

High School Students and the College-Choice Process

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### **Introduction**

You are determined to go to college. It's the beginning of your senior year and you have the GPA and prerequisites to take you to almost anywhere you'd like. Your transcripts are loaded with AP and IB classes, you've had many SAT Prep courses, and you have a private college coach to assist you during your application process. Your parents both went to traditional four-year residential institutions; they believe it's important for you to do the same, and they are available to assist you with your application as well. All your friends are also going to college and support your decision to attend whatever institution you'd like. What are my chances of applying, getting into, and beginning college?

Now reflect on this scenario: You are determined to go to college. It's the beginning of your senior year and you have one of the highest GPAs in your high school. Your transcripts are loaded with all Honors classes and the one AP course available. You've done the best you could to prepare for the SAT by borrowing books from the school and public libraries and there is a counselor at school who can see you between addressing troublesome students, she sometimes even remembers your name. Neither your mother nor father went to college, although they did graduate from high school. They aren't really supportive of you attending college, they think it is a waste of time when you could be making money. None of your friends are going to college, they all will be working full-time instead of part-time at the places they are now and they don't really support the idea of college because they believe you will change. What are my chances of applying, getting into and beginning college?

Although two extremes in a spectrum, both scenarios described above are similar in intention. This process begins even before the student is born; it is cyclical and begins with the parents. Some families intentionally plan for their child(ren)'s education by saving early, other

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families even if they wanted to do not have that luxury, while others simply want their children to be at least a little more successful than they were which may or may not include a college education. As you can see, the college-choice process, which begins prior to birth and is only accentuated with the student's age, will vary greatly by student and will most often than not yield very different outcomes.

The first scenario provides you with an abundance of support; you have the resources to propel you in the college-choice process, you feel good about the progress you're making which only makes you work harder, and you have a very encouraging environment (friends and family). If the student feels confident in their abilities to be successful, based on the qualifications they have displayed throughout their schooling, this will increase the chances that they will have a positive perception of their ability to succeed in higher education (Hamrick & Stage, 2004). In contrast, in the second scenario, you are provided with very little, and have even less desire to continue striving for success. Will power and self-motivation can only take you so far when you are presented with so many obstacles. For a student to desire higher education they need continuous positive exposure beginning at a young age as well as the support of parents, school counselors, teachers, and peers. (Hamrick and Stage, 2004) Only a strong few with enough perseverance to blaze the trail will succeed. Which of these two do you believe will achieve their goal of going to college? On the opposite end of both scenarios, is the student who chooses to not continue on to achieve a higher education degree whatsoever. What is different about each of these student representations? Why are some more successful than others by societal standards? What will contribute to some students' decisions to attend college while others don't? This is what I explore in this study.

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Examining the factors that contribute to the college-choice process for students as they transition from their junior to senior year, I look at low-income students and the additional variables that contribute to their post graduation decisions. I sought to determine whether or not the college-choice process differed for this group of students and in this study I follow this specific population as they begin, and travel through (or do not travel through), a variation of Hossler and Gallagher's 1987 choice- process model. I found that although the same stages may exist for all ends of the economic spectrum, the length of time and the depth and breadth of each stage differs specifically for low-income students. Because the college choice process for this population is slightly different than that of other high school students, the models currently in existence do not accurately reflect the experiences of the low-income student population.

In this paper I will first provide a synopsis of information already available in the field, I will then address the main variables and phases that contribute to the preliminary college attendance process, and finally, I will provide an analysis of the acquired information. The purpose of this research topic is to identify the factors that enhance or restrict low-income students specifically from matriculating and I will present the few most recurring themes for this population as they solidify their plans post graduation. If students are subtly, or blatantly, being deterred from higher education, I plan to assess the ways those factors can be addressed and ultimately alleviated for future cohorts of students.

### **A Review of Current Literature**

For multiple reasons many high-achieving, low-income students graduate from secondary education with no intentions of receiving a higher education degree. Similarly many high achieving, low income students "are not applying to the nation's highest-ranked colleges and

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universities.” (Anonymous, 2006) I believe this is either because they are under the impression it is not within their reach or they have been deterred by authority figures and peers. From my research thus far I have concluded that there are four main factors that contribute to the preliminary college -attendance process and three main phases a student travels through which contributes to college choice. These factors, listed below, will provide a roadmap for the review of current literature on my topic.

Four main variables that contribute to the preliminary college attendance process:

1. The support of family and peers
2. The perceived notion of financial ability
3. The perception of the student’s ability to succeed
4. Knowledge of the application process

And three main phases by which a student cycles through contributing to college choice:

1. General aspirations during childhood about attending college
2. Information seeking and beginning applications
3. Determining which college to attend from a data set (Wolniak & Engberg, 2007)

### **Support of Family and Peers**

For a student to desire higher education they need continuous positive exposure beginning at a young age as well as the support of parents, school counselors, teachers, and peers. (Hamrick & Stage, 2004) Stemming from the individual’s perception of their own ability to succeed, if a student does not have the belief from their social surroundings, which includes role models as well as peers, that higher education is attainable their chances of matriculating are likely to decrease. “Some minority students may have their college selection process confounded by the following issues: they may have received little encouragement to pursue a higher

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education and feel alienated; they may be the first member of their family to go to college and have little insight or experience with the process; and they may not know factors to consider in selecting a suitable college.” (Elam & Brown, 2005, p. 15)

Depending on the aspirations and dynamics of the social surroundings, the environment may not be conducive to an individual’s entrance and persistence into higher education.

“...Students’ college choice decisions are circumscribed not only by such individual characteristics as academic performance or socioeconomic background but also by the structural characteristics of their high school.” (Wolniak & Engberg, 2007, p. 29) A community may value immediate results, and thus for many low-income students, educational attainment is not always the most desirable progression post high school. Earning money immediately may often outweigh the benefits of *potentially* earning more money in the future. (Trow, 2005) Other than the financial ramifications of seeking higher education, for many students classified as low-income, educational attainment can sometimes be skewed with a negative image; attainment can be seen as *selling out* your community or believing you are *better than* your peers because you are attempting to breach a higher social culture. Many ethnic/racial minorities subconsciously (and oftentimes consciously) view higher education as assimilation to *whiteness*. (Hamrick & Stage, 2004)

Overall, if students do not have a supportive environment, one where education is encouraged, or if they feel they are being *tracked* by counselors this increases the chances that students will be deterred from seeking higher education.

### **Financial Ability**

Many low-income students that desire higher educational attainment are immediately discouraged due to the assumed cost of college attendance. Whether or not students believe they

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can afford college catalyzes their continued, or discontinued, exploration of higher educational attainment. (Venegas & Hallett, 2008) For countless low-income families a cost benefit analysis is continuously being conducted to determine the opportunity costs of attending higher education. Unfortunately, for many, thorough exposure to the future impact of an education is low especially if the guidance counselors are *tracking* or deterring certain students from higher aspirations. Immediate employment has an outcome of immediate financial benefits, if counselors are subtly, or sometimes not so subtly tracking students, seeking employment instead of considering continued education post graduation may seem more and more appealing. (Hamrick & Stage, 2004)

In a study conducted of Black/African-American high school students in comparison to White high school students, they found that Black/African-American high school students indicated that “future income and future status had a greater influence on their career choice than on the career choice of their white counterparts...Black/African-American college students place a high value on income and financial independence.” (Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007) Although there is an increase in minority representation across the board in higher education (Trow, 2005) the desires of this population in particular can reflect many minority groups’ decisions to postpone matriculation for immediate employment. Increased exposure regarding the financial aid process would alleviate this stress factor and ultimately increase attendance for this population of students. (Venegas & Hallett, 2008)

### **Ability for Success**

I believe that the surrounding environment throughout the primary and secondary educational system lays the foundation for student’s educational motivations. If the student feels confident in their abilities to be successful, based on the qualifications they have displayed

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throughout their schooling, this will increase the chances that they will have a positive perception of their ability to succeed in higher education. (Hamrick & Stage, 2004) Confidence in their academic preparation can be defined by one's Advanced Placement classes or SAT preparation classes. If students were unsure of their academic ability in the primary and secondary levels, doubts of their ability to compete at the collegiate level could transcend simply concern for the academic grades to even beginning the college-choice process all together.

Low-income students often lack exposure to higher education which decreases the confidence they have in its attainability. One teacher/advisor conducts role playing as a method for students to explore their hesitations and concerns regarding college attendance. She urges students to leave the area they are from to experience success, a very different environment from which the students are accustomed. (Alessio, 2006) Often the idea of college is romanticized and begins to seem out of reach for students, yet there are many options available for students to continue their education outside of attending a traditional 4-year residential institution. Community Colleges offer a great alternative, with opportunity to transfer, for those students who did not elect to have as difficult a course load in high school, want to save money, or simply want to stay close to home. If students' exposure is limited to what is advertised many will be discouraged to even begin the application process for fear of rejection. (Anonymous, 2008),

### **Application Process**

Whereas some families are able to assist their children throughout the application process, such as hiring counselors in educational consulting forms, other students must learn to navigate the application process and world of higher education on their own. Current populations of students rely more heavily on their school counselors and other forms of media (Anonymous, 2008) and discuss the lack of initiatives of colleges and universities to reach out and encourage



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the diverse populations they claim to embrace. Low income students often do not utilize traditional resources when searching for colleges, traditional most often being parents who have gone through the higher education process. Many low-income students do not have the adequate knowledge to apply or even begin the application process but many are “looking for the resources to help them finish college applications and identify mentoring programs.”

(Anonymous, 2008)

The four factors outlined above determine whether or not, or how far along, a student will travel in the stages of the college choice process. These factors contribute to the preliminary thoughts of college going and influence the phases of the college-choice process described below.

### **Childhood Aspirations**

A student must develop initial aspirations to attend college, however, if a student retains these initial aspirations for higher education, they may stem only from parental or peer coaching. (Wolniak & Engberg, 2007) Students may be unaware of why they want to attend the college they will be applying to or college at all. Working with students who experience their world by way of others' desires can provide the guidance counselor the opportunity to work through developmental challenges with the student in order to increase their critical thinking. (Walczak, 2008) Although students (adolescents) still need guidance, during this stage of their development they begin to analyze thoughts about their future independently. This initiative is observed during the next phase of the college-choice process which is seeking out information and beginning the application process.

### **Information and Application**

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Once a student internally solidifies their desire to continue in education post graduation, and if that approach is supported externally by the environment with which a student develops, the student will then begin the college information seeking process. During this phase, the student begins exploring his/her options, searching for basic information on colleges and universities such as distance from home the costs of attending that institution. (Wolniak & Engberg, 2007) After the information seeking concludes, a list of potential institutions will be drafted and the application process will begin. For low-income students, there may be additional steps before commencing the actual applications such as acquiring application fee waivers. The added workload may deter students from applying to as many schools as they would like to, or it has the potential of discouraging students altogether.

As the application process is underway, admissions offices may “also provide opportunities for students to test higher orders of consciousness and alleviate some pressure on students by emphasizing there is not one ‘right’ way to gain admission.” (Walczak, 2008, p. 35) Critical thinking and reflection on students’ desires during this process are essential in determining what type and which institution will be best for them. Guidance counselors and admission counselors should “support the development of self-authorship by providing a safe space for students to reflect upon their expectations of college, thus laying the foundation for the transition from one phase of knowing to the next.” (Walczak, 2008)

### **Decision Process**

The decision-making stage can either be the most difficult or the easiest phase in a student’s college choice process. Many factors, such as distance from home and available programs of study, are involved in determining which school to attend. For low-income students the financial aid package they receive from a school, or do not receive, can determine college

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attendance; additional assistance can be sought out if needed. “If financial aid is a determining factor in whether low-income students enroll in college, then increased, specific attention to individual financial aid issues can serve to increase students’ understanding of the financial aid process and by extension, their enrollment in college.” (Vengegas & Hallett, 2008, 22) This decision, especially for this population of students, is one of much internal reflection coupled with outside input as to the potential support offered by the university.

### **Conclusion of Review of Current Literature**

As these factors are identified, direct action can be developed to address each area. For example, in December I initiated a new program at my high school in conjunction with the college counselor through the school’s National Honor Society. The program seeks to address the basic admissions process as well as the steps necessary to receive financial aid through in class presentations. These presentations are set to be given in every junior English class so that each student has the opportunity to gain exposure to a few aspects of college applications, witness peer support, and ultimately feel empowered to strive for higher education if that is what they feel is best for them. As I continue to research the factors that contribute to the college-choice process as well as the elements necessary to create success stories, I hope to be able to develop more programming specific to low-income students and their successful exposure to higher education.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

For this study I utilize Hossler and Gallagher’s original 1987 three-part college choice process model. Many researchers have based their work on this model and I look to mold its applicability to the population of students I am studying. A summary of this model is below:

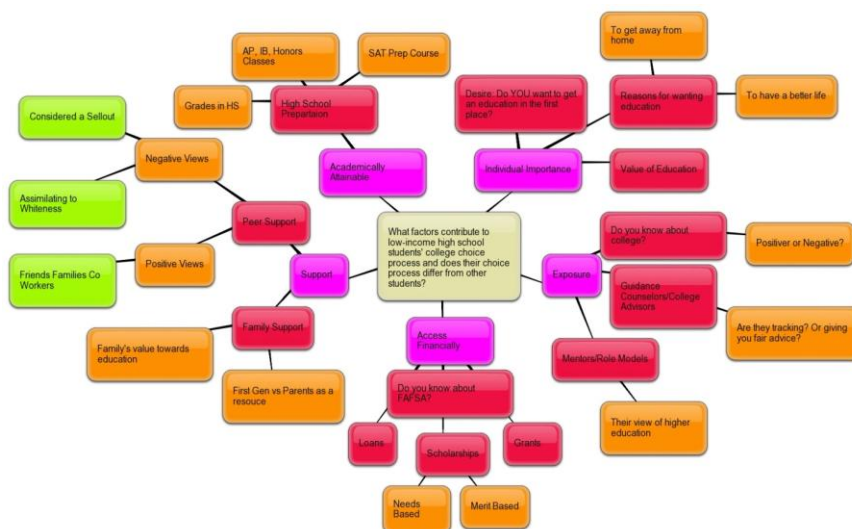
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First stage: Predisposition Phase. In this stage students decide whether they desire higher education or not. Certain factors contribute to this decision such as a student's academic ability, financial ability, and social/environmental support.

Second stage: Information Phase. In this stage students gather information about various institutions and create a data set. This decision is affected by identifying what activities are important to the student, their preliminary assumptions of certain institutions, and beginning the application process.

Third stage: Choice phase. In this stage students are deciding which college to attend. This decision is affected by desire, finances, location, and perceived success at the institution.

This framework depicts students' decision making process as they begin to solidify their post graduation, specifically college attendance, decisions. I question how one's socio-economic status and exposure to higher education affects this process. As a result of this information I look to explore the ways in which this model can be more inclusive as well as ways high school students can be further assisted during their decision making process and before. An example of assistance would be a greater emphasis on the potential influence of role models.



### **Research Design**

This study explores the factors that contribute to the college-choice process of low-income underrepresented high school juniors and seniors.

#### *Participant Sample*

Although the college-choice process can begin as early as the pre-natal stage, I examine high school students as their post graduation plans are becoming more solidified. My design focuses on the individual, familial, and social impacts of second semester juniors and first and second semester seniors. I specifically am looking for information on low-income underrepresented students. Low-income students will be identified as students participating in the free or reduced lunch program, a federal program to assist eligible families.

To increase the ability to generalize the information gained, I will identify a variety of schools across the nation ranging in geographic location (south, north, east, west), type of area (urban, suburban, rural, etc.), and economic status of the area (high-income, middle-income, low-income, etc.). The larger the study, the more applicable it can be for the nation overall, and thus for this study I hope to have a participant sample of 1,000 schools and an average of 50 students per school depending on the area. Once I identify a diverse pool of secondary schools, I will present my research proposal to the school's administration in hopes that they will allow access to those students that meet the qualifications of participating in my study, the main requirement being that a student is a participant in the Free/Reduced Lunch Program.

Being that these participants will be high school students, most will have yet to reach the legal age of 18. There are many special considerations when working with minors, and thus for them to participate I will first need a parental consent form outlining the details of the study. This form (as well as the survey) will be available in multiple languages to ensure that each

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participant is able to fully comprehend the questions being asked. To recruit participants, I would like to provide a small incentive for participating. A gift card of \$15 to a music store, bookstore, or supermarket will be available and the student can choose what they would like.

### *Methods and Limitations*

Using a semi-longitudinal data collection method, I plan to disperse survey interviews to 1,000 schools across the nation at multiple points during a student's secondary schooling. As students begin to solidify their post-graduation plans, this survey will be sent out once a semester for three semesters until their graduation; the first survey will be released during the spring of the junior year, the second during the fall of their senior year, and the third during the spring of their senior year. The online survey is made up of about 25 questions ranging from demographic information to individual and social perceptions of higher education and shouldn't take more than an hour. My hope is that schools will allow their students the opportunity to utilize the school computers during the school day, as many of the potential participants may not have access to a computer at home, or the luxury to attend a nearby library. Appendix A contains the questions for the school and Appendix B is the initial online survey. The two subsequent surveys are shorter and only ask specific questions in each section. The other sections have questions that target potential areas where change can occur.

As with any study, there are limitations to the data collection methods. The most concerning issue with this method of data collection is low-income students' ability to access computers in order to submit the survey. The second concern is students' time; if the surveys are not able to be completed during school hours, will students have sufficient time between other responsibilities after school? My hope is that both these limitations can be addressed and alleviated with the schools' assistance. Compromises are made when any decision is set.

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Although a more economical approach, surveys as opposed to individual interviews limit the quality of responses and depth of information attainable. Because my end goal is to have this information applicable nationally, the focus shifts from more individualized attention (a smaller area or region) to a broad range of schools allowing the potential of less direct impact or influence.

### *Analysis*

I identify five independent variables that correspond with a student's initial openness to college matriculation, they are: whether or not the student values its importance, whether or not the student has had exposure to higher education, whether or not there is access financially, whether or not the student feels it is academically attainable, and whether or not the student feels supported by friends and family to seek out higher education. These variables will be compared with a categorical variable which is the status of being low-income. I will conduct an ANOVA test (Analysis of Variance) to analyze this information. Examining the study a step further, this information can also be separated by the subpopulation of students (high achieving, above-average, remedial, low-achieving) to determine if the concerns are similar for all students or if there are differences between these groups.

### **Conclusion**

The National School Lunch Program (free/reduced lunch program) continues to increase annually since its inception in 1946. (National School Lunch Program) That increase equates to an increase of low-income students that will reach college-age with additional needs to ensure their success and matriculation into higher education, if they so chose to attend. "Colleges and universities must find ways to facilitate access to education for all students, including those who have been underrepresented in the past." (Elam & Brown, 2005) It is college and universities'

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responsibility to ensure that they are recruiting, supporting, and retaining a diverse population of students, in this case, those who are identified as low-income. This population has concerns about college that must and can be addressed with the research I've begun here. In order for these students to become educated adults, we need to bring attention to and reduce the widening gap of economic inequality as it effects education, as early as the secondary, if not primary, school systems. These students may travel along the same model as originated by Hossler and Gallagher in 1987, but their ability to move through the stages at the same pace as their counterparts is still lagging. As researchers and student affairs professionals, we may not be able to reduce the economic inequality in the lives of these students, but we can compensate by preparing them early for the choice process and providing them with the tools to make educated decisions about their futures.



**Appendix A**

School Demographics – to be completed by each of the 1,000 schools

1. What structure does the academic calendar follow?
  - a. Quarters
  - b. Semesters
  - c. Trimesters
  - d. Other
2. What is the maximum/minimum amount of classes required of each student?
  - a.
3. Does your school offer any Honors, AP, IB classes? If so how many? (Ex: 3 AP, 2 Honors)
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
4. Does your school have a college counselor a guidance counselor who provides information about college?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. Is there a library in your school?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Are there computers available for student use?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

## **Appendix B**

### Individual Online Survey - Approximately an hour in duration

Hello Participant. Thank you for agreeing to contribute to our study. You should have received informational material regarding our research when your parents submitted the informed consent form, but as a refresher, the following is a brief explanation of the study:

As a result of this study, we hope to identify the variables that contribute to your and other students' decisions of whether or not to enter college. We will also be examining whether or not this process looks different for identified low-income students.

Each section's questions may differ and it is essential that you read the directions provided. A few questions provide a text box for you to enter your response, while others provide you with a pull down menu of multiple responses.

### **A. Individual Demographics**

1. What is your legal full name?
  - a.
2. What is your age?
  - a.
3. Do you identify with a certain gender? If so, what?
  - a. Yes/No
    - i. Male
    - ii. Female
    - iii. Transgender
    - iv. Other

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4. What year are you in school?

- a. Junior
- b. Senior

### **B. Academically Attainable**

5. How many classes are you currently enrolled in?

- a.

6. Do you have any Honors, AP, IB classes? If so what is the breakdown?

Ex: 3 AP, 2 Honors, 1 Regular

- a. Yes
  - i.
- b. No

7. What is your GPA?

- a. 3.75 – 4.0
- b. 3.25-3.74
- c. 3.0 – 3.24
- d. 2.75 – 2.99
- e. 2.25-2.74
- f. 2.0 – 2.24
- g. 1.75 – 1.99
- h. Below 1.75

8. Have you taken the SAT? If so, what was your score?

- a. Yes/No
- b. 1500-1600

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- c. 1400-1490
- d. 1300-1390
- e. 1200-1290
- f. 1100-1190
- g. 1000-1090
- h. 900-990
- i. Below 900

9. How, if it all, do you gain resources/information regarding admissions to college? Check all

that apply

- a. Parents/Family
- b. Teachers
- c. School Staff/College Counselors
- d. College Outreach
- e. Friends
- f. Internet
- g. Media
- h. other

### C. Individual Desire

10. ~~“What do you want to be when you grow up?”~~ What type of career path are you interested in? Field of interest.

*\*\*For questions 11-13 please rate the level of importance on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being of very little importance, 2 being of little importance, 3 being neither important nor not important, 4 being of importance, and 5 being of great importance. \*\**

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11. How important do you believe higher education is in general?
12. How necessary do you believe higher education is in achieving **your long terms goals**?
13. How important is it to *you* that *you* attend college?

#### **D. Family Structure**

14. Do you live with one, both, or neither of your biological parents?
  - a. One
  - b. Both
  - c. Neither

*\*\*For this section, please identify up to three persons you feel have a large influence on your life and your decisions. In Question 15 you will assign each a letter (ex: (a) Mom (b) Dad...) \*\**

15. Can you please ~~describe~~ identify up to three people who have a large influence on your life and your decisions? (Parents, Siblings, Friends etc.)
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
16. On a scale from 1-5 - 1 being of very little influence, 2 being of little influence, 3 being neither influential nor not influential, 4 being of some influence, and 5 being of great influence: Can you please describe how much influence each of these people have on your life as a whole?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
17. What is the highest educational attainment of each of these people?

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a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

18. On a scale from 1-5 - 1 being of very little importance, 2 being of little importance, 3 being neither important nor not important, 4 being of some importance, and 5 being of great importance: Can you please describe each of these persons' views on the importance of education?

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

19. On a scale from 1-5 - 1 being never, 2 being a few times a year , 3 every other month, 4 being monthly , and 5 being weekly or more: Can you please describe the frequency with which your family members discuss a college education in your future?

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

### **E. Financial Accessibility**

20. Is your household a dual, single, or other income household? How many persons contribute to the income of your household

a. Dual

b. Single

c. Other

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21. Does your family participate in any federal assistance programs aside from the Free/Reduced Lunch Program? Please Specify.

a. Yes

i.

ii.

b. No

22. In what type of dwelling do you and your family live?

a. House

b. Condo

c. Apartment

d. Trailer

i. Owned

ii. Rented

e. Shelter

f. Other

23. Do you receive free or reduced lunch?

a. Free

b. Reduced

24. Is your family's financial situation a factor in determining your plans post-graduation?

a. Yes

b. No

## **F. Social Support**

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25. If you had to assign a percentage, ~~how many~~ **what percentage** of your friends would you say are **planning** going to college?
26. On a scale from 1-5 - 1 being of very little influence, 2 being of little influence, 3 being neither influential nor not influential, 4 being of some influence, and 5 being of great influence: Can you please describe how much influence your friends have on your life as a whole?
27. Do you have any role models or people you look up to? Did they go to college?
- a. Yes
    - i. Yes
    - ii. No
  - b. No

This concludes our first survey. Thank you for agreeing to participate today. We will be contacting you sometime before the start of next semester. Thank you for your time.



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