The streets immediately bordering the complex are lined with small bungalows, in various states of disrepair. Many of these buildings are vacant as well. One group of two or three bungalows, facing the complex playground, is surrounded by cyclone fencing. The windows and doors of the homes are covered by sheets of weathered plywood. My attention is drawn to the area that once was the yard of these homes, where two ducks walk back and forth. I cannot imagine the story associated with how these ducks came to live in this particular place.

The day is cold and wet from an earlier rain. I am happy to step into the warmth of Mrs. Williams' apartment, and to meet her daughter, Ashley. Ashley is a 2009 high school graduate who qualified for the Project GRAD scholarship offer, but has not enrolled in college. Also present with us are two very young children. Ashley's nephew, Jalon, is her sister's son. He is three years old. Ashley's mother spends much of her time keeping watch over this very active child. He is in constant motion. Sitting calmly in Ashley's lap is Ashley's own daughter, Briana. She is sixteen months old. Throughout the conversation, Ashley holds her and cares for her.

College Plans

Ashley responds to most questions with very few words. Her reflections and impressions are expressed without emotion. She is direct. She has the most to say when she tells me about her earlier plans, "I had everything planned. I was going to [a large state university located away from Houston]. I had plans. All my financial aid was done and I was accepted. I did everything to go, but then the baby came." When I ask her to describe what it is like being a mother, she returns to her pattern of responding with few words, yet she conveys so much meaning. "Tired," is her reply. I think she is. Mrs. Williams explains her own beliefs in the possibilities that she sees in her daughter, "She got short stopped because of the baby and I told her to take a year and I'll do whatever it takes to help her get back."

Family Support

Mrs. Williams has four children, one of whom is still in high school. She explains her beliefs in the importance of school and her daughters' success:

I have three [children] raised. I just have one more in high school I am almost done. I raised these girls with respect for school, for education. I told them they need to get an education and they did and I can pat myself in the back for it. That was the only reason they went to school, not to play, for no other reason than to get a good education. Two of my daughters graduated first in their class from middle school. I got them through school. My oldest daughter, though, once in high school, for a while would go in the front door and out the back door. I went to the school and told them…. She dropped one year. I made her go back and she finished. She went to another program and I got her through it. She had a mind

of her own and I had to work with her in another way. I did not finish high school but I made sure she did.

One of Ashley's older sisters also received the Project GRAD scholarship. She did enroll in one of Houston's four-year state universities, but according to Mrs. Williams, she did not persist beyond two years of classes. Mrs. Williams expresses continuing support, "She needed to work. She had her baby. I am trying to talk her into going back. I encourage her to go back at night." She adds, as if speaking directly as if her daughter were in the room, but also probably to remind Ashley, "Even if you go back and have to give up your apartment, you can always come back here and stay with us until you get back on your feet."

High School Experiences

Ashley reports that her first thoughts related to the possibility of college occurred in high school. She found the resources and the people working in her high school's college access center helpful. She reports that some students would use going to this office as an excuse to skip class, but also believes that better systems are in now place to monitor student behavior. Ashley was not motivated by other college access resources. Instead of the Project GRAD College Institutes, Ashley attended summer programs with Upward Bound. She recalls, "The Upward Bound program at HCC was boring, nothing to do but just sit around and listen. It gave me something else to do besides sit at home, work, or other things on Saturday." When asked about other college access experiences, like visits to college campuses, that may have changed her perspective, she only says, "That was a couple of years ago," as if these experiences all occurred at a time too far

from the present to be of any use today. Circumstances in Ashley's life have changed

dramatically since her high school graduation.

Community

Mrs. Williams has always lived in this neighborhood, an important neighborhood

in Houston's African American history. She clearly places responsibility on parents for

the success of their children. "It's not the community. It is how you raise your children,"

she says with complete conviction. She is not sure of her support of new ideas to

repurpose some of the community's schools. She reports, "[The school district] wants to

separate the schools into male and female I do not agree with that. … My son said he

does not want to go there with half a school for boys and a school for girls." But she

returns to her belief in parental responsibility, "My thinking is you have to keep your

children walking a straight line. I tell you it sounds simple but it is hard." Reflecting

further on the difficulty of parenting, she expands her ideas to include the need for

students to assume responsibility for themselves. She says, "You can't force anything

out on these kids today. It's up to the child. If they don't want to do it, they aren't going

to do it. [I tell them], don't go to school if you are not ready. It will be a waste of time."

As I listen to Ashley discuss her plans for the future, I wonder if Mrs. Williams'

message, too, was another message really meant for Ashley.

Future Plans

When asked about her plans, Ashley qualifies any idea of college going, "I guess I

will be going to college…. Something better. I guess [going to the local community

college] to take the basic classes." She describes her career plans vaguely, "Computers,

that is what I was thinking, something in computers. I always liked the idea of a degree

in computers. Maybe I will attend college and get my degree in computers. I don't know yet, maybe."

When Ashley is asked for her recommendations to improve programs promoting college-going and college success, she responds immediately and directly, as if she had prepared for this question in advance. "Know more about their personal lives; be more aware of individuals and their life situations. So you can better help them with their life situations," she advises. This time, I believe she was not merely responding to my question. She was speaking to the heart of the matter, issuing a call to action. In this moment, Ashley becomes the authority. Her credential is her story of plans arranged and then delayed. Revisiting her earlier words, "I did everything to go, but then the baby came," I hear another story in the space between the two phrases of Ashley's last thought, a story perhaps of Ashley's own "life situation, " where she found herself with family support, but lacked other support and so possibilities have been missed.

First-Generation Success

This interview took place in two parts and because of the interest in multiple family members, participation expanded beyond student and parent to include both parents, their son, a college freshman, and their daughter, a high school junior. The first interview was held on February 6, 2011, in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Dominguez, and included both parents and their daughter, Sonia. I was joined by Andrea Pihlaskari, who acted as research assistant and bilingual translator. Their son, Mario, was at work and could not participate with the rest of the family. An interview with him took place over the phone during the following week, on February 11, 2011. His thoughts are interwoven into the responses as if he were present with us.

My introduction to this family occurred before arranging this interview. In January, I had volunteered to help high school seniors with their college essays as a part of Project GRAD's sponsored College Week activities. Sonia is a student at this high school, and, although not yet a senior, she is anxious to have an early start on her ability to write a powerful essay. She and I discussed what she intended to write to satisfy the essay guidelines of describing a person who has played a significant role in her life. Sonia began to talk with me about her mother. She was able to portray their relationship with compelling stories, sharing the loving guidance and high aspirations her mother conveyed to all of her children. When Sonia added that her mother had never been to school, had never received any formal education for herself, I hoped to be able to meet her.

Sonia is the youngest of the three Dominguez children. She is full of enthusiasm. Both of her older brothers graduated from high school and qualified to receive the Project

GRAD scholarship offer. The eldest, Reynaldo, enrolled in community college, but did not finish a degree. Mario is a member of the 2010 high school graduating class and is now enrolled as a freshman in one of Houston's local universities.

The Dominguez home is located in a neighborhood of single family homes that were probably built in the late 1950s or 1960s, a time when this area would have been a suburban working class, probably white, community. From the exterior, the homes show the benefit of care and maintenance. The community's elementary school is just a few blocks away from the Dominguez house. The population of people living here today is primarily Hispanic, reflecting the trend within the school district's enrollment, and the emerging majority population of young Houstonians. The atmosphere inside the household is formal; the rooms are immaculate. I feel I am in a place where long-held traditions and cultural norms continue. Mrs. Dominguez and Sonia answer almost all of the questions. Mr. Dominguez smiles and listens attentively, but does not participate, until the conversation provides him with an opportunity to tell of his own education, and then again when he contributes at the conclusion of our conversation. In each instance his words are few but his message is clear.

During our conversation, extended family members arrive as guests. Mr. Dominguez's' brother and his wife, both probably in their late 20s, are accompanied by their two children, a baby and four year-old-daughter. Consistent with the norms I have observed, they are impeccably dressed and their manner is formal. They enter the living room and stand, without speaking. I sense that even though I am a guest in this home, because I am leading the interview it is incumbent upon me to acknowledge these members of the family and to greet their children. I walk over to them and introduce

myself. They do not speak English, but with the assistance of Andrea, the research assistant, we shake hands and I speak briefly with the young girl and compliment the couple over their beautiful baby. The young family moves on to another part of the house. Later, as they are leaving, the couple returns to say goodbye. Time stands still as they walk first to me, then to Andrea, and then to Mr. and Mrs. Dominguez and Sonia. They take our hands and kiss our cheek. Their formal gestures convey so much warmth that any barrier of language or distance between cultures is instantly diminished.

School Support

The Houston Independent School District has an open enrollment policy, and while this home is located within the attendance boundaries of one Project GRAD partnering high school, the Dominguez children attend high school at a different school, also a Project GRAD partnering high school. The conversation begins with a discussion of their thoughts about the high school that they have chosen for their children. I expected to hear about school programs or a more motivated student body, or even the school principal. Instead, they spoke of one inspirational teacher who has motivated Mario and others to succeed and to pursue a college education.

According to Mrs. Dominguez, "The math teacher helped him so much. He was excellent with him. He always supported and helped him with everything. He took him to competitions and we always supported him." Sonia agrees, adding information from her own experience, "I did have him for Algebra two, but I hope to have him for my senior year for statistics. He's a wonderful teacher. He helps us out in anything that he can." Mario's thoughts confirm what his mother has said, "When I was on the math

team, I visited [Texas] A&M, but only for competitions. He also requested an essay from me for the college academy. He was really involved with his students."

Mario adds his thoughts on the other support he received in high school, but with emphasis on the importance of his own sense of personal responsibility, "Teachers talked about courses in college. I was ready for college, in some subjects. The magnet counselor helped me with financial aid forms. The [college access coordinator] helped with college applications, but I mostly helped myself."

Mrs. Dominguez stresses the significant influence of parents on children and the influence her children have on each other. She says:

> I don't think that [the school] has the same vision for my children. No. I have seen that my son has always wanted to get ahead, always talks to his sisters. He always helps and supports them. He has always been with the girls. His dream is for both to become honor students. He tells them that they have to study.   He is working and studying. He does both things and brought home good grades. He has big dreams for his sisters.

She downplays the role or the responsibility of the school alone. She says, "I've told my kids that school isn't bad. Some kids just don't get it. It doesn't matter what school, just that you want to work hard. [Mario] didn't think he was going to like school. He was very shy, but now he is in college."

Mario sees benefit from dual credit courses while he was still in high school, through a program with the community college. He expresses his positive experiences and the support he has received from the community college staff, saying, "They helped

us with school programs, seminars. They talked to us and stayed connected." He also values the support he receives from a counselor on staff at his university.

Family History

Mrs. Dominguez says, "My biggest dream has always been for my children to study and keep moving forward. That applies to all of my children." The Dominguez family has lived in the United States for sixteen years, always in Houston. Mrs. Dominguez shares the details of her own education, "I did not really attend school at all. Two of my brothers and my two youngest sisters went to school. Although I've never been to school, I've always wanted the best for my children." Knowing this, I understand Sonia's motivations and the inspiration she has received from her mother to live out these dreams. Mr. Dominguez adds that his education consisted of "just three or four years of elementary school."

Community

I ask for their thoughts regarding the community in which they live. It is Sonia who asks for clarification, "Are you trying to say how our community was affected or how the community affected us?" I am intrigued by Sonia's level of engagement in the conversation, seeking to clarify what is being asked before her parents begin to articulate their responses. Each of these questions is asked first in English and then asked again in Spanish. I wonder if her clarification is from a concern that the Spanish translation of the question lacked clarity, if this is a role she often assumes for members of the family who are not fluent in English, or if she is keenly aware of the subtleties of language and communication and participates at this level in any context. Mrs. Dominguez responds

by expressing her desire that her children grow up free from concerns of what others think or tell them, which could potentially limit their progress.

Future Plans

Mario is studying mechanical engineering. He believes that this job contributes to his success as a student. Sonia echoes these feelings as she shares the family's support for Mario's studies and his current job, "Right now he is working at a car dealership, so we think that's going to help him to get further in what he wants to do." Mario has a sense of obligation for his family and expects to be contributing significantly by holding the good job he currently has, completing his education, then finding even better employment opportunities as a result of his education. Sonia wants to study business and accounting. She fully expects one day to own her own company. She feels that accounting and business management will support her success no matter what field she eventually enters.

Value of Program

The conversation moves toward a discussion of the different elements of the Project GRAD program. Mrs. Dominguez defines the value of the scholarship offer in terms of what it meant for her son:

> Mario always talked to us about what happened to him at school. I remember that he told us, 'Mom, they are going to give me a scholarship to study.' We could not help pay for his studies, but [Project GRAD] helped him pay and he has the scholarship. I've noticed that it was a very good thing.

When we discuss the college institutes, Mario describes his experiences attending Rice University's institute on mathematics as a positive experience. Mrs. Dominguez adds, "I

visited the institutes with my children. [Transportation] was difficult for me…. Even though it was cold or was hot I was going with them and I never left them alone and I always talked to them about everything."

Challenges

As we discuss the challenges that may threaten successful completion of college, the issues that caused Mario's older brother to leave college are discussed. Mrs. Dominguez says, "Sometimes I feel that the economy is the problem. They are eager to study. Reynaldo left his studies because of finances. Mario continues studying because of scholarships." Sonia adds, as a way of clarifying the differences between the two brothers:

> [Mario] looked for more scholarships than Reynaldo did. Mario really did get
> more help with scholarships…. [Reynaldo] only got the Project Grad
> [scholarship] and that's why he decided to go to a community college. He tried to
> get his basics and they knew he had no more scholarships and we were really in
> tough times so my parents couldn't help him out to get through college.

The family has concerns that Mario's scholarships may not be enough, from one year to the next. They express hope for enough money, but there is an obvious concern, an insecurity from one semester to the next.

The conversation moves to the topic of Mario and his job while attending school full time. Mario has what he describes as a good job. He is also enrolled full time at the university, a requirement in order to maintain many scholarships. He relies on public transportation or other family members to get to and from home, school, and work. He describes the situation as stressful, but feels he is managing. He recognizes that financial

tension was the primary influence in ending his brother's college education, but he hopes that his brother will find his way back. He expresses concern that his brother will have little choice in jobs because he lacks the education to access greater opportunities.

Final Thoughts

As our conversation ends, I ask Mario if his friends are also in college. "Not really," he replies, "Not many of my close friends, but some of my classmates did go to college." He is clear on what differentiates himself from those who are on a different path. He says, "I have the initiative and want something better." Both Mario and his family express ideas for improving services for students to support their college-going aspirations. Mrs. Dominguez values the opportunities for one-on-one interaction with parents. She adds, "My daughter told me that she was excited about this visit and if my kids are excited, it makes me excited too." Mario feels that the students who are unable to enroll in college are restricted by personal or familial issues. He adds that, "[The program staff] should keep in contact with the students and let them know they are there to help."

Mrs. Dominguez summarizes the views of the family, connecting education with their dreams for their children, "We didn't have a lot of opportunities. It is good to know that they have plenty of opportunities to succeed in life. That is why we came to the United States." Mr. Dominguez stands to shake our hands and says proudly, "Our American dream is for our kids to go to college." He is a man of few words, fewer still in English. He chooses to own the American dream for his family with the plural form of the possessive pronoun, "our." This could be "the" American dream, a dream belonging to a different people and something he has adopted for his children. This could also be

"my" American dream, as patriarch. But instead it is more. His words convey ownership by all of the family, of their shared dreams of possibility and their common identity as Americans.

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Financial Aid Glitch

On February 7, 2011, Arizona and her father, Noble, arrive at the office. They have chosen this location for the interview because they seek answers to their own questions, and hope the Project GRAD program staff can help. The actual interview is of secondary importance. We shake hands and I introduce myself. Noble Jones and his daughter have a magnetic presence that I find striking. Both are tall and slim. There is no excess about either of them, in their dress or in their mannerisms. I watch others in the office respond to their presence as we walk to the conference room. Arizona and her father, without effort, command the attention of others. Neither father nor daughter smiles or makes any gesture to create tension or to alleviate tension. They simply are present. I have an immediate sense that I am in the presence of artists, individuals who will allow themselves to be known or make themselves known strictly on their own terms, individuals who place little value in convention or ceremony for its own sake.

Mr. Jones makes clear his purpose for coming. He seeks information that will end their frustration with Arizona's initial experiences in higher education. He wants to create conditions that will allow her to move forward with her plans. Arizona is a high school graduate from the class of 2010. She qualified for the Project GRAD Houston scholarship offer and had been accepted by a small private liberal arts university in Houston. Like most Project GRAD scholars, she relies on multiple sources of financial aid to pay for college, including a federal Pell grant. In the fall semester, Arizona began taking classes at the university as a full- time freshman, turning in her assignments, pursuing what she planned to be a course of study to further her goals to work in fashion design. At some point after three or four weeks of classes, she was notified that she had

been withdrawn as a student by the university because, as she explains, "[The university staff] told me there has been a 'glitch' in my financial aid." She now finds herself in the midst of a confusing intersection of differing systems as she tries to create a new plan for her studies, move resources from one university to another, and ensure that there are no financial obligations remaining from this glitch that will haunt either her or her father. For this family where there is no excess, there is an added frustration of resources wasted: completing assignments no longer relevant, purchasing books no longer needed, and orchestrating systems of support to navigate not just access to campus but also the world of higher education.

First Things First

Arizona asks if we can determine if any unused money is remaining in her account at the University. She wants to know if there is a refund available to her that she could use at another university. She has brought her acceptance letter and proof of enrollment. Mr. Jones explains his efforts thus far to resolve the situation:

> I asked questions about [any remaining resources]. You know, I told them she would not be attending and that she would be changing schools. I asked them about that. I asked how much money from Project Grad they actually used. I asked those questions, but they didn't really answer me. They wanted her to talk to someone from here.

He adds details to illustrate his frustration with being unable to access information related to his own children, "You know it's crazy. You're eighteen, eighteen or older. And once students become technically adults, even though you see them as young children still, they are the only who can get this information." We agree to finish the interview and

then to work together to see what information can be obtained through Project GRAD program staff, with Arizona's participation, in order to resolve their questions so that Arizona can make a new beginning.

Mr. Jones adds details to explain his disappointment with his daughter's experiences at this university. He explains how they had worked to arrange transportation for her, not just to get to and from the university and home, but also to travel to off-campus locations for assignments. At least one of her courses regularly met at the Museum of Fine Arts. On those occasions, Arizona would have to walk from campus to the Museum. This further complicated any arrangements for transportation home. Mr. Jones was uncomfortable with his daughter walking alone, a reasonable concern considering the one mile distance involves navigating high-traffic streets in a part of the city that is not familiar to Mr. Jones.

Family

Arizona is the second member of the family to enroll in college. Her brother is also a college student and Project GRAD scholarship recipient. The family includes two other daughters, the youngest still in high school and the eldest working. Mr. and Mrs. Jones both completed high school, but Mr. Jones did not finish until the age of thirty-three.

Mr. Jones expresses his hopes for his children in contrast to his own experiences, "I want my kids, all of them to have some quality of life. I am from the South." Later, he picks up this thread again. When we talk about his thoughts about his son's pending college graduation in the coming months, Mr. Jones adds:

I don't know yet. I will have to wait and see. I don't want to wait too long. I have to wait and see how he's going to do. Education is important and I've been telling all of them since they were little. I try to make them see it from my perspective and finish high school. Most blacks aren't expected to get an education and you can't compare [what a college education means] from [your own experience from] high school.

This brings the conversation to Mr. Jones' experiences growing up. He summarizes his life to illustrate what has influenced the value he places on the importance of education for his children:

My father decided that he didn't want to be a father anymore. A tradition in my family was that the oldest son had to take over the father responsibilities. He bailed when I was nine. I was nine and had to do whatever I could to help my mother because she was in the hospital. I had to be half the day at school and half of the day at work. So I don't mess around about any education. I am very pleased that [this opportunity] came to visit. When I'm not around, I don't want them to struggle. Life is hard.

Arizona and her father discuss their shared artistic endeavors. Arizona explains, "I always wanted to be an artist. My father is a painter but now is blind so he has not been able to paint. Now I can sew, I sculpt, sketch, paint, and make digital art. He also made clothes." I am intrigued to learn more. Mr. Jones acknowledges that he did make his children's clothes when he was still able to see, but he dismisses any talk of talent or creativity, assigning those labels to Arizona. She obviously connects to her father, and values her inheritance of an artist's identity that she has received from him.

Arizona mentions the artists Alex Purdy and Pat Perry as her two favorite artists. Perry is a surrealist. I later look at some of his work. One painting depicts children sitting in a traditional classroom with rows of individual desks. The students wear uniforms and are facing the front of the room. One child, near the center of the room, has, instead of a face, streams of colorful and strange images flowing from his head. Arizona's connection is obvious. She says only, "The difference is they like to use a lot of colors and I like black and white."

In contrast, she describes her mother saying, "She is very funny and a people person, but she's not very artistic. She loves animals." Mr. Jones adds, "My wife is the type that could stop a wild dog and pit bull and keep [them] from fighting. I don't know what it is." As the father and daughter take joy in describing the very different gifts and intelligences of Mrs. Jones, I wonder how these alignments have played out over time within the family. I wonder how differently this conversation would unfold with the added dynamic of Arizona's mother.

High School Reflections

Arizona sees a college education as a means to having an independent life, the ability to take care of herself. She does not credit any of her high school experiences as preparing her for college or as motivating her to want to go to college. She sees the source of her motivation from within. She says, "I always knew what I wanted to do.… High school did not influence my decisions at all. I knew where I wanted to go and what I wanted to major in in college." Further illustrating her independence from other influences, she adds, "We were who we are before we went to [this high school]. It didn't shape us at all. It made us negative towards people."

To better address the academic preparation for students, Arizona offers the following:

> [The schools] need to have a more challenging curriculum. You have to push the kids. They aren't just going to do it. If you tell kids things once they aren't going to do it. You have to continue drilling in their heads that college is important, especially in high school. It's going to help you in your future. Also they need to be challenged and should make high school classes more like college classes.

Arizona continues to describe her high school experiences with more negative examples. She remains emotionally detached throughout the discussion, but she finds different examples of experiences that illustrate her lack of engagement throughout high school. She explains:

> I had Advanced Placement classes all through high school and I never studied. I got all As. I never had to study because the classes were really laid back. If you didn't turn in an assignment, you could turn it in two weeks late and you would only lose twenty points. It was too laid back. Teachers need to be harder on the kids.

Arizona compares these experiences with what she has seen so far from college professors. She says that some classes are taught by professors who don't care about attendance or an individual student's success. She adds, "That's how it needs to be in high school." She feels that students must be allowed to fail in order to become personally responsible.

Mr. Jones adds his thoughts regarding current practices in high school. He explains, "I would go to [the high school] often to see about her. She will tell you if I see

a C, you can expect to see me because I know you can do better. I have been in the office where I talked to other students." He then describes the practice of allowing students to spend time working in the office during their senior year. His evaluation of this practice is evident from his remarks:

They need to cut that out. They have students doing office work. It's not a class. Stop giving them credit for it. They should be in class. There are a whole lot of students leaving. There's still work to be done. It takes up a lot of time that the students should be learning.

Mr. Jones' experiences in trying to access the principal are not reported in a positive light. He says, "I asked questions about that. I tried to speak to the principal about that one. He refused to see me. I haven't seen him since [Arizona] was in high school. He doesn't have the time." His next statement takes the conversation in a direction that is obviously of significance to him and to his daughter. He says, "[The principal] is either hosting some sporting event and the school budget is being screwed over real bad."

Mr. Jones and Arizona pay attention to how resources are used, and they have strong opinions when they feel resources are wasted or directed inappropriately. At this point, Arizona begins to speak with obvious passion. She says, "You should see how much school spirit stuff they have. They have a huge [team mascot] head. They're going to paint the whole school [for the team's colors]. The football team gets new uniforms every few years." Mr. Jones makes reference to the students who participate in football and he is interrupted by his daughter. She says, with indignation, "They suck." Mr. Jones continues, "They can't pass a test…. They are passing them because of sports. I

think it should stop." To summarize her high school experiences and their lack of influence on her future, Arizona says, "I already had my plan together. Yeah, I didn't really need high school. I just had to go." She pauses and then adds, "Want to know what the problem is with high school? People talk about college, but don't think about it until the last few months."

College, Plan B

Arizona describes her plans to continue her college education, enrolling for a while at another university in Houston. She provides details of the courses she is taking, her feelings about different degree plans, and the possibility of considering other universities once she has basic courses out of the way. Mr. Jones makes an observation that connects him and his family with Houston's past:

> If you stand [at the main building of the university] and look across the street to your right, the building on the corner used to be a dorm. My uncle, he cooked there for thirty years. He was a chef of the cafeteria before they changed. Now the building has been changed into something else.

Mr. Jones' observations are correct. The buildings and the university itself have changed purpose over the years. The students, too, have changed. The stories composed from experiences and expectations associated with Mr. Jones' education, in contrast with those of his daughter, are a testament to this change. The frustrations they are living through, as Arizona and her family negotiate a new landscape, are a testament to the trials inherent in the process of change.

Program Experiences

Arizona remembers first hearing about Project GRAD when she was in middle school, but she does not elaborate. She elected to attend the same College Institute program for two years to satisfy her requirements with Project GRAD.   She valued the professor and the courses, including web design and debate. The Institute was located on the campus where she first enrolled as a freshman. Her experiences from spending two summers at this College Institute played a major role in her decision to enroll there as a freshman. Once enrolled, both the university as well as the Project GRAD program failed to provide adequate support to Arizona in her first semester. Her independent spirit may have kept her from reaching out for help or from even recognizing that she needed help. Her father's earlier comments concerning their efforts to arrange transportation and the added complications when she needed to be able to access class at the Museum illustrate some of the erroneous underlying assumptions made by those designing courses or planning programs.

Arizona's older sister is a manager in retail. Together she and Arizona plan to have their own business one day. Arizona describes their idea:

> She calls me on her lunch break and asks me when we're going to start our business. We want to start up a boutique called Nine Arrows that would only sell black, white, and gray clothes only because that's the colors that people look for the most. Our inventory would be black, white, and gray and some of our clothing would be our personal designs - hopefully in the next three years.

A quick survey of the room supports her plan. The three of us are dressed in black, white, and gray.

For-profit Influence

Mrs. Sanchez and her son, Enrique, arrive at the office on February 25, 2011, to share their experiences and perspectives. Joining in this interview is Melissa Martinez, who acted as research assistant and bilingual translator. Enrique is a 2010 high school graduate and he has qualified to receive the Project GRAD scholarship offer. He has not accessed his scholarship because he has elected to attend a for-profit technical school in Houston. This school is not accredited in a way that meets the policy guidelines approved for use of the Project GRAD Scholarship.

The board of directors of Project GRAD Houston establishes policy related to the use of Project GRAD Houston scholarships. The most recent change in policy was enacted at the board of directors meeting on March 2, 2010, where the following policy guidelines were adopted:

> The Project GRAD Houston Scholarship is available to students who enroll in a two-year or four-year degree granting college or university with accreditation recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

This policy does not eliminate the use of the scholarship at all proprietary, for-profit institutions, but it does rule out its use at the for-profit technical training school that Enrique has chosen.

Enrique and his mother are proud of the plans he has made. When they arrive at the offices of Project GRAD Houston, they are both wearing t-shirts from the technical school. I was concerned that they would feel defensive, but there is no evidence of any such feelings. The conversation takes place in a private office. Both Enrique and Mrs.

Sanchez are enthusiastic to share information about his plans. The interview seems to proceed at a fast pace, and the tone is cordial and pleasant.

The Plan

Enrique has enrolled in a 51-week training program that, he reports, is designed to prepare him for a job as a mechanic. He describes the process that led him to this decision:

> I liked a more hands-on program, and I saw this TV commercial for [this school] and I gave it a shot. They gave [my contact] information to the school. A couple of weeks later they called me and told me they had a campus here in Houston. I wanted a more hands-on degree. Some students say they have recruiters on campus, but I never saw them. I contacted them from the commercial.

Enrique is considering adding an optional extended program targeted specifically for work with a specific car dealer at the conclusion of this program. He is unsure of the specifics of the extended program, its duration or cost. He describes his perception of the added benefit, "I might apply for this program and if you are accepted, I might go work for Ford or Nissan. You come out with credentials and everything." He adds, "They guarantee a job."

Enrique is content with his choice, primarily because of the way classes are structured. He explains, "They have the best equipment. That's why it's so expensive. Some courses have lecture, but it's more hands-on." His reference to cost leads to a conversation about the expense of the program and the financial aid and loans that he and his parents have secured in order to pay for it.

Enrique and his mother acknowledge the high cost. They equate the cost with quality. "It costs for the year $22,000. My parents took out a loan and I took out a loan, applied through the FASFA," he explains. His mother confirms the details, "Yes, the Parent PLUS loan is about $7,000 and his dad already started paying on them. That way when he's done with school, he will owe less." Enrique continues, "I applied and got $5,000 through the Pell grant, plus the student loan and I already started paying on them. Anything that's left after you graduate you can pay like over 10 years."

Family and Community

The family has a strong commitment to insuring their children have access to college. Mrs. Sanchez explains, "The motivation to go to college was what we always encouraged them to do, without college things aren't easy." Connecting her comments to her husband's experiences, she adds, "My husband also tells them, if you don't go to college, you're going to always be having odd jobs here and there, like me, not a better future."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sanchez completed high school, but Mrs. Sanchez has always sought what she considered to be better programs for her children. Enrique and his younger sister attended a charter school for their middle school years. His younger sister has applied to attend an early college charter high school. These alternatives necessitate parental involvement. Families must apply for admission. It is obvious that Mrs. Sanchez is actively involved in the education of her children.

Enrique is not the first in his family to continue his education beyond high school. His older sister, who attended a different high school, one not affiliated with Project GRAD, is now enrolled in community college. Enrique's mother describes the training

she received when she was living in Mexico, "I took first aid in Mexico. I can even deliver a baby and give shots, and I worked as an assistant. In addition, I told them they could take the basics and then become an assistant in a hospital."

She explains the added responsibility that comes from home and from the students themselves:

If the student wants to have a better life for themselves, they'll work hard in high school. I tell them to always ask questions, inform themselves about going to college. It comes from home – the motivation – and some students are afraid to ask questions at school, and once they get to college…"

She stops her comments mid-sentence, then adds, "I always tell them to ask, always ask, it does not matter if they do not understand, you have to ask."

Mr. Sanchez is a machinist, working on car engines. Enrique connects with his father as he explains, "That's another reason why I liked the hands-on work. I saw my dad's work." Mrs. Sanchez hopes that they will work together, perhaps open their own shop. "That is what I have been telling them," she says proudly, "With my husband's experience and his education, they should open a shop."

High School Experiences

Understanding Enrique's perception of his high school and Project GRAD program experiences is important in understanding the choices he has made. Clearly the idea of continuing his education in a way that would be a departure from the classroom and, as he describes it, "more hands-on," is an attractive alternative to him. The community college system offers technical programs, too. With his Pell grant and GRAD scholarship, the community college program would have cost him nothing.

Enrique speaks positively about his high school and his teachers. Mrs. Sanchez feels that Enrique's experiences from his high school are superior to what his older sister experienced. He does feel that there is a difference that should be addressed between students who are in special programs and the rest of the students. He describes this when he says, "The college center and the coordinator had good information that could help you decide about college, but more students from the magnet program went there. It would have been good to have more videos, more information, and presentations for all of us." This comment gives emphasis to his earlier statement regarding the for-profit advertising on television. Providing further evidence on this same point, he says, "[The school and scholarship staff] told us about college, but it depends on the student."

Enrique admits that he was slow to associate himself with Project GRAD's scholarship program. He explains, "They told us about the scholarship program, but I did not sign up for anything until tenth grade when I signed the agreement. I went to the one college institute at [the university]. They contacted me from Project Grad. They saw my GPA was good so that is why they told me I could go." He adds positive comments related to his other college-going experiences, "I was in the academy for the health and science. They took us on a field trip to the community college."

Enrique considered other choices, but the decision rested on his desire to depart from classroom instruction. He says, "My other interests are to be a firefighter or a cop, but to be a cop you have to have at least your college basics."

When Enrique announced his decision for the technical school, he reports, "[The college access coordinator] asked me why I wanted to go there, that I could go to the community college, that the program there would be cheaper. But [the technical school]

was more hands-on and that's what I wanted." He pauses and then admits, "I agreed that I should check it out but I heard from other people that at the community college they had more book work. I don't know because I did not check it out." His friends, too, shared their thoughts with him when he enrolled in technical school. He says, "My friends tell me some of these schools are not legit, but this is one of the good ones. One of my instructors graduated from the school. He told me if you have to return and take the classes again, a refresher course, you do not have to pay for it."

Enrique reports that most of his friends have not gone to college. Many students from his high school have enrolled, but his friends have not. He explains, "Some don't want to go, feel they are not smart enough, do not have enough money. But there is help out there. You have to make sacrifices and you will have to pay the money back."

First-Generation Family

Maria Soliz and her son, Miguel, speak on the phone every day. "I call him," she admits almost as a confession, "I have to." Miguel is a freshman in college, attending a state university in another city. This interview takes place on March 17, 2011. Mrs. Soliz chooses to come to the Project GRAD office. The staff is on spring break, so the office is quiet. With her is her youngest, a two-year-old boy. Later we are joined by her daughter, who is in elementary school. Also present is Melissa Martinez, who acts as research assistant and bilingual translator, as necessary. Additionally in the room is Project GRAD staff member, Dr. Laurie Ballering. Laurie and Mrs. Soliz have known each other for many years. Laurie is a trusted friend of the family. She helps to entertain the three-year old child as the conversation progresses. A second interview by telephone is necessary in order to accommodate Miguel's location and schedule. This meeting is arranged for March 19, 2011. The responses and stories of Miguel and his mother are blended into one account, as if they both were present.

Family History and Family Dreams

Miguel is the first in the family to go to college, creating a new experience not just for himself, but for the whole family. They are a tightly knit family. Mrs. Soliz adds emphasis to this idea when she says, "I think he is kind of prepared for it because I always pushed him to follow my dream and his dream." Her inclusion of "my dream" is no accident. She does not unite her aspirations with his, using the words "our dream." She is describing the hopes of two different persons and the distinct identity and validity of each. She elaborates, "I wanted to go further academically, but because of my father's

old-fashioned ideas, I wasn't able to. I wanted something better for my children. That's

my dream, to be able to give that to my children so that they can advance in life."

She tells the story of her own father's decisions concerning her access to an

education:

It was also hard dealing with my dad's way of thinking. He would say, 'No, you

are a woman and you shouldn't continue your education.' [My education] was

only elementary school. You're supposed to be raised [just through] middle

school, work, and get married and have a family and take care of your family; that

is it, and not to have school. I always dream about it because I always wanted to

be a teacher.

Mrs. Soliz begins to cry a little as she recalls her aspirations. She then adds, "My son

will do better than me. That is what I expected from Miguel. He is doing better there

and I don't want to see Miguel [have to work so hard] like my husband." Mr. Soliz

works in landscaping. It is hard, physical labor. Miguel has a physical limitation

associated with one of his legs. Mrs. Soliz explains, "I don't want to see him doing that

kind of job. I want [him] to have a better life than us and I wish [his sister] the same. "

Mr. Soliz also dreamed of a professional career. He wanted to be a veterinarian,

but his education in Mexico ended after tenth grade. At that point, because he lacked

financial resources to continue with school, he had to work. Mrs. Soliz explains. "In

Mexico, you don't have the opportunity that Hispanic people have here that people help

you. Over there you have to pay for everything." She adds, "He's just like me because

whenever he remembers that, he feels sad about it because he never followed his

dreams." To point again to the many dreams that are realized through the success of their children, she adds, "So that is why we are supporting Miguel."

Miguel's parents met in Mexico when his mother was only twelve years old. His father was seventeen. Mr. Soliz moved to the United States first. Mrs. Soliz followed when she was eighteen. They married in the United States and all three of their children were born here. She stresses the difficulties that they have encountered. They are a family determined to persist, but with every step forward, they have encountered new challenges. After working very hard, they have sometimes found it difficult to afford paper, supplies for school, and even shoes.

Miguel has big dreams, too. Because of his own experiences with physical limitations, he hopes to work in the field where new technologies are used to develop prosthetics. He says, "I want to work with robotic prosthetics [for people] that have had to suffer through amputations; I just want to bring them back to normal." He has had this goal in mind for some time, but more recently he has been influenced by other students. He explains, "I met a graduate student, and he was telling me how they have a bio-technology department. I somewhat researched and it made me want to pursue [this field] even more."

High School Perspectives

Miguel was in magnet programs throughout his elementary and middle school years. He began ninth grade at his neighborhood high school and, although he was enrolled in the high school's magnet program, he was not sufficiently challenged. His parents felt the academic programs were weak, and that his peers lacked motivation. He transferred the next year to the high school from which he graduated. His mother

explains, "[The program] wasn't good enough for him. I think he was smart; he had more to show, more to give, more to learn and he wasn't having that there."

His new high school offered a more rigorous program and held higher expectations. Mrs. Soliz feels that certain teachers contributed the most toward preparing Miguel for college. He credits his teachers from his Advanced Placement courses as making a significant contribution to his readiness for college. He references their more rigorous assignments and higher expectations. "It's pretty much the same thing [at college]," he says.

Miguel and his mother share their different recollections from the day he graduated high school. Miguel acknowledges the unique experience for all of the family in his telling of the event:

> It was pretty exciting because I have never been to anyone's graduation. My parents were like, finally you're done. They've been waiting for that day for eighteen years now, and it was special since I was the first one to graduate from high school in my immediate family and my parents weren't able to finish school themselves. I think my dad was able to only get to high school and he could not keep going for many reasons, but seeing that I continued and kept going, it was something special.

Mrs. Soliz adds the emotional details of her experience, as she describes the family's shared celebration:

> It was a really, really, it was the best.… He says we made a big deal about it, but for me, it was like if I had gotten what he got. When he received his certificate, it was [as] if I had lived it and it was something I always dreamed of, for me and for

him…. I thought, 'We're a step further towards college.' [My husband] was crazy about it. He doesn't show a lot but we are very proud of him.

Program Experiences

Miguel remembers first hearing about the Project GRAD scholarship as a freshman in high school. "Honestly," he says, "I didn't know how much four thousand dollars would help out with because at the moment I had no idea how much tuition would be for a school." Today, he values having the extra funding each semester.

Mrs. Soliz believes that the program provided her with an understanding of the process of going to college, the steps to follow that parents and students need to take in applying to college. She also values the opportunity to visit college campuses. She and her son visited Texas A&M. She remembers, "[Miguel] really loved it. It was really good…. I remember that once I went to the University of St. Thomas, but I don't remember if he went with me. He went to the University of Houston Downtown."

Miguel attended one College Institute at Rice University, studying chemistry. Miguel describes his time at Rice as very challenging, but worth the effort. He recalls, "My first impression of the campus was, 'Oh my God! I'm at Hogwarts!' It was a really beautiful campus and I actually saw one of my teachers from middle school. She was going back to finish her graduate degree and seeing her made me realize this place has a lot of smart people."

Miguel also references the help he received from the high school's College Access Coordinator. He recalls, "She really helped me a lot. She told me, 'You should apply for this, this is available.' She made the application process very easy. The first time I got there, she explained how to do everything."

Both Miguel and Mrs. Soliz recall his participation in an internship program, through another partnering organization. Students are able to count the internship as fulfilling one of the College Institute requirements for earning the scholarship. Miguel recalls his experience as a very positive one, because it gave him a vision of downtown professional careers. Miguel appreciates their insistence that interns complete one new scholarship application every week. He found all the resources he needed for his first year in college.

Through interactions with the professionals during his internship he discovered academic paths he might have otherwise missed. He explains:

> I learned a lot, not only with the [IT professionals] I worked with, but also I learned a lot from the attorneys. A lot of them were graduates from law school and it was pretty interesting to know that if they got a bachelor's in electrical engineering, they still continue to get their law degree. I learned that you can always change your mind later on.

Program Needs

> Mrs. Soliz focuses on specific program enhancements that she would value:
>
> [Project GRAD] should be more involved with the parents and involve them more…. In school or being volunteers…. I think that for me, it would be even better if there was a program for the students and the next step that they're going to take…. For those who are in high school.

This train of thought leads to a theme that has been mentioned by others. Mrs. Soliz adds:

I have some friends whose daughters are already in the eleventh grade. They don't know anything about the universities, but their children aren't as involved as Miguel was. Miguel got this because he was in a magnet program. There are many kids in school who aren't in a magnet program and don't have the opportunity to get help.

Mrs. Soliz has been able to share her knowledge with others. She explains that other children who are not in magnet programs are not necessarily achieving at low levels. She has the impression that the Project GRAD Program directs its resources to the magnet students. While this is not the intent of the program, her impressions indicate that this may be how the program's resources are being directed at the campus level.

Miguel agrees that there is a difference in expectations for kids in magnet programs versus the rest of the kids in the school. He explains, "The magnet programs really push the expectations of going to college and finishing college. They really push that and maybe going to college is not an option, it's mandatory."

Mrs. Soliz offers as an example, "This person didn't even know about career day for the kids. I don't know if it was just me because I'm very involved with my son, and I helped him. This program really helped me and I've noticed that many mothers aren't aware of this program." She continues to examine possible causes for the lack of knowledge awareness. She suggests two possibilities: the parents who work very hard because they want to provide for their children and then don't have to time to be engaged with the school, and the parents who are at home and are just not interested.

When Mrs. Soliz considers her daughter's academic success and eventual college readiness, she expresses a variety of concerns. The first links back to an earlier comment

she made regarding magnet programs. She describes the situation, carefully choosing her words, "The thing that worries me a lot is she's a little more… She's intelligent and has good grades…. Miguel has been in magnet since he was in first grade. I don't want to compare her to Miguel." She adds that when she assists her daughter, her methods are different from the school's methods, and this causes her daughter to reject them. She explains, "I know she has trouble with mathematics. I try to help her, but I can't because she says, 'It's not like the times when you went to school. It's not done this way; it's done another way'" She sees her daughter motivated by her older brother's example. Mrs. Soliz feels that by repeating the support that her son received and the choices they made for him, her daughter will find equal success.

When she considers the school's expectations and responsiveness to her daughter, she compares experiences from Miguel's classes at the same time in his life. His third grade teacher, who is bilingual, is still teaching in the school. Her daughter is not in bilingual classes, and has a teacher who speaks only English. Her story illustrates the many challenges that exist between a parent's expectations, the competing expectations of the school system and the teacher's ability to help every student reach their full potential. Mrs. Soliz describes her recent experience:

> I needed someone to help me with [my daughter] in math. [Miguel's former teacher] noticed that my daughter has problems with math…. She told me to talk to the teacher about it and I talked to the teacher. She said, 'Oh she's fine, she's going to pass the grade.' I feel bad about it because I chose the teacher for her because I heard she was a nice teacher, but it's not working for me…. The

teacher says that she is at the level to pass the third grade. I don't want that; I want her to be above the level.

Mrs. Soliz is made aware of her daughter's needs in school not by her daughter's teacher, but by the bilingual teacher who had taught Miguel years ago. Many complicating features are present in this element of the story. Miguel's former teacher may have higher expectations of his sister because of Miguel's achievements. Expectations for academic achievements or failures are often automatically assigned to a younger child based on an older sibling's grades or interests. Miguel's mother and his former teacher have an existing relationship. They share a history that involves Mrs. Soliz and her son. This teacher will already know the expectations that Mrs. Soliz has for her family. Through their bond, this teacher knows that information of this nature is desired. Because Miguel's former teacher is bilingual, communication can take place in Spanish if needed. Mrs. Soliz communicates well in English, but not fluently. The daughter's teacher speaks only English. She or Mrs. Soliz may be hesitant to seek communication with another who lacks the ability speak in their preferred language. This teacher may even have bias in her expectations of children coming from families with limited English proficiency or limiting her expectations of parents and their ability to support academics at home.

Mrs. Soliz expresses her commitment to persist in finding a better environment for her daughter. As I listen to her story, I am reminded of how intentional she was when she represented her separate and distinct participation in her son's academic pursuits, "my dream and his dream." She reaches back in her own history to tell of the limitations imposed upon her by her father. She has identified an opposite role for herself in the

lives of her children. She will be relentless in removing barriers, and perhaps Mrs. Soliz assumes this role with even greater intensity because mother and daughter are connected by gender. Mrs. Soliz continues to apply for her daughter to be accepted into the more rigorous magnet programs, but her scores in mathematics continue to be the barrier. She questions the appropriateness of her actions but says, "I know that she can [achieve at higher levels] and she's not missing that much, but something is wrong."

Miguel feels strongly that affordability has a significant impact on a family's beliefs around college attendance. The same idea can impact a teacher's expectations for their low-income students, and their ability to visualize college as a viable option. Miguel adds, "A lot of people say that they can't go to college because there is not enough financial aid or because people are undocumented." Miguel confirms that he has friends who could be successful in college, but they lack good information. The issues surrounding legal status are later revisited by Mrs. Soliz when she discusses the barriers to parental engagement with the schools.

Community

The Soliz family has lived in the neighborhood surrounding their daughter's elementary school for 14 years. Over time, Mrs. Soliz believes that the neighborhood has deteriorated. She feels that crime has increased and more students, who should be in school, are only getting into trouble. She mentions shootings, drunk driving, and increased violence on weekends. In spite of these concerns, she does not expect to move in the near future because of other family obligations.

Miguel has a different vision of his community. He says he sees everything as improving. He supports his perspective with these thoughts:

[Before], I didn't see many people talking about college or anything like that. I would see people lying around without a job and I would be like, 'What are you doing all day, you know?' But now I go back home and just like me, people … they have their school permits hanging on their car all proud. I started seeing that more in my neighborhood. People are coming back home from different places, doing things out of the box, either go to school or find a job. It is getting a lot better.

Even with these improvements, Miguel does not plan to make this community his home. He says, "I am actually thinking of moving out of state, something different. I am the kind of person that cannot stay in one place."

College Choice

Miguel has had big plans for himself and his career. Miguel describes the process he used for choosing his college:

I was looking for somewhere similar to Houston… fast paced…. I was mostly looking for a place I can study science; a science institute. I researched and looked into many schools like Texas A&M, University of Texas and I thought, 'Yeah, they have good science departments.' I saw how they were investing a lot of money into their science departments. I don't know if you're aware, but [this university] recently built about four new science buildings for the science department. One is dedicated to physical engineering, another one for biology research and other stuff like that. What I found interesting, for the last four years they've been dedicating a lot to their students and that seemed promising.

Miguel has declared a double major: computer science and biology.

Mrs. Soliz expresses pride in the way Miguel went through the process. His first choice was MIT, but he was not accepted. She says, "The other universities that he looked at, he believed that the university [where he is currently enrolled] had the best program and that is why he went over there. It also benefited me because he would be closer to home." Mr. and Mrs. Soliz have been to visit their son on campus. She reports, "It's safer over there and he has everything handy. [The location] is a small city and it's not like crazy like here. So I think it's good over there."

College Support

Miguel completed 16 of the 19 hours he scheduled in his first semester. "That was a mistake," he admits today. Rather than overloading himself this term, Miguel is taking 13 hours in his second semester. He feels fortunate to have learned from an orientation program about the unique differences in college course enrollment and the grading systems.

Miguel has been assigned a mentor from one of Project GRAD's corporate sponsors. The mentors agree to email Project GRAD scholars who are freshmen in college, primarily those who are in school away from home. Miguel values his access to a mentor. He says:

> My mentor is really funny and she has an interesting college career you can say. She has always been there with me kind of helping out [when I'm] having problems with my professor or test stuff like that. She told me what she did. I have horrible time management, but she gave me examples.

He also participates in the monthly campus meetings of Project GRAD freshmen, led by an upper-level student, also a recipient of the Project GRAD scholarship.

Challenges for the First-generation Family

Often forgotten in efforts to support the first-generation college-going student is the concurrent challenge to the rest of the family. Obviously, his choice of attending a university away from Houston adds to the challenge. Yet every first-generation college student has, by default, a first-generation family who experiences residual challenges. Parents and others must learn to navigate new systems and the dynamics of their family relationships change. Mrs. Soliz cannot mention her son's success without including the status of the rest of the family, "He's doing pretty well. I think it's kind of hard for us because we are minority and we have to work hard to keep him there. I think he's doing his part; I think we're doing well." Her words illustrate an expression of common identity and experience. Individuals become one family as their unity is expressed through "we" in her story. She represents their common identity in three ways: the individuals share in a life lived as minority; they share a life lived with limited financial resources causing the need to work hard to achieve long-term goals; and finally, they share in her positive assessment of their collective progress made.

Adequate money

Miguel relies on various forms of financial assistance to pay for college. Mrs. Soliz has little confidence in the continuation of funding from his existing scholarships. She says, "For my husband and me, it's kind of hard to keep him there and we are doing the best we can." She does not want Miguel to feel burdened with financial concerns.

Miguel currently works on campus to help with his personal expenses, about 25 hours each week. He suggests that Project GRAD add support to college students specifically related to finding new scholarships and other resources to help pay for

college. He makes the point that so much of what he applied for as a graduating high school senior is not available to college freshmen. He is always looking for additional sources of funding, but he expresses a need for more information.

Miguel was living in the dormitories on campus, but experienced some problems associated with his roommate. His parents have paid for him to move into a university apartment where he is able to live alone. This adds to Miguel's expenses. He has the added burden of rent which he pays from what he earns through his job.

Citizenship – Papers – Fear – Trusting the System

Mrs. Soliz is currently working toward obtaining U.S. citizenship, "[My children] were born here, and I'm trying to study for my citizenship. It's a bit difficult, but right now we're residents. My husband is a bit more hard headed [about studying], but he is trying to obtain his citizenship." Mrs. Soliz represents her husband as reluctant to dedicate the effort necessary to prepare for the test. Mr. Soliz is frustrating her access to this goal. Mrs. Soliz was unable to access an education because of the barriers placed on her by her father. Now her access to citizenship is conditional, controlled by her husband's efforts for himself.

Citizenship, and documented residency, are often barriers to engagement for parents at the school and for their children in their academic pursuits. Mrs. Soliz suggests that with a trusted relationship, a possibility to engage these parents more fully could exist:

> Many parents stay silent because of [their status] and I think that [what] you guys can do, having these interviews with the parents is really good. It would be great if you held meetings so that parents would know what they need and the program

that they would miss if they don't take action. How can you guys make them understand that there is no risk by doing this for them to get involved with this?

She continues, with an explanation of a tendency to place too much trust in the system to do what is best for their children:

> Many times, we as parents think that the school does everything. We think that the school has all the answers.… The meetings should be held so that the parents may know what's going on. Also, I think that I can give my opinion, but when there is majority in one place, one [voice of the community] can be given.…

Mrs. Soliz then tells a very sad story of a family split apart, and the fear that this event has caused throughout the community:

> The thing is not a lot of people, a lot of the parents are afraid for many reasons and I know of a family that is separated right now because the mom was deported to Mexico because she was taking her kids to the school and the police asked her for papers.… She is in Mexico right now and things like that have happened, but you probably don't know about it because [the authorities] didn't let people know. People, who are close to them, spread the word. 'Be careful when you're taking the kids to school and you see the police or get close to the police.' A lot of people are afraid of it. Something is happening and people don't know about it.… So people are afraid.

She continues with the specifics of an incident that her husband learned had happened to an associate from his work:

> [This woman is] the wife of my husband's friend. I think she has a twelve year old, ten and eight, something like that; she has four in total. She's in Mexico right

now, so if I was in her shoes, I would not get involved. [Being involved] is probably nothing for people, but for us it's a big thing. I'd be afraid to sign papers or things like that. So I think the better thing to do is have meetings in school and make sure to tell them to get involved and that nothing is going to happen like that.

So often these stories, when heard by others lacking experience with the complexities associated with immigration and citizenship, are dismissed as hyperbole and rumor, but deportation occurs and the threat is real. Parents fear being taken from their family. Wage earners fear losing a source of income. Children fear the sudden disappearance of a family member. The presence of fear creates conditions that only limit engagement. Mrs. Soliz suggests that trust is an essential element to foster engagement in these communities, and she sees the school as a place where trust can be developed.

The Future

In describing her feelings for Miguel, Mrs. Soliz says, "He has always been close to me and he is wonderful." When she describes her expectations of seeing him graduate from college, she says:

I don't know what's going to happen. I really don't know. I was really nervous when he graduated from high school. I don't have the money to do what other parents do for their kids when they graduate like big parties and things like that. I wish I did have it to show him more that I am really proud of him. At the same time, I don't think you have to show that. With your support and the fact that he can feel it and we are there for him. I think that is the best. So for college, I don't know what I'm going to do.

After a moment, she adds, "I will cry; I don't know. I will jump around. It's like a dream come true. I hope to see him there."

Miguel is looking further into the future. He is aware of the example he is setting for his younger sister and brother. He feels that his siblings can compare their parents' sacrifices in raising them to what he has done by going to college. They can chose between what he describes as, "Either work to the bone or go to college." Miguel is aware of the sacrifices that have been made in order for him to be where he is today. He does not hesitate to acknowledge this. He wants to make life better for his parents. He also hopes to make even more opportunities available to his younger siblings. He offers these thoughts:

> [My parents] had to work hard to actually help me get here, and they still are. Usually when it's the first time everything has to be done, you do have to struggle and pretty much do a lot for it. So right now I am looking at it and [my siblings and I] are pretty spread out in years. Hopefully what I do now makes me successful, and I can help them a lot more. That way my parents don't have to worry about it so much.

Miguel conveys his family's ideals, beliefs that exist through multiple generations. The persistent themes of hard work, the need to sacrifice to achieve, respect for family, and the responsibility to give back to those who paved the way and to provide opportunities for greater achievement to the next generation - these themes are all present in his thoughts and actions. The multi-generational belief in these ideals combines to create an interconnected system of support, providing individuals and families to live stories of success. For the first-generation immigrant family, however, the system can be

extremely fragile. An event as serious as an illness, loss of a job, or unexpected pregnancy can cause the high school or college student to abandon education for minimum wage work to support the family. Something as seemingly trivial as a needed car repair, the cost of a textbook, or the uncertainty of the source of money to cover the cost of a few hundred dollars of unmet tuition, can become the tipping point that ends a college education. A single interruption to the system can result in dreams interrupted and human potential unrealized.

Spotlight Scholar

Demarcus Evans and Mrs. Evans arrange to meet me at the Project GRAD offices on February 26, 2011, a Saturday morning. The offices are closed, so the atmosphere is calm and quiet. Mrs. Evans has been at work, a degreed professional who works in health care industry. Demarcus, her son, was a member of the 2009 high school graduating class of his high school. Demarcus is African American, as is over 90 percent of his high school's enrollment. Demarcus has matured dramatically since we first met at the Scholarship Awards Ceremony near the time of his high school graduation. I would not have recognized him.

The scholarship coordinators from each of the five participating high schools choose one scholarship recipient every year to be their "Spotlight Scholar." Each of these students speaks on behalf of their high school's scholarship recipients. Included in their brief remarks is their own college access story. They speak of their college-going plans and what this partnership means to their community, school, and family. These high schools serve communities of highly segregated populations, some Hispanic and some African American. Demarcus reminds me, with pride, that he filled this role for his high school at the Scholarship Awards Ceremony almost two years ago.

Motivation

Demarcus pays attention. He notices details, about himself and the world around him. Demarcus graduated sixteenth in his high school class of 223 graduates. After his first year of high school, however, he was ranked first. He describes what happened:

Students, they want to be at the top of their classes but they worry about taking classes that are more rigorous. But which do you think is better? I think the more

rigorous classes. My main goal was to graduate; to get into the top 10 percent to

get the automatic acceptance in [rigorous state university] so the more rigorous

classes will prepare you.

He knew that there would be a sacrifice for taking more rigorous courses, but Demarcus

knew how the system worked and the importance of his grade point average in ensuring

his acceptance into the university he had identified as his top choice.   He describes how

closely he monitored his performance, "If I would have made an 86 instead of an 88 [as

the course grade] in the class it could [have] dropped me down [in ranking] to number

17…. It was very close."

Demarcus did gain acceptance into his university of first choice. After his

freshman year, however, he left and enrolled in a campus based in Houston. We discuss

what happened later. His plans remain the same. He says emphatically, "Right now, I

am at [university] getting a bachelor's in nursing, trying to become an RN. Then I plan

to go back to [this university] or [my first choice university] to get my master's in

Pediatrics to become a nurse practitioner, and hopefully go for a Ph.D."

Family Background

Demarcus connects his influences from home to his personal motivation for

success and his ability to persist toward his goals. He believes he will reach his goals.

He is likely to be the first among his siblings to succeed at this level. Mrs. Evans

describes the academic paths taken by her other children:

My daughter went to [university] for two years. She came back home. Then she

became focused again and went to [community college] for a year to complete her

associate's degree…. She is 30. I tell her, 'You are going to look up, and you're

30 years old [and] you haven't finished school.' And guess what? It's reality.

She continues with the story of her older son, "He started out in pharmacy. He did well

for two years but his girlfriend got pregnant, so he decided to get a job." She

acknowledges his responsibility, "He is doing what he has to do, to raise his family….

So my hand is in making sure that my grandkids are exposed to academics, encourage

them. We talk about college already."

Mrs. Evans and her sisters represent the first generation from her family to go to

college. She had two brothers who started college, but did not finish. Her sisters were

influential in paving the way for her. They became teachers. She also credits her high

school preparation combined with her clear goals toward a specific profession.

Regarding her high school, she says, "Their focus was education. I mean the

encouragement was there…. Looking at my ranking was always something I paid

attention to." She had a focus on a nursing career in elementary school and that dream

never wavered. She explains, "I wanted to be a nurse. That was my career and that's

what I focused on all along."

Mrs. Evans remembers an important contributor to her own college success, "My

mom was very supportive. She was always there while I was in school." She confirms

her role, "That's for all my kids. I tell them, when you finish high school, go to college,

get your education…. That's always been what I tell them."

Community

The Evans family lives near but not within the community of his high school.

Demarcus has not noticed any real change in the area over the years, good or bad. He

sees potential in improving long-term outcomes for the area through greater involvement

from the neighboring universities. He offers the following plan as possibility:

> They can start with getting some people from [the neighboring universities] to
>
> come in and help tutor. I know, like, some time, they'll start a program, but it
>
> usually it doesn't last too long. So I think if they become more connected with
>
> the students…. You know something like a mentor system even if [the students]
>
> have to go to [the university campus to see their mentors]. Don't wait for college
>
> [enrollment] to find a mentor. [The universities] should start now and maybe that
>
> will influence more students to even go…. I know a lot of students [who] kind of
>
> shift away.

In support of his idea, he adds, "There is only so much that the high school can do….

[This high school], you know, is used to so many changes in administration. I had four

principals since I began [ninth grade at this high school].   I had a new principal every

year, you know." Another principal has just been hired in the current year. This

particular high school has had five different principals in six years.

High School Perspective

Demarcus expresses his concerns related to the emphasis on testing in schools.

He observes that school culture has shifted to serving the accountability system in order

to avoid sanctions rather than serving students. The school motivation, he says, is, "Let's

meet the standards so we can stay open." He supports this observation through personal

experience:

> [The teachers and administrators] don't realize when we go to college there is no
>
> [annual accountability assessment] in chemistry. We only get to half into the

book in high school [because of test preparation] so you go to college and for

[students who have had access to a full course] it's like a refresher to them. But

to us? We never learned this.

Demarcus began his college career at a large top tier state university away from Houston.

He knew he would be accepted for enrollment because of his high school ranking. Once

there, he struggled with the academic demands, particularly in chemistry. He found his

peers were better prepared. Demarcus has confidence. He knows he is capable of

succeeding in a demanding academic program, but he needed support to complete his

freshman year.

His mother recalls his high school preparation from the perspective of his

struggles in college. Regarding high school, she says, "I know he was doing well. He

took care of his homework. He was making good grades." Once he began his college

courses, she recalls the change in his experiences, "He shared this [idea of being less

prepared than others] more when he got to [university] because he felt his classmates

where ahead of him, knew the stuff, how better prepared they were. One of his

roommates knew all the chemistry." Demarcus adds for emphasis, "[This roommate]

came in with 50 hours [college credit]…. In private school he was taking college

classes."

Demarcus has hopes that future graduates from his high school will be better

prepared. He says, "I wish [my high school] would have better prepared me and had me

ready when I opened this chemistry book…. I just knew the basics it was just a struggle

for me." To access tutoring support from family members, Demarcus drove home every

weekend. He has now transferred to a university in Houston, closer to home and to the support of his family.

Program Experiences

Mrs. Evans and Demarcus describe their thoughts related to having the Project GRAD partnership at the school and in the community. Demarcus says, "You know, my twelfth-grade year, it was only Project GRAD that hosted a college fair…. [For some], it is the only option in the feeder pattern." With budget cuts threatening the continuation of many programs, Mrs. Evans adds, "I don't think that the school board understands that this is the only money that some people actually get for college."

When Demarcus is asked to discuss specific elements of the programming that support students in their college-going aspirations, he immediately credits the persistent focus that the partnership makes possible. Of particular significance to him is the work of the scholarship coordinator on his high school campus:

The first thing I remember is the scholarship coordinator. He really pushed scholarships. The more we got closer to graduation, the more he encouraged us for more college tours. He went on to tell us not to wait so long to get everything done as far as FAFSA, any financial aid and to go to the interviews, and plan not to wait until the last minute. He is very college driven towards the last year of high school.

Mrs. Evans adds, "He really did a good job in filling out applications and trying to get scholarships. And he worked very hard. In that, I was very impressed. I was mailing 10 and 12 [scholarship] applications a month."

As we discuss the experience of the College Institutes, both Demarcus and his mother express the value of these experiences in motivating students for college and in teaching the rewards associated with persistence. Mrs. Evans mentions specifically the exposure to college life that was a motivational factor for her son. Demarcus recalls, "The College Institute experiences were fun…. I went to Baylor and I went to Prairie View." When he had not yet completed his second required Institute, he describes his procrastination, and being reminded by the school coordinator,

> [He] just stopped me in the hallway: 'Hey, your second summer institute session is not done.' I end up saying, 'Well, I'll get them done later.' But you know I ended having the time of my life. [When it was nearing time to graduate] at the end, [other students were] stressing, 'I don't have my second summer institute session done!' But I was done by my eleventh grade year!

Demarcus and his mother share an appreciation for the scholarship itself, not only in providing additional financial support for the expenses of higher education, but also in the way it can be leveraged for better planning throughout high school. The added financial resource of $500 every semester is described by Demarcus, "That's a lot in my opinion because the tuition is off the roof. We have a book that's $300 …. Any amount is helpful." He continues with what is the greater reason for the scholarship offer, "It just made you make better decisions along the way." Mrs. Evans and her son exchange ideas about their own thinking once they learned of the scholarship offer. Mrs. Evans recalls, "You know, we went to meetings. They were discussing how if he would stay in the feeder, go through the program, go to [the community middle school] and then go to [the community high school], this would be something. That's what we focused on."

Demarcus agrees, "It was an incentive…. I was going to another different high school but I said, 'I'll go to [my community high school]… and go to college.' And that is exactly what I did."

Mrs. Evans adds emphasis to the importance of financial assistance for families. She describes her situation as a single parent caring for her aging mother. She appreciates the fact that this scholarship is available to all students in the high school, regardless of need. From his experiences applying for many different forms of financial aid, Demarcus appreciates the support his mother gives to both him and to her mother. He feels that her obligations are not always reflected in some scholarship award calculations.

Program Needs

Demarcus has well-considered ideas to share when the conversation turns to the students who finish high school, qualifying for the scholarship, but who do not enroll in college. He provides this analysis:

> Well, one thing I know it gets in the way. I've seen it for myself. When students start working that last semester of their high school year, they start working the summer time, they get so used to that fast money. You know, they start getting a pay check. [They think,] 'I have to pay so many bills at home, I really don't need college. I am making money.' You see those students when you come back home from college.

Demarcus describes two activities to regain the focus of these students. He suggests, "I think what needs to happen is that… during the break, go and visit the university they thought about [attending]… and you continue to fill out the scholarship [applications]. In

the summer time they get lazy and say, 'Well maybe I don't want to go anymore.'" He then sums up the fundamental gap faced by students at this critical juncture, "Nobody, I think nobody is driving them."

Access for Others

Adriana Flores and her daughter, Blanca Castro, have arranged to participate in an interview at the Project GRAD office on March 17, 2011. This is the second interview scheduled to occur on this day. Mrs. Flores and her daughter arrive early, and they are accompanied by additional family members. The previous interview is still in process. I introduce myself to the group, offering water or coffee. Arriving with Mrs. Flores and Blanca are Blanca's siblings. Blanca has two sisters, one still in high school and the other already finished, but without satisfying all of the requirements that would allow her to receive a diploma. Also accompanying the group is the boyfriend of Blanca's younger sister. Another young man is with them. I assume that this is Blanca's brother. I learn that this is Blanca's husband. Since her high school graduation in May 2010, Blanca has married.

Joining the interview are Laurie Ballering, a member of the Project GRAD program staff, and Melissa Martinez. To create a greater level of familiarity for Mrs. Flores and her daughter, I ask Melissa to lead the conversation and to provide the necessary translations as she has done in most of the other interviews. I ask Laurie Ballering to support the process because she is familiar to most parents who have had children participate in the program. As soon as the earlier interview is concluded, Mrs. Flores and Blanca are welcomed into the conference room. The rest of the family waits in the reception area. Blanca is a 2010 high school graduate. She qualified to receive the Project GRAD scholarship, but she has not enrolled in college. Both Mrs. Flores and Blanca exhibit extreme shyness, looking down at the table and speaking in very quiet tones. When they are most nervous, they look at each other and laugh together with a

quiet little laugh that seems to alleviate some tension. Their shyness connects them, reminding me more of sisters than mother and daughter. Given their shyness, I am surprised that they actually agreed to participate in this interview. I am surprised that they wanted to come to the office, a place neither of them had ever been before. I am also grateful that the office is closed on this day so that they do not experience greater discomfort that might be caused by the typical office environment.

Program Experiences

Mrs. Flores describes her earliest memory of the Project GRAD program and the offer of a scholarship for her children. She says, "It was when my oldest daughter was in the ninth grade, that's when I was visited by Project GRAD." Volunteers came to her house during the Walk for Success. She describes the experience, "When you guys visited, [one of the volunteers] was a lady from Scarborough Elementary School. Since I already knew her, she explained why they were there." She recalls signing the agreement but does not remember anything else about the event. From this point forward, both Mrs. Flores and Blanca tell stories that unfold as illustrations of miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Without prompting, Mrs. Flores describes a problem that her daughter has encountered in being able to access the summer College Institute experiences. Because she introduces this topic into the conversation, I wonder if this might be the reason that she is here. She continues immediately to describe the barrier experienced by her daughter that limited her access to these programs. At first, it is unclear that she is talking about not just Blanca's experiences, but her older daughter as well. This barrier has persisted for both. She was unable to access transportation. I assume that she means

transportation to the high school in order to access the buses. Each day school buses are available to transport students to and from the college campuses. More conversation reveals that she and her daughters believed that they needed to provide their own transportation to the universities each day.

We continue to explore the topic so that we can learn where communication failed. Mrs. Flores says, "I believe that school buses should be available so that they can go to their [College Institute] classes. The school told us that there weren't any buses and that every student had to have their own ride." As if to emphasize her efforts, Mrs. Flores adds, "I told her to ask around, but she said that there wasn't anything available. She wanted to go so she asked." Blanca was able to qualify for the scholarship by completing alternate programs offered on the high school campus. These are arranged by college access staff and typically help students who have experienced some hardship in accessing one of the two program offerings. The alternate programs involve lessons in the college application process, accessing financial aid, and attending college fairs. As the conversation continues, both Blanca and Mrs. Flores provide information that illustrate how limited these experiences have been for Blanca.

Family History

Mrs. Flores grew up in Mexico. She and her first two daughters moved to Houston twelve years ago. Only her third child, the youngest daughter, was born in the United States. She describes her life in Mexico as "very different," but makes no further comment. She also says nothing of a husband or of her daughters' father.

Aspirations

What follows next is another signal of Mrs. Flores' reason for coming here. She says, "Blanca likes school, but we don't have money right now. She told me that she was told about the scholarship and that she wants to go back. I told her, 'Then let's go.'" Blanca, who has remained so quiet, agrees. She says that she does want to study, but because of their limited resources and the costs of college, she did not think it was possible. Also, Blanca is unclear if she is actually eligible to receive the scholarship.

Mrs. Flores continues to add information that she feels is important so that her daughter's aspirations are better known. She says, "She's told me that she wants to study accounting." Mrs. Flores makes it very clear the greatest barrier to access for any of her family is their ability to access sufficient resources to pay for college. When federal aid is brought up, she insists that this is something she has never discussed. Blanca then adds what has become the family's greatest hurdle, "No papers."

Then, as if to make up for all of the lost time and missed opportunities, too many solutions are presented as possibilities. Solutions do exist, but it becomes clear that there is no simple way to describe all of the next steps. Many students and parents believe that there is no financial aid available to them because they are not documented citizens. In order to successfully navigate the system, students and their parents need to participate in well-facilitated processes. Blanca and her mother do not need to be hit by a barrage of confusing information coming at them all at once. Finally, the conversation is able to refocus on gathering data from Blanca and her mother. Blanca agrees that community college would be a good place to begin the next phase of her education.

High School Priorities

Mrs. Flores is asked to describe how regular communication from the school could be more easily accessible to her. She says, "When I could, I would go with [Blanca] to school. We weren't really told about the aids for college. We were only told how to help our children to do better in their classes, to pass the tests." While this signals a focus on accountability systems rather than higher aspirations for students, it is also true that Blanca's older sister failed to graduate because of her inability to pass the exit level tests.

Barriers Identified

Information is not reaching this family about meetings about college, opportunities to participate in trips to college campuses, and career fairs that reach her family. Blanca reports that she can only remember one college fair at the school. This is not because she was not interested. Blanca acknowledges that she always wanted to go to college. She remembers this desire as far back as seventh grade. Her high school achievement is evidence of her desire to learn. She graduated with almost a 3.5 grade point average and completed pre-calculus during her senior year. Finally, Mrs. Flores articulates the barrier that for her has been able to silence any desire she held for her children, "We're always told that because we are not citizens, that we cannot go to college. That's what we always heard."

Blanca now begins to tell a different story. She is asked a series of questions to understand what actions have been encouraged and taken. She says that she first learned of the possibility of college access for undocumented students, "last year, as a senior." She explains, "I heard that from a friend. One of my teachers told me to fill out an

application for college." Blanca did submit an application.to to the community college. Then she admits, "I didn't go because I wasn't ready." "I was scared," she adds, now with tears. Her fear was not of the academic challenge, but of the unfamiliar place. For whatever reason, she never fully participated in the College Institute experience as it was intended to be experienced. Her mother never participated in one of the college tours with or without her daughter.

Possibilities Emerge

Blanca's voice begins to grow stronger as we discuss plans for attending community college in the summer. She describes feeling nervous over the idea and laughs when she is told that this is an improvement over feeling scared. She admits that she has friends who are in college, some of whom are attending the neighborhood branch of the community college. Her voice picks up even more as she starts to ask her own questions about how courses are scheduled and how the scholarship can be used. She confirms that she now knows what to do when she has questions and she recites the names of those who are available to help her.

Mrs. Flores says, "I never dreamed that any of my children would go to college. I only thought my youngest daughter because she was born here. But I never dreamed the others would go." When Blanca starts classes, Mrs. Flores says she will feel very proud. I wonder what could have happened if an hour of time had been given to this mother and her daughter before today. I wonder how many families believe the information that circulates about college and scholarships is information related to a story of access for someone else's children.

Yesterday's Disappointments or Tomorrow's Dreams

On March 30, 2011, we meet at the home of Andrea Medina and her grandson, Ricardo. Ricardo was raised by his grandmother, and he continues to live at home while he attends the university as a freshman. Their home sits directly across from the high school Ricardo attended until his graduation in May of 2010. This side of the busy four-lane street is a mix of single-family homes and commercial buildings. At some time in the past, the street was widened, leaving little space remaining for front yards or driveways. Cars park on a narrow strip of grass and sidewalk that exists between the road and the fences, protecting homes from the street traffic and other threats. As I approach the gate, Ricardo comes out to greet me. He introduces me to their three dogs; the smallest is the only one barking. We laugh at this together. Ricardo is gracious. I cannot imagine feeling more welcome. Melissa Martinez is already in the living room, visiting with Mrs. Medina. Melissa acts as research assistant and provides translation to Spanish for Mrs. Medina and to English for me.

After all introductions are made, Ricardo provides a status report, "[College] is going really well. I'm doing my basics and they're actually really easy. College is fun and I just love it." He completed 13 hours during his first semester and is currently taking twelve. His grade point average is a 3.0. He confirms for me that he is continuing to live at home. He adds, "I've been living here since I was one," as he gestures to a framed baby picture on the table next to me. His grandmother smiles. This home is full of love and respect.

High School Reflections

Ricardo provides his assessment of his high school, "[This school] is a great school; I wouldn't change it for anything." I am surprised to hear this because during his high school years, this school was forced to undergo reorganization because of persistently low ratings. I am even more surprised by the statements that follow. He says, "What happened was, when I was a freshman and in the tenth grade, I was off track. I was a bad kid." I never would have imagined this. With everything I observed, there was no evidence to support this assessment. Ricardo explains:

> I would skip and not go to school. I was on the wrong track because of the people that were living around me. It's actually a sad story. I was a bad kid; I didn't see my life heading anywhere. At night my grandmother would just cry because of how bad I was doing. It wasn't until the end of my tenth grade year, Coach, the football coach at [the high school], he saw that I loved football and that I was a great kid. I knew I was in the wrong crowd and he took me under his wing. Even though I have always had the support of my father, I saw my coach more like a father. He taught me how to be a leader and a fast learner. No one had ever told me I could go to college, even if I had screwed up before. Fortunately I had [Coach].

He continues to tell his story:

> I brought up my GPA from a 1.9 to a 2.7 or 2.8. He taught me how to study and I had straight As for those two years. He made me take my ACT and my SATs in my eleventh-grade year and during my senior year; it paid off in school. From the whole district, I think, I made the highest ACT score, 27 out of 36. When I got

my score, I told my coach I made a 27 and he was like, 'What!' I was told that it

was a big deal. My high score and my [improved] GPA opened a lot of doors for

me.

Ricardo's climb from potential drop-out to achieving a solid score on his college entrance

examination is impressive. This level of achievement, after only two years of effort,

signals the possibility of greater potential that he may yet realize. He remains naïve in

his understanding of college entrance exam scores, but he may have scored above his

peers at his high school. His perception of his score as being the highest in the district is

probably linked to a limited sense of the size of this district and the great range of

achievement among its students. His increased grade point average is an example of the

difficult climb many students face once they begin to take their grades seriously. For

many, the realization comes too late. Without a Coach to act as mentor to advocate on

their behalf, students often face limited possibilities.

Ricardo's grandmother confirms that his early high school years were as he has

described them. She cries a little at the thought. He responds by gently holding her arm

as she says, "I always advised him that if something bad happened when he was hanging

with the wrong crowd, he would also be in trouble." She felt he was with the wrong

crowd.

Ricardo describes the transition as difficult, "At first it was hard leaving my

childhood friends, but then I realized that there's a good future for me. It was hard to say

goodbye, but I decided to do good in school." The Coach and his teachers helped him

make the transition. The current status of his former friends stands as an example of the

limited possibilities that were waiting for him, "A lot of those friends dropped out or have

kids, at 17 or 16 years old. A couple of them are in jail. I don't really talk to them anymore." Some of them made the transition difficult, but he says, "I ignored it because I was like, 'How are you going to get me to college? So how are you going to help me if you get me in trouble?' I tended to block that out and hang out with the crowd, like valedictorians and [top] 10 percent kids."

Once his focus changed, he did not struggle with academics. He realized he was very capable. Before, he just did not care. Not doing the work was a way to express his apathy. He explains his former ways, "I wouldn't do it, but I did pay attention and when it came time to do what I had to do to progress, it came pretty easy to me, especially English." He names the teachers who influenced him and supported his transition. "I only got straight As in their classes," he adds, "I learned Algebra, Calculus and a little bit of trigonometry."

Ricardo is certain that his story of the influence he felt from this Coach is not unique. He explains the challenge of the neighborhood:

> At [my high school] there are a lot of bad kids because of the neighborhood,
> drugs, and gangs trying to get them to join and stuff. They need to see what is
> actually out there besides gang violence and drugs. Coach really tries; some of
> them listen. It was luck that he got to them at an early age, when they were in
> their freshman year. They're actually doing really great.

He continues to describe the specific moment that created the opportunity for Coach to intervene:

> The coach from Texas State University came to see me for football. He said,
> 'You're a great player; I saw your films. You have a lot of potential football-

wise.' I was excited because I didn't think I had the potential to play in college. I know I was great in high school, but it's college. He said, 'I'll call you later and I'll tell you about all the information.' I was so excited when I got home and got that phone call. I was hoping for good news, but he told [me] that he was sorry because my GPA was too low.

Having his greatest hopes come together and then fall apart so quickly became the pivotal moment for Ricardo. He describes this as a great moment because for the first time he saw that he could take charge of achieving the outcomes that he wanted in life. Today, Ricardo has big plans. He admits it is a big dream, "I know it's very far, but I want to get into the medical field. I want to be a general surgeon, like a plastic surgeon."

Program Experiences

Ricardo recalls hearing about the Project Grad Scholarship in the middle of his tenth-grade year. Again, Coach was involved. He introduced Ricardo to the college access staff and arranged for him to sign up for the scholarship program and to enroll in a college institute. Ricardo only wanted something to do during the summer. At the same time, Coach arranged for Ricardo and another student to train with a former professional football player every morning, from 7AM until noon. The two boys then would catch the bus to attend the College Institute at UHD. They would return in the late afternoons and train even more. Coach was putting Ricardo with a group of people who were already on the right track. He was also keeping him engaged and motivated. "UHD was great," Ricardo adds, "I thank Coach every time I see him."

In addition to the help he received from Coach with his college applications, Ricardo also had an opportunity to work with Rice University graduate students as mentors for his college applications. He offers this reflection:

> I already knew that Rice was a great school and that it's hard to get in. They kept mentioning that it's a great school and billions of doors open for you. I thought it was a good opportunity to know about Rice and it made me want [college] more. We saw how happy the students were and we asked them, 'How do you like Rice?' They said they loved it. I actually saw a football player coming out of his dorm…. I was thinking, 'I want to be you one day. I want to have that GPA, I want to have all those classes, and I want to play football. I want the opportunity to play in the league, the NFL, and play professional ball.'

Mrs. Medina adds her council, "Everyone has to make sacrifices and it's up to you if you want to go further. You as an individual will have to make sacrifices."

College Decisions

Ricardo has a cousin who has graduated from college. "He has a great job," Ricardo says. He was the first in the family to go to college and to complete college. Ricardo wants to follow. He smiles as he says, "I look up to him and want to get all the degrees. I actually want to pass him."

When Ricardo was in the eleventh grade he was awarded the Dean's scholarship from Baylor University. He describes his thoughts at the time, "I knew that it was a big deal because it's a private school and it's hard to get into. I received my acceptance letter from Baylor in a gold envelope." Because of his GPA, universities that had not received his ACT scores were not accepting him. He was enthusiastic about going to Baylor. He

went to visit the campus, accompanied by his grandmother and his cousin. Once he learned how much it would cost to attend, however, he knew that Baylor was out of his reach. He came home and applied to other colleges and was accepted to most of them.

This experience, the acceptance and then the disappointment associated with Baylor, is the moment Ricardo remembers as when he knew with total certainty that he was going to go to college. Ricardo consistently makes meaning from the events in his life in ways that are empowering. He explains, "Whenever I don't reach what I want to get, I always remember a quote that my cousin taught me, 'Never let yesterday's disappointments overshadow tomorrow's dreams.' I didn't let them put my hopes down." Far from it. Ricardo has a way of narratively storying and restorying yesterday to fuel achievement.

His grandmother is happy with his choice of a local university. She was concerned over the distance to Waco and other places he considered. She wanted to know she could reach him and continue to help him. She says, "Me getting to you then, you coming to me, it was going to be more expensive." Ricardo reaches over and pats her shoulder. It is almost impossible to imagine this young man as ever being headed in the wrong direction. When he started his college classes, Mrs. Medina says, "I cried every day. I realized that he's going to get a better education. I felt proud when I said that he was [in college]."

Potential Barriers

Ricardo anticipates the courses will get harder. He knows he must achieve at the highest levels if he is to realize his biggest dreams. He says, "If I stay on course I will be able to do it. I will get there and I will progress." His grandmother is concerned over the

cost of college. She says, "The finances are difficult, but we will find a way for him to continue moving forward."

Community

Mrs. Medina has lived in this home for twenty years. She says, "Years ago it was calm. As years passed, things happened, but here on this street things are calmer than the streets behind here." With the school across the street, she says, "There is police here, so I feel more at ease that they are there so there is not a lot of [negative] activity here." Ricardo does not see himself as living in this community when he finishes his education. He says, "I am not sure because I love Houston. I have been here all my life, but I want to see what is out there."

As we discuss what changes students, what will better motivate students, Ricardo offers these reflections:

> A lot of adults and teachers think that being more strict with the students will help the students be better in class, but I think if you get teachers that can relate more to the students and are kind of like fun, but still teach things that they need to learn, that is how the student will see it is not boring in class. It is always fun there.

His thoughts return to the example of Coach, who managed to motivate him through what he cared about at the time, and through that motivation, continued to hold him accountable to even higher standards than other students. But first, he connected to what Ricardo found important.

Ricardo compares this to other teachers at the time. He would skip class. Some would try to hold him accountable, without any result. He explains, "I wasn't really

hearing it, and I know that… you can try to help this one person, but if they do not want the help, what is the use of helping them...? So it was mostly my fault for not paying attention, for not wanting the best for [myself].”

He adds another thought that was inspired by Coach, who said, “I wish I had you your ninth grade year. I promise if I had you would be top 10 percent or valedictorian.” It was Coach who made him earn As in order to play. He explains the logic, “He saw that I had the lowest grades and I started low…. [Coach explained], ‘I want you to have As so we can get that GPA up and we can get you to college,’ and I did.” He credits Coach’s efforts for the scholarships he received. As an example, he remembers, “I got that letter in the mail saying that I received the Jessie [Jones] scholarship, and I was ranked 173 in my class, and I received that scholarship!”

Family History

Ricardo explains the differences between his education and the education his parents were able to access:

> My dad and my mom are from Mexico and over there the education is not like here…. There are stories my dad says… his dad was not really there a lot. He was just a bad person. So my dad with his brothers and sisters had to go work and they would sell like candy or whatever. My grandmother would cook donuts sometimes and they would go sell it to make money… to put food on the table.

Ricardo believes that because there was no money for school, his father did not continue education beyond sixth grade. His mother left school after fifth grade. Ricardo is motivated by these stories from the past. He adds, “Thanks to my dad and my grandmother I am doing good in school, I am getting a good education, there is no limit.”

His grandmother shares in this expression of hope with a smile. Ricardo is certain that when he has a family, his children will go to college and hopefully exceed his level of education. "I don't care if you have to be an astronaut," he says as if they are there to hear him, "You're going to pass me because that is what I want."

Ricardo hopes to have his grandmother watch his college graduation and his family. He says, "I want them to be there and feel not just proud but to feel the same feeling I am going to feel like success and accomplishment because if it was not for them I would not be there." He then adds the important role his grandmother has played in his life, raising him when his mother left. He says, "I thank her every day for being there because, like my cousin, if it wasn't for her I don't know where I would be right now…. Coach might have been there, but his lecture would not come into my ears without my grandmother." He adds, "She was there since day one to lead me in the right direction and not give up on me in my bad times." Mrs. Medina responds with a blessing for him, "God bless you, son, and I hope he makes your dreams come true."

As we are preparing to leave, Ricardo asks questions that about potential cuts to state and local grants that are important resources for him and for other college students. He is concerned about his ongoing ability to pay for college. He asks, "If [the legislators] say that we are the future, but cut our funding, how do they expect us to pay?" More people who make policy should meet Ricardo and his grandmother. I encourage him to write letters and to help them understand the importance of the funding. Mrs. Medina adds, "We have to do it for him and for others who would like to finish their degree."

Chapter VI: Interpretation of Narrative Accounts

My narrative inquiry began with a desire to access the voices of students and their families, to participate in their storying of the journey to college, and to bring their perspective into the work of our organization in a more immediate way. I have followed the organization and model of a recent study of young adults who left school prior to graduation by Clandinin et al. (2010). In this study, following the collection of the narrative accounts, the research team moved away from the relation space between researcher and individual student as they looked for threads connecting all accounts to resonate with the topic more deeply (Clandinin et al., 2010, p.443). I, too, do this in order to pull narrative strands from stories as they were told by the nine young adults and their representative parents, most of whom were mothers. To facilitate a deeper look across the narrative accounts, table 6.1 lists the nine narratives.

Table 6.1

Narrative Accounts

	Pseudonyms Assigned	
Narrative Title	Student	Parent and Others
The Fifth Daughter Becomes First in the Family	Angela Rangel	Mrs. Rangel
Plans Delayed	Ashley	Mrs. Williams
First-Generation Success	Mario Dominguez	Mr. and Mrs. Dominguez
Financial Aid Glitch	Arizona Jones	Mr. Noble Jones
For-Profit Influence	Enrique Sanchez	Mrs. Sanchez
First-Generation Family	Miguel Soliz	Mrs. Maria Soliz
Spotlight Scholar	Demarcus Evans	Mrs. Evans
Access for Others	Adriana Flores	Blanca Castro
Yesterday's Disappointments or Tomorrow's Dreams	Ricardo Medina	Mrs. Medina

Illuminating the Pathways

This study was organized to provide a more meaningful understanding of the students' lived story. We do this exploration within the shifting three-dimensional framework of temporality, relational or sociality, and place and how these simultaneously shape the composition and recomposition of lives and identity making (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007; Murray Orr & Olson, 2007). Important in the process of identifying the resonant intersections across the narrative accounts is connecting with the social, practical, and personal justifications identified for the study. The social purpose emerged from a need to address the incomplete representations included in outcome data, particularly outcome data associated with the development of policy. The storied experiences of the students and their families in particular school and community milieus complete a view of how policy is lived by people in the context of their storied lives. The practical purpose formed from the desire to have a clearer understanding of the perceived relevance of certain aspects of the Project GRAD program, specifically in two areas: 1) the work of the staff dedicated to college access, and 2) the early college experiences gained from the college institutes. The knowledge that emerges from this study will benefit any program focused on improving college access and college success for similar populations of students. Finally, I describe my personal purpose as my desire to learn how to position the organization to achieve the greatest impact for students and families while existing in a milieu of competing reform agendas and fractured relationships within the district administration at a time of limited resources at local, state, and federal levels.

The nine narrative accounts have been interrogated individually and collectively for key intersections or emerging narrative strands. Initial thoughts were exchanged with

research assistants and others who practice in the field. Each time I returned to the field texts, I encountered something new, which illustrates the generative nature of studies such as my own. Seemingly endless ideas emerge from the narrative texts as the nested stories of parent(s), students, and siblings unfolded. In reflection, my own stories intertwine with theirs to make meaning. I refer to the photographs of the families and their communities that I used as I composed the narrative text, reconnecting to place, time, and the relationships. The warning issued by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) as the research moves from the field to text resonates with me.

Moving away from the immediacy of personal engagement in the field creates a loss of security. The need to look across narrative text necessitates this shift in the relational dimension (Clandinin et al., 2010). The challenge is to engage with the narrative text from a new context of inquiry, listening for and restorying new elements, observing the intersections of pathways, discovering new silences and tensions between and among the lives in motion, no longer frozen in the isolation that can occur in separate, disjointed narrative texts (Clandinin et al., 2010). The shift from narrative space to the space of open inquiry is the space where the possibilities associated with transformation overcome the limits of conformation (Murray Orr & Olson, 2007). All the while, the space of inquiry remains without conclusion, offering answers of increasing number, answers existing in the stories, ready to be "found" when one's own experiences and wakefulness enable the discovery.

Broadening and Burrowing

Broadening techniques were used to bring additional perspectives into the milieu of the students' and parents' stories. This interpretive strategy deepens the representation

of the complex context in which these students and their families make decisions about future plans. For instance, Adriana spoke of her daughter's inability to access reliable information. Blanca, her daughter, spoke emotionally of her fear of new places. Her fear resonated with the learning of the importance of university-based College Institute experiences; the very same experiences that her mother mistakenly thought were not available to students who needed transportation. Eventually, the expression of fear and miscommunication led to an entirely different story of legal residency and erroneous beliefs surrounding that issue.   From the themes that emerged, burrowing techniques delved more deeply into specific areas of major import to my study participants, but also to all others involved in the scholarship program. Looking into how the family accesses information illuminated their reliance on an informal network of communication. Fear of repercussions creates a dependence on peer-to-peer communication. What this parent understood as policy for the children of undocumented parents and their inability to attend college was incorrect and limiting for her daughter, while concomitantly frightening from a family perspective.

Other larger ideas surfaced through this process of inquiry. The unintended effects of restructuring College Institutes because of limited funding, resulted in a narrowing of some elements of program experiences. Other life events have disrupted the community or the family – for example, an unplanned pregnancy or financial insecurity. The ability to examine the minutiae of a situation has provided an uncovering of policy or practice with much larger meaning for the study.

Intersections

The intersections surfacing from this inquiry have been organized around the three-dimensional framework of narrative inquiry of the relational, place, and time with an additional section to address specifically the implications for program and policy. Each element of intersection is expressed through all dimensions of the framework, as I hope I have demonstrated in the aforementioned discussion.

Relational

Relational: Student

Know more about their personal lives; be more aware of individuals and their life situations. So you can better help them with their life situations. Ashley

When Ashley offered these words, I heard everything that had not been said throughout our conversation. The answers until this point had been almost limited to single words. Ashley summed up her feelings of parenting on that day, in that moment, with a single word, "Tired." I observed her own mother caring for her sister's young child. Three generations of women were present in this small room, the youngest on Ashley's lap. Ashley's tiredness resonates in all of her responses. But her last thoughts in the quotation above filled the room with Ashley's authority of her own lived experience. Her unique experiences and her unique needs happen in their own time. How is it possible to be present with relevant resources in the complexity of these students' lives? What relationships could have been formed over time that would have become a network for her and for others? Ashley mentions no names when she reflects on her experiences from school, yet she was willing to have us come into her home to be a part of our learning, to allow us to participate in her telling and retelling. How do we

move forward with Ashley? Ashley's name will stay with me. How do we assess our

work with students and families so that they will know and come to name a community

of resources existing for them, a community of people, people working in relation with

students - students in relation with individual people – each knowing the other by name?

Relational: Student and Family

> *Mario always talked to us about what happened to him at school. I remember*
>
> *that he told us, Mom, they are going to give me a scholarship to study.*

Mrs. Dominguez

Consistently across all stories was the theme of high aspirations held by all

parents for their children. Mrs. Dominguez, having no formal education, held clear

expectations for her children. Another recurring idea was the importance of the student

acting as role model for their siblings. Students expressed an understanding of their

responsibility for their own success. Mario was well aware of his responsibility to pave

the way for his sister, and he expressed his desire to help his older brother return to

college. Parents often expressed their responsibility for supporting and encouraging

success.

Students who are most on track for success engaged with confidence when

communicating with their parents. Information passed back and forth between parent and

child, in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Students like Ricardo and others expressed a

desire and responsibility to do well and later to be able to help their parents. They were

aware of the sacrifices their parents have made to encourage their own progress.   But

students who needed the greatest levels of support also had parents who desired to help.

Blanca's mother, who stopped her participation in so many opportunities because of fear

and erroneous information, expressed a strong desire to support her aspirations for an education.

I am often told by those who come to observe our work of the power they see in our engagement with parents. Yet Blanca's mother could not access accurate information. The perceived risk was too great. Enrique's parents borrowed a large amount of money so that he could attend a school offering certification that could have been accessed through other educational systems with no cost to this family. They equate cost with quality, and their borrowing money is their testament of support. These stories provide me with a new way of looking at our work with parents, of seeing the relationship within a more complex dynamic that includes the added interchanges: parent as living policy, parent as informing community, parent as influencing systems, parent as advocating for children. Mrs. Soliz wants parents to know "the next step that [children] are going to take [in school]." She wants to have greater influence in not just guiding that process as it is defined by those in authority within the system, but also in shaping what is to come for her children and her community.

Relational: Student and Counselors

> *[The program staff] should keep in contact with the students and let them know*
> *they are there to help.* Mario

Students who were further along the road to success were able to articulate clear goals for themselves in terms of careers. Angela spoke of becoming a teacher, but continuing her education until becoming a principal. The strength of her plan stands in sharp contrast to Ashley's vague notion of wanting a degree in "computers." Angela's

neighborhood friend who returned home admitted to saying only what others wanted to hear, but having no personal vision.

Students need greater access to career-related information and the academic pathways to career goals. Students express the desire to become doctors without an understanding of what is expected academically. On the other extreme, students who have successfully graduated and have no desire to return to a classroom of lectures and books are swayed by television commercials to obligate themselves to large loans from for-profit institutions or direct campus-based recruitment. As we consider the enormous value in the College Institute experience as evidenced in this study, and the limits on resources available in any given year, the importance of facilitating a richer knowing for students is evident. Counselors have become test coordinators in these schools. College access staff, now under the authority of district administration, has been relegated to meet measures of productivity that serve the system rather than the students and their community.

Relational: Student and Others

> *I was afraid. I went over there. I looked at my roommates. I was afraid. I guess*
> *we are Spanish-speaking people.* Angela

Angela and other students spoke of feeling themselves identified as a minority once arriving on the college campus. High school campuses are not integrated, particularly those in low-income communities. Students need broader experience to increase their resilience, know their strengths, to develop their leadership potential, and to connect with the wider community for support. One reason the College Institute exists is to serve as a vehicle for exchange between students from different communities served

by our organization. Students speak of their appreciation of this opportunity to know and share story with other students from different neighborhoods. A larger opportunity exists within this context, and practices have evolved as models for expansion.

Demarcus recommended engaging universities with high schools to establish mentoring relationships with students. Ricardo and others have accessed Rice graduate student volunteers who have mentored them through the college application process. Through university partners, other opportunities for student engagement can be developed to provide the context for new relationships to occur, expanding identity-making for students and parents.

Following her initial shock of self-identity as a "minority" when she viewed herself through the eyes of the "majority" of her new surroundings, Angela's story ended with her surprise of being received and welcomed, but Angela is able to find potential in every challenge. Is resilience connected to this characteristic evidenced through the stories of Angela, Ricardo, and others with similar potentially challenging encounters, enabling them to create possibility? Parents, too, shared stories that illustrate the same practice of interpreting story to move forward. Exploring this idea leads to the final relational topic of student with self.

Relational: Student and Self

> *I met a graduate student, and he was telling me how they have a bio-technology department. I somewhat researched and it made me want to pursue [this field] even more.* Miguel

Students able to express themselves and their observations of the world around them in ways that exhibited critical analysis gained traction early in their journey. They

readily asked for clarification or felt at ease in questioning ideas expressed by others. Their shared stories conveyed an ability to access resources and to create an environment supporting their needs. Angela did not want the distractions of college life. She avoided parties. Mario says that he will succeed because he has initiative and wants something better in life. Miguel moved to his own apartment because of roommate problems. He also enrolled in the college freshman mentoring program because he knows he needs the help in better managing his time. He meets monthly with an upper level student who acts as an ambassador to college freshmen. As we plan our work with the realization of the need for individualized support for students and families, how do we help foster conditions that help students know their own needs?

Place

Place: School

> *I think the bad thing about high school was that they only focus on the top 10 percent. I think they should focus not that they only pay attention to us, but they should try to pay attention to the other students as well.* Angela
>
> *I wish my high school had better prepared me and had me ready.* Demarcus

Many of the students and some of the parents expressed concern over the schools' focus on college access for only the highest achieving students. Even those students who count themselves among the high achievers assessed this practice as unfair. Most students perceived the existence of different expectations for different groups of students, those who were most likely to benefit from additional resources and those who would not.

Enrique was influenced by ads for technical school and both he and his parents signed loans because he thought all other options would require more lecture and courses. His conversations with his college access coordinator yielded very little that interested him.

Another recurring theme was the growing priority schools place on ensuring their success with the state and federal accountability systems in order to keep the school from being targeted for takeover. Demarcus, in particular, expressed this idea, feeling that their focus needs to shift to ensuring success of students. Demarcus has struggled in chemistry. He compares his performance with his peers in college who had attended private schools. He knew the basics; they knew the content. His high school has experienced constant turnover of principals – five principals in six years. During Demarcus' four years in high school, a different principal was hired for each of those years. Demarcus and his mother expressed the constancy that has been established by the many years of partnership with Project GRAD.

Place: Home

Although I've never been to school, I've always wanted the best for my children.

Mrs. Dominguez

Parents and students share a desire for success, and better ways of sharing accurate and timely information with parents will facilitate the realization of that desire. Multiple solutions to accommodate working parents, undocumented parents, and others need to be considered. The language and culture of the community must be considered and made welcome in the school. Relevant information on college access for students must also be available to parents in ways that respect their level of experience with the

topic without allowing situations like Blanca's to perpetuate, where access to college was always a story for someone else. Any field trip experiences or college fairs should include an opportunity for parents. Schools and our organization must improve our measures of the depth of reach within the community, not being satisfied with sign-in sheets of the same names multiple times over. Just as students are often informed by peers, so too are parents. Trusted peers within the community need to be supported with accurate information.

Mrs. Rangel's first four daughters "weren't given the idea [of college] on time," but she also refers to her legacy to her children to be her support of education. Sonia speaks of her mother as the guiding influence for her education. Yet her mother has had no formal education of her own. Mrs. Soliz spoke with remarkable words when she referred to her encouragement of her son "to follow my dream and his dream." We must explore ways to bring accurate information to the household so that families are able to make informed decisions and become informed advocates for their children.

Place: University

It was hard; it was different. High school really didn't get me ready for college. I didn't know classes were going to be that much…. I thought that classes would run from August all the way to May, like in high school, but I was like, Oh my God! These are so many classes. How am I supposed to finish in four years?

Angela

First-generation students lack the social capital to easily navigate the system and may need additional support. Consider Arizona's experiences when her financial aid did not arrive. She and her father were surprised when the university withdrew her from their

system. Universities need to consider support systems for first-generation students and their families if they wish to enroll and successfully support these students to degree attainment. Angela was in her first semester before she understood the credit system for classes, thinking courses lasted for two semesters as they had at her high school.

Demarcus suggests that universities begin strategic mentoring of high school students, not waiting until they are enrolled in college. He feels this would create greater levels of engagement with college for the students and provide the university with a way to greater engagement within the community. Students need access to both mentors and advocates who will connect with them around their interests and leverage other resources to motivate them to succeed. Ricardo's coach is an example, connecting with football and then accessing Project GRAD to enroll Ricardo into College Institutes to help him create a different vision for himself.

An existing resource for expanding exchanges between students and other communities and cultures and contexts is provided by Rice University. Rice graduate students assist high school seniors in the process of completing college applications and writing compelling essays. This resource is made available to Project GRAD partnering schools and the activities take place on the Rice University campus with continuing contact via email. Ricardo mentioned participating in this program.

College readiness of students is more often discussed by institutions of higher education. These institutions are beginning to look at their own needs to be student ready. Ironically, students' voices are seldom heard in this conversation. Our organization has access to approximately 1,100 students who are currently enrolled as students on college campuses. Within this community of students exist countless stories

to inform better policy and practice. Beyond the students, their community of parents, too, has stories of experience of their own encounters with the systems of higher education. Finding a way to facilitate the gathering and exchange of these stories is a worthwhile effort for the organization to consider.

Place: Community

> *We're always told that because we are not citizens, that we cannot go to college.*
> *That's what we always heard.* Mrs. Flores

An informal network exists within each community where important information is shared. Often this information can be misleading or wrong. Mrs. Flores's understanding of the lack of opportunity for college for the children of undocumented parents is an example. Community organizations must intentionally explore these networks and engage parent leaders to assist in the dissemination of accurate information [to] students and families.

Schools and community partners must explore ways to re-engage the community in ownership of the schools. When schools are slated for closure because of low enrollment and scarce resources, the community loses more than a building. Parents and students can be engaged as powerful advocates. Without these advocates in place, highly resourced schools can drain the neighborhood population away from the community school while the slow decline in enrollment goes unnoticed until school closure is under consideration.

Time

Mrs. Rangel has seven daughters, but Ashley, who is the fifth daughter, is the first to pursue a college education. As for the others, they weren't given the idea on time. Mrs. Rangel

Ashley's story is also an illustration of the need for access to resources in time. Students need to be supported when they need it. Ashley had everything planned. But the baby came. How do we stay in contact in a manner that is efficient but still will catch students when they need the extra support? Arizona needed support but reached out too late to correct whatever glitch in financial aid caused her to be withdrawn. Ricardo is an example of a student who was able to connect with a powerful mentor at a time when he was ready to hear the message.

Major Themes

Table 6.2 provides a summary of intersections of common strands from across the narrative texts.

Table 6.2

Narrative Strands Emerging from Narrative Texts

Major Theme or Need	Category	Storied Evidence
Personalized attention	Complex systems	Disconnect K-12 & higher education
		Financial aid access
	Life experiences and relevance of information	Timing is essential
		First-generation
		Unplanned pregnancy
		Financial insecurity
		Absent parent influence
		Link education to career
		Address circumstances
Identification and development of strengths	Aspirations and communications	Parent and community aspirations
		Siblings as role models
		Inter-family communications
		Inter-community expectations
		Limited social capital
		Resilience
	Shared expectations	School, community, family, student
		University, student, family
	Self-identity	Minority in university setting
		Access to new resources
		Creating new relationships
	Skills and habits	Realizing opportunities
		Critical analysis
		First-generation experiences
Access to accurate information	Communication networks	Undocumented parents and/or students
		Influence of for-profit marketing
		Trust of the system
		Misinformation
		Limitations of campus staff
		Rapid changes in workforce demands
Impact of test-driven accountability	Goals	Underprepared for college courses
		Narrow definitions of success
		Threat of sanctions
	Resouces	Focus on highest achievers
Changing priorities	Limited resources	Abbreviated experiences
		Waivers granted
		University partnerships
	Leadership turnover	Annual change of principal
	Collaboration	Community history and vision
		Reform agenda

The strands emerging from the narrative stories have been organized into intersecting areas of need. The five major categories are: personalized attention, identification and development of student strengths, access to accurate information, impact of test-driven accountability systems, and changing priorities. Each intersection forms a unique texture, resulting from the way in which the strands have aligned and intersected, at this moment of inquiry, this time, from this perspective. The strands emerge, twist, and overlap, each composed of countless other individual threads, all woven throughout the narrative stories, intersecting across the landscape of inquiry. The intersections signal back to existing knowledge, strengthening the fabric of research, enriching the understanding of its application in new storied settings, and occasionally revealing a divergent element or contrasting hue. Further scrutiny illuminates program development and policy considerations.

Arizona's experiences as she was withdrawn from her university, Angela's panic over the mistaken idea that courses lasted throughout the year, and Enrique's pride over the costly option of for-profit certification – evidence the wide range of information students need to access. Ashley's pregnancy derailed her plans, but her vague notion of career possibilities may pose the greatest barrier to her moving forward. These examples also point to the vast differences between the institutional systems of high school and college. Timely and accurate information is often inaccessible. The journey of the first-generation student is daunting (Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, & Lynch, 2003). Higher education has been resistant to change (Crow, 2008). Personal relationships with dedicated program staff are an essential link to frequent communication of timely and relevant information (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006).

Identification and Development of Student Strengths

Each narrative account tells a story of persistence, of resilience, and desire from both parents and students. Angela and her friend arrive on campus together, but only one remains. The story is frustrating to hear. What trait has developed for Angela that can be learned by others, or supplied by a mentor so that others can share the ability to persist, to restory their experiences in more powerful ways? Even Conley's (2007) expanded definitions of college readiness are informed by more formal academic habits that what was evidenced here. This is resilience and persistence.

Parents, even those with no experience in formal education, shared their dreams for their children as well as the dreams they had held for themselves that were unable to be realized. These hard working men and women shared their resources to see their children through high school and into college. Their high aspirations provide contrast to the National Center for Educational Statistics study (Choy, 2001) regarding first-generation college-going students. These parents may lack formal knowledge of the systems (Coles, 2002), but their desire for their children to succeed in college and their willingness to sacrifice to see that dream realized was evident in all narrative stories.

Access to Accurate Information

Students and their families navigate from one world to the next with the support and guidance from their existing networks. Sophisticated marketing strategies by for-profit institutions, fear over legal status, and limitations of campus staff and advisors can interfere with this navigation. Availability and dissemination of accurate and timely information can make the existing community network stronger and more useful.

Impact of Test-driven Accountability

Consistent with Rein and Moore (2008) many students expressed the value of rigorous academic programs and college-access supports. Many students and parents faulted the school system for targeting highest achieving students with the majority of these resources, including some who benefitted from the practice. The Education Trust (1999) recommends a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum for all students. Schools were also blamed for any gaps that students experienced when facing the rigors of college academics. Their stories had a tone that adds depth to the research. These students did not express their academic struggles from a position of weakness or intellectual deficit. Rather, they looked back to their high schools and issued a challenge. Their voices blend with a call for higher expectations for student learning instead of test-driven limitations to keep the school free from sanctions or to meet graduation goals with meaningless diplomas (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2004).

Academic readiness is important to these students. Academic readiness is cited by many reports as the most significant indicator for college success (Adelman, 2009). Much attention is given to the high demand and high cost paid for remediation (Adelman, 2004; Lee & Rawls, 2010; Education Trust, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Clearly some of these students struggled with the rigorous expectations of their universities. Some struggled to the point of transferring to a less-rigorous school. Remedial courses were never mentioned as a negative factor or barrier to success by these students. Arizona's problems were related to financial aid. Enrique wanted to access a hands-on environment and what he believes will be a quick start to a career.

Adriana's progress was halted by fear she and her mother shared over documentation status.

Changing Priorities

District staff now fills the role of college access coordinator on the school campus. Burrowing through this idea brings me to the much larger issue of relationship between district and community partner. Superintendents face the enormous challenge of serving communities as their children are educated from early childhood to college-ready, a span of at least 13 years, yet the position is occupied by a different leader every three to four years. Leadership turnover at the school level is even more frequent. Demarcus reflected on his high school experience, recalling a different principal for each of his years in school.

The U.S. Department of Education's report, *The Conditions of Education 2010,* provides an analysis of the 20 percentage point gap in college enrollment rates of high school graduates from low-income communities when compared to more affluent communities (Aud et al., 2010). This gap has persisted for almost 40 years. The communities surrounding the schools whose students are included in this study are certainly low-income, with at least 85 percent of high school enrollment is reported as economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2010a); however, over time these schools have tripled college enrollments according to Project GRAD Houston program data. This evidence of success is an illustration of existing possibilities, waiting to be realized. Parents and students have high aspirations. The stories are evidence of this. These dreams can be realized through the combined elements of carefully designed early college experiences, a motivational scholarship award, the engagement and added support

of all stakeholders, all driven by the persistent focus of a partnering organization (Mitra, 2009).

Program and Policy

Our organization had its beginning through a business partnership with one high school. The relational aspect of the program was unique in its beginnings, because of the emphasis on community leader engagement as the resources were planned and then provided. Common was the welcome acceptance of resources, at least in terms of bringing new money into under-resourced schools and community. This relationship began at a time when the district was led by a superintendent who held the position for twelve years, tenure unimaginable today. Now working with the sixth leader following this initial relationship, I have seen change at the most senior levels as well as at the school level happen with greater frequency.

Navigating the change of leadership and the need for relationship has become an enormous challenge, each time threatening the organization's viability. We exist in our own state of restorying, struggling to convey identity and potential. Understanding and leveraging the power available through creative partnerships requires an intimate and trusted relationship, a history of knowing both the partner and the community, an awareness of potential inherent in engaging resources of all kinds from outside the system to work inside the system where there is need and shared purpose. Our organization must find new ways of sharing and co-creating story with each community and with district leadership. We must frame new conversations to avoid the waste of time and energy and attention. Our organization must lead in creating continuity for a shared vision in community.

Systems

In order to measure progress and to improve policy and practice, better data systems are essential. Cook and Pullaro (2010) make this case and further strengthen their position with the cautionary reminder that today's student is not the same full-time resident student of the past. The pipeline is not only an outdated image, but its continued use is potentially harmful. The Center for American Progress has recommended the development of policy in support of systems customized to address student needs (Soares & Mazzeo, 2008). Students' stories include details of transfers from one institution to another, of moving from four-year university to community college and back again. Different students accessing courses in different ways necessitate different data systems.

Practitioners share the burden to accurately represent data and better explain limitations of existing measures. Publications from the Pell Institute (Engle & Tinto, 2008) and Postsecondary Education Opportunity (Mortenson, 2007, 2010) have provided alarming data on the growing disparities in educational attainment between the affluent and the low-income. This sheds new light on the future of regions where the majority of the population growth is coming from low-income, minority communities, where parents have had little formal education. A recent editorial in the Houston Chronicle (2011) cites demographic changes and predictions that indicate the region could become a Third World city unless changes take place in educational attainment. The same editorial specifically mentions positive changes that have taken place through the collaborative partnership of Project GRAD:

> Project GRAD has changed things for the better - boosting graduation rates at Jeff
> Davis, which once stood below 30 percent, by 54.5 percent. Over the years, this

has meant thousands of additional high school and college graduates who have

gone on to achieve more productive careers in the workplace and have become

taxpayers and community leaders as well. (Editorial, 2011, Section B, p. 3)

District management of the college-access position at the schools has resulted in

measurement of outcomes that create the false impression of effective practices. For

instance, school staff must report the total scholarships awarded to every graduating

class. In order to maximize total awards, school staff will push applications to the top

performing students, thinking they are more likely to receive larger rewards. Equally

misleading practices result when outcomes are measured tracking the total number of

college applications and acceptances. School staff then will organize events to have all

seniors complete the community college application with automatic acceptance,

regardless of the students' plans. Schools then are evaluated and compared against each

other with meaningless reports, which set them up as competitive rivals rather than sister

milieus, each of which is entirely different from the others. Recommend measures that

are indicators of reaching more students with quality college access programming.

Scholarship Use

Creating greater access to accurate information will help students and their

families make choices that do not involve large loans to attend schools with high default

rates and low completion rates. Preventing the transfer of scholarship funds from the

program to for-profit institutions will help refocus college access efforts where they

belong. The high school principals need accurate data in order to change their practices

of welcoming for-profit schools to their campus and allowing recruitment of students and

parents. Parents with access to accurate information can make more informed choices,

and in turn they will be more likely to advocate for the same on behalf of their students. Students need access to the same tools. College access staff and school principals need regular reports of the default rates associated with these programs. Alternatives to the traditional four-year university or two-year community college can be a viable option, and as an organization with our mission we must be responsible to investigate quality alternatives that do not leave families in debt and students with low-paying jobs.

Assessment of Student Strengths

New support systems are underway for students once in college. A part of this involves mentoring, the design of which includes access to an assessment of strengths and needs on a social and emotional framework. This resource is intended to inform and to empower students, creating a greater awareness of their own ability to identify resources they need to access and to access resources when they are needed. The potential of this resource can be evaluated with these students' stories in mind.

College Institutes

Through this study we now have compelling evidence that university-based institutes make a difference in inspiring more students to enroll in college. This information and a renewed policy need dissemination in the high schools to inform campus staff. Further research can explore the differences in the university-based institutes: length of program, location, and content. Increasing levels of information connecting careers and academic pathways will motivate students to explore interests and articulate specific ideas about careers.

Parental Engagement

Parents expressed high aspirations for their children and a desire for more information in order to support them more effectively. Current parental involvement models do not appear up to the task. We must explore different methods of accessing and communicating through informal networks within the community. Mrs. Dominguez expressed the value of having direct conversations where better information could be shared.

Parents and students need access to training to advocate for themselves and others. Increasing college going and college completion will not occur if low-income families are in a constant state of insecurity related to their ability to cover costs of college. Mario's brother left college because of cost. Many students expressed fear of not being able to continue to cover college costs from one year to the next. These students are examples of everything possible, yet this cycle of perpetuating financial insecurity will cause many to leave the college system. Increasingly spare federal, state, and local budgets will result in many more never enrolling.

Concluding Comments

The lived story of these students and their families has history, and it moves forward toward the future. The text tells of what has been, is now, is becoming – as expressed in a moment of reflection – as told and then retold and now becomes part of a larger research landscape. The context from which this research unfolds is a time of economic uncertainty at local, state, and federal levels with potentially significant impact on these students and on the program they have experienced.

The metaphor of a journey provides a way of visualizing our landscape of inquiry, initially examined from a distance, as if looking through a window at distant paths and obscure directional signals. The inquiry then changed, bringing the research to the field to participate in the lived story of students and their families on this journey within which they make meaning and compose and re-compose identity in a reflective moment.

Through the process of narrative inquiry, the researcher is given opportunity to step into the field of inquiry and become a part of the community. I have been able to observe policy as it is lived by parents and their children. One parent, whose daughter recently graduated from college, shared his frustrations over the potential loss of resources because of policy dictates from a new district leader:

> Why must this community defend funding for a scholarship program that serves
> the children of families who were once free labor, and the children of those who
> have provided cheap labor to this country? These scholarships provide a means to
> a different future for our children. And we have to defend that?

His message reminds me of the need to be wakeful to the dangers of responding to a "community" by implementation of "program" or "policy," becoming blind to the individuals. This idea is further explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

> The researcher learns that people are never only (nor even a close approximation
> to) any particular set of isolated theoretical notions, categories, or terms. They are
> people in all their complexity. They are people living storied lives on storied
> landscapes. (p.147)

As a part of preparing to hear these lived stories, I learned new dimensions of my own story, personally and professionally. As a leader of an organization involved in complex

work that can only happen in relationship to others, I am challenged to make use of this inquiry to create new possibilities for our work. Past ways of knowing both the needs of others and of evaluating the efficacy of efforts to address those needs have often been determined by those far removed from the milieu of the community and the school, far too distanced from the voice and the story.

Mr. Dominguez expressed his aspirations for himself and his family when he said, "Our American dream is for our kids to go to college." In that moment he connected his story to mine and to the millions of others who share these aspirations for themselves and their families. He did not refer to "the American dream," or "my American dream," but to a shared hope and collective identity in his choice of the pronoun, "our." Empowered by the example that Mr. Dominguez has provided, I realize that creating conditions for new possibilities is built on successfully creating conditions for new relationships, relationships to take hold today, in this time, collaborative and creative relationships existing in response to this place, this community of common mission, this community of location shared by unique individuals, and this community of practice. Starting a new journey to develop organizational and individual relationships will begin the process toward new possibilities. This is my dream, this is *our* dream.

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APPENDIX A

PROJECT GRAD HOUSTON SCHOLARSHIP AGREEMENT

Project GRAD HOUSTON

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AGREEMENT

Jefferson Davis High School

I, _____, along with my parent(s)/guardian, _____ ,
  (Print Student Name)   *(Print Parent/Guardian Name)*

state our intent that I will remain in Jefferson Davis High School until graduation in four years or less. I understand that after graduating from Jefferson Davis High School and meeting the outlined qualifications, I will be eligible to receive a $1,000 scholarship annually for four years.

I understand that in order to qualify for this scholarship, I must meet all of the criteria described below:

1) I must complete two Project GRAD provided or pre-approved college institutes.

2) I must take the PSAT College Entrance Exam in my sophomore or junior year.

3) I must complete all of the Houston ISD academic requirements for graduation under the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement Plan as indicated below:

4 credits - English	2 credits - Language other than English
4 credits - Math	3 credits - Physical Education (1), Fine Arts (1), Speech (0.5), Health (0.5)
4 credits - Science	5 credits - Electives
4 credits - Social Studies	

4) I must have at least a 2.5 overall Grade Point Average upon graduation from Jefferson Davis HS.

5) I must begin high school at Jefferson Davis HS and graduate from Jefferson Davis HS in four years or less.

6) I must enroll at an accredited college or university (in accordance with Project GRAD board policy) within one year of graduation from high school, and I must not let enrollment lapse for more than one year. To renew my scholarship each year, I must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and complete a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester at a college or university. Subject to the military exception described below, my scholarship expires within five years of the date I graduate from Jefferson Davis HS.

Additionally, both student and parent/guardian agree to participate in activities that support and enhance the goal of graduating from high school within four years, specifically those addressing academic, cultural, and career awareness/college access. Project GRAD Houston welcomes GRAD Scholars' willingness to give back to their high schools by volunteering for the Walk for Success, College Week, our annual Scholarship Ceremony, or other GRAD supporting events.

In the event the undersigned student enlists for active duty in any branch of the United States Armed Forces and begins serving within the twelve month period immediately following graduation from Jefferson Davis HS, then the student's eligibility for the Scholarship shall be extended for two years. In no event, however, shall Project GRAD Houston's obligation to provide funding under the Scholarship extend beyond six years after graduation, unless special circumstances warrant an exception, which shall be at Project GRAD Houston's sole discretion.

I authorize release of confidential information (such as test scores, grades and school records) to Project GRAD personnel by the school or school district. Subject to state and federal law, this information will be maintained in a confidential manner. In compliance with Federal Confidentiality Regulations, I acknowledge access to individual student files is provided only to Project GRAD program personnel, school staff directly involved in providing service to this student, qualified service organization personnel to which the student is referred, and qualified personnel involved in audit or program evaluation.

Year of Graduation		
Student Signature:	Student ID:	
Parent/Guardian Signature:	Date Signed:	
Home Phone Number:	Email:	
Home Address:		Zip Code:

I furthermore, grant Project GRAD the right to use photographic and video images of me/my student and to make such images available in Project GRAD's publications, promotional materials, and websites. *Your response to the media approval request does not affect your eligibility for the scholarship.* _____ ☐ Yes ☐ No
  (initial)

Project GRAD HOUSTON

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AGREEMENT

Jack Yates High School

I, _____ , along with my parent(s)/guardian, _____ .

(Print Student Name)   *(Print Parent/Guardian Name)*

state our intent that I will remain in Jack Yates High School until graduation in four years or less. I understand that after graduating from Jack Yates High School and meeting the outlined qualifications, I will be eligible to receive a $1,000 scholarship annually for four years.

I understand that in order to qualify for this scholarship, I must meet all of the criteria described below:

1) I must complete two Project GRAD provided or pre-approved college institutes.

2) I must take the PSAT College Entrance Exam in my sophomore or junior year.

3) I must complete all of the Houston ISD academic requirements for graduation under the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement Plan as indicated below:

4 credits – English	2 credits – Language other than English
4 credits – Math	3 credits – Physical Education (1), Fine Arts (1), Speech (0.5), Health (0.5)
4 credits – Science	5 credits – Electives
4 credits – Social Studies	

4) I must have at least a 2.5 overall Grade Point Average upon graduation from Jack Yates HS.

5) I must begin high school at Jack Yates HS and graduate from Jack Yates HS in four years or less.

6) I must enroll at an accredited college or university (in accordance with Project GRAD board policy) within one year of graduation from high school, and I must not let enrollment lapse for more than one year. To renew my scholarship each year, I must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and complete a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester at a college or university. Subject to the military exception described below, my scholarship expires within five years of the date I graduate from Jack Yates HS.

Additionally, both student and parent/guardian agree to participate in activities that support and enhance the goal of graduating from high school within four years, specifically those addressing academic, cultural, and career awareness/college access. Project GRAD Houston welcomes GRAD Scholars' willingness to give back to their high schools by volunteering for the Walk for Success, College Week, our annual Scholarship Ceremony, or other GRAD supporting events.

In the event the undersigned student enlists for active duty in any branch of the United States Armed Forces and begins serving within the twelve month period immediately following graduation from Jack Yates HS, then the student's eligibility for the Scholarship shall be extended for two years. In no event, however, shall Project GRAD Houston's obligation to provide funding under the Scholarship extend beyond six years after graduation, unless special circumstances warrant an exception, which shall be at Project GRAD Houston's sole discretion.

I authorize release of confidential information (such as test scores, grades and school records) to Project GRAD personnel by the school or school district. Subject to state and federal law, this information will be maintained in a confidential manner. In compliance with Federal Confidentiality Regulations, I acknowledge access to individual student files is provided only to Project GRAD program personnel, school staff directly involved in providing service to this student, qualified service organization personnel to which the student is referred, and qualified personnel involved in audit or program evaluation.

Year of Graduation		
Student Signature:		Student ID:
Parent/Guardian Signature:		Date Signed:
Home Phone Number:	Email:	
Home Address:		Zip Code:

I furthermore, grant Project GRAD the right to use photographic and video images of me/my student and to make such images available in Project GRAD's publications, promotional materials, and websites. *Your response to the media approval request does not affect your eligibility for the scholarship.* _____ ☐ Yes ☐ No

(initial)

Project GRAD HOUSTON

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AGREEMENT

Phillis Wheatley High School

I, _____ , along with my parent(s)/guardian, _____ ,
(Print Student Name)   (Print Parent/Guardian Name)

state our intent that I will remain in Phillis Wheatley High School until graduation in four years or less. I understand that after graduating from Phillis Wheatley High School and meeting the outlined qualifications, I will be eligible to receive a $1,000 scholarship annually for four years.

I understand that in order to qualify for this scholarship, I must meet all of the criteria described below:

1) I must complete two Project GRAD provided or pre-approved college institutes.

2) I must take the PSAT College Entrance Exam in my sophomore or junior year.

3) I must complete all of the Houston ISD academic requirements for graduation under the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement Plan as indicated below:

4 credits - English	2 credits - Language other than English
4 credits - Math	3 credits - Physical Education (1), Fine Arts (1), Speech (0.5), Health (0.5)
4 credits - Science	5 credits - Electives
4 credits - Social Studies	

4) I must have at least a 2.5 overall Grade Point Average upon graduation from Phillis Wheatley HS.

5) I must begin high school at Phillis Wheatley HS and graduate from Phillis Wheatley HS in four years or less.

6) I must enroll at an accredited college or university (in accordance with Project GRAD board policy) within one year of graduation from high school, and I must not let enrollment lapse for more than one year. To renew my scholarship each year, I must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and complete a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester at a college or university. Subject to the military exception described below, my scholarship expires within five years of the date I graduate from Phillis Wheatley HS.

Additionally, both student and parent/guardian agree to participate in activities that support and enhance the goal of graduating from high school within four years, specifically those addressing academic, cultural, and career awareness/college access. Project GRAD Houston welcomes GRAD Scholars' willingness to give back to their high schools by volunteering for the Walk for Success, College Week, our annual Scholarship Ceremony, or other GRAD supporting events.

In the event the undersigned student enlists for active duty in any branch of the United States Armed Forces and begins serving within the twelve month period immediately following graduation from Phillis Wheatley HS, then the student's eligibility for the Scholarship shall be extended for two years. In no event, however, shall Project GRAD Houston's obligation to provide funding under the Scholarship extend beyond six years after graduation, unless special circumstances warrant an exception, which shall be at Project GRAD Houston's sole discretion.

I authorize release of confidential information (such as test scores, grades and school records) to Project GRAD personnel by the school or school district. Subject to state and federal law, this information will be maintained in a confidential manner. In compliance with Federal Confidentiality Regulations, I acknowledge access to individual student files is provided only to Project GRAD program personnel, school staff directly involved in providing service to this student, qualified service organization personnel to which the student is referred, and qualified personnel involved in audit or program evaluation.

Year of Graduation		
Student Signature:		Student ID:
Parent/Guardian Signature:		Date Signed:
Home Phone Number:	Email:	
Home Address:		Zip Code:

I furthermore, grant Project GRAD the right to use photographic and video images of me/my student and to make such images available in Project GRAD's publications, promotional materials, and websites. *Your response to the media approval request does not affect your eligibility for the scholarship.* _____ ☐ Yes ☐ No
(initial)

Project GRAD HOUSTON

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AGREEMENT

John H. Reagan High School

I, _____ , along with my parent(s)/guardian, _____ ,
(Print Student Name)   *(Print Parent/Guardian Name)*

state our intent that I will remain in John H. Reagan High School until graduation in four years or less. I understand that after graduating from John H. Reagan High School and meeting the outlined qualifications, I will be eligible to receive a $1,000 scholarship annually for four years.

I understand that in order to qualify for this scholarship, I must meet all of the criteria described below:

1) I must complete two Project GRAD provided or pre-approved college institutes.

2) I must take the PSAT College Entrance Exam in my sophomore or junior year.

3) I must complete all of the Houston ISD academic requirements for graduation under the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement Plan as indicated below:

4 credits - English	2 credits - Language other than English
4 credits - Math	3 credits - Physical Education (1), Fine Arts (1), Speech (0.5), Health (0.5)
4 credits - Science	5 credits - Electives
4 credits - Social Studies	

4) I must have at least a 2.5 overall Grade Point Average upon graduation from John H. Reagan HS.

5) I must begin high school at John H. Reagan HS and graduate from John H. Reagan HS in four years or less.

6) I must enroll at an accredited college or university (in accordance with Project GRAD board policy) within one year of graduation from high school, and I must not let enrollment lapse for more than one year. To renew my scholarship each year, I must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and complete a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester at a college or university. Subject to the military exception described below, my scholarship expires within five years of the date I graduate from John H. Reagan HS.

Additionally, both student and parent/guardian agree to participate in activities that support and enhance the goal of graduating from high school within four years, specifically those addressing academic, cultural, and career awareness/college access. Project GRAD Houston welcomes GRAD Scholars' willingness to give back to their high schools by volunteering for the Walk for Success, College Week, our annual Scholarship Ceremony, or other GRAD supporting events.

In the event the undersigned student enlists for active duty in any branch of the United States Armed Forces and begins serving within the twelve month period immediately following graduation from John H. Reagan HS, then the student's eligibility for the Scholarship shall be extended for two years. In no event, however, shall Project GRAD Houston's obligation to provide funding under the Scholarship extend beyond six years after graduation, unless special circumstances warrant an exception, which shall be at Project GRAD Houston's sole discretion.

I authorize release of confidential information (such as test scores, grades and school records) to Project GRAD personnel by the school or school district. Subject to state and federal law, this information will be maintained in a confidential manner. In compliance with Federal Confidentiality Regulations, I acknowledge access to individual student files is provided only to Project GRAD program personnel, school staff directly involved in providing service to this student, qualified service organization personnel to which the student is referred, and qualified personnel involved in audit or program evaluation.

Year of Graduation		
Student Signature:		Student ID:
Parent/Guardian Signature:		Date Signed:
Home Phone Number:	Email:	
Home Address:		Zip Code:

I furthermore, grant Project GRAD the right to use photographic and video images of me/my student and to make such images available in Project GRAD's publications, promotional materials, and websites. *Your response to the media approval request does not affect your eligibility for the scholarship.* _____ ☐ Yes ☐ No
(initial)

Project GRAD HOUSTON

SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM AGREEMENT

Ninth Grade College Preparatory Academy
Sam Houston Math, Science &Technology Center

I, _____ , along with my parent(s)/guardian, _____ ,
(Print Student Name)   _(Print Parent/Guardian Name)_

state our intent that I will remain in Sam Houston MST Center until graduation in four years or less. I understand that after graduating from Sam Houston MST Center and meeting the outlined qualifications, I will be eligible to receive a $1,000 scholarship annually for four years.

I understand that in order to qualify for this scholarship, I must meet all of the criteria described below:

1) I must complete two Project GRAD provided or pre-approved college institutes.

2) I must take the PSAT College Entrance Exam in my sophomore or junior year.

3) I must complete all of the Houston ISD academic requirements for graduation under the Recommended or Distinguished Achievement Plan as indicated below:

4 credits - English	2 credits - Language other than English
4 credits - Math	3 credits - Physical Education (1), Fine Arts (1), Speech (0.5), Health (0.5)
4 credits - Science	5 credits - Electives
4 credits - Social Studies	

4) I must have at least a 2.5 overall Grade Point Average upon graduation from Sam Houston MST Center.

5) I must begin high school at Sam Houston MST Center and graduate from Sam Houston MST Center in four years or less.

6) I must enroll at an accredited college or university (in accordance with Project GRAD board policy) within one year of graduation from high school, and I must not let enrollment lapse for more than one year. To renew my scholarship each year, I must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average and complete a minimum of 12 credit hours per semester at a college or university. Subject to the military exception described below, my scholarship expires within five years of the date I graduate from Sam Houston MST Center.

Additionally, both student and parent/guardian agree to participate in activities that support and enhance the goal of graduating from high school within four years, specifically those addressing academic, cultural, and career awareness/college access. Project GRAD Houston welcomes GRAD Scholars' willingness to give back to their high schools by volunteering for the Walk for Success, College Week, our annual Scholarship Ceremony, or other GRAD supporting events.

In the event the undersigned student enlists for active duty in any branch of the United States Armed Forces and begins serving within the twelve month period immediately following graduation from Sam Houston MST Center, then the student's eligibility for the Scholarship shall be extended for two years. In no event, however, shall Project GRAD Houston's obligation to provide funding under the Scholarship extend beyond six years after graduation, unless special circumstances warrant an exception, which shall be at Project GRAD Houston's sole discretion.

I authorize release of confidential information (such as test scores, grades and school records) to Project GRAD personnel by the school or school district. Subject to state and federal law, this information will be maintained in a confidential manner. In compliance with Federal Confidentiality Regulations, I acknowledge access to individual student files is provided only to Project GRAD program personnel, school staff directly involved in providing service to this student, qualified service organization personnel to which the student is referred, and qualified personnel involved in audit or program evaluation.

Year of Graduation		
Student Signature:		Student ID:
Parent/Guardian Signature:		Date Signed:
Home Phone Number:	Email:	
Home Address:		Zip Code:

I furthermore, grant Project GRAD the right to use photographic and video images of me/my student and to make such images available in Project GRAD's publications, promotional materials, and websites. _Your response to the media approval request does not affect your eligibility for the scholarship._ _____ ☐ Yes ☐ No
(initial)

APPENDIX B

PROJECT GRAD SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP QUALIFIERS

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

1. High School Information

Your response to this survey is entirely voluntary and in no way changes your ability to participate in the Project GRAD Houston scholarship program or in any other program. If you have any questions regarding this survey, or your participation in the Project GRAD Houston programs, please call 832.305.0324 or email survey@projectgradhouston.org

* 1. From what high school did you graduate?

○ Davis

○ Yates

○ Wheatley

○ Reagan

○ Sam Houston MSTC

* 2. What year did you graduate from high school:

○ 2009

○ 2010

Other (please specify)

_____

* 3. Did you attend the same high school from 9th grade through graduation?

○ Yes

○ No

4. If not, where did you attend high school each year?

9th Grade: _____

10th Grade: _____

11th Grade: _____

12th Grade: _____

* 5. Were you eligible for free or reduced lunch in high school?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Don't know

* 6. What was the zip code where you lived when you were in high school?

_____

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 7. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

- ○ African American
- ○ Hispanic
- ○ White, non-Hispanic
- ○ Asian
- ○ Other

* 8. What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

2. Courses in High School

* 1. What were your grades in high school?

- ○ All A's
- ○ Mostly A's and some B's
- ○ Mostly B's and some A's
- ○ Mostly B's and C's
- ○ Mostly C's and some D's and F's
- ○ Mostly D's and F's
- ○ Don't know
- ○ Rather not answer

* 2. If known, what was you Grade Point Average (GPA) at the time of your high school graduation?

- ○ 3.5 or higher
- ○ 3.0 to 3.49
- ○ 2.5 to 2.99
- ○ 2.0 to 2.49
- ○ below 2.0
- ○ don't know

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 3. Did you take any Advanced Placement (AP) or Dual Credit courses when you were in high school?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Don't Know

* 4. Which of the following math courses did you take in high school? (Select all that apply.)

☐ Algebra 1

☐ Geometry

☐ Algebra 2

☐ Pre-calculus

☐ Calculus

☐ Other

* 5. Did a teacher or a counselor or other school advisor give you information about potential careers that interested you?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Don't Know

* 6. Did a teacher or a counselor or other school advisor give you information about the classes you needed to take in high school to be ready for college?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Don't know

* 7. When you graduated from high school, did you feel prepared to take college-level courses?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Don't Know

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 8. Please identify two of the College Institutes you attended during high school.

1st Institute	[ ]
2nd Institute	[ ]

Other (please specify)

[   ]

3. College Planning

* 1. To how many colleges or universities, either 2-year or 4-year, did you send applications?

- ○ None
- ○ 1-3
- ○ 4-6
- ○ 7-10
- ○ More than 10

* 2. At how many were you accepted?

- ○ None
- ○ 1-3
- ○ 4-6
- ○ 7-10
- ○ More than 10

* 3. With whom did you discuss plans for going to college?

	Yes	No
your parents?	☐	☐
your teachers?	☐	☐
your friends?	☐	☐
College Access Coordinator?	☐	☐
Guidance Counselor?	☐	☐

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 4. Who expected you to go to college?

	Yes	No
your parents?	☐	☐
your teachers?	☐	☐
your friends?	☐	☐
College Access Coordinator?	☐	☐
Guidance Counselor?	☐	☐

* 5. Did any of your friends enroll in college?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Don't Know

* 6. Please answer "YES" or "NO" to the following questions about which tests you have take:

	Yes	No
SAT	○	○
ACT	○	○
THEA	○	○
COMPASS	○	○
Acu-placer	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

* 7. Did the results of these tests indicate that you would need to enroll in remedial classes?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

* 8. Did you visit any colleges during high school?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't Know

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 9. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"A college education is necessary for me to have the things that I want, like a car and a comfortable home."

○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

* 10. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"Loans to pay for college are only good as a last resort or in an emergency."

○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

* 11. In college, I want to study.....

* 12. In 10 years, the kind of job I would like to have is....

4. Work and Financial Obligations

* 1. Do you personally provide financial support for other people in your household?

○ Yes

○ No

* 2. Do you have any children that you financially support?

○ Yes

○ No

* 3. About how many hours each week do you currently work?

○ Less than 15

○ More than 15, but less than 25

○ More than 25, but less than 35

○ More than 35

○ I am not currently working

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 4. Which of the following items do you pay for?

- ☐ Mortgage or rent
- ☐ Car
- ☐ Credit card
- ☐ Child care
- ☐ Other debt
- ☐ None of the above

* 5. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"Taking care of my family makes it difficult for me to attend college."

○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

5. History

* 1. What is the highest level of education obtained by your mother or female guardian?

- ○ Less than high school
- ○ High School Graduate
- ○ Some College
- ○ College Certificate
- ○ College degree
- ○ Masters degree
- ○ Doctorate/professional degree

* 2. What is the highest level of education obtained by your father or male guardian?

- ○ Less than high school
- ○ High School Graduate
- ○ Some College
- ○ College Certificate
- ○ College degree
- ○ Masters degree
- ○ Doctorate/professional degree

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 3. Do you have an older brother or sister who went or is going to college?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Comments:

6. College Enrollment Status

* 1. Are you currently enrolled in college?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

7. Not Enrolled in College

* 1. In your own words, why are you not enrolled in college?

* 2. Are you currently enlisted in military service?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 3. How important was each of the following in your decision not to enroll in college?

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
The price of college (tuition, fees, room and board)	○	○	○	○
Your academic preparation	○	○	○	○
Your score on a college entrance/placement exam	○	○	○	○
Encouragement from high school counselors or teachers	○	○	○	○
Encouragement from parents	○	○	○	○
Your motivation or desire to attend college	○	○	○	○
The availability of grant or scholarship financial aid	○	○	○	○
Your need to work after high school	○	○	○	○
The willingness of parents to help pay for college	○	○	○	○
The availability of quality, affordable child care	○	○	○	○
The college is close to home	○	○	○	○
The availability of transportation to/from college	○	○	○	○
Not wanting to borrow for college (student loans)	○	○	○	○
Your friends also enrolling in college	○	○	○	○

4. If you had any of the following, would you be willing to enroll in college during the next 12 months? (Check all that apply.)

☐ Assistance with financial aid forms

☐ Assistance with college application

☐ Assistance with studying for college placement exams

☐ Assistance exploring career choices and options

☐ Assistance working through paying for college with my parents

Other (please specify)

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

* 5. Are you aware that you may be qualified for a Project GRAD scholarship?

○ Yes

○ No

Thank you for your voluntary participation. You may call Project GRAD at 832.325.0324 or email survey@projectgradhouston.org if you have any questions.

8. Enrolled in College

* 1. Where are you currently enrolled?

[   ]

* 2. In your own words, please explain how you chose this college or university?

[   ]

* 3. What is your declared or desired major?

[   ]

* 4. What job do you eventually hope to have as a result of your college education?

[   ]

* 5. Which of the following influenced your thinking about going to college?

☐ Help with financial aid forms

☐ Help with college applications

☐ Help with college essays

☐ Help with exploring career possibilities

☐ Attending college institutes

☐ Talking with my college access coordinator

☐ Help with planning for or paying for college with my parents

Other (please specify)

[   ]

Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers

✱ 6. How many college credit hours are you currently taking?

- ○ less than 12 hours (less than full time)
- ○ 12 hours (full time)
- ○ more than 12 hours

✱ 7. How many hours are you currently taking that do not qualify for college credit (developmental courses, etc.)?

- ○ none
- ○ one course
- ○ two courses
- ○ more than two courses

✱ 8. Are you currently receiving your Project GRAD scholarship?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Don't Know

Thank you for your voluntary participation in this survey. You may call Project GRAD at 832.325.0324 or email survey@projectgradhouston.org if you have any questions.

9. Scholarship Status

✱ 1. What is your status with Project GRAD's scholarship?

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Does Not Apply
Did you qualify for GRAD's scholarship offer?	○	○	○	○
Have you activated your GRAD scholarship?	○	○	○	○
Did you attend a meeting to learn about GRAD's scholarship?	○	○	○	○
Did you register for the GRAD scholarship on GRAD's website?	○	○	○	○
Did you submit your college acceptance letter to GRAD?	○	○	○	○

Thank you for your voluntary participation in this survey. You may call Project GRAD at 832.325.0324 or email survey@projectgradhouston.org if you have any questions.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Study title: College-bound or College-abandoned: Student Stories from the Place Between

<div align="center">

Interview Script

</div>

The following questions are intended to guide the conversations between the researcher and the voluntary participants. *Student* refers to the high school graduates, both those who are enrolled in college and as well as those who are not. *Parent* refers to the parent or guardian of the student. In all instances, the questions below are intended as examples that will be used to guide the interview process and assist the volunteer student or parent in the telling of their story.

Introduction for both student and parent

Before moving into the actual narrative data collection, questions will be asked to reconfirm the participant's voluntary status, their understanding of their ability to decline to answer any question or to end participation, their decision to allow or not to allow the use of audio-recording or video-recording, and, their assent to volunteer. If the student is a minor, the parent's permission will also be reconfirmed.

<div align="center">

Inquiry with Students

</div>

Students will be asked the same questions included from the survey, *Project GRAD Survey of Scholarship Qualifiers* (Project GRAD Houston, 2010). Following the completion of the survey, further inquiry will include an interview using the examples of following questions, organized within the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry: 1) temporality, looking at the past, present, and future; 2) the personal and the social, looking both inward and outward; and   3) place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Expectations from high school

When you think of your early experiences in high school, what stands out in your memory? What expectations did you have for yourself? What expectations did you have for your friends? What did you feel were the expectations that the different people in the school had for you? How were your expectations different?

Project GRAD program experiences

What is your recollection from the actual event when you and your parent signed the agreement to participate in the Project GRAD scholarship program? Did you have any prior knowledge of it or any other family members participating in it? What did it mean to you then?

Describe your experiences in the college institutes? Where did you go? What stories really stand out for you? How was the experience different or similar to high school? How did your thoughts about yourself and college change from the beginning to the end of the institute? How was one institute different from another?

College planning and beliefs

Do you recall a particular moment when you knew that going to college was something that you definitely planned to do? When was this? What do you recall about that time or place or the people participating in that moment or influencing your certainty?

Can you describe how you think about the idea of going to college now? What are your expectations? What or who are the biggest influences in how you think about these expectations today?

Experiences after high school

What has happened in your life since high school graduation? What has influenced your next steps in continuing your education? What or who has been the most help? What do you see as your greatest challenges today? What are you doing now? What about your friends?

What other plans do you have for yourself in the near future? What is important or influential in your planning? How do your thoughts or plans for college connect to your idea of work and your personal interests? Do you have a particular career in mind or a type of work that you hope to be a part of?

Reflections regarding community

How would you describe your community today? Was this your community when you were growing up? What are the important things here – to you – to others who live here? What do you think it will be like ten years from now? Twenty years? Do you see yourself or your friends as a part of the future of this community?

Reflections regarding high school

What would you like to be able to change about high school to make things better for students from your community? What do you wish your teachers or others would know about you or your friends or your community? From your years in high school, what one experience would you pick that taught you the most about your future?

Reflections regarding college access

Is there anything else that you think is important for someone to know or to think about if they want to help students prepare for and to enroll in college? Is there anything else you want to add to this conversation?

Closing

Thank you so much for your time and for your willingness to volunteer to participate in this study. I will send you the written report from our conversation today. I will call you if I have any questions. You may call me if something occurs to you that you want to ask or that you want to add to what you have said today.

<div align="center">

Inquiry with Parent

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Expectations from high school

When you think of your child's early experiences in high school, what stands out in your memory? Did you feel that the school shared your expectations for your child? How were your expectations different?

Project GRAD program experiences

What is your recollection from the actual event when you and your child signed the agreement to participate in the Project GRAD scholarship program? Did you have any prior knowledge of it or any other family members participating in it? What did it mean to you then?

Do you have any memories from your child's experiences in the college institutes? Do any stories stand out for you?

College planning and beliefs

Do you recall any specific conversations with your child about college? Can you describe how you think about the idea of your child going to college now? What are your expectations? What or who are the biggest influences in how you think about these expectations today?

Experiences after high school

What events have taken place since high school graduation that influence decisions about college or continuing education? What do you see as the greatest challenges that your child faces today?

Reflections regarding community

How would you describe your community today? Was this your community when your child was growing up? What are the important things here – to you – to others who live here? What do you think it will be like ten years from now? Twenty years?

Reflections regarding high school

What would you like to be able to change about high school to make things better for students from your community? What do you wish teachers or others would know about your children or other children or your community?

Reflections regarding college access

What was or is your own story as a student? Other family members? Is there anything else that you think is important for someone to know or to think about if they want to help students prepare for and to enroll in college? Is there anything else you want to add to this conversation?

Closing

Thank you so much for your time and for your willingness to volunteer to participate in this study. I will send you the written report from our conversation today. I will call you if I have any questions. You may call me if something occurs to you that you want to ask or that you want to add to what you have said today.