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AN EXAMINATION OF THE COLLEGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF HIGH  
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RURAL VERMONT: A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

A Dissertation Presented

by

Jon Reidel

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education  
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Earning a college degree has been shown to have a number of positive socioeconomic impacts on individuals and society as a whole. Although researchers acknowledge that the decision to attend college is a complex process involving multiple factors, studies have focused primarily on individual reasons as part of a linear college choice paradigm. Individual obstacles to college attendance that consistently emerge in this strand of research include academic preparation, socioeconomic status, cost, family background, parental influence, motivation, and guidance counselor support (Harris & Halpin, 2002).

College attendance rates are particularly low among students living in rural areas. Nationwide, only 59 percent of students from rural America choose to attend college, compared to 62 percent of their urban counterparts and 67 percent of students from suburban areas. (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine the college decision-making process of high school students in rural Vermont to better understand why fewer than 61 percent choose to attend college, despite more than 90 percent aspiring to do so at some point during their K-12 academic career (VSAC, 2016). A qualitative ethnographic case study approach was used to provide a unique student-focused perspective on the complexities of the college-decision making process as they go through it during their senior year of high school. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 students at two rural high schools throughout their senior year as they wrestled with an influx of information from multiple sources creating a series of pushes and pulls from guidance counselors, family members and friends with varying motives.

Individual case study analyses were conducted on the following three groups of students based on their level of commitment to attend college at the start of their senior year: College Confident, College Considering and College Conflicted. A cross-case analysis of those three groups was also conducted. The result is a detailed account of how students in each group internalized and acted upon new information about their post-secondary plans, which depended heavily on when they received it, who they received it from and its quality. In most cases, the experience proved to be a frustrating, convoluted process that waxed and waned with each new piece of information. Ultimately, students made final college-going decisions based heavily on a combination of information that was not always accurate, sometimes misleading, and on the advice of at least one parent they perceived as having their best interest in mind.

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to acknowledge three individuals who passed away between the time I first applied to the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (Ed.D.) program and started writing my dissertation proposal.

First, I am forever indebted to my daughter Bridgette Dawn Martin, who my wife and I adopted when she was 12 years old, for her inspiration to study why so few children in Vermont attend college, especially those who spent time in foster care like her. She passed away at age 20, but defied the odds by being accepted to Castleton State University where she spent one semester.

Secondly, I want to recognize my father, Carl Reidel, Ph.D., for keeping me on track throughout life and for his inspiration as the first in his family to graduate college.

Thirdly, my mother, Jean Andrews, also the first in her family to graduate college, and I had many meaningful conversations near the end of her life about her own doctoral dissertation, which she gave me just before she passed away in 2016.

A person could not have asked for a better daughter or parents.

## ACKNOWLEDEMENTS

There is not enough room on this page to thank all of the people who have helped guide me through this dissertation journey. It would not have been possible without the willingness of the principals, guidance counselors, VSAC staff members, and most importantly, the students who were willing to share their lives with me throughout their senior year. Their personal stories provided rich qualitative data, which was the heart and soul of this dissertation. I wish them nothing but success as they move forward.

No one has been more supportive or endured more throughout this entire process than my wife Lisa. She has been the ultimate partner and positive presence in my life since the day I met her in high school more than 30 years ago. Our children, Anthony, Angus, Caitlin and Bridgette, have been our greatest joy, and unbeknownst to them, served as my own little pre-dissertation case study.

I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for taking the time out their busy schedules to provide their professional expertise, insight and guidance. They brought decades of experience producing top tier research to the process with each offering specific areas of expertise. I can only hope this dissertation reflects the rigor and professionalism they brought to the experience.

Finally, thanks to the 16 members of my doctoral cohort, especially Xavier De Freitas, Tom Geisler and Sarah Childs for their friendship, humor and support. Our dissertation work sessions at local restaurants and cafes often turned into needed therapy sessions on the way to the finish line.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As perhaps never before, the attention of state policymakers and researchers has galvanized around the need for a college degree in the United States to improve the educational attainment of its population since it is increasingly required for the economic and social well-being not only of individuals, but also of society (Perna & Finney, 2014). These concerns are well-founded considering that current levels of production in the US economy are expected to produce a shortfall of five million college-educated workers by 2020 (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013) with an estimated 65 percent of all jobs requiring bachelor's or associate's degrees or some other education beyond high school, particularly in the fastest growing occupations—science, technology, engineering, mathematics, health care, and community service (Bergeron & Martin, 2015). There are many reasons why earning a college degree is beneficial to individuals and society. These include college graduates' larger earnings over a lifetime, lower unemployment rates, lower crime rates, better health outcomes, and greater civic involvement (Rose, 2013). For every dollar earned by college graduates, those who drop out without a degree earn 60 cents less (Selingo, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education (2006) estimates that individuals with a bachelor's degree earn nearly twice as much as a high school graduate, averaging \$2.1 million over a lifetime. Clearly, the nation's economy demands workers that possess increasing levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are best acquired through postsecondary education (Bergeron & Martin, 2015). Helping young people from the lowest income bracket who are 15 percent less likely than those from the highest income quintile (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013) to attend

college would go a long way in reducing an increasingly widening income disparity gap in America. Currently, the richest 5 percent of U.S. households has an average income 13 times higher than the poorest 20 percent of households (Estelle, Price, & Wazeter, 2016). The picture is particularly bleak for rural America, where high school graduates choose to attend college at a lower rate (59 percent) than their urban counterparts (62 percent) as well as students from suburban areas (67 percent) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). In any given year, more than 6 percent of America's nonmetropolitan bachelor's degree-holders migrate to a metropolitan area creating a phenomenon known as rural brain drain (Carr & Kefalas, 2010). For every thriving metropolis now, there are dozens of agro-industrial brain-drain areas where economic growth has stalled (Carr & Kefalas, 2010).

In his first address to a joint session of Congress in 2009, President Barack Obama set an ambitious goal: "By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world" (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>, 2009). At the time, just over 40 percent of Americans above the age of 25 had some form of postsecondary degree. Since then, the US has increased its college graduation rate by just under one percentage point per year (Carnavale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013) while other countries have increased at varying rates. This has not always been the case as the percentage of young Americans age 25 to 29 with a bachelor's degree has increased from 15 percent in 1950 to 25 percent by 1995 to 33.5 percent by 2012 (Ingels & Dalton, 2013). America's transition from a manufacturing to a service economy lead to a parallel shift from a high school to a college economy (Carnevale & Rose, 2015). Unless

educational attainment improves, workers in the US will lack the educational skills and training required to meet the workforce demands of a global knowledge economy (Perna, 2004). By 2018, it is estimated that 62 percent of jobs in the US will require a college education, and that over half of those jobs will require a four-year degree (Dyce, Albold, & Long, 2012). If the US maintains its current college graduate production rate, the country will face a shortage of 16 to 23 million college-educated adults in the workforce by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2009). However, even with these increases in college attainment and the aforementioned benefits, the demand for college-educated workers, especially in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) – related fields far exceeds the number of current workers with a college degree – in some case by as much as 40 percentage points (Bidwell, 2014).

Yet, for all the importance placed on the need for more Americans attaining college degrees, there has been surprisingly little research conducted on the college decision-making process that students and their families go through (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). Much of the research in this area has focused on the decision-making process of students deciding on *which* college to attend as opposed to *whether* to attend college. In both cases, the process of choosing whether and where to attend college is frequently viewed as a comprehensive process in which students realize their college-going aspirations (or not) through the use of several linear steps leading to enrollment (Bergerson, 2009). The most widely cited and used college choice model is Hossler and Gallagher’s College Choice Model (1987), which emphasizes a three-stage process: Predisposition, Search, and Choice. At the heart of this established college choice model

is a set of assumptions about college aspirants' decision making – including a sequential, linear process, and an array of possible alternatives – that does not hold true for various groups of students (Cox, 2016). Historically, three perspectives have framed this overall process: sociological, psychological, and economic (Paulsen, 1990). More recently, literature has focused on specific factors negatively affecting the chances of college enrolment such as a lack of parental support (Engle, 2007), socioeconomic background, a lack of resources, college readiness, race, and cost (Burdman, 2005), among others. However, most of these studies have been focused on one potential determinant, leaving the need for an examination of how students weigh each of these options as part of a larger, more complex overall decision-making process.

The primary focus of this dissertation is to examine the factors that shape decision making, in totality, to better understand how they work together or against students' decision to enter college. Also of interest is the points in time where certain factors are more or less influential, which should help better understand the complicating conditions and moments of non-choice that shape the loops, detours, and stop-outs of some students' postsecondary paths (Cox, 2016). Studying decision making wholistically, as well as the temporal decision-making process, holds promise for furthering our understanding about the decision to attend college.

### **Vermont Context**

To varying degrees, all 50 states must improve higher education performance in order to ensure the nation's continued economic prosperity in a global knowledge-based society (Perna, 2004). Increased educational attainment has a positive fiscal impact on

state and local budgets and is especially important for states facing significant budget challenges (Baum et al., 2013). In states like Vermont, where there are an anticipated 132,000 job openings in the next decade requiring education and training beyond high school, there is reason for concern. Postsecondary college enrollment in Vermont is below the national average of 68.4 percent with only 60.2 percent of Vermont high school graduates choosing to attend a 2- or 4-year postsecondary institution. (Vermont Student Assistance Program (VSAC), 2016). In response to this postsecondary degree deficit, the Vermont Commission on Higher Education Funding (VCHEF) recommended increasing the total percentage of Vermonters with college degrees from 42 percent to 60 percent by 2019 (VCHEF, 2009). More recently, a collective-action organization called 70x2025vt involving some of Vermont's most influential leaders in education, business, nonprofits, philanthropy, and local, state and federal government set an ambitious goal of assuring that 70 percent of Vermonters possess a postsecondary degree or credential of value by 2025 ([www.70x2025vt.org](http://www.70x2025vt.org), 2017). To achieve that goal, at least 30,000 more Vermonters will need to earn an associate's or bachelor's degree or "credential of value" (i.e., electrician's license) within the next eight years. VSAC was selected as the home for the new initiative, led by chief executive officers from both the private and nonprofit sectors, members of the administration of Governor Phil Scott, including the secretaries of the Agency of Education (AOE) and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD), and leaders of the House and Senate education committees.

Vermont consistently ranks first in New England and among the top 10 states nationally for high school graduation rates, including an 87.7 percent rate for the 2014-

2015 schoolyear (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), yet ranks among the bottom 10 states for the percentage of high school graduates it sends to college (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The reasons why a relatively high percentage of Vermonters choose not to attend college have become an increasingly debated topic among educators and state policymakers alike. The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) and VSAC have addressed the issue in recent years by producing extensive reports. One of the most revealing findings is that the postsecondary “aspiration rate” of high school seniors in Vermont is higher than the national average. Approximately 90 percent of graduating high school seniors from the class of 2014 reported “aspiring to attend college” at some point during K-12 academic career (VSAC, 2016). By the fall of 2014, however, only 75 percent of those students who participated in the survey still intended to pursue some form of postsecondary education. A primary goal of this study is to understand why.

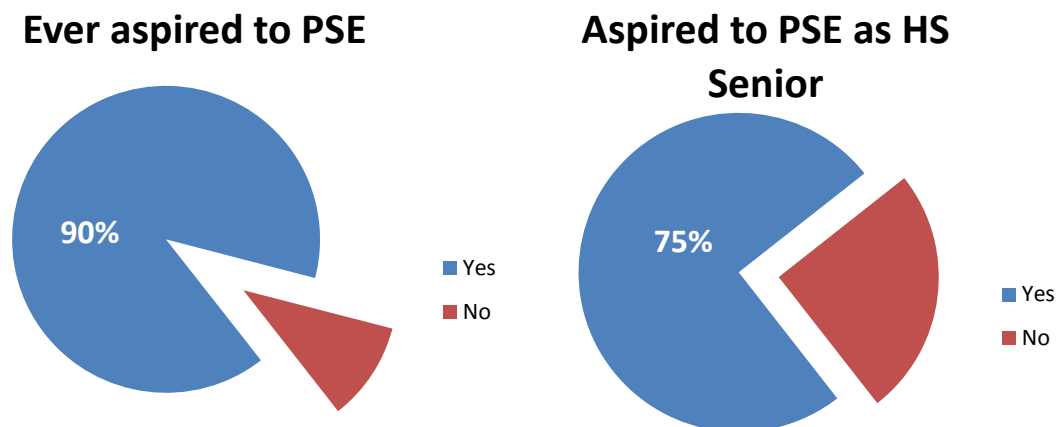


Figure 1: The Postsecondary Aspirations for the Vermont Class of 2014 (n=5,331)

Further examination of VSAC data shows incongruent levels of college-going aspirations across the state, as well as significant differences in college attendance rates, which are noticeably lower in more rural areas of Vermont. The State’s most populace county (Chittenden), for example, sends 67.8 percent of its high school graduates to college, while Orleans and Lamoille Counties – two of Vermont’s least populated counties – have the lowest college enrollment rate at 47.2 and 53.2, respectively.

**Q01 COUNTY \* Fall14Enrolled Fall 14 Enrolled Crosstabulation**

% within Q01 COUNTY

		Fall14Enrolled Fall 14 Enrolled		Total
		1 Enrolled	2 Not Enrolled	
Q01 COUNTY	1 ADDISON	55.3%	44.7%	100.0%
	2 BENNINGTON	62.5%	37.5%	100.0%
	3 CALEDONIA	59.9%	40.1%	100.0%
	4 CHITTENDEN	67.8%	32.2%	100.0%
	5 ESSEX	58.1%	41.9%	100.0%
	6 FRANKLIN	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%
	7 GRAND ISLE	55.3%	44.7%	100.0%
	8 LAMOILLE	53.2%	46.8%	100.0%
	9 ORANGE	57.7%	42.3%	100.0%
	10 ORLEANS	47.2%	52.8%	100.0%
	11 RUTLAND	54.9%	45.1%	100.0%
	12 WASHINGTON	61.8%	38.2%	100.0%
	13 WINDHAM	57.2%	42.8%	100.0%
	14 WINDSOR	61.1%	38.9%	100.0%
Total		60.2%	39.8%	100.0%

**Source: VSAC, 2016**

*Figure 2: Postsecondary Enrollment Rates of the Vermont Class of 2014 who enrolled at 2- or 4-year institutions in fall 2014, by County*



The fact that high school students from rural areas are less likely to attend college is not unique to Vermont. In fact, of the 42 percent of people between the ages 18 and 24 who are enrolled in all of higher education, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 29 percent come from rural areas, compared to nearly 48 percent from cities. The U.S. Census Bureau (2014) defines “rural” as all population, housing, and territory not located within Urbanized Areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people or Urban Clusters (UCs) of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. Residents living in rural areas between the ages of 18-29 have the lowest enrollment in undergraduate programs nationwide by far (Brown, 2011). This issue is especially critical to states like Vermont, where 61.1 percent of its total population lives in rural areas, joining Maine, Mississippi and West Virginia as the only states with the majority of their populations living rural areas.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The decision to go to college is one of the first noncompulsory decisions made by American adolescents and is an important marker in their transition from the final stages of childhood to the first steps of adulthood (Hossler et al., 1999). Despite some observers questioning whether everyone should attend college, higher education is undoubtedly growing in importance to the social and economic prosperity of individuals and society (Perna, 2006). Yet, we know very little about this process and how students go about making this critical decision that has lifelong consequences. The purpose of this study is to examine high school students living in rural Vermont as they go through the college decision-making process to better understand why a relatively high number choose not to

pursue postsecondary education, contributing to the state's low overall college attendance rate. An ethnographic case study approach was used involving a series of 36 in-depth interviews with 10 students at two rural high schools throughout their senior year as went through the college-decision making process. Individual case study analyses were conducted on the following three groups of students that emerged after initial interviews based on their level of commitment to attend college at the start of their senior year: College Confident, College Considering and College Conflicted. A cross-case analysis was then conducted on the three groups to highlight any key differences and similarities between the three groups. Secondary interviews were also conducted with select guidance counselors, parents and VSAC counselors.

The following four research questions guided this study:

1. What factors play a role in the college decision-making process of high school students in rural Vermont?
2. How do students weigh these factors as they experience them at different stages of their senior year while trying to decide whether or where to attend college?
3. What impact does the level of college going aspirations by a student entering their senior have on their final postsecondary decision.
4. What role does information play in the decision-making process of seniors as they decide whether or where to attend college?
5. Who do students rely on most for information and guidance when making a final decision about whether or where to attend college?

## **Significance of Research**

Increasing the number of college educated citizens has become an increasingly important priority for local, state and federal officials seeking to meet the demands of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy. Gaining a better understanding of the college decision-making process of high school students as they go through this complex life experience leading to a final postsecondary choice should help policymakers create more effective strategies for increasing college enrollment. The aim of this study was to provide insight into that process by interviewing and observing students as they grapple with a barrage of information from school counselors, family and friends that is not always accurate or in the best interest of the student. By identifying the causal mechanisms and when they occurred in the process leading to a final decision by students, local and state policymakers can use these key decision points as points of leverage for policy.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of education, the college decision is one of both practical and theoretical importance for researchers studying real-life decision making, and is an important and difficult life decision faced by over two million students in the US each year (Galotti & Mark, 1994). Research in this area has focused primarily on individual reasons why students decide whether or not to attend college such as cost, socioeconomic status, race, family background, academic performance and lack of parental and guidance counselor support. Less available is literature focused on the actual college decision-making process of high school students, especially in rural America, to better understand the causal mechanisms that lead to a final postsecondary decision. With that gap in mind, this literature review starts with an examination of decision theory to establish a foundation for how individuals make decisions in general, followed by a review of literature on the primary reasons why students choose not to attend college. Research on educational aspirations is also examined since this study started by establishing the college aspiration levels of 10 high school students in Vermont, where 9-of-10 seniors report having aspired to attend college at some point during their K-12 academic career (VSAC, 2016). An assessment of the most widely cited college decision-making models is also included to highlight the stages that students go through while attempting to make this complex life choice. Most of these models, however, are focused on how students choose *where* to attend college rather than *if* they should pursue a college degree. Helping to fill this gap in the literature on the actual decision-making process of students as they consider *whether* to attend college is the primary goal of this study. Part of this chasm

includes a lack of understanding for why students from rural areas such as Vermont enroll in college at lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts. A review of the minimal, but growing amount of literature on the unique issues facing rural students when it comes to college enrollment is followed by a section on Vermont-based research to provide context and highlight issues that may be unique to rural areas in the state, such as the counties where the two high schools in this study are located.

### **Decision Theory**

Numerous studies have shown that the decision to attend college has a lasting impact on the careers, livelihoods, and lifestyles of individual Americans and of society as a whole (Hossler et al., 1999). Despite the established importance of an educated society, there is limited literature focused on the actual process of how students arrive at the potentially life-altering decision to pursue a college degree. There is a large body of research about how people make decisions in general; however, that could shed light on the college decision making process of high school students like the ones in this study. Social scientists have studied decision-making in general since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and have produced a large body of theory and experiments that deal with individual decision-making (Edwards, 1954). The study of decision making, consequently, has touched multiple intellectual disciplines: mathematics, sociology, psychology, economics, and political science, to name a few (Buchanon & O'Connell, 2006). As a result, decision theories have embodied several prevalent concepts and models, which exert significant influence over almost all the biological, cognitive, and social sciences (Doyle & Thomason, 1999). Decision theorists from all disciplines share a number of basic

concepts and distinctions, however. To start with, most agree that it makes sense to distinguish between *descriptive* and *normative* decision theory (Peterson, 2009). Descriptive decision theories seek to explain and predict how people *actually* make decisions, which is the focus on this study. This is an empirical discipline, stemming from experimental psychology (Peterson, 2009). Normative theories seek to yield prescriptions about what decision makers are *rationally required* – or *ought* – to do. Descriptive and normative decision theory are, thus, two separate fields of inquiry, which may be studied independently of each other (Peterson, 2009). Some researchers have also focused on prescriptive decision theory, which tries to guide or give procedures on how or what we should do in order to make the best decision in line with normative theory. In the book, *Descriptive, Normative and Prescriptive Interactions in Decision Making* (Bell, Raiffa, & Tversky, 1988), researchers focus their attention on the individual decision maker facing a choice involving uncertainty about outcomes – not unlike the 10 students in this study. They augment the aforementioned dichotomy that distinguishes the normative and descriptive sides (the “ought” and the “is”) of decision making, by adding a third component: the prescriptive side. They do so to address what other researchers have failed to take into consideration: that decision makers are not economic automations; they make mistakes, have remorse, suffer anxieties, and cannot make up their minds; not all people have well thought out preferences, but that they might be viewed as having divided minds with different aspirations, that decision making, even for the individual, is an act of compromise among the different selves (Bell et al., 1988). The role of emotions in decision making is an important one in relation to this study as the 10

students involved experienced a wider range of emotions as they considered whether or where to attend college. In particular, there is a small body of emerging research that highlights the important influence of immediate emotions – emotions experienced at the time of decision making (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Immediate emotions can influence decisions indirectly by altering the decision maker’s perceptions of probabilities or outcomes or by altering the quality and quantity of processing of decision-relevant clues. They can also affect behavior directly. As the intensity of immediate emotions intensifies, they progressively take control of decision making and override rational decision making (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Further, especially in the case of students in this study, immediate emotions can distort people’s judgment of self-interest. Even when people have a realistic understanding of their own self-interest, immediate emotions can cause people to “lose control” of their own behavior (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Decisions may be influenced by one’s emotional state at the time a decision is made (Plous, 1993). Emotions can also derail the steps typically followed as part of a standard decision making process. According to Fischhoff (1999), in real life people often make choices out of habit or tradition, without going through the decision-making steps systematically. Decisions may be made under social pressure or time constraints that interfere with a careful consideration of the options and consequences (Reason, 1990).

A number of decision making models have focused on the psychological aspects of decision-making. In rational decision-making models, for example, decision makers analyze a number of possible alternatives from different scenarios before selecting a

choice (Oliveira, 2007). These scenarios are weighted by probabilities, and decision makers can determine the expected scenarios for each alternative. The final choice would be the one presenting the best-expected scenario and with the highest probability of outcome. Both rational and psychological decision-making models have people as their central element either as decision makers or as the ones who are affected by decisions (Oliveira, 2007). This area of decision-making is especially relevant to this study in that students are the ones who will be the decision-maker, albeit with influence from family members and other influencers, and will be the most affected by the decision. The overall essence of decision making integrates both the beliefs about specific events and people's subjective reactions to those events, according to Oliveira (2007), who posits that decisions are responses to situations that may include three aspects: First, there may be more than one possible course of action under consideration. Second, decision makers can form expectations concerning future events that are often described in terms of probabilities or degrees of confidence. Finally, consequences associated with possible outcomes can be assessed in terms of reflecting personal values and current goals. A number of researchers have also discussed the significance of beliefs, values and behavior in the decision-making process (Geva & Mintz, 1997; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Meneghetti & Seel, 2001) and the effect of culture on those three factors. On the other side of the spectrum are researchers who have shown that taking a more pragmatic, emotionless statistically-based approach produces the best results. In the book, *Making Decisions*, author D.V. Lindley a former statistics professor at University College London, for example, argues that there is only one logical way to make a decision. By the



use of three basic principles – assigning probabilities to the uncertain events; assigning utilities to the possible consequences; and choosing that decision that maximizes expected utility – decisions can be reached more efficiently and with less disagreement. It shows that only maximization of expected utility leads to sensible decision-making (Lindley, 1991).

It is important to note that some researchers have pointed to the fact that adolescents approach decision-making differently than adults. They have different brain functioning than adults do, which can affect their decision-making skills (Snyder & Blackmore, 2015). Achieving a long-term goal, like graduating from college is challenging for all adolescents because their executive functioning is still developing (Snyder & Blackmore). When we are overwhelmed by the enormity of a decision, our brains may employ strategies that lead to poor decision-making as a defense mechanism (Castleman, Baum, & Schwartz, 2015). In regard to students considering whether to apply to college, cognitive overload can occur, which can lead to procrastination. When faced with too many choices or with a process that is perplexing, people frequently go with the path of least resistance, often the default option (Castleman et al., 2015), which in this particular study resulted in a student deciding not to complete the FAFSA to receive financial aid. Over time researchers have learned that, in many ways, student decision making is not quite so straightforward as the simple benefit-cost model would suggest (Castleman et al., 2015). One assumption built into that model, for instance, is that students have access to complete information about the various options that are available to them, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the benefits and costs

associated with each option. How though would we expect low-income students – who are often the first in their families to go to college – to have a good idea of what each postsecondary option has to offer? (Castleman et al., 2015). These questions are ones this dissertation is designed to address in hopes of making an empirical contribution to existing literature.

In the field of education, the process of choosing whether and where to attend college is frequently viewed as a comprehensive process in which students realize their college-going aspirations (or not) through the use of several steps leading to enrollment (Bergerson, 2009). Historically, three perspectives have framed this process: sociological, psychological, and economic (Paulsen, 1990). The sociological perspective focuses on college choice as part of the status attainment process, with emphasis on individual background factors that influence the decision of whether and where to go to college (Bergerson, 2009). These include race, ethnicity, family income, parent education, peer groups, school contexts, parental expectations, student and parent educational aspirations, academic achievement, and high school curriculum (Bergerson, 2009). In studies framed by the sociological perspective, researchers found that student background characteristics have a significant impact on students' postsecondary choices, both in developing college predisposition and influencing their institutional choices (Bergerson, 2009). The psychological perspective focuses on the climate and how perceptions of that climate influence students' institutional choices (Paulsen, 1990). This perspective focused more on institutional characteristics such as cost of tuition, room and board, and curriculum play into the psychological aspect of choosing a particular college as opposed to

attending college or not. The economic perspective constructed the college choice process as an investment decision in which students weigh the costs and benefits of attending college and make choices based on their evaluation of the economic benefits of a postsecondary education (Paulsen, 1990). Historically, economic-based research argued that students are more likely to enroll in college when the perceived return on the investment is greater than the cumulative costs (Kodde & Ritzen, 1988).

### **College Choice Models**

A handful of college choice models emerged from the sociological, psychological, and economic perspectives that have framed this process. The most widely cited and replicated model is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model, which emphasizes a three-stage process: Predisposition, Search, and Choice.

**Predisposition.** The initial Predisposition phase can start as early as elementary school for some students and is shaped by a number of background characteristics and influences. This initial phase is helpful in determining the predisposition of a student and their likelihood of attending college because it focuses on the development of aspirations to go to college (Bergerson, 2009). During this phase, students arrive at a tentative conclusion to continue, or not continue, their formal education after high school graduation (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith (1989). It takes into considerations the following factors: socioeconomic status, parental involvement, peers, interaction with higher education institutions, significant others such as teachers and guidance counselors, high school involvement, and the relative value placed on attending college (Bergerson, 2009). The empirical methods used to determine a student's predisposition level was

based on interviews with each student early in their high school career and throughout their college choice process leading to a decision. Although family variables clearly shape the Predisposition phase of the choice process, significant others such as peers, teachers, and counselors also influence students' perceptions of and aspirations for postsecondary education (Bergerson, 2009). Further, a student's understanding of college and his or her ability to access information about higher education also play into the predisposition phase (Hossler et al., 2009).

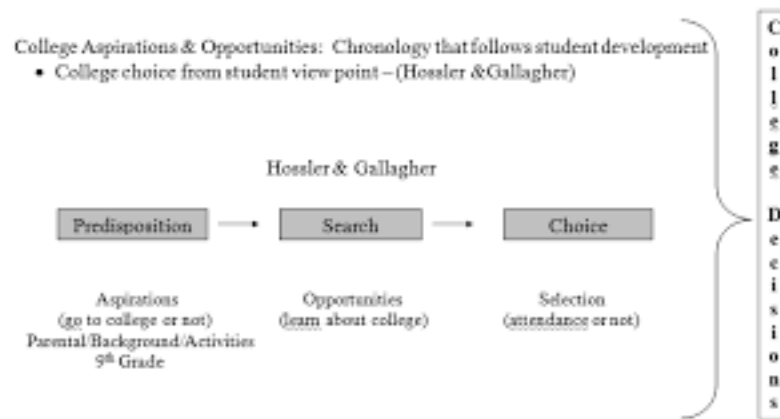


Figure 3. Hossler & Gallagher (1987) College Choice Model

Although Hossler agreed via an email query that the search and choice phases might not be as applicable to this dissertation if a student does not progress past the Predisposition phase, he did say that they could still offer guidance for students on the fence who have not yet given up on their college going aspirations. For example, if a student starts gathering information on specific colleges such as admissions or marketing information, he or she has technically entered the search phase.

**Search.** In this phase, students form choice sets and determine which institutional characteristics are most important, which involves learning more about themselves and the institutions in which they are interested (Bergerson, 2009). They also consider taking college entrance examinations like the SAT or ACT that further influences their college choices based on their scores. Choices are also determined by students' socioeconomic status, their parents' education, and the availability of financial support. The search phase generally occurs during the 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). If a student reaches the final choice phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model during which they use information to select an institution and complete the enrollment process, they are highly likely to end up attending college.

**Choice.** For the purposes of this study, observing students who make it to the choice stage versus those that do not may offer some key insights into what ultimately leads to the sustainment or loss of college going aspirations. That said, this model has significant limitations for researchers interested in using it to determine why students choose *not* to attend college as opposed to those who are choosing *between* colleges.

Future college choice models attempted to expand or improve Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, but generally all included various stages on the way to a decision. Cabrera and LaNasa's (2000) model of college choice, developed through a review of literature, conceptualize the choice process as including direct and indirect influences on the ultimate decision. For example, the availability of information about higher education influences a student's aspirations, which directly affect his or her choice, but information also affects parental encouragement and the saliency of a

student's choices (Bergerson, 2009). Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice illustrates the complexity of the process and includes four layers of influence on student's college choice. These include habitus, borrowing from Bourdieu's (1977) work that includes an understanding of a student's background characteristics; school and community context such as school size, availability of counseling; higher education context that includes factors such as nearby institutions and regional and cultural norms toward higher education; and the social, economic and policy context including labor markets, demographics and policies that support or discourage college enrollment (Bergerson, 2009). Other models focused on similar aspects of the college choice process including Breen and Goldthorpe's Rational Choice Model (1997); Tierney and Venega's Cultural Framework Model (2009); and Henrickson and McKelvey's Agent-Based Model (2002) focusing on the interactions between students and institutions during the choice process, among others. The central mechanism that Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) used in an attempt to explain class inequalities in educational participation rates was that of relative risk aversion: that is, young people have, as their major educational goal, the acquisition of a level of education that will allow them to attain a class position at least as good as that of their family of origin. More simply, their chief concern is to avoid downward mobility. Tierney and Venega (2009) created a "cultural ecological model" that builds upon what is known about how students make (or do not make) the decision to go to college. In this case, the model focuses on financial aid access and the contexts that affect aid availability. The authors' work, like the work of many of others like Perna (2007) suggests that there are multiple environmental influences that play a role in access

to financial aid. They posit that the ideas that flow from such a model may help to increase college going by delineating financial aid programs in three states with different types of funding programs – California, Nevada, and Kansas – to demonstrate that students and families lack information about how much college costs and how to access aid for college. Although new college choice models are being developed, it is clear that the complexity of environments, systemic issues, and individual differences complicate the process for individual students and constrain the degree to which a comprehensive model can explain this process (Bergerson, 2009).

### **The Role of Information**

Information overload is increasingly perceived as having an adverse effect on decision making (Buchanan & Kock, 2001). This is somewhat in contrast to much of the decision-making literature which assumes that individuals start from a position of a lack of information or simply have sufficient information (Buchanan & Kock, 2001). Buchanan and Kock (2001) conducted a study focused on the perceived existence of information overload and its effect on decision making by surveying and interviewing a sample of MBA students from New Zealand and the US. Results showed that approximately 60 percent of the reasons given for information overload related to task factors; principally information and time pressure issues. The remaining 40 percent of reasons are attributable to individual factors, notably a lack of organizing skills and issues relating to the style (decision, management, cognitive) of the decision maker. This offers some insight into the process of students trying to decide whether or where to attend college, while simultaneously being bombarded with large amounts of information from

multiple sources. In some cases, informational asymmetries exist in the market for higher education, in that students lack information on which colleges are available, how to take standardized tests, what preparatory classes are needed, and how to apply for admission and financial aid (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003). This lack of information is likely the most severe for students with few college-going peers or college-educated parents and for those who attend high schools with few college counseling resources (Avery & Kane, 2005; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). These informational inequalities create an imbalance among students even in the same high school as was the case in this study, in that students are not playing on an equal informational playing field. Further, when people lack adequate information or skills, they may make less than optimal decisions (Fischhoff, 1992). Even when people have time and information, they often do a poor job of understanding the probabilities of consequences; even when they know the statistics, they are more likely to rely on personal experience than information about probabilities (National Research Council, 1989). Some students in this study were provided with substantial amounts of data and information, yet made decisions that were not based on this information, instead relying on advice from their parents and their personal experiences.

### **Reasons for Not Attending College**

Ingrained in American society is a belief that higher education is an investment in human capital (DeYoung, 1989) that benefits the individuals who earn the college degree and society as whole. Yet, for a variety of reasons, just under half of America's graduating seniors opt not to attend an institution of higher education. A shortage of



college educated workers and a growing income disparity gap has spurred a new body of research focused on the reasons why some high school students choose to attend college while others do not (Hossler et al., 1999). Despite the fact that many researchers acknowledge that the decision to attend college or not is a complex process involving multiple factors, most studies have focused on individual factors in isolation or as part of a college choice paradigm. Individual obstacles to college attendance that consistently emerge in this strand of research include academic preparation, cost, family background, motivation, peer influence, and guidance counselor support (Harris & Halpin, 2002). Hossler and Stage (1992) list multiple factors such as student ability, parental educational levels, expectations and encouragement, encouragement from high school teachers and counselors, race/ethnicity; socioeconomic status; and gender. One study relied on survey data from a state university system asking students why they decided to attend college as first-year student and again as seniors (Dole & Digman, 1967). The following 13 factors emerged from the survey data: social reasons, conformity, curiosity, vocational reason, academic value, material value, altruistic value, school influence, experience, avocational influence, science interest, humanities interest, and verbal interest (hearing positive things about college). Interestingly, students listed most of the same factors as seniors that they did as first-year students, strengthening the confidence in the stability of the major factors within groups (Dole & Digman, 1967).

**Cost of attendance.** An increasing number of studies and surveys show that the cost of college attendance is emerging as the top reason why students choose not to enroll. As the cost of college continues to rise at a faster rate than family income (College

Board, 2013), the overall price of attendance and the byzantine financial aid process have become leading obstacles to why students choose not to apply to college. Indeed, tuition has increased by almost 50 percent in the last 30 years, prompting some people to ask whether college is still worth the price of admission (Greenstone & Looney, 2012). Yet, millions continue to enroll in higher education with plans to work, borrow, and save, only to find that their funds fall short (primarily at public institutions), due in large part to an untimely choice by state governments to spend less on education just as Americans decided that college was essential (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). At the same time, the financial aid system, long intended to make college affordable, failed to keep up with the growing student and family need while the cost of attending a four-year college increased by \$10,000 between 1974-75 and 2013-14. The median income in 1974 for men was \$8,452 (\$36,650 adjusted for inflation) and for women was \$3,082 (\$13,364 adjusted for inflation), making tuition 7 percent of men's median income and 20 percent of women's median income per year (College Board, 2014). In 2015, the median income for men was \$37,138 and \$23,769 for women, making tuition 25 percent of men's median income and 39 percent of women's median income per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). More recently, students and families have had to absorb a 54 percent increase in the cost of attendance at public universities since 2000 (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). A national survey of high school guidance counselors indicates that they perceive lack of finances as the primary reason college-qualified students choose not to enroll directly into a four-year institution (Hahn & Price, 2008). They (guidance counselors) marked both "not enough financial aid" and "tuition too high" as "almost always" or "frequently" important over

70 percent of the time for why students choose not to enroll in college (Hahn & Price, 2008). Researchers have tried to quantify the effect of higher tuition rates on attendance with one study using composite data from 25 studies showing that a \$100 tuition price increase results in a 0.6 percentage point decline in the 18-24-year-old participation rate, and an enrollment decline of 1.8 percent (Leslie & Brinkman, 1987). In Vermont, a decrease in college enrollment is due in part to the rising cost of college and the potential debt burden for attending higher education, according to survey data compiled for the Vermont Public School Dropout and High School Completion report (2014). The increase in price, as well as the complexity of the financial aid process, has shown to disproportionately affect students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For low-income/Pell-eligible students, financing an education is one of the primary factors in determining whether higher education is an option to pursue (Perna, 2004). In order to cover the gap between rising tuition and cost and stagnant family income, there has been an increased dependency on student loans and other sources of financial support (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008). Even so, trying to understand the access to these resources for students and families has proven challenging, in particular for those students and families who come from low-income backgrounds and experiences (Perna, 2004). Students with parents who attended college have been shown to have an advantage when applying for financial aid. In more rural areas of Vermont, where a lower percentage of residents own a college degree, this could prove problematic for students trying to understand the financial aid and application process, potentially resulting in the decision not to apply. The hard truth is that while financial aid reduces the ever-

increasing cost of college, more often than not it still leaves families with unmanageable prices (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Based on a growing body of literature it is hard to deny that these increasingly unmanageable prices, coupled with a confusing financial aid system, has emerged as perhaps the primary reason why students choose not to attend college.

**Guidance counselor support.** An extensive body of research has shown that the support of a guidance counselor can have a major impact on whether a student chooses to apply to college. One of the more significant influences on whether high school students attend college is the advice given by their guidance counselor (Perna, 2008). School counselors help create a school's college-going culture and shape students' and parents' perceptions and expectations of potential college options (McDonough, 2005).

Counselors can also influence students' aspirations for and understanding of college, academic preparation for college, and college-related decisions, as well as parents' support for their children's college aspirations (McDonough, 2005). School guidance counselors play an especially critical role in helping students traverse the challenges of high school and providing insight into the many options available to them following graduation (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013). A study by Belasco (2013) using data from the 2002 Educational Longitudinal Study showed visiting a counselor for college entrance information had a positive and significant influence on students' likelihood of postsecondary enrollment, and that counseling-related effects are greatest for students from low socioeconomic status. Among college qualified 1992 high school graduates, 52 percent reported receiving help with completing their college applications from school officials, 3 percent with preparing an admissions essay, and 46 percent with arranging

days off to visit colleges (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Unfortunately, there is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that counselors have neither the time nor the skills needed to adequately facilitate college transition, especially for low-SES students (Belasco, 2013). The National Survey of School Counselors (2011) captured the frustrations of 5,300 middle and high school guidance counselors, most of whom reported wanting to help students graduate high school and attend college, but lacked necessary resources and time – much of which is spent on non-student administrative work. A research brief by the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center showed that the addition of one high school guidance counselor is predicted to induce a 10 percentage point increase in four-year college enrollment (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013). Perna (2008) and her colleagues conducted case studies at high schools in five states and found that the student-counselor ratio exceeded the recommended 100:1, resulting in low availability and lack of support for students considering college. Unfortunately, many high schools are facing shrinking school budgets with guidance counselors often the first to get eliminated despite an increasing number of students wanting to attend college (Perna, 2008). Correlations were drawn with higher student-counselor ratios resulting in higher college attendance rates. More guidance counselors do not always produce the desired results, however, as Cook (2007) found that guidance counselors are more than passive gatekeepers as suggested by previous scholars, playing a more assertive role in funneling black male students away from college altogether or into California Community Colleges. According to Cook's (2007) study, non-African American counselors showed an unwillingness to consistently provide unequivocal, adequate and sufficient college-related pedagogical practices,

options, pathways, and services to African-American males (Cook, 2007). Other studies showed that by simplifying the financial aid process and award criteria and educating guidance counselors about the process, guidance counselors felt more confident advising students on the availability of state and federal aid, resulting in more students filling out college applications (Perna, 2008). Freedman (2011) points out that by simplifying the FAFSA – the form used to calculate financial need – more students felt comfortable applying to college. Evidence shows that an increase in the number of guidance counselors focused on the college admission process has a positive impact on college enrollment. However, with many local and state governments facing rising educational costs and shrinking budgets, the likelihood of a reduction in guidance counselors could be a real possibility. In fiscally austere times in public schools, counseling positions are among the ‘nonessentials’ cut. When not eliminated, counselors’ main jobs – as defined by principals and demanded by accountability systems – are scheduling, testing, and discipline (McDonough, 2005). After that, in public schools located in middle and upper class neighborhoods, the priority is college counseling. But in schools in poor neighborhoods with large numbers of students of color, the next counseling priorities are dropout, drug, pregnancy, and suicide prevention, along with sexuality, personal and crisis counseling (McDonough, 2005). A third of American counselors are in high-poverty public high schools, the schools that enroll the vast majority of low-income students and students of color, the schools that enroll a significant proportion of the 12.8 million high school students today (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Despite these disparities, counseling is generally agreed upon as one of the three main needs for

improving college access for poor students and students of color along with a more rigorous high school curriculum and a better financial aid system (McDonough, 2005).

**Socioeconomic status, first generation students, and parental support.** The disparities in college access by socioeconomic status are well documented (Castleman et al., 2015). In 2012, just over half of 18- to 24-year-olds from the lowest family income quintile who had earned a high school diploma or GED in the past year enrolled in college, compared to 81 percent of students from the highest family income quintile (Digest of Education Statistics, 2013). What is less apparent is why these disparities have persisted. After all, the federal and state governments have invested hundreds of billions of dollars in need-based financial aid over the last several decades (College Board, 2014). Financial aid is supposed to result in more individuals choosing to attend and complete college, and moderate the long-standing relationship between wealth and opportunities to attain a college degree. Thus, for nearly 50 years, federal, state, and local governments have invested in aid policies that reduce the short-term price of college for individuals who otherwise could not afford a college degree (Long, 2014). Yet somehow, despite these efforts, socioeconomic disparities in higher education persist. A handful of recent studies have shed new light on why this might be occurring with a focus on the college decision-making process of high school students. More specifically, that the difficult process of accessing financial aid (among other byzantine process-oriented obstacles) discourages students from applying to college (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006). The complexity goes beyond the application for financial aid, as students also must satisfy an array of “satisfactory academic performance standards” (Castleman & Page, 2014). This

is one of the key points made by Goldrick-Rab and Kolbe (2016) and one of the contributions this dissertation hopes to make. That is, that this complex higher educational system exacts psychological consequences with subtle, but important, influences on the decision-making process (Goldrick-Rab & Kolbe, 2016). Mental transaction costs, which occur when a decision must be pondered, make college attendance even more costly than the price paid by the student (Szabo, 1999). The decision becomes “is it worth it?” rather than “can I pay for it?” In this context, the existing financial aid system attempts to address the latter question, while complicating the former (Goldrick-Rab & Kolbe, 2016).

Research shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds whose parents did not attend college have a harder time completing the necessary steps in the college application process. In this regard, there is general consensus in educational literature about the importance of parents and families in the education of students (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998). Among the factors predicting students’ early educational plans, parental encouragement is the strongest (Hossler et al., 1999). Parental encouragement has two dimensions. The first is motivational: parents maintain high educational expectations for their children. The second is proactive: parents become involved in school matters, discuss college plans with their children, and save for college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Development and maintenance of postsecondary education aspirations among high school students is proportionally related to the frequency and consistency with which parents provide encouragement (Flint, 1992). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds oftentimes lack not only the resources, but the information



and support needed to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education (McDonough, 2005; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). More often than not, they live in homes, reside in communities, and attend schools where college-going is not the norm and where few adults, let alone educators, understand the prerequisites to, and benefits of a postsecondary education (Belasco, 2013). Thus, the road from high school to college is particularly perilous for students from families with limited college experience, because many of these students lack access to information about college entrance requirements, selection criteria, and cost (Woods & Domina, 2014). Without this critical information, it is difficult for students to realize their college expectations, and even high-achieving students fail to make the transition from high school to postsecondary educational institutions (Woods & Domina, 2014). A report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2001) found that college enrollment rates vary considerably with parents' educational attainment. In 1999, for example, 82 percent of students whose parents held a Bachelor's degree or higher enrolled in college immediately after finishing high school. The rates were much lower for those whose parents had completed high school but not college (54 percent) and even lower for those whose parents had less than a high school diploma (36 percent) (NCES, 2001).

In Vermont, where the more rural areas of the state have a less educated population, students are at a disadvantage when taking into account the fact that students with at least one college educated parent enroll in post-secondary education at nearly twice the rate of students whose parents do not possess a college degree (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, 2011). Increasingly, students who are the first

in their families to attend college, known as first-generation college students, have been receiving the attention of researchers and practitioners (Metah, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011) have found that this group contains more minorities, are more likely to be from lower-income families, and have lower academic achievement than their peers whose parents have some experience in college. In addition to demographic differences, this group of students appears to be distinct from their peers in other areas relevant to educational attainment as well. They tend to perceive less family support for attending college (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991), are less likely to take college preparatory coursework (Horn & Nunez, 2000), and are more likely to have lower grade point averages during their first year of college (Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001) than students with college-educated parents. The educational background of a student's parents has also shown to affect the academic self-perception of the student and whether they see themselves as "college material." When students perceive their ability to succeed in college as low, they tend not to apply, especially if the cost of attendance is too high and does not seem worth the risk (Daun-Barnett, 2013). Much of the literature in this arena focuses exclusively on whether students think they are prepared academically to succeed in college. Daun-Barnett (2013) makes a rare connection between student self-efficacy and cost of attendance and their collective role in whether a student chooses to attend college. It is these types of connections that much of the literature fails to make in the overall college decision-making process of high school students. There are a number of factors that contribute to the development of strong, positive academic identities for all

students. It is critical to recognize the role that parent and teacher expectations, race, and socioeconomic status play in the formations of these identities (Howard, 2003).

**Issues facing students from rural America.** There has been no shortage of research on the educational attainment rates of high school students from America's most populated urban centers. Far less attention has been paid to the unique obstacles facing students from more rural areas of the US. Rural communities possess distinct demographic, economic, political, and cultural characteristics that vary by region (Coladarci, 2007). A number of researchers including Breen and Quaglia (1991) report that rural youth have lower educational and career aspirations than their urban peers. More specifically, rural students aspire to lower levels of higher education, express lower levels of self-confidence in completing the degree requirements, and expect to pursue higher education for a shorter time than urban students (Breen & Quaglia, 1991). Additionally, rural students enroll in college at lower rates than their counterparts in cities and towns, even though they outperform their non-rural peers on achievement exams (Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Kristapovich, Rathburn, Wang, & Zhang, 2013). According to Hillman (2016), geography of opportunity is a key concept in understanding the nature and extent of educational inequality in America. For prospective students living in communities where there are few colleges nearby, educational opportunities are constrained not simply by their own preferences and dispositions but also by their community's educational infrastructure (Hillman, 2016). By applying a spatial lens to college opportunity, we can see that the root cause of inequality in many communities is driven by the simple fact that no accessible college is located nearby. No matter how well

informed a student might be, their choices are still constrained by their local environment (Hillman, 2016). Uneven rates of participation in higher education across different segments of U.S. society should be a matter of urgent concern not only to the individuals directly affected, but also to public policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels (Baum et al., 2010). Carr and Kefalas (2011) explore this issue in their seminal book *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America* that examined the exodus of young people from rural America and the impact on the small towns they left behind. In short, they placed residents into four categories: working class “stayers”; ambitious college-bound “achievers”; “seekers” who head off to war to see what the world beyond offers; and “returners” who circle back to their hometowns. Ironically, many adults in the small communities they examined encouraged the best and brightest young people to leave and attend college. The decisions that young people on the edge of adulthood make about whether to stay or leave home have profound implications for the future of rural America. The fact is that the birth of a child cannot replace what small towns lose every time a young adult moves away (Carr & Kefalas, 2011). This creates a perplexing situation for local educators who are often measured by the test scores of their students and how many ultimately enroll in college. At the same time, local government officials are desperate to keep young people in their communities as older residents pass away as part of a demographic shift. The picture is particularly bleak for rural America, where, in any given year, more than six percent of America’s nonmetropolitan Bachelor’s degree-holders migrate to a metropolitan area (Carr & Kefalas, 2011). The youth exodus is a zero-sum phenomenon: it benefits the destination

cities and hurts the regions that migrants flee. For every thriving metropolis now, there are dozens of agroindustrial brain-drain areas where economic growth has stalled (Carr & Kefalas, 2011).

Part of the reason for the issue not receiving much attention until more recently is that rural areas of the country are often left out of the national conversation when it comes to low college attendance rates. Despite research focusing primarily on students from more populated areas, high school graduates from rural areas chose to attend college at a lower rate (59 percent) than their urban counterparts (62 percent) as well as students from suburban areas (67 percent) (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). Though rural areas of the country have declined in population or grown at a slower pace than urban areas, 20 percent of all public school students were enrolled in districts classified as rural in 2010-11 (NCES, 2014). Some studies have found that both rural youth and first-generation students are more susceptible to doubts about their intelligence and ability to compete in college (Striplin, 1999) even when they have the same level of high school preparation and achievement as their peers (Engle, 2007). Rural communities also often lack the social and financial capital needed to inform all families about the benefits of college attendance (Howley, 2006). The limited college choice knowledge possessed by rural parents who have not attended college negatively impacts the postsecondary educational pursuits of their children (Howley, 2006). Moreover, Howley found that in rural settings a lack of college choice knowledge inadvertently resulted in parents discouraging college attendance. A study of high school graduation rates in West Virginia showed a major discrepancy between graduation rates in rural counties and more

metropolitan counties ranging from 37 percent to 82 percent of students planning to go to college (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2002). In the same study, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found that the most consistently salient factors in predicting college decision making among rural Appalachian students were those related to academic preparation. Objective measures, such as students' grade-point averages and whether they had engaged in a college preparatory curriculum in high school were strongly associated with college plans. In addition, more subjective measures, such as students' perceptions of their own intelligence, preparedness for college, and comfort in the school setting, were also highly associated with college plans (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004), though these same attributes have also shown up in studies focused on students in urban and suburban settings as well.

This issue is particularly relevant to Vermont as one of only three states, along with Maine and Mississippi, where more than half of its students are enrolled in rural districts. Vermont ranks third in the nation for its percentage of rural schools (72.5) with almost 6 in 10 students attending high school in a rural area (Rural School and Community Trust, 2014). Even within Vermont, students from more rural areas of the state have lower postsecondary aspirations. Not surprisingly then, more rural counties have traditionally sent fewer students to college (VSAC, 2014), which appears to be responsible for driving down the state's overall college attendance rate. For example, South Royalton High, North Country High School, and Poultney High School – all located in towns with populations under 4,600 residents – had the lowest post-secondary enrollment rates in the state all under 40 percent (Vermont Agency of Education, 2015).

A 1993 study titled “Factors Influencing Rural Vermont Public High School Seniors to Aspire or Not to Aspire to a Four-Year College Education” found significant differences on 64 of 105 variables between students who were on a “college track” compared to those enrolled in “general or vocational track” courses. Based on a survey of 772 high school seniors at 18 economically disadvantaged rural Vermont public schools, students aspiring to attend college felt that college education was essential for a satisfying career, that they had control over their level of success, that their community provided few career opportunities, and that their school experiences motivated them to continue learning (Kinsley, 1993).

**Educational aspirations.** Researchers, educators, and policymakers have frequently looked to the educational expectations of young people – that is, their belief about their likely educational attainment – to gauge their future success (Jacob & Linkow, 2011). Aspirations is a term that is used frequently in education, yet there is little understanding and agreement as to what it means and even less understanding about its origin (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996). Despite being found in many district mission statements, school goals, reform agendas, and student learning outcomes, the concept of student aspirations and the conditions under which high aspirations are fostered has received little attention from researchers (Plucker & Quaglia, 1998). The study of educational aspirations – defined by Quaglia and Cobb as a student’s ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals – appears to have its foundation in status attainment literature in the field of sociology (Carter, 2002). The status attainment model was the primary way in which aspirations were studied from

the late 1960s through the 2000s. It is important to note, however, that aspirations have been measured in a variety of ways, including a focus on intentions, expectations, plans and wants (Carter, 2002).

The initial status attainment model developed by Blau and Duncan (1967) focused on occupational attainment of males from different social classes using characteristics of the father, such as education and income, to determine the son's occupational attainment. Although educational aspirations were not included in Blau and Duncan's (1967) model, subsequent status attainment models took aspirations into account by adding social psychological variables (Carter, 2002). Research completed in the late 1950s and early 1960s identified several elements of the educational process that are related to the degree attainment process: significant others; reference groups; self-concept, aspirations, and experience of school success (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). The social psychological model of status attainment, also known as the Wisconsin Model, posits that the socioeconomic status and ability of the student affect the encouragement and support the student receives from significant others, which in turn, affect the student's goals and aspirations (Kerckhoff, 1976). Sewell et al.'s (1969) model based on a 1957 study of white male high school seniors in Wisconsin makes four causal links: social structural (SES) and psychological factors (mental ability) affect significant others' influences; significant others' influences affect educational and occupational aspirations; aspirations affect attainment; and educational attainment affects occupational attainment (Sewell et al., 1969). Two competing theories emerged as a result of Sewell and colleague's work. One theorized that educational aspirations and attainment are the direct result of



socioeconomic/ascriptive factors (Blau & Duncan, 1967), while the second posits that a student's socioeconomic status affects the way he or she interacts with others – and in turn how others interact with the student – which affect aspirations and ultimately attainment (Sewell et al., 1969). Bourdieu (1973), Hopper (1973), Kerckhoff (1976), Turner (1960), and others have suggested that although all societies need to encourage high aspirations among their youths, they also have a tendency to replicate themselves in order to preserve the status quo (Hanson, 1994). Educational systems contribute to this replication process by using external criteria, such as gender, race, and class, in order to select out the youths who will be successful and to cool out or lower the educational aspirations of those who will not be successful. The almost-universal high aspirations and eventual cooling out of these aspirations for some is the basis for the notion of lost talent used here (Hanson, 1994). Hanson's analysis shows that 16 percent of American youths who aspire to a college degree do not expect to receive one; 27 percent of youths who expected a degree in their senior year of high school did not expect one six years later; and 8 percent of those who expected a college degree during their senior year of high school had not attended a four-year college by 1986. Is there a selection process working in the creation of lost talent? Yes, and these differences do not always go in the expected direction (Hanson, 1994).

When taking the entirety of educational aspirational theory into account, it is clear that a multitude of factors are involved in the development and sustainment of college going aspirations. Students' educational goals are the function of several elements, including internal psychological processes, social interactions, and structural processes

(Carter, 2002). Measuring student aspirations, however, has proven challenging for researchers with only a handful attempting to do so. One such study based on a solid body of theory and research by (Quaglia, 1998) and his fellow researchers at the National Center for Student Aspirations at the University of Maine conceptualized aspirations as having two distinct dimensions, namely, inspiration and ambitions (Plucker & Quaglia, 1998). They define inspiration as reflecting the individual's willingness to engage in activities in the present for both their inherent value and future worth, whereas ambitions represent the individual's ability to identify and set goals for the future. Plucker and Quaglia (1998) identified eight conditions that support the development of high levels of inspiration and ambitions in students. These conditions, which have both organizational and personal dimensions, include achievement, belonging, curiosity, empowerment, excitement, mentoring, risk taking, and self-confidence. Plucker and Quaglia (1998) developed an instrument to measure the level of aspirations and the presence of the eight conditions at schools to help administrators and teachers comprehensively address the development of student aspirations. A 130-item pilot instrument at three rural and suburban New England high schools involving 2,100 students resulted in a revised instrument with 98 items. The Student Aspirations Survey consisting of 13 scales (three aspirational, two self-perception, and eight conditions) is one of the only tools available for testing student aspirations and found moderately high levels of student aspirations and perceptions of school climate conditions.

One question that has puzzled researchers is when and how students develop college-going aspirations. The aspirational goal or desire to attend college starts as early

as elementary school (Sharp, Johnson, Kurotsuchi, & Waltman, 1996) or middle school (Schmidt, 1991) with students searching vicariously through the experiences of their older siblings or friends. In a study of more than 1500 low-income youth, Ou and Reynolds (2008) found that the major predictor of educational attainment was students' expectations by age 15. Somers, Cofer, and VanderPutten (2002) found that students who in 8<sup>th</sup> grade aspired to any postsecondary education (ranging from technical, vocational, two-year, to four-year) were 15.68 percentage points more likely to have enrolled in any postsecondary training by 1994 than students with no aspirations. Further, students who attended four-year schools were 20.55 percentage points more likely to have had postsecondary aspirations in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade than all other students. Students who attended two-year schools were 6.42 percentage points more likely to have had postsecondary aspirations in the eighth grade than all other students (Somers et al., 2002). Within those percentages, students from families in the highest income quartile were much more likely to attend some type of postsecondary education (Somers et al., 2002). Not surprisingly, the majority of aspirational studies show that the longer a student holds an aspiration, the more likely he or she will meet that goal (Carter, 2002). Alexander and Cook (1979) found that students who, before the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, planned to go to college were about 47 percent more likely to attend college as students who decided in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade to go to college. Therefore, early and sustained aspirations are important in the future attainment of students (Carter, 2002). Furthermore, researchers have used the construct of expectancy to measure the educational and occupational goals of young people (Trusty, 2002) and the goals that their parents and teachers have for them.

As previously stated, measuring college-going aspirations has proven difficult due in part to the different terminology used to discuss the issue. Student expectations is one measure that has received a fair amount of attention from researchers, including Mahoney and Merritt (1993), who used expectations and attainment data for 5,353 students, parents and teachers who participated in the 2002-2006 Educational Longitudinal Study (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) to investigate the relationship between high school expectations for post-secondary educational attainment and students' educational status one and a half years after high school. They found that students have expectations beyond what they are actually doing, a significant number enroll but drop out, many more go to two-year institutions than expected, and teacher expectations have the strongest predictive effect, followed by student and then parent expectations (Sciarra & Ambrosino, 2011). Using the National Education Longitudinal Study, Kao and Tienda (1998) analyzed how educational aspirations are formed and maintained from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades among a single cohort of youth. Guided by status-attainment literature and how aspirations are shaped, and the blocked-opportunities framework, which considers the structural obstacles that bound or level aspirations, Kao and Tienda (1998) find that the relative shares of minority youth who have further educational aspirations are high from 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades. However, ethnic groups differ in the extent to which high educational aspirations are maintained such that black and Hispanic youth have less stable aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Their results suggest that family socioeconomic status (SES) not only contributes to ambitious aspirations in 8<sup>th</sup> grade but, more important, to the maintenance of high aspirations throughout the high school years (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

Because blacks and Hispanic students are less likely to maintain their high aspirations throughout high school, owing to their lower family SES background, they argue that their early aspirations are less concrete than those of white and especially Asian students. Thus, the negative rendition of the blocked-opportunity model predicts that blacks and other ‘castelike’ minorities have low educational aspirations because they do not expect educational success to produce economic success (Kao & Tienda, 1998). This point was masterfully illustrated in MacLeod’s (1987) classic ethnography “Ain’t No Makin’ It” in which he shows how the educational aspirations of disadvantaged youth are leveled by their everyday experiences in school, on the streets, and at home (Kao & Tienda, 1998). MacLeod does not consider that minority status per se levels educational aspirations, but rather attributes the leveling of educational aspirations to limited opportunities that produce disadvantage. In fact, his case study revealed that the minority youth maintained higher aspirations and remained more optimistic about their future than the white youth (Kao & Tienda, 1998).

Maintaining aspirations in Vermont has proven especially challenging. In addition to having one of the highest high school graduation rates in the nation (91 percent), it also has a higher percentage of high school students who aspire to continue their education after high school (VSAC, 2014). A nationally representative sample of 9<sup>th</sup> graders revealed that by the spring term of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 72.5 percent of students planned on pursuing some form of postsecondary education or training after graduating high school (Ingles & Dalton, 2013), compared to almost 75 percent of Vermont students from the class of 2014 (VSAC).



### College Enrollment & Family Education:

Vermont High School Class of 2014  
Vermont postsecondary education  
Aspiration rate by county

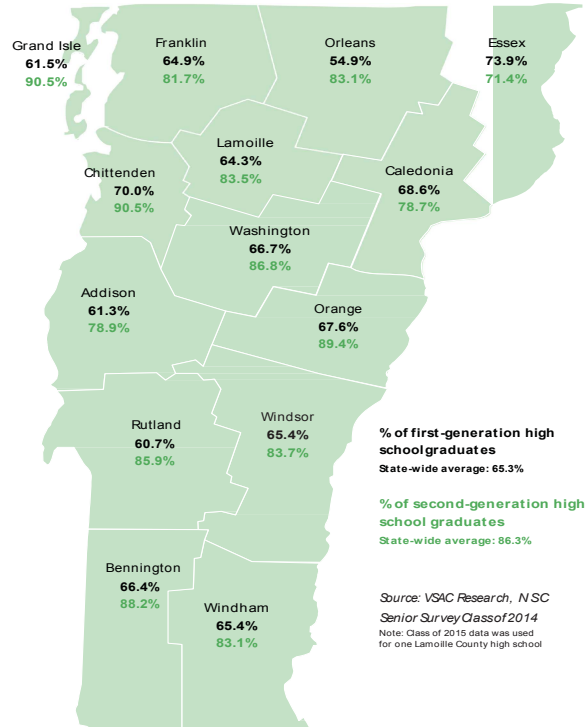
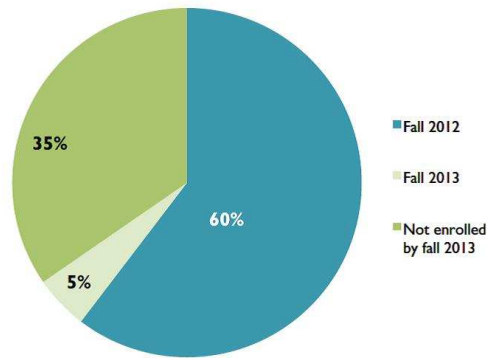


Figure 4: Vermont Postsecondary Education Aspiration Rate by County

Despite this desire to further their education, only 60 percent of high school students in Vermont chose to attend college compared to the national average of 66 percent (VSAC, 2014). One of the primary questions of my dissertation research is why Vermont has such a low college attendance rate and high school graduation rate, despite 75 percent of high school students expressing a desire to go to college as late as the fall of their senior year.

**Figure 2. The postsecondary enrollment by fall 2013 for the Vermont Class of 2012 (n=5,853)  
At a 2- or 4-year postsecondary institution**



Source: VSAC, Vermont's Class of 2012: *Highlights and challenges for pursuing a postsecondary education*, November 2015.

**Figure 5: Vermont Postsecondary Enrollment by Fall 2013 for Class of 2012**

In an effort to find answers to this perplexing question, VSAC included some related questions in its 2014 annual “Senior Survey” taken by more than 8,000 Vermont high school seniors. One of the questions posed to students who were not planning on continuing their education was “what is the most important reason for not planning to continue your education this fall?” The top 10 answers in percentage points were as follows: need a break (19.4); want to work (18.6); need to work (12.8); joining the military (9.4); unsure of goals (5.9); other reason (5.7); want to travel (5.5); continue education later (3.8); can’t afford to continue (3.4); and don’t need education for job (3.2). Among these students, 62.1 percent planned to work a full-time job; 17.6 percent planned to take time off with plans to continue education; 12.2 percent planned to join the military; 3.9 percent planned to take time off with no plans; 2.2 percent had an apprenticeship; and .05 percent planned to be a homemaker.

Maintaining aspirations has proven difficult over the summer months contributing to a more recent phenomenon known as “summer melt,” where students make the

decision not to enroll in college during the summer after their high school graduation. Researchers have shown that as many as one in five high school graduates who have been accepted to and intend to enroll in college fail to matriculate anywhere in the fall semester as a result of unforeseen challenges they encounter during the summer (Castleman & Page, 2014). In Dallas and Philadelphia, upwards of 30 percent never matriculate, while the summer melt rate in Lawrence, Massachusetts and Fort Worth, Texas has approached 40 percent (Castleman & Page, 2014). Surprisingly, it was not until a groundbreaking study in 2006 by Boston College Professor Karen Arnold that people became aware this issue even existed. In her study of students in Providence, Rhode Island, Arnold discovered that despite three-quarters of recent graduates reporting that they were going to college, only half had actually matriculated (Castleman & Page, 2014). Subsequent research pointed to a lack of support by guidance counselors and other school officials over the summer, which disproportionately affected first-generation college students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, Castleman, & Wartman, 2009). For low-income students who have made it through the entire admission and financial aid process, the education pipeline springs a leak at the very last moment, during the summer after high school graduation (Arnold et al., 2009). The same factors that reduce college aspirations in the national population of low-income students of color continue to operate in the summer after students' admission (Arnold et al., 2009). Students from college-educated families are more likely to receive constant support and direction through the summer months (Castleman & Page, 2014). Many of the same factors contributing to "summer melt" on a national level also apply to



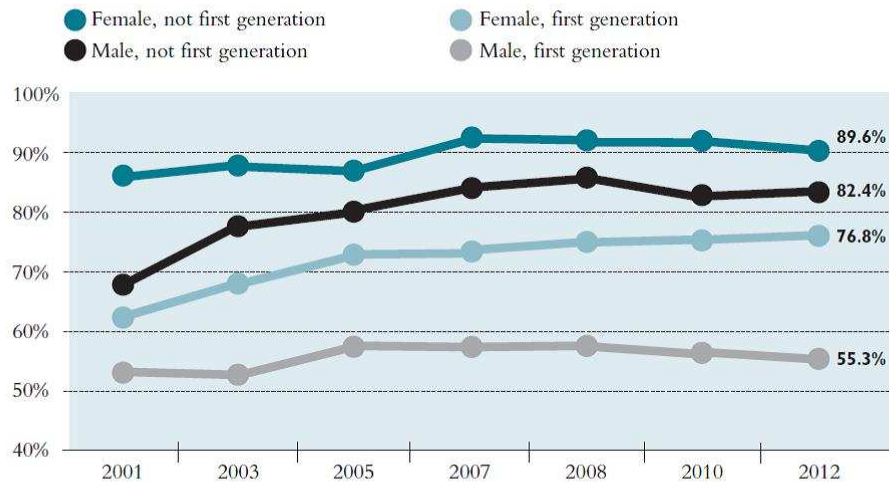
Vermont. A report by VSAC shows that 16 percent of Vermont seniors graduating in 2012 who planned to enroll in a two- or four-year post-secondary program never actually enrolled. Students cited several factors for changing their mind with 40 percent saying that they “wanted to take a break from their studies.” An additional 37 percent said they “could not afford it”; 35 percent were “unsure of their academic goals”; and 16 percent felt they “weren’t academically prepared.” Summer melt is a serious issue that contributes to Vermont’s low college attendance rate, yet remains somewhat of a mystery to college admissions officials. This study follows students through the summer after their senior year in hopes of shedding light on this perplexing issue.

### **Vermont-Based Research**

Vermont’s low post-secondary educational attainment rate has become a statewide issue and has spawned multiple reports by the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) and VSAC. A recent AOE report found that 52 percent of public high school graduates (and the four independent high schools that serve as public schools) enrolled in two- and four-year colleges by October of 2012 – the lowest college enrollment rate among the New England states (New England Secondary School Consortium, 2013). Overall, the Vermont college attendance rate has traditionally been lower than the national average and has remained essentially unchanged since the Senior Survey was conducted in 2010 by VSAC. A 1977 study by the Vermont Commission on Higher Education found that Vermont has lagged behind the national average for college attendance as far back as the 1970s when 50 percent of all high school students in the US enrolled in higher education, compared to 38 percent in Vermont (Vermont Department

of Education, 1975). Another report showed some variances in college attendance rates by gender, family education, and geography (VSAC, 2014) that lag behind nationally such as a 14-point difference in college enrollment rates by gender with females attending at 67 percent rate versus 53 percent rate by male, compared to a 10-point difference nationally. Vermont’s postsecondary enrollment rates by parent educational attainment can range between 2 and 15 percentage points below the national rate.

**Figure 2. Trends in aspiration rates for recent high school graduates by gender and parent’s educational attainment level**

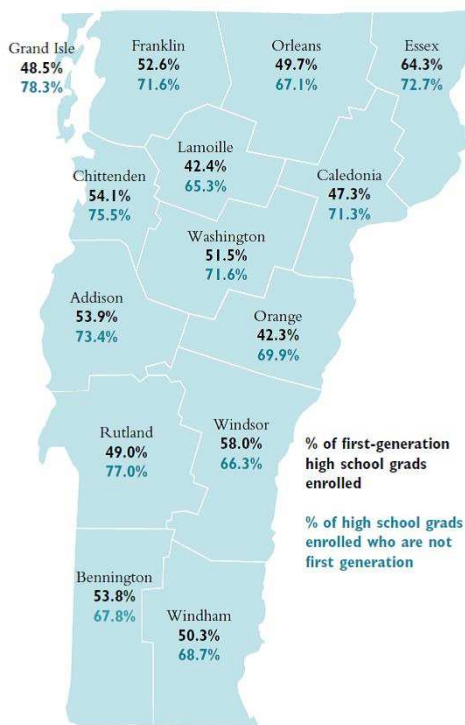


Source: VSAC, Gaps in postsecondary education aspiration: *A report on disparities among Vermont’s high school graduates*, April 2014.

**Figure 6: Trends in Aspiration Rates for Recent High school Graduates by Gender and Parent’s Educational Attainment Level**

First generation college students also enrolled at lower rates than non-first generation students, although that varied by county with the gap ranging from 8 percentage points in Essex and Windsor counties to as many as 28 percentage points in Rutland and Orange Counties.

**Figure 9. Class of 2012 immediate college enrollment by family education and county**



Source: VSAC, Vermont’s Class of 2012: *Highlights and challenges for pursuing a postsecondary education*, November 2015.

*Figure 7: Class of 2012 Immediate College Enrollment by Family Education and County*

Interestingly, Vermont continues to outpace many states in the percentage of low-income students enrolled in college (VSAC, 2014). In fact, data from the Pell Institute shows Vermont ranks second in the nation in college participation rates for students from low-income families, with 40 percent of low-income students enrolled at a four-year institution and receiving Pell grants. Children living in deep poverty in Vermont share many characteristics with the national demographics of people living well below the poverty line, but they live in much more rural areas (Blalock & Lumbert, 2010). Even so,

the percentage of students attending college from rural areas of the state remains low, calling into question the notion that students from rural areas attend college at a lower rate simply because they are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The previous sections of this literature review highlighted the individual factors faced by high school students during the college decision-making process. Researchers have attempted to frame this process through the development of college choice models based on three primary perspectives: sociological, psychological, and economic. Individual factors such as cost of attendance, race, lack of parental and guidance counselor support, socioeconomic status, lack of support over the summer, college readiness and geographic location have been placed under these three main categories. Despite the grouping, however, we know little about the implicit weighting of each option by students as they go through this arduous process leading to a decision. A number of questions are in need of answers: Does the collective onslaught of obstacles and decisions facing students during the college decision-making process overwhelm them so they do not apply? Is it easier to just opt out of the process, and if so, which factors play the largest role in that decision? Is the psychological cost of applying to college so high for some students that it outweighs the benefits of going to college? Does the current process of applying to college create a confluence of issues that discourages prospective students from applying?

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the literature by offering insight into how students weigh all of these factors and collectively internalize them, while also

dealing with an influx of information from family, friends, guidance counselors and other sources of information as they try to decide whether to attend college or not. It is the examination of this complex decision-making process that makes this research unique. As explained in the next section, it was determined that the best way to achieve this contribution was to spend time in the field with students, guidance counselors, parents and other relevant parties at two rural high schools in Vermont as they traverse this arduous process. By conducting an ethnographic case study, I hope to fill a void in the literature that shows how students untangle each individual issue as they navigate this challenging process, and whether the rural culture in which they live plays a role. Policymakers on all levels have access to a plethora of discrete studies on the individual reasons for why some students choose to attend college while others do not, yet lack information on the actual “think aloud” process and weighting of issues that students cycle through during a process that starts with 90 percent of them aspiring to attend college, but only half ultimately doing so. Somewhere along the line something happens to millions of high school seniors each year that leads them to not pursue a postsecondary education. The goal of this study is to find out what that “something” is and the collective role of the many factors that lead to that life-altering decision.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Problem

Unless educational attainment improves, workers in the US will lack the educational skills and training required to meet the workforce demands of a global knowledge economy (Perna, 2014). In Vermont, there is an anticipated shortage of individuals to fill the more than 132,000 job openings expected in the next decade that require education and training beyond high school (Carnevale et al., 2013). Compounding this issue is the fact that Vermont ranks last in New England and among the bottom 10 states in the nation for the percentage of high school graduates it sends to college (VSAC, 2015). In response to this issue, the VCHEF (2009) recommended the state increase the percentage of total Vermonters who have college degrees from 42 percent to 60 percent by 2019. In 2017, some of Vermont's most influential leaders in education, business, nonprofits, philanthropy, and local, state and federal government formed the collective-action organization [www.70x2025vt.org](http://www.70x2025vt.org) with an overriding goal of assuring that 70 percent of Vermonters possess a postsecondary degree or credential of value by 2025 ([www.70x2025vt.org](http://www.70x2025vt.org), 2017). Unless educators, college administrators, lawmakers, and the private sector work together to find ways to increase the number of college graduates, companies will be unable to fill job openings and consider moving elsewhere. This issue is especially dire in more rural areas of Vermont, where the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college is lowest. An imbalance in the number of college educated workers by region and socioeconomic status will continue to create pockets of poverty across the state and force younger generations to look outside Vermont for work.

Compounding the issue is the state's rapidly aging population. In 1990, Vermont's median age was the same as the rest of the nation. Today, only Maine has a higher median age than Vermont's (42.8) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). With more than 11,375 Vermonters retiring every year, and only 8,000 young people entering Vermont's workforce from either high school or college, according to a report from the Vermont Futures Project released in January 2017, helping young Vermonters earn a college degree or workforce credential has never been more critical to the state's future. The same issue is facing other states with predominantly rural populations. What is happening in many small towns – the devastating loss of educated and talented young people, the aging of the population, and the erosion of the local economy – has repercussions far beyond their boundaries (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Simply put, the health of the small towns that are dotted across regions of the US (like Vermont), the Southeast, Southwest and the Heartland matters because without them, the country could not function in the same way that a body cannot function without a heart (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

### **Purpose**

Despite more than 90 percent of high school students within the state expressing the desire to attend college sometime during their academic career, Vermont has one of the lowest college attendance rates in the nation. The purpose of this study is to examine high school students in Vermont as they go through the college decision-making process to better understand why a relatively high number choose not to pursue postsecondary education, contributing to the state's low overall college attendance rate. By examining this complex process, especially at rural high schools where the college attendance rate is

lowest, a number of key factors, both individually and collectively that contribute to this life-altering decision were identified. These findings offer new information for educators, guidance counselors, and local, state and federal policymakers working to develop innovative policies designed to help more students attain their postsecondary aspirations, and in turn, help fill thousands of anticipated job openings requiring a college degree in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

My guiding research questions included:

1. What factors play a role in the college decision-making process of high school students in rural Vermont?
2. How do students weigh these factors as they experience them at different stages of their senior year while trying to decide whether or where to attend college?
3. What impact does the level of college going aspirations by a student entering their senior have on their final postsecondary decision.
4. What role does information play in the decision-making process of seniors as they decide whether or where to attend college?
5. Who do students rely on most for information and guidance when making a final decision about whether or where to attend college?

### **Ethnographic Case Study**

Despite the majority of earlier studies focusing on student college choice relying on quantitative methods, a review of research published since 1990 demonstrates the growing contribution of qualitative approaches. Both approaches are critical to the



development of knowledge on student college choice (Perna, 2006) relying on the student as the primary unit of analysis with a focus on the characteristics, understandings, and behaviors of each individual student (Perna, 2006). However, qualitative approaches are especially useful for discovering theoretical propositions to explain student-college-choice processes, developing in-depth understandings of student-college-choice processes for particular students, and understanding the influence of the context or setting on student college choice (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Because the research questions that guide this study focus on the process that students go through to reach a decision about whether or where to attend college, a qualitative approach was used in order to interview students as it unfolds. A number of qualitative research traditions were considered including narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. Traditionally, most qualitative researchers focus on only one approach – say ethnography or grounded theory – and try to convince their readers of the value of that approach (Creswell, 2013). However, more recently, researchers have started using multiple research traditions to address their research questions. In keeping with that emerging research trend, this study includes both ethnographic and case study design elements with the unit of analysis being three groups of high school students at two rural high schools.

There are a number of reasons why it made sense to include elements of both research traditions and conduct an ethnographic case study. The primary attraction to ethnography was its focus on culture and ability to uncover and describe the cultural beliefs, shared attitudes, values, norms, practices and attitudes of a group (Johnson &

Christensen, 2008). Culture has proven to be a key element in previous studies for why students choose to enroll in college. A study by the Consortium of Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago (2008), for example, found that the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate. The College Board's 2012 Survey of School Counselors and Administrators revealed that half of guidance counselors believe they should spend more time (if they had it) on building a college-going culture. Perhaps most importantly, a college-going culture has the biggest positive enrollment impacts on students with the lowest academic qualifications (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Clearly, culture plays an important role in the college decision-making process of high school students. However, conducting a pure ethnography, which literally means the study or writing of a culture (Wolcott, 1999), would be committing to a methodological approach that views how students decide whether to attend college exclusively through a cultural lens. By combining elements of both ethnography and case study design, which involves the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2009), it was determined that a more complete picture of the college decision-making process of high school students within their cultural setting would emerge. Some researchers such as LeCompte & Preissle (1993) go as far as to say that because they are reconstructions of a single culture, ethnographies *are* case studies, by definition. Combining the emic approach of ethnography to understanding culture that relies on members of the culture as the main source of information with the more etic approach of case study design that relies on existing

theories and perspectives that originated from outside the culture being studied (Banks & McGee Banks, 2004) was also attractive. Some researchers like Stake (1995) consider case study research more of a choice of what is to be studied (i.e., a case within a bounded system, bounded by time and place) rather than a methodology, while others present it as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy (Yin, 2009). Case study design was chosen as the primary research methodology for this study because it has proven effective when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions; (b) the behavior of those involved in the study cannot be manipulated; (c) the contextual conditions you want to cover because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context (Yin, 2013). Case study design is also known for producing results that policymakers can easily understand as opposed to ethnographic findings that are often written in longer, narrative form. It is the direct policy implications of their research that sets those who do case studies apart from other qualitative researchers (Lancy, 1993) such as pure ethnographers. In much of ethnography, the narratives are written in literary, almost storytelling approach – one that may limit the audience for the work (Creswell, 2013). Educational ethnographers can ill afford to ignore the state (policymakers) (Mills & Morton, 2013). That said, the findings of this study are presented primarily in narrative form, though the inclusion of case study design elements such as semi-structured interviews and iterative coding provide structure and cohesiveness across the three case studies and within the cross-case analysis.

Ultimately, though it might have been easier to conduct an ethnography *or* a case study, utilizing elements of both qualitative research traditions allowed for a broader examination of each case within a larger cultural context to see how they were interrelated. Consequently, a more comprehensive analysis of the myriad factors that played a role in the college decision-making process of high school students in this study produced results that are ideally more useful to school administrators, academics and policymakers alike.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations of a study are choices made by a researcher that are within their control such as location, setting, and the sampling of participants. These factors limit the scope and establish the boundaries of the study (Creswell, 2013). This study was conducted at two rural schools in Vermont where the college attendance rates were amongst the lowest in the state (VSAC, 2014). The relatively small sample size of 10 high school seniors was chosen in part because it was a manageable number of students for one researcher to follow in an in-depth way throughout their senior year, and because ethnographers are interested in developing a complex description of a group (Creswell, 2013). Studies purporting to be educational ethnographies vary widely in focus, scope, and methods of execution (LeCompt & Preissle, 1993). Traditionally, ethnographers spend months or even years in the field. As a process, ethnography involves extended observations of a group, most often through participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants (Creswell, 2013). But Wolcott (2008) asks an important

question(s) that relates to this study and the time spent in the field: must the ethnographer *always* spend months and months in the field in order to claim ethnographic validity? If so, is there an absolute *minimum* length of time required in order for a study to qualify as ethnography, an implicit guideline if no explicit rule exists? The reality for 21<sup>st</sup> century researchers is that they have less time (Wolcott, 2008), which is why an ethnographic case study methodology was used in hopes of retaining some of the advantages of ethnographic thoroughness in the face of rigorous time constraints while avoiding such self-contradictory labels referred to by Wolcott (2008) as “rapid ethnographic assessment” or “focused ethnographic assessment” (p. 181). This methodology was also chosen to avoid a potential delimitation such as falling into the trap of prior educational ethnographers by producing anomalies that Rist (1980) called “blitzkrieg ethnography” or “micro ethnographies” (p.8 ) that rely on two or three days of fieldwork, or studies which ignore the culture of the people under investigation. Consequently, this study followed the lead of researchers who could not spend as much time in the field, but who still wanted to retain certain observational elements of ethnography that they can combine with design strategies from other research traditions such as case study. In terms of overall balance, it is important to note the majority of the study is based heavily on responses by students to a series of semi-structured interviews in the case study tradition with some ethnographic observations used to augment that data. One delimitation of such a design choice, however, is that studies with ethnographic and case study elements often produce results that are in longer, more narrative form that policymakers may not have time to read. In an effort to avoid that pitfall, some quantitative data from each school,

the State of Vermont, VSAC and other governmental entities was used to support some of my qualitative findings.

Limitations are weaknesses in a study that are out of the researcher's control. Limitations of this study include the fact that qualitative research has limited generalizability, as the samples involved are representative of a particular population (Creswell, 2008). Though the goal of this study was to produce useful information from the field that was potentially useful to other schools in Vermont, it is likely that it will be less helpful to larger high schools, where students face different issues than students at the more rural schools in this study. Another potential limitation is that the small sample size may not produce results that reveal a substantive amount of information regarding the college decision-making process and why students at these rural schools choose to attend college. In other words, a limitation of this study is that my findings are contingent upon the willingness of the students to share their thoughts and experiences about the college decision-making process, which they may or may not want to discuss. Overall, though, access to students, guidance counselors, and parents and their willingness to answer questions was not a major limitation of this study, though a number of parents chose not to participate.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks, conceptual systems, and philosophical orientations are bound inextricably to all phases of research activity regardless of whether their uses are conscious and explicit or unconscious and implicit (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

Typically, however, qualitative research is not explicitly driven by theory, but it is

situated within theoretical perspectives (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Decision-making theory – the process of how individuals go about making a decision – was the primary theoretical framework used in this study to shed light on how students make decisions during the college decision making process leading to a final decision about their postsecondary future. By doing so, a better theoretical understanding was expected to emerge regarding all the factors that go into making a final decision about whether or where to attend college. For example, when students consider whether to apply to college, cognitive overload can occur, which can lead to procrastination. When faced with too many choices or with a process that is perplexing, people frequently go with the path of least resistance, often the default option (Castleman et al., 2015). This theory is of particular importance to my study since most of the factors leading to non-college attendance have been studied independently rather than collectively, which could lead to the aforementioned overload.

The study of educational aspirations – defined by Quaglia and Cobb (1996) as a student’s ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals – was also taken into consideration. I based the division of the three case groups in this study – College Confident, College Considering and College Conflicted – on each student’s college aspiration level entering their senior year. This is somewhat of a study limitation, because although students answered retroactive questions about their aspiration levels to attend college, the aspirational goal or desire to attend college starts as early as elementary school (Sharp et al., 1996) or middle school (Schmidt, 1991) with students searching vicariously through the

experiences of their older siblings or friends. Even so, the aspirational level of students in this study fluctuated at key points during their senior year, leading to a final decision.

Another theoretical perspective taken into consideration, though less rigorously, was the theory of enculturation, due in part to the nature of my research questions and ethnographic case study approach. Ethnography frequently has been advocated for studies which apply middle-range theories to complex group processes such as cultural transmission, socialization, acculturation and change, and cultural and personality (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). In this tradition, enculturation – defined as the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values – was considered due to this study’s interest in why students living in more rural areas enroll in college at lower rates. Perhaps the earliest, and still one of the most compelling, topics in educational anthropology, enculturation (Lancy, 1993) was initially defined by Herskovits (1948) as the process of socialization into and maintenance of the norms of one’s indigenous culture, including its salient ideas, concepts, and values. Research has shown that the more isolated a group is from others, the more pronounced certain traits become over time. To flush out those traits, this study involved the observation and interviewing of students as they went through the college decision-making process in the rural context of their school and hometown. A combination of decision theory, literature on student aspirations and enculturation were the guiding theoretical frameworks of this study.



## **Participant Selection, Recruitment and Site Selection**

Since most research situations are too vast to interview everyone or to observe everything associated with the topic, a researcher needs a justifiable selection strategy by which to choose people, events, and times (Glesne, 2011). Because the focus of this study is to gain a better understanding of how students living in rural areas decide whether or not to attend college, the primary participants in this study are high school seniors at two rural high schools in Vermont. More specifically, this ethnographic case study was conducted at two high schools with student populations between 230-300 students, located in small towns of predominantly white, lower-middle class residents with populations under 3,500 residents. Selection criteria included schools with annual college enrollment rates of below 50 percent in 2014, compared to the state average of 59.4 percent. This pool consisted of 10 schools located primarily in rural towns with populations of less than 5,000. *Convenience* sampling was used by leveraging personal and professional contacts, including the head of a state guidance counselor association, in areas that were geographically convenient and appropriate to sample in that they included relevant sample population (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). After consulting with officials at three of the 10 high schools, two sites were selected based in part on the willingness of the guidance counselors and principals to participate, and on the fact that one school had the lowest college attendance rate in the state, while the other had the fourth lowest (VSAC, 2014). One of the high schools is located in central Vermont and the other in the northern part of the state. After agreeing to participate in the study and signing IRB approved consent forms, guidance counselors at each school began to recruit

a broad, but specific number of students who were considering attending college on various levels. This initial recruitment involved *strategic* and *purposeful* sampling – a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Guidance counselors at each school were asked to recruit a pool of about 10 students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, an equal gender mix and racial diversity if possible (Vermont has among the highest percentage of white residents in the nation along with Maine at 95 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau). The main criteria, however, was to recruit a pool of students who were considering attending college on varying levels, based in part on the Predisposition Phase of Hossler & Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model. More specifically, an equal mix of students who were strongly leaning toward going to college (College Confident); leaning toward college, but still considering other postsecondary options like entering the workforce (College Considering); and students who were leaning toward entering the workforce, but had not ruled out going to college (College Conflicted). In the end, five students from each school were selected based on these criteria, but also a willingness to participate on a consistent basis. Other participants in the study who were interviewed included guidance counselors, selected parents, and a VSAC guidance counselor. All participants received and signed IRB approved information sheets and consent/assent forms that provided a detailed description of the study, participant rights and expectations.

## **Research Design**

When deciding what research design to use, Creswell (2013) suggests asking the following key question: How does the type or approach of qualitative inquiry shape the design or procedures of a study? A case can be made for tight, pre-structured qualitative designs and for loose, emergent ones (Miles et al., 2014). Much of qualitative research, however, lies between these two extremes (Miles et al., 2014) including this study. More specifically, the research paradigm used for this study is an interpretivist, social constructivist approach, which is designed to better understand the world in which we live and work – in this case students considering college at two rural high school in Vermont – by taking into account multiple meanings and viewpoints (Creswell, 2013). This qualitative approach is conducted from an experience-based perspective in that the researcher does not start with concepts determined a priori, but rather seeks to allow these to emerge from encounters in the field (Creswell, 2013). As explained earlier in this section, an ethnographic case study design was chosen to allow for the interviewing and observation of high school seniors as they go through the college decision-making process. A major feature of well-collected qualitative data is that it focuses on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings, so that we have a strong handle on what “real life” is like (Miles et al., 2014). A primary goal of this study was to observe “real life” for students at two schools through ethnographic observation, but also through case study research techniques, which requires much less time in the field and is used to illustrate real-life, contemporary cases involving multiple sources of information

(Creswell, 2013). It is also an established method of inquiry proven to be effective at producing answers to questions and shedding light on an issue (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, a series of interviews with 10 students and two high rural schools in Vermont, where the college attendance rates are among the lowest in the state were conducted. A *collective* case study was used because it involves studying a particular case to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization (Creswell, 2013) such as why students in rural areas of Vermont attend college at lower rates. This approach allowed for the analysis of a bounded system (case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection used in this study was a series of semi-structured interviews with 10 high school students at two rural high schools in Vermont during their senior year. A total of 37 interviews were conducted starting in October of 2016 and ending with final interviews in May of 2017 one month prior to graduation. Seven students were interviewed four times each during every quarter of their senior year with the remaining three students being interviewed three times each due to missed appointments. Interviews provided data that was rich in description and helped to understand the decision making process students go through as they attempt to make a critical and stressful life choice about whether or where to attend college (Creswell, 2013).

**Semi structured interviews of primary participants.** Prior to initial interviews with students, a basic set of questions was developed to get to know students better using a personally congenial approach to build rapport as recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). Questions about their favorite hobbies, classes and extracurricular activities eventually segued into slightly more in-depth questions about family and friends; academic performance; socioeconomic status, parental involvement, peer pressure, teacher and guidance counselor support and postsecondary goals and aspirations. Some of these questions (see Appendix A, B, C and D) were based on the Predisposition Phase of the Hossler and Gallagher College Choice Model (1987), which attempts to establish how strongly a student is planning to attend college, akin to the notion of educational aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999). Once the first round of interviews was coded, the following three categories were established based on the aforementioned criteria: College Confident, College Considering and College Conflicted. The practice sequential coding of each set of questions helped identify themes, and consequently follow-up questions, for the next round of interviews. This iterative process also helped narrow the focus of the study and limit the number of questions, which Miles et al. (2014) warn can easily proliferate, making it harder to see how emergent themes link across different parts of the database and to integrate findings. In keeping with that advice, a set of major questions, each with sub-questions for clarity and specificity, were constructed, which helped identify whether there was a key question – the “thing I really want to know” (Miles et al., 2014). More specifically, second round interviews focused on the information gathering process of students as they sought more data and advice to help

them realize their postsecondary goals, which in some cases were not fully established. Some of these questions focused on the sources of information they were relying on, the level of trust they put in those sources and the relative weighting of each new piece of information. Specific questions about the college application process were also included in hopes of gaining insight into whether the process was overwhelming enough to force students to opt out altogether. More specifically, questions were asked about the cost of attendance, the complexity filling out financial aid and college application forms, level of parental and guidance counselor support, and other issues that might deter students from applying to college. These questions were tailored to each group depending on the issues they were dealing with most prominently. As was the case with Hossler et al. (1999), some of the students in the College Considering and College Conflicted groups who were still “on the fence” during this critical phase about whether they wanted to continue their education after high school, were still searching among educational and non-educational alternatives (Hossler et al., 1999). As students encountered certain obstacles like not being able to get their parents to fill out the FAFSA, questions became more specific to find out why they might be occurring and how they were dealing with them to determine if they might prevent them from moving into the second “Search Phase” of the Hossler and Gallagher model (1987). It is during this phase that Hossler and colleagues (1999) shift the focus from the formation of student aspirations to their stability, which is necessary for student to advance onto the final “Choice Phase.” For students who reach this phase of their model, the choice is now about “which” college they will attend rather than “if” they will attend college. In regard to this study, that included members of the

College Confident group and one member of the College Considering group, but was not applicable to the remaining five students. Consequently, questions were again tailored to each group and student for the final round of interviews to determine how and why students made final postsecondary decisions.

**Secondary participant interviews.** Interviews were also conducted with guidance counselors at each high school, select parents of students, and a VSAC counselor. Both guidance counselors provided a wealth of information often during informal conversations in their offices as part of the ethnographic approach to this study, but also participated in extensive 90-minute interviews at the end of the study after student interviews were conducted. The majority of questions asked were in response to student feedback about the level of support they received from the guidance counselors. This allowed guidance counselors an opportunity to counter or validate comments by students while providing multiple perspectives. Parent interviews also provided another perspective and shed light on issues raised by students and on why some parents supported their child's college-going aspirations while others did not.

Bolstering all of the above referenced interviews was data from the U.S. Department of Education, the Vermont Department of Education, Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, archival documents, individual school data, and other sources of information that were triangulated. Additionally, follow-up emails and texts were sent to students in the fall of 2017 to confirm whether they enrolled at the college they planned to attend or were employed at the job they expected to be working.

## **Data Analysis**

The primary data analysis method used for this study was multi-level sequential coding involving the assignment of codes or themes to field notes, interview transcripts and other documents. Miles et al. (2014) define codes as labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study that are often attached to data chunks of varying size, which can take the form of a straightforward, descriptive label or a more evocative and complex one. In short, Saldana (2013) describes coding as a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-based or visual data. Hossler and colleagues (1999) describe the importance of coding in their book, *Going to College: How Social, Economic, and Educational Factors Influence the Decisions Students Make*, as a way to give life to the experience of students who went through the college choice process with the reporting of empirical analysis providing the evidence necessary to arrive at useful conclusions and recommendations. Data analysis for this study started by conducting First Cycle coding to initial student interviews ranging from a single word, to a full paragraph, to an entry page. By doing, early themes emerged that laid the foundation for the questions that were asked during second interviews. The practice of iterative or sequential coding continued after each round of interviews, which helped steer and focus the direction of the study. It is worth repeating here that guidance counselors were asked to seek students for this study who were considering attending college on varying levels. However, it was not until after initial interviews were completed and coded that students were placed in the three main categories in this study: College Confident, College Considering and College



Conflicted. At no point following initial interviews and coding were any students moved from one category to another, although that option remained open and was considered for Sid, who fluctuated between College Considering and College Confident. He was placed in College Considering due to his consideration of non-college options such as working as a border patrol agent.

Second Cycle coding and limited use of NVivo software coding was later conducted on all interviews to further develop and refine these themes through the addition of pattern coding to condense the larger amounts of data into smaller numbers of analytical units (Miles et al., 2014). Pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes that identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation and pull together a lot of material from First Cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Pattern codes can be categories or themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014).

Once all coding was completed, individual analyses were conducted on all three case studies on the following groups: College Conflicted, College Considering and College Confident. A cross case analysis was then conducted on the three individual case studies focused on the similarities and differences between the three groups, and how those factors affected the final decision by students in each group to attend college or enter the workforce. These results were written primarily in a rich, thick narrative form. Some data was also presented in matrix displays in an effort to condense the large amount of data into an “at-a-glance” format for reflection, verification, conclusion

drawing, and other analytic acts (Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, a display method known as “stacking comparable cases,” which allows for the comparison and presentation of individual case studies in matrices and other displays, helped in the single and comparative analysis of each case study (Miles et al., 2014).

### **Validation and Trustworthiness**

Qualitative analysis can be evocative, illuminating, masterful – and wrong (Miles et al., 2014). When compared to the stringently controlled designs of laboratory experiments or to the regulated procedures of field experiments, ethnographic design in particular may appear to baffle attempts at replication (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Not surprisingly, some researchers consider qualitative research less trustworthy and more difficult to validate than quantitative research. Others like Creswell (2013), however, see validation as a distinct strength of qualitative research in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to participants in the study all add to the value of accuracy of a study. Providing the detailed, thick description of which Creswell (2013) speaks was the primary goal of this study. Yet, even with an informative, revealing narrative, a lack of data to back up a researcher’s observations from the field can be problematic. Most agree that that we cannot create criteria to ensure that something is “true” or “accurate” if we believe concepts are socially constructed (Glesne, 2011). However, there are ways to increase the validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research. One of the best ways to accomplish that goal is to triangulate data by making use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). This process involves corroborating evidence from different sources such as students, guidance counselors and VSAC data to shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2013). Another established method of trustworthiness known as “member checking” was also employed in this study. This method involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell, 2007). Students in this study, for example, were often read back answers they had given in prior interviews to make sure it was interpreted correctly and to introduce follow-up questions. It also served as a way to fact check information. Another method used to increase credibility included peer review analysis and debriefing for external reflection and input (Glesne, 2011). Similarly, an external audit was conducted, where an outside person – in this case two students in the same doctoral program – examined the research process and product through “auditing” field notes, coding schemes, and other data collection methods (Glesne, 2011). In short, this study relied most heavily on the natural rich description required in ethnographic and case study research based on extensive time in the field; the triangulation of data; member checking; and a combination of peer review analysis and external audit methods to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness.

### **Researcher Identity**

The background that a researcher brings to a study plays a significant and inescapable role in how the study is conceived, constructed and carried out. For qualitative studies, the researcher is immersed in the study because of the relationship with the topic or affiliation with the individuals involved (Creswell, 2007). As far back as

elementary school I have wondered why someone would not want to go to college. Having grown up with a father as a professor and a mother who was a minister, both of whom earned doctoral degrees, I assumed everyone was encouraged and would strive to attend college. This was of course the perspective of a privileged white student growing up around parents who were supportive and even demanding of this pursuit. It was not until middle school that I became aware of the challenges facing some of my classmates and the lack of support they received from their parents or guardians.

More than 30 years later and I am still fascinated by the topic and hold the belief that almost anyone can graduate college if given the proper guidance and support, despite not believing it is the best path for everyone. Admittedly, my perspective is skewed having worked in higher education communications for more than a decade, promoting the values of higher education. It should also be noted that I work at a college that is interested in receiving as many applications as possible from the very population I am studying. Given those reasons, I was very conscious not to interject my opinions about the value of a college education or encourage students to apply. Admittedly, this was difficult at times, especially when students who were excited about the possibility of becoming the first student in their class who decided to enroll. It was also challenging not to suggest to students with ambitious college lists that they should consider adding some backup schools in case they did not get into any of the colleges on their list. By the end of the study, I felt confident that I did not interject my opinion in a way that altered or influenced student's responses, although it was tougher than I had anticipated.

It should also be pointed out that although I am a strong believer in many of the benefits of a college education, I do not think it is for everyone. My wife and I raised four children together from two previous marriages, including a child in foster care who we adopted when she was in middle school. As of the writing of this dissertation, one of our children is a hairdresser and the other is an orderly at a local hospital. Our youngest daughter is a sophomore in college. Sadly, the daughter we adopted had to withdraw from college after one semester due to health concerns and passed away a year later. College is definitely not for everyone as was evident in my own family as well as in this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

During the process of planning and designing a qualitative study, researchers need to consider what ethical issues might surface during the study and to plan how these issues need to be addressed (Creswell, 2013). A common misconception is that these issues only surface during the data collection phase (Creswell, 2013) when in fact they occur throughout the entire research process. Some of the ethical issues that could affect my study include selecting a school that I have a vested interest in for any reason. I intentionally chose schools that I had no personal connection to or felt pressure to produce certain results. Since ethnography involves observation I was careful not to interject my opinion or lead students in a direction that skewed their true feelings or opinions. When analyzing data, I tried not to favor certain participants (Creswell, 2013) or disclose only positive results. Even in the reporting phase, it is important not to exaggerate or falsify results (Creswell, 2013). I ran my practices by an unbiased third party because ethical issues often tend to be masked by our taken-for-granted

assumptions, beliefs, and values. Engaging a trusted third party can be very helpful in bringing them to our attention (Miles et al., 2014).

One of the primary questions a researcher should ask themselves is what might their study do to hurt the people involved? Harm could come in many varieties: from blows to self-esteem or ‘looking bad’ to others, to threats to one’s interests, position, or advancement in the organization (Miles et al., 2014). I was careful not to ask questions or put students in a position that made them feel “lesser” if, for example, they were not planning on attending college. Diener and Crandall (1978) identified three areas of ethical concern for social and behavioral scientists: the relationship between society and science; professional issues; and the treatment of research participants.

**Relationship between society and science.** This revolves around the extent to which societal concerns and cultural values should direct the course of research (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). For example, researchers often study issues that are supported by government funding, but that are not necessarily the most important to society.

**Professional issues.** These focus more on research misconduct defined by the U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy (2000) as the “fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results” ([www.aps.org/policy/statements/federalpolicy.cfm](http://www.aps.org/policy/statements/federalpolicy.cfm)).

**Treatment of participants.** This is the most important and fundamental issue that researchers must confront because the conduct of research with humans has the potential for creating a great deal of physical and psychological harm (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

In order to make sure I adhered to these three principles and conducted an ethical study, I followed the general guidelines of the American Educational Research Association, which include the following six principles: responsibilities to the field; research populations, educational institutions and the public; intellectual ownership; editing, reviewing, and appraising research; sponsors, policymakers, and other users of research; and students and student researchers. These are broad categories, but within them are some important ethical areas that had the potential to affect this study. Some of these include adhering to the federal guideline of giving participant's informed consent, including consent from the parents of the minors I studied; confidentiality; anonymity; and a respect for the personal time of participants so not to overburden them with requests related to my study. In regard to the latter point, the question of costs and who should bear them is important because research participants normally must take time from or beyond whatever else they are doing and are usually not compensated (Miles et al., 2014).

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of study was to examine how high school students in rural Vermont weighed multiple factors at different points during their senior year as they decided whether to attend college or pursue other post-secondary options. The goal of the research is to better understand how students navigate this complex process as they experience an influx of information from a wide range of sources leading to this critical life decision. To gain a deeper understanding of this intricate and multifaceted process, an ethnographic case study approach was utilized involving a series of semi-structured interviews and observations with students throughout their senior year at two rural high schools in northern and central Vermont. The high schools had amongst the lowest college attendance rates in Vermont, which ranks among the bottom 10 states nationally for college attendance at around 60 percent, despite more than 90 percent of students reporting that they aspire to attend college at some point during their K-12 academic career (VSAC, 2015).

My guiding research questions included:

1. What factors play a role in the college decision-making process of high school students in rural Vermont?
2. How do students weigh these factors as they experience them at different stages of their senior year while trying to decide whether or where to attend college?
3. What impact does the level of college going aspirations by a student entering their senior have on their final postsecondary decision.



4. What role does information play in the decision-making process of seniors as they decide whether or where to attend college?
5. Who do students rely on most for information and guidance when making a final decision about whether or where to attend college?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I conducted 37 interviews with 10 high school seniors between September and May of their senior year. I also interviewed the two head guidance counselors at each school and parents of the selected students, attended a college information session for seniors, observed a VSAC counselor working one-on-one with a student to compile a colleges list, fill out college applications and other college-related forms, and had informal discussions with other staff members including a principal. I also spent time walking around the schools and the small towns in which they are located as part of an ethnographic methodological approach to better understand the culture of each community to see if it contributed to post-secondary decisions of students. One of the high schools, located in the northwest corner of Vermont near the Canadian border in a town with 2,781 residents (Vermont Census, 2010), has approximately 300 students in grades 9-12. The other high school, located in Central Vermont, has approximately 200 students in a town with 3,389 residents (Vermont Census, 2010).

### **Student Classification**

One of the primary goals of this study was to examine a cross section of high school seniors in rural Vermont who aspired to attend college on varying levels. To achieve that critical mix, I asked guidance counselors at the two high schools to recruit a

diverse pool of students in terms of socioeconomic status, academic level, racial and ethnic diversity, gender, first-generation and non-first gen students; and most importantly in regard to the focus of this study, a combination of students who were considering attending college on varying levels. More specifically, the following mixture was requested: students who were definitely planning to attend college; students who were leaning toward attending college, but had not ruled out other options; and students who were leaning toward non-college options, but had not ruled out the possibility of attending college. Each guidance counselor came up with a list of about 10 students that was reduced to five students at each school based primarily on the goal of achieving a mixture of students desiring to attend college on the above referenced levels. Following initial interviews in the fall of 2016, it became clear that four students were definitely planning on attending college, four were leaning toward attending college, but had not ruled out the possibility of entering the workforce, and two were leaning toward entering the workforce, but had not ruled out the possibility of attending college. Based on these criteria, I placed students in the following three categories:

1. **College Confident** (definitely planning on attending college)
2. **College Considering**: (leaning toward attending college)
3. **College Conflicted**: (leaning toward entering the workforce)

The combined final groups included six girls and four boys with an equal mix of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. All of the students were white except for one participant who identified as Hispanic. Another student moved to the area as a young child after her parents fled war-torn Bosnia. Six of the students' 20 parents had an

Associate's degree or a Bachelor's degree with five others having attended college, but not finishing. The remaining parents had a high school diploma or GED with one not attaining either. Academically, four students had GPAs between 3.5 and 3.9, three had GPAs of at least 3.0, and three had GPAs between 2.3 and 2.9.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four main sections. The first three parts comprise the study's overall results presented as individual case studies focused on the aforementioned three groups – College Confident, College Considering, and College Conflicted. Each section opens with a brief introduction including background information on the students, followed by subsections focused on the different issues faced by each group throughout the year leading to a final post-secondary decision just before graduation. The fourth section is a cross case analysis of the three individual case studies focused on the similarities and differences between the three groups and how those factors affected the final decision by students in each group to attend college or enter the workforce.

### **Group I: College Confident (Case Study)**

**Introduction.** All four students in this group made it clear during their initial interviews that they have expected to attend college for as long as they can remember. Three of the four students had one parent with at least a Bachelor's degree (none had two parents with Bachelor's degrees). Only one participant was a first generation student. All of the students had GPAs above 3.5 and were ranked among the top 15 in their class. Three of the students described themselves as being from "middle class families" with one student saying that her family "struggled financially." Three students – Jimmy, Liv

and Adam – identified as white. Ella said she is “part Mexican” due to the fact that her “father is Mexican and has always lived in Mexico.” In order to protect the identities of study participants, all students in the College Confident, College Considering and College Conflicted groups were assigned pseudonyms.

**College aspirations: Not ‘If,’ but ‘Where’.** Members of this group were focused exclusively on *where* – as opposed to *if* – they would attend college. They all had at least one parent who has pushed them to attend college for “as long as I can remember” as one student put it. Jimmy, who is the only student in this group whose parents are not divorced, says he has always been encouraged by his parents to go to college because it would lead to a “better life.” He explained it in the following way:

I’ve always thought I should go to college. I picked it up from my dad that it was important. He highly stressed it from an early age. It was gonna happen. My dad keeps telling me that he wants me to have a good life a good family life and to be able to support my family. He says he wants me to have a better living situation than he has, so he’s like ‘the only way you are going to do that is if you push and go to college.’ My mom is supportive of college like my dad. She said I have no option, but to go to college.

Similarly, Adam has been fed a steady drumbeat of positive college messaging from both parents since elementary school. He said he feels somewhat forced into it by his parents, but admits to “pushing hard” academically to get into a good college.

My parents have pushed me to go to college. It’s definitely one of those things we’ve always talked about. I kind of think I have to ... kind of forced into it. I

mean I just think it's part of what we do these days. Everybody kind of goes to college. I think it's good, um, for some people. I think for some people it doesn't make sense at the same time. My parents have always been like 'go to college,' but part of it was my own push too.

Most of the students' parents in this group did not attend college until later in life, if at all, and shared a strong desire for their children to take a different path by enrolling in college immediately after high school. Ella's mother dropped out of college after one year while her father, who she has never met, lives in Mexico and "may not have graduated from high school." Ella thinks her mother's insistence on her becoming the first in her family to earn a college degree is fueled by the fact that she never finished college and does not want her to struggle in life like she has without a college degree. She also said the following:

My mom dropped out because she didn't value her education. I think she always regretted not pursuing her college education because I think there are job opportunities that she could have had when she was younger that were not presented to her because of her lack of college education. Being a single mom has been hard for her. I can't even imagine.

Ella shared the following personal story about needing psychiatric counseling to help illustrate the desire her mother has for her to attend college:

Yea, and so, um, just growing up I've been around an entire system of people who are really pushing me to succeed in college and wanting me to complete my college education and do something they hadn't been able to do. It was something

I really struggled with my freshman and sophomore year. Um, I don't know if this is too much information, but I was clinically diagnosed with depression at the beginning of my sophomore year, so after I had gone through counseling and stuff it was ... we targeted that it was around school and that I have a certain level of perfectionism that does come from pressure of family and out school system. It's something I'm comfortable with and I no longer have depression and feel comfortable trying to succeed in school. It was more of a perception thing that I just felt like I had a lot of pressure on me when in reality my family just wants me to be happy and successful.

All of the students in this group cited their parent(s) as the most influential person regarding their decision to attend college. They said things like "I would be lost without them" or "I'm not even going to college without their support." Jimmy has friends whose parents do not push them to go to college and are planning to enter the workforce immediately after high school. He says they do not think about the long-term financial advantages of attending college, because no one is explaining it to them. "It makes more sense to them to get a job," he says. "They have that opportunity to make more money, faster, and they don't end up making more money in the long run. That they don't see... that's why I'm going."

Liv, who is the youngest of five siblings, says it has "never crossed her mind not to go to college" after seeing all of her older siblings go to college:

Growing up with five older siblings and just seeing them going to college, I just knew I was going to college. I think my work ethic has definitely been influenced by my siblings' success. The bar is definitely high with all of them.

**Building an (unrealistic) college list.** As referenced earlier, students in the College Confident group were focused exclusively on getting into the best college possible. Given that desire, they sought information about colleges early in their senior year focusing on a broad range of criteria location, size, major, academic reputation, cost and school colors. Students relied most heavily on computer programs, VSAC counselors, parents and outside college search organizations. They also talked with their guidance counselors, but more so about procedural information related to applications rather than choosing colleges. Liv, for example, relied on a college search website and her VSAC counselor to build a college list “in one day” that included Boston College, Boston University, the University of Vermont, Northeastern University, Suffolk University, Notre Dame, Duke and the University of California at San Diego. Unsure which schools were the best fit based on multiple criteria, Liv said she started basing her choices on unrelated and seemingly insignificant criteria. She was exaggerating to some degree, but seemed genuinely frustrated when she said the following:

I don't even know how to just go out and find a school. There are so many. How do you even start? Like 30 schools popped up at that point on the screen. I'm like 'that one has a lame name, I'm not going there. I don't like the mascot. I'm not going there. I don't like that one's school colors, so I guess I'll rule out all of those.'

Although Liv's list contained one college that would be considered a "safety" school (Suffolk) based on her academic record, it became apparent that students in this group were building college lists that included mostly "aspirational" or "reach schools," and very few, if any, "safety" schools. Ella, who has a 3.7 GPA and 1,300 SAT score, relied almost exclusively on an organization run by Yale University called Questbridge to build her college list. The nonprofit is dedicated to "connecting the nation's brightest students from low-income backgrounds with leading institutions of higher education and further opportunities." Its stated mission is to "increase the percentage of talented low-income students attending the nation's best universities and the ranks of national leadership itself (questbridge.org, 2017)." cite After signing up for the program, she toured some of the 32-member institutions and received counseling about the college application process. She did not make the final round of cuts by the organization, however, and was left to navigate the remainder of the college application process on her own. Nonetheless, she said the experience was invaluable and that she "would be more lost without Questbridge." She decided not to change the schools on her college list that she constructed while in the program, which included Yale, Stanford, Washington & Lee, Tufts, Vanderbilt, Tulane and Colby.

Adam's list was smaller and more balanced in the sense that he had a "reach" (Dartmouth), "match" (UVM), and "safety" school (UNE). He loves to ski and picked schools that were near ski resorts. He is leaning toward UVM because "he has friends there and knows some members of the ski team," which he hopes to join. He is also receiving financial aid and academic-based support that makes UVM the "most



affordable.” Adam is not sure how his classmates built their college lists, but finds some of their choices “odd.”

Some kids picked odd schools or religious ones in places I’ve never heard of before. It makes me wonder how they heard about them. I chose UVM because I know it and have friends who go there. Other kids read emails from random colleges that just happened to catch their eye and they’d open up the packet and say, ‘oh, let’s go here.’

Similarly, Jimmy has a list of three schools with Clarkson as his “reach,” the University of Maine as his “match” and Keene State as his “safety.” He is leaning heavily toward Clarkson because his best friend and cousin go to a nearby college and because it has a strong engineering program. Adam used a college app called SCHOOLED to help build his list. “I don’t see the point in applying to any other schools,” he says.

**Navigating the college application process.** Once students decided on which colleges they planned to apply, their focus shifted to seeking information about the actual application process. Students relied on different combinations of parents, guidance counselors, friends, and VSAC counselors. Liv is the only student with a VSAC counselor who she described as having “saved my life many times” in regard to filling out college applications.

She (VSAC counselor) was always the one to reach out to me. ‘Do you want to meet me here, here and here?’ The fact she reached out to me knowing that I was at a place where even I couldn’t really think of a question, she just knew to give me information anyways. She even knows that I prefer texting over email, so we text all the time. I’m already a scatter brain with what is going on now with the

help I have... I have (VSAC counselor), so I know without that I would just be a mess.

Liv's VSAC counselor helped all five of her siblings get into college and won a national award for her efforts. Liv's mother, Jill, has always pushed her children to go to college and has been an active participant in the application process. Jill, who is a single mother, was valedictorian of her high school class, but had to raise five children on her own and could not attend college until later in life. She describes her commitment to her children in the following way:

I went through a horrible divorce and custody battle and my kids saw me struggle to put food on the table. They saw me struggle and go back to college and how important it was to me. They wanted to be able to take care of themselves and not go through what I did. My kids are like 'I'm not going to struggle like my mom.' My dad went to VTC (Vermont Technical College) and then worked for GE (General Electric), so I had a good role model growing up. He wasn't going to work at Blue Seal Feeds and throwing bags of gran all day. I truly believe in the role model is the best way.

Since Jill earned her bachelor's degree in counseling, she has been working with children living in poverty and is planning on getting her special education license to "try and help these kids break out of their cycle of poverty." She makes a point to let her own children know how lucky they are to have a parent who supports them and encourages them to go to college:

(Liv) is lucky enough to have a mother who can even read. Some parents can't even read, so how are they supposed to fill out an application? There are a lot of traumatized kids in this town who want to know if they're going to eat and not get beat some days. It's too much work for many of these kids to go to college. The applications are too hard and they're just trying to keep up in school and deal with their home life.

Liv, who was also ranked No.1 in her class like her mother was in high school, said her mother has been an inspiration to her and is "right on top everything" in regard to her academic life and college application process. Liv admits to procrastinating when it comes to filling out applications (she had not applied to any schools as of late November), saying that she would have "been lost" without her mother and especially her VSAC counselor pushing her to meet deadlines. One significant error that occurred with her VSAC counselor, however, was that Liv mistakenly filled out an application to the University of San Diego instead of the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), where she was "seriously considering attending." By the time the error was discovered by her VSAC counselor, the application deadline to UCSD had passed.

When asked if her experience choosing and applying to colleges would have been different if she relied solely on her guidance counselor instead of a VSAC counselor, Liv made the following distinction:

With our guidance counselor, I'd be scared to ask questions. Most of the time she's very helpful when I ask, but I know a lot of kids that complain and say that she's not very helpful. That's why I'm happy I have (name of VSAC counselor).

You can't do it all yourself. At some point you have to let others do. When you don't have a support system, it's definitely hard. I meet with (name of VSAC counselor) at least two or three times per month.

Adam, who was ranked No. 2 in his class entering his senior year but would later pass Liv for the top spot, received much less support on the college application process, and struggled because of it. He often consulted Liv because he knew she had a VSAC counselor and siblings who went through the process. Liv empathized with Adam and helped him whenever possible, which included running his questions by her VSAC counselor for him. Specifically, he is having trouble getting his parents to fill out the FAFSA.

I didn't do the FAFSA. My mom did it all, but I know Adam has been freaking out because he hasn't gotten it done. His mom's been like postponing it. I was talking to (name of VSAC counselor) about it and it's not something you can do because it's all your parents bank statements and everything that you can't access. If my mom hadn't done it five times before this, I would probably be freaking out about it too. She made my FAFSA and VSAC account and did everything. I have (name of VSAC counselor) to help as well. Like he's (Adam) not in VSAC, he doesn't have older siblings who have gone through it, so it's harder.

Adam, who completed most of the application materials on his own, said he wishes he was in the VSAC program because he knows people who say it has been "very helpful." He is not clear why some students are accepted into the VSAC program while others are not. For a student to qualify for a VSAC counselor, (name of VSAC counselor) explains

that students have to be a first generation college student and come from a family who falls into a lower economic bracket. She can make exceptions in some cases depending on her caseload, which she says is already beyond capacity. When asked if she has a pretty good success rate in terms of getting students into college, she said “yes, most of my students go to college.” When pressed if that meant “as many as 9-out-of-10,” she said, “yes,” adding that every senior she worked with this year was going to college.

The guidance counselor at the school says the VSAC counselor already takes on as many students as possible. “Her caseload is way higher than it should be,” she says. “She actually advocated for an extra day here and this year she is doing an extra day here based on the need that we showed. She does really good comprehensive work. We co-facilitate.”

When asked if she thinks she could get at least a few students into college if “she could clone herself” and take on more students, she said “most definitely.” When asked how many more, she said, “At least five or six students.” Adam, who has a parent who graduated from college, wishes he was one of them. “I don’t know how it (VSAC qualifying) works exactly,” he says. “(Liv) works with a VSAC counselor, so she knows more about it, like the UVM kind of stuff. Cuz’ when I first started applying, I was like, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing. What do you do with this?’ And then she (Liv) would say ‘oh, you can do that.’”

Getting financial information has been especially difficult for Adam because his parents recently separated and are going through a divorce. He explains his frustration

with trying to get financial information from his parents to complete the FAFSA in the following way:

My parents are split now, which makes it really hard, especially since it's not a legal... I don't think it's a legal split yet. It makes it really complicated with the financial stuff. When you send in documents (to colleges) you have to send it in from both sides. It's rigged for two ... for married couples. It's not really for divorced families... you can't do it by yourself. You need both parents. Yea, not a convenient time for that (parent's separation) to happen.

Despite always encouraging him to attend college, Adam's parents are not helping him with the application process or the FAFSA. "I set up the FAFSA account and was like, 'ok, it wasn't really my job from there,'" he says, adding that his school guidance counselor has "taught me quite a bit, because there's just stuff I didn't know about." Even so, Adam, explains that he is finding the entire college application process harder than expected:

UNE is still missing a ton of stuff. I don't think Dartmouth got my IDOC (Institutional Documentation Service of the College Board that collects families' federal tax returns and other documents on behalf of participating colleges and programs). I don't even know what that is. I kind of send my mom stuff and I'm like 'ok mom, do this' and she doesn't know what's happening. It's definitely a lot. It's really hard to keep track of what goes where.

When asked if he thought a student who is on the fence about going to college might opt out of the application process if he or she was not receiving help from anyone, Adams

says that, “If you really want to go somewhere to college, you’ll probably go through it all ... it just makes it harder and more complicated.” Later in the year, however, when asked the same question, Adam says that if he was on the fence and was having trouble getting information from his parents, “He’d probably just not do it.” He continues by saying that it “takes quite a bit of initiative to get your parents, when they’re busy or whatever, to get them to sit down and do it... I would have missed all the deadlines if I wasn’t looking into it. There was nobody telling me to do it.”

All of the students in the College Confident group except for Jimmy said they found the college application “overwhelming.” They cited similar reasons for feeling this way such as having to deal with a full load of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, jobs and extracurricular activities like sports or volunteering for local charities. Ella, who works at McDonald’s after school in addition to playing sports and taking four AP courses, says she can see how students who are not sure they want to attend college decide to opt out of the college application process:

I think it’s a difficult process and I’m sure there are kids who just kind of give it up halfway through. It’s too much with the FAFSA, work and school. I definitely think there is a pool of students who could go either way and who are intimidated by the process, which is why they haven’t really stepped out and ... had I not gone in and tried out for that program (Questbridge) and talked to my guidance counselors and went to meetings and stuff I would have had no idea what I was doing, and I can see myself not even bothering (applying). If you don’t know what you are doing you can’t really apply... I don’t know, at least in my

experience you really have to make the first move and really initiate all of it if you want help, but it's not like it's impossible. It's definitely not like if you are kind of iffy about college the guidance office is going to be on your butt about it or anything. You definitely have to reach out (to guidance counselors) especially during this time of year.

The school guidance counselor expresses frustration when hearing comments like the one made by Ella, explaining that her office continually tried to expand its outreach efforts. She offers the following examples: college information sessions for students and parents during their junior and senior years; a new mobile app that allows her to send deadline reminders to students and parents; "Financial Aid 101" night; "forms night" where parents can come and get help filling out the FAFSA and grants; trips to college fairs; open lunch hours for students and parents to evaluate financial aid award letters from colleges (no one showed up); weekly college advisory training sessions open to students; and SAT support classes, among other college counseling services.

Despite offering the aforementioned array of college support services, the guidance counselor says she is discouraged by the lack of initiative by students and parents to engage in the college application process, and feels overwhelmed trying to help everyone:

It's insane. I could work... I actually feel like the longer I work the more overwhelming it is. I'm in my 10<sup>th</sup> year, so I feel like I'm at a pivotal point where I'm like 'what am I doing?' There is just more and more and more and more and more you know and it's like we have other non- (guidance counseling) roles... I



cold email all day and all night at home, ya know what I mean? You have to set boundaries. The job is real. I love it, but it is so overwhelming.

**Questioning college.** Even though members of the College Confident group focused the majority of their efforts on getting into college, they had moments of uncertainty about whether college was the best path. Two students expressed concerns about the cost of college and whether the debt they would incur was worth it. Jimmy expressed the most serious financial concerns. “I’m not going to lie, when I first started looking the numbers scared me a lot,” he said. “I was like ‘how much am I going to actually get for my situation?’ It’s a lot to consider.” When asked what helped him overcome his financial fears, Jimmy cited his parents’ reassurance that the investment would be worth it later in life. “They were like ‘don’t worry about it. It’s not going to be as bad as you really think it’s going to be. We already have a trust fund set up for you, so that will help a little bit.’”

Adam commented early in the year that he sometimes wishes he could just skip college and start working. “My friends and I joke a lot about how great it would be to just drop out of it all right now,” he said. “We joke, but we’ve all stuck with it (college).” Adam made a similar reference later in the year after talking with a friend who guaranteed him a job at a ski shop in Burlington after he graduated high school. “He’s like ‘why are you going to college and have all that debt?’ And I’m like ‘I was thinking it would be nice not to go to college.’” When asked why he does not just skip college then, Adam said, “because I don’t want to be scraping to get by.”

Like Jimmy, cost is Adam's single greatest concern when it comes to college. He bases that, in part, on the amount of college debt his parents still have to pay off, which he expresses in the following statement:

I have the feeling that I'll be able to pay for it eventually. I know it's going to be a lot, but ... I mean my parents are still paying their college debts off. At the same time, it's a little discouraging to see that, but I feel like I have to go (to college) at the same time. Sometimes I think it would be nice to just get out of high school and just work instead of having to go to college and have all that debt. I always think that I have to go to college and then I have to do this and this...it must be nice sometimes, I would think, to just get out of high school and be done and just work. But ... it's harder to go back later I think.

Adam does have a price point, however: "I would never pay full price for college," he said. "If I had to pay full price or like out-of-state tuition, I wouldn't go. It's crazy... cost is definitely a deterrent for a lot of people."

Liv is more definitive about attending college and never questions going during any of the four interviews. That said, she understands how some students question whether the cost is worth it. "If my parents didn't go to college and I didn't have any siblings, I think that would definitely really make me question whether it (college) was worth it," she said. "Some kids say, 'I see my two parents are doing well and they didn't go to college, so I could do that too.'"

The most surprising comment by any of the students came from Ella when she responded to a hypothetical question about whether she would still go to college if her

parents(s) did not care whether she went to college or not. “I think that if they (her family) told me they didn’t want me to go to college then I wouldn’t go to college,” she said. “If I were in a situation where I was on a farm and it was my family’s farm and they didn’t want me to go I think I would have a very hard time leaving.” When asked if her own mother had a change of heart and told her that she did not want her to go college, she responded in the following way:

I would still be very hesitant to go. I’ve always been very close with my family. I’ve always just kind of trusted what my family has taught me. I mean I still think for myself and I know when they are wrong, because they are wrong a lot (laughs). But if they were to flat out say that they didn’t want me going to college or anything like that I probably wouldn’t go.

**College rejections prompting a reality check.** By the time the third set of interviews were conducted in February, students had heard back from about half of the colleges to which they applied. Two students were feeling especially anxious because they had received only one acceptance letter between them. Liv was rejected by Boston University and Notre Dame and waitlisted by Boston College. The University of Vermont was the only school she had been accepted to so far, but she was holding out hope for a few other schools. She was starting to think that UVM was her best option, due in large part to the financial aid package she received, which included a Green and Gold scholarship for being ranked No. 1 in her class entering her senior year. She explains her current state of mind in the following way:

I'm feeling good about UVM, but what I regret most is missing the deadline for UCSD (University of California at San Diego), because I would be right near my sister in California. When I sat down with my VSAC counselor to make a list I had no idea where I wanted to apply. Just seeing the names of the schools doesn't help, because I'm just going to pick the coolest name or the mascot, and so it was definitely tricky. I honestly had no idea where to go. I narrowed it down and applied to those out-of-state colleges the day before the deadline. Notre Dame was really long. When I didn't get in I was like 'I don't care.'

Ella was feeling "very nervous" because she had yet to be accepted to any of the seven schools to which she applied. She was waitlisted at Washington & Lee and Colby, which was her "safety school," but had not heard back from any other schools. "I don't know... I'm not feeling great about any of it," she said. "In hindsight, I feel like there were a lot of little things I didn't realize I should have done like sending emails better your chances or regular decision isn't actually the best way to go or just stuff like that." When asked if she wished she had not relied so heavily on Questbridge and her mother to build a college list that did not include any backup schools, she said "maybe." In case she does not get into any of the schools on her list, Ella is starting to develop the following backup plan:

I think that I was already getting overwhelmed looking at schools, so right now my end plan is to apply to Castleton if I don't get into these other schools. It's not like it's the end of the world, but it's definitely not the best-case scenario. I just wanted good news from at least one school. That's all I want. Just one.

Adam joins Liv as the only two students in the group to be accepted by UVM. He is still waiting on word from UNE and Dartmouth. Interestingly, he took over the No. 1 class ranking from Liv, who fell to No. 3, which “caused some drama,” according to the guidance counselor. Fortunately for Liv, who did not come to school for almost two weeks after she found out she was no longer valedictorian, her Green & Gold Scholarship remained intact since it is awarded to the top-ranked student in each class at the end of their junior year. Adam is frustrated by requests for additional information from UNE and Dartmouth and seems to be leaning toward attending UVM after qualifying for the Catamount Commitment, a program offered to students who are eligible for the Federal Pell Grant designed to cover the cost of tuition and the comprehensive fee through a combination of federal, state and institutional grants and scholarships. Adam said it seems “unlikely” at this point that he would choose UNE or even Dartmouth if he gets in over UVM. He also sounds frustrated with the entire application process based on the following statement. “The process was harder than I thought,” he said. “UNE is still missing a ton of stuff. I’m wanting to get it over with. It shouldn’t be this difficult.”

Jimmy, on the other hand, was accepted to Clarkson and thought the process was “pretty easy.” He said he “didn’t see the point in applying anywhere else” because Clarkson was his top choice. Although he was concerned about having to pay \$30,000 a year to attend Clarkson, his parents put those fears to rest. “They were happy,” he said. “They were like ‘it’s the cost of a good education to get a good job out of college.’”

**The college choice.** By the time final interviews were conducted in May, students had received decisions from all of the schools to which they applied. Overall, they were

accepted to 5 of 20 schools. Ella was not accepted to any of the schools she applied to and decided not to put her name on the waitlist at Colby and Washington & Lee, which was her first choice. When asked why she did not put her name on the waitlist, she said she heard or read the following:

If you are on a waitlist you are almost guaranteed not to get any scholarship or grant money or any assistance or anything like that because it's too late in the process and they probably already give it out to other students. It would cost too much even if I got in.

Ella said she only relied on her school guidance counselor for transcripts and recommendation letters. "I didn't feel like I needed help, so I didn't reach out," she said. "But yes, the guidance counselor reached out to me a couple times." Ella tried to get into the VSAC program, but was told that the VSAC Counselor was already overloaded and could not accept more students. "I definitely tried to get in," she said. "There are definitely scholarships that are accessible to them that aren't to me, so in that way I could have used help, and then they also got all of their college applications for free, which is nice." In response to a question about whether she thought her college list was too ambitious, Ella said "no" because she kept receiving positive feedback from alumni of the colleges on her list when she interviewed with them as part of the application process. Ella's mother also told her that her list matched her academic performance, based on what staff members at Questbridge told her. Additionally, Ella said she was being "hounded by Colby and Tulane" with emails and other information, which led her to

believe that “they were trying so hard because they were going to accept me.” She explains:

During interviews alumni would say things like ‘when you get in’ or ‘when you come here.’ During all of the interviews, they told me that I had a really good chance of getting in... I definitely think that, I don’t know, I think during the entire process I was pushed to apply to these really tough schools and was told that ‘of course I would get in, of course,’ which isn’t a bad thing, but I guess that’s part of the reason I didn’t apply to any other schools.

When asked who encouraged her to apply to the seven schools on her list – all of which were part of Questbridge’s 32-college network – Ella said “my mom I think, my family... she (mom) went to all of the Questbridge things for me and also likes researching things and stuff like that.” When pressed on why she and other students might listen to a parent, who may not have gone to college, over a trained professional like a guidance counselor, Ella said, “I think if a student’s parents are supportive, they’ll usually rely on their parents, because they trust them.”

At the end of the final interview with Ella, her plan was to attend Castleton University, which had accepted her within a few days of applying. The school offered her a spot in their Honors College and \$8,000 off the overall cost of attendance. Her final comment was: “I’m just glad it’s over.” A follow-up inquiry in the fall of 2017 confirmed that Ella was attending Castleton.

Liv was also rejected by every school that she applied except for UVM, which is where she ended up enrolling in the fall of 2017. In retrospect, she wishes she took more

time researching other colleges that were better matches for her academically and socially. “I feel like I could have gone into a deeper range and done more research on figuring out other schools,” she said. “Once I got the Green & Gold I think a part of me knew I was going to end up at UVM. I’ve been to UVM so many times it felt like a second home already.”

The school guidance counselor said she was aware that some students had built overly ambitious college lists. Despite reaching out to them, not all of them responded. She expresses a desire to improve the system in the following way:

It would be nice if students had goals that would match their skills and abilities. If they haven’t figured that out by senior year then I think programmatically or comprehensively we’ve failed a little bit. A lot kids dive into filling out college applications without even having a connection to the college, so then the application is not valuable. They are just filling it out.

Adam also decided to attend UVM after being rejected by Dartmouth and accepted to UNE. Overall, he expects to pay \$15,200 a year after scholarships, aid and grants. He struggled the most with the application process among the four students, due in large part to a lack of support from his parents, who were in the midst of a divorce. He explains his frustration in the following way:

You think you are done after the Common App, but you are not done. Then the financial aid starts coming out, and it starts getting crazy. I needed help with all that stuff. I would have missed all the deadlines if I wasn’t looking into it. There



was nobody telling me to do it. The guidance counselors did send reminders, but senior year came around and it was like ‘I could use help.’

Of all the students in this group, Jimmy struggled least with the college search and application process, calling it “easier than I thought.” He never wavered in his commitment to attend Clarkson, where he was enrolled in the fall of 2017. Reflecting back, Jimmy said he would have struggled without the support of his parents, adding the following statement about why some of his classmates did not go through the application process without the support of their parents:

I think that if you raised the same kid and one family pushed them to go to college and one family didn’t say anything, I think the kid (who is being pushed) will want to go because it’s in the back of their mind, and it’s all they thought about. They get a school in mind and are like ‘wow, that’s a cool place, I want to go there someday,’ and they’re always thinking about that. And then this kid is like ‘eh, I’m just going to work somewhere, just gonna go earn money.’

**Conclusion.** Ultimately, the support and expectations of parents and family, coupled with their own aspirational desire to attend college, resulted in all four members of this group enrolling in college in the fall of 2017. Despite some occasional thoughts of entering the workforce, none seriously considered skipping college due to continued parental reinforcement that college was the best option. Though on varying levels, students in this group received significant help from parents, VSAC and guidance counselors, friends and external organizations like Questbridge and college search websites. The same could not be said for the quality of information they received in

regard to compiling college lists. In the end, the four members of this group were accepted to 25 percent of the colleges that they applied to. Two students were accepted to only one college each, despite applying to 16 schools between them. Though it was never a question of “if” they would attend college, “where” they ultimately enrolled was either well below their academic level or not among their top choices, based on information that was either faulty or misleading. One takeaway is that school guidance counselors as well as local and state-level policymakers should not be too confident about students who are “College Confident” getting into college or at least one that is a good match.

### **Group II: College Considering (Case Study)**

**Introduction.** All four students in this group made it clear during their initial interviews that they were “leaning” toward attending college over other post-secondary options. In other words, college was their top choice entering their senior year with “entering the workforce” coming in second. All of the members of this group were first-generation college students with only one parent having earned a bachelor’s degree later in life and another having earned an associate’s degree in mortuary science. Students had GPAs ranging between 2.3 and 3.5 with an overall average of 3.0. Three of the students described themselves as being from “poor” or “lower class” families. Three of the four students lived with one parent. All four of the students identified as white

**College aspirations/expectations.** All of the students in this group initially aspired to attend college in elementary school. Not all of the students maintained that desire, however, with two students (Katie and Joan) entering high school not planning on going to college after struggling academically in middle school. Those struggles

continued for the first two years of high school, leading them to believe they were no longer “college material.” After overcoming some challenging family issues, both students rebounded academically during their junior year, giving them renewed confidence in their ability to handle college course work. Joan explains her rekindled desire to go to college in the following way:

I failed most of my classes freshman year because a lot of family stuff happened. I didn't even want to go to college my freshman year of high school. I didn't want to whatsoever. It was the same thing my sophomore year and then I started opening up a little to it and, um, thinking about what I wanted to do as a career. It's a little scary, but the fact that I've progressed and gotten better (academically) and everything is a big deal. Like I went from all F's to B's to like A's and B's, and now I'm all A's... I also started getting closer with a lot of people who are going to college... visiting friends at the University of New England and Castleton was really like a turning point for me

Similarly, Katie attributes her academic struggles in middle school and early high school to major “problems at home” before regaining confidence during her junior year:

I've experienced failure most of my life and have been able to move on to other things. Like how I went to summer school for seven years before I came here. I think I started doing poorly in school because of how my mom was treating me. I fell into a depression and was diagnosed with depression... I mean from 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade I just went down, but then I earned mostly A's and B's my junior year. For the most part I want to go (to college) to make my mother proud,

because she never thinks I'm smart or that I've achieved something. She tried going to college, but she just couldn't do it, because she had me and my little brother. She never thinks I'm smart and always compares me to my younger siblings.

Madonna and Sid on the other hand, have always performed well academically and have always thought they would "most likely" attend college. Sam has wanted to become a game warden since he was "a little kid" and thinks college will help him achieve that goal. "As I grew older I realized that I needed to go to college to become a game warden," he says. "They are not going to let you unless you pretty much have a bachelor's degree or a military background, so that's when I decided I wanted to go to college." Madonna has also wanted to attend college to earn a bachelor's degree in order to become a nurse, physical therapist or x-ray technician.

**Non-college options still on the table.** Despite having been the most consistent over the longest period of time with their plans to attend college, Madonna and Sid have not totally ruled out other postsecondary options. Madonna said that even before her senior year began she was questioning her desire to work in the healthcare field. "I'm not finding any of that very interesting anymore," she said, adding that she "didn't see herself being happy in 20 years doing any of those things." What did excite her, however, was the thought of going to cosmetology school to become a hairdresser – something she has been contemplating since her sophomore year. "I've always been really good with art and really good with like hair, so I put two and two together and was like 'oh, maybe I should do art with hair.'"

Surprisingly, by October of her senior year, she decided to abandon her college plans and began the process of applying to the Aveda institute to become a hair stylist. “I was nervous and was like ‘oh, should I do this,’ and then I started looking into it more and I had like people I know be really successful with cosmetology, so then I looked at Aveda and was like ‘that’s what I want to do.’” Madonna said she also became scared off by the cost of college and was more comfortable paying a total of \$18,625 to attend Aveda, which she said was “the cost of one semester of college.” “I don’t come from a wealthy family. I come from ... I live in like drug central of (name of town). I like don’t come from a wealthy family.”

When Madonna informed her father, soccer coach, guidance counselor and VSAC counselor of her plans to enroll in cosmetology school she received “major pushback.” Her mother, who she has lived with since she was three years old when her parents got divorced, “isn’t that involved” and “seems fine with any decision I make.” Her father, who lives in New Hampshire, was not happy about her decision, captured in the following statement:

When I first told my dad he was like ‘you need to apply to college,’ so he was kind of up my butt about it for a while. I feel like he pushed me because he didn’t go, because he’s that parent that’s like ‘I want you to have all these opportunities.’ I’ve been hearing it from everyone ... like I met with my VSAC counselor and he was like ‘why don’t you want to go got college? You have great grades (3.5 GPA)?’ And then my guidance counselor was like ‘why don’t you look into this

school? And then my soccer coach was like ‘you need to go!’ It’s just like college, college, college! Finally, I’m like ‘enough is enough, leave me alone!’

Sid was also considering other options early in his senior year, but not as seriously as Madonna. He said the only reason he was going to college was “because he had to in order to become a game warden.” He was still considering pursuing professions that did not require a college degree and paid well. “I would like a job where I wouldn’t have to go to college... like with the U.S. border patrol near the (Canadian) border that has a pretty good set salary without going to college,” he said. “They make a good chunk of change.” The idea of working as a border patrol agent was fleeting, however, with Sid saying he “thought about it briefly” before deciding he should still go to college.

Katie and Joan are also considering other postsecondary options, but more as a backup plan in case they do not get into any colleges. Katie is worried about the cost of college and is applying for a job at a local bowling alley to help “pay for gas money and some of college” so she “doesn’t have to rely on her parents.” She is considering moving into her dad’s trailer and sleeping on his couch because she thinks her mother will “kick her out of the house” if she does not go to college. Joan is also concerned about her options if she does not get into college and is considering moving in with her uncle in Maine, who has offered to teach her how to be a surfing instructor at his surf shop. “If I get into a school that I really like I would most likely go, but if I don’t get in then I’m really thinking about moving out of state and living with family in Maine and just getting a job and going on with life,” she said.

**The application process.** By December, students are trying to firm up plans about their future and have been gathering specific information related to those choices. Katie applied to Wentworth College in Boston and wants to major in computer science; Joan applied to Castleton where she hoped to major in psychology and play soccer; Sid applied to Paul Smith's to major in wildlife management and was in the process of applying to UVM; and Madonna was still leaning toward cosmetology school. At this point, students were relying primarily on the school's guidance counselor to help identify potential colleges and procedural information related to the college application process. Katie credits her guidance counselor with helping to complete the application to Wentworth, which is the only college she intends to apply. She built her college list by "putting search criteria into a computer program based on major, size and location," which produced about 20 schools. She received some help narrowing down the list, "but not too much." When asked if she was encouraged to apply to any in-state schools, she said "no," but that she would have "felt like going (to one) if I applied for financial aid and the money was low enough." She thought about applying to St. Lawrence and the University of Hartford, but "missed the deadlines." She is "worried" that her mother will not get around to filling out the FAFSA. "I'm happy with my decision to apply to Wentworth," she said.

Joan is now focused exclusively on Castleton, which she refers to as her "dream school." She has had "a lot of catching up to do" because of her "failing freshman year" in terms of the college application process, but has been receiving help from the school guidance counselor. She adds that her high school could "do a lot more to help kids

understand what college is all about” and what type of scholarships are available. “I think had I known that there were scholarships available when I was a freshman I would have tried harder (in school), because that’s a big thing for me,” she said. “I mean I’m from a lower income family and it’s going to be hard for me to pay.” More recently, Joan is considering applying to the University of New England, Colby-Sawyer and Becker, but says she will “definitely go to Castleton” if she gets in.

I love the Castleton campus. It’s my dream come true campus. Their soccer fields are to die for. I love them. Like I’m passionate about it. I didn’t even know about Castleton until like the beginning of soccer season my senior year. They came and watched me and like came to my homecoming game. Their coach said I could start for them at Castleton. I was all teary-eyed.

Unfortunately, Joan is “having trouble” getting her mother to fill out the FAFSA and has only applied to Castleton. “My mother mostly doesn’t care,” she said. “She hasn’t helped me much with the process. She has been kind of oblivious to it. She’s like ‘make your own decisions. I’ll be there to warn you about the bad stuff.’”

Maddie has been gathering information on her own about the application process to cosmetology school. She said she’s “in the home stretch now” and has not reconsidered going to college, because “it’s harder to go to college when you don’t know what you want to do.” She also does not want to go into debt like one of her high school teachers, who “still has a few months left to pay on her student loans and she’s 33 (years old!)” She filled out the FAFSA on her own “because her mother wouldn’t do it,” which is required by Aveda to determine financial aid. “I may not be making \$200,000 a year



and I may make as low as \$50,000, but it's my life and all that matters is being happy," she said.

Sid has remained consistent with his plan to apply to college, describing the process as him "getting motivated one day and just cranking out applications to Paul Smith's and UVM." He admits to procrastinating at the beginning of the process, saying that he "didn't want to do it, but powered through." He received some help from the guidance office, but has received the most help from his parents of any of the students in the group. "My mom likes to have everything done," he said. "Like the money stuff and the FAFSA and all that, so she did that, but when it came to applications I had to do that myself." When asked if he still thinks about being a border patrol officer he said it was "just a short period when I was looking into that because they don't have to go to college and just take a test." His parents still want him to attend college even though it "probably wouldn't bother his mother" if he found a good job that "he didn't need to go to college for." "If I didn't really do anything for a few years (after high school) she probably wouldn't be too happy about that," he added.

**Information and parental influence.** Up until this point in the college decision-making process students in this group have relied primarily on school guidance counselors and VSAC counselors for information related to building a college list and other procedural information related to the application and financial aid process. That changes later in the year, however, as students begin receiving more advice and guidance from parents who were previously not very involved in the process. After the holiday break, three parents in particular began to weigh-in now that their child is solidifying

post-secondary plans. Madonna, Katie, and Joan have received minimal, if any, parental support or advice during the college decision-making process until now. The input is coming exclusively from their mothers, who they have lived with since their parents got divorced when they were younger with the exception of Katie whose parents never married. They attribute the recent input to the realization by their mothers that they are serious about moving away from home and going to college. Discussions with their mothers about their future, coupled with input from two of the students' estranged fathers, has "caused major tension" and forced the students to consider alternative post-secondary options.

The most dramatic change comes from Madonna, who has decided not to go to cosmetology school. Instead, she has applied to eight colleges with the help of her school guidance counselor and VSAC counselor. They helped her identify eight schools that had nursing programs or similar majors that offered rolling admissions since she missed the admissions deadlines for most other colleges. Madonna recently moved in with her boyfriend's family after "having a major argument" with her mother the day after she found out she got into college. She explains her decision the following way:

I think it's (the decision to attend college) because I want more for my future, and when I was a kid, like, I didn't have much. I watched my mom when I was a kid just sit on the couch and do nothing for half of my life and I don't want that for my family. I actually want to make use of the brain I have I guess... I want to get out of Vermont 'cuz I feel like if I'm in Vermont, I'll still have like the

connection to my mother and all the drama that she brings... if she gives you \$20 she expects \$40 back. We don't talk anymore.

Madonna also attributes a key conversation she had with her father as an important turning point in her decision to apply to college. Her father, Johnny, explains the pivotal conversation in the following way:

I just told her, 'ya know a lot of people graduate high school and don't really have a plan. They go from job-to-job and you can make a living, ya know, you can go to trade school or other schools, but the world needs people to help others.' I said, 'you can have a job or you can have a career. You can find a job in the paper, but you go to college for a career. What makes you happy? What makes you feel like you can do your part?' I'm a funeral director, so I help people after they die. That's my contribution, ya know, that's an honorable living. I can look myself in the mirror and can say 'I'm proud of myself, I helped bury someone's family.' Or I can say 'I went to work today and I couldn't wait to get out.' And I just told her 'ever since you have been young you have been a leader. You can take it as what you want, but you are 18 and your decisions are final. Your decisions, your accomplishments, your failures, they are all yours to stay; they are hard now, but it's going to be easier later. Do the hard job now.' And I just kind of encouraged her to be selfish. 'It's your life,' I told her. 'Help people. Do something that's gonna be worthwhile.' And out of blue she picked up nursing. She wanted to be a nurse. So with her outstanding grades and her commitment to education, I said 'they can never ever take education away. People can take your home, children,

job, marriage, but they cannot take your education away. Education is key. And with that I think a little light went on and I think she said ‘okay.’ She went into school the next day and told her guidance counselor that she changed her everything. I give her (daughter) the credit; I just spoke the words.

Katie is also considering a major change to her postsecondary plans after receiving pressure from her parents to pursue different options. Her father, who lives an hour away, suggested that she move in with him and work part-time at a restaurant while taking a few classes at a local community college. Her mother is adamantly opposed to her living with her father, however, and is trying to convince Katie to continue living with her after high school or go to college at Wentworth. Her mother, who continues to refuse to fill out the FAFSA, also tells her that Wentworth “will never accept her again” if she does not go and that she will “never be able to transfer there later.” Katie, who is convinced her mother is in favor of any scenario that does not involve her living with her father, explains her difficult situation in the following way:

My mother doesn’t understand and hates the fact that I might live with him (her dad), so there’s a lot of drama right now. She told me she would rather I went to Wentworth and have to live in debt than live with my dad. I think that’s the reason behind it. It’s hard to tell if she cares or not. My dad thinks she wants me to stay with her after high school so I can be her babysitter (and watch her younger siblings). He wants me to get out from the life I have with my mom, because it’s not really much of a life ‘cuz I have to babysit and go to work and

that's all I do. He just wants me to get away from it and I want a better life than my mom's life.

Joan is also feeling pressure at home and is "frustrated" that she has not heard back from Castleton. She is now "really thinking about going to Maine to teach surfing with her uncle." She is wondering if Castleton has not responded because her mother refuses to fill out the FAFSA. She explains:

My mom went to the (FAFSA) website and said they asked her too many personal questions about her income and her taxes and everything and was like 'no, I'm not going to do that.' We had a big fight about it and she was like really unsupportive and the stuff she said was not really nice.

Earlier in the year, Joan said her mother "mostly doesn't care" about what she does and "has been kind of oblivious to all of it." Her mother now seems more directly opposed to college, telling Joan that she "doesn't think college is the right choice," because it is too expensive, based in part on the fact that her brother's girlfriend owes UVM thousands of dollars since dropping out of college after becoming pregnant. Joan explains how a recent incident added to her dislike of college:

The State of Vermont or IRS took her \$6,000 tax return that they were going to use for their wedding and applied it directly to her UVM bill, so that was another thing that piled onto it for her (mother). She really didn't agree with college before that and now she incredibly, like, despises the whole system.

Joan's mother is also telling her that she can "get a career without college," using her sister, who has a GED and makes a living with three of four different jobs as a masseuse, body piercer and personal trainer, as an example:

She was like 'you have to go to high school, but you don't have to do that well as long as you keep your grades above passing. She even was like 'if you wanna get your GED you can.' I was like 'no, I wanna have a high school diploma and a college degree so I can have a career as a psychologist.'

At the end of the interview, Joan said she still hoped to attend Castleton, but may pursue a career as a professional surfer if she does not get accepted. "I hope I get into Castleton, but if not, I mean Maine will be great," she said. "I love surfing. I've thought about doing it competitively, so maybe I could get good enough, because you don't really need a degree to become a professional surfer."

Of the four students in the group, Sid is the only one who has received consistent support from his parents to attend college, and is no longer considering other options. He recently applied to the criminal justice program at Castleton, however, explaining that Paul Smith's is "pretty expensive:"

My parents have been supportive of wherever I want to go to college as long as the cost isn't too high, because they don't want me to have too much debt. My mom suggested I apply to Castleton in case I couldn't afford it (Paul Smith's or UVM) for some reason, and said that it would be good to have a backup.

**The final decision: “Relying on the person you trust most”.** By the time students were interviewed for the final time in May of their senior year, they had made final decisions about their postsecondary plans. All four students were accepted to at least one college, but only Sid and Madonna planned on enrolling. Katie and Joan sounded excited to hear that they were accepted to Wentworth and Castleton, but decided not to enroll and instead planned to live with a parent and work locally. Katie explained how a conversation with her father prompted her to move out of her mother’s house and move into her father’s trailer in a nearby town to “find a job and take a few classes at CCV (community college):”

I decided not to go (to Wentworth) because my dad brought up a thing, like really good logic. He was like most people do college and realize it’s not for them, so instead I should take classes at CCV and can always transfer later if I like college, and be in less debt than if I were to go straight to a four-year college.

Katie cited cost as a major factor in her decision not to accept an invitation from Wentworth. She explained that her dad recently lost a job that paid \$22 an hour, and that his new job only paid \$15 an hour. Wentworth informed her that it would cost \$49,000 a year to attend, which her family “could not afford.” When asked if her mother ever filled out the FAFSA, she said “no,” but that she “might if I take classes at CCV.” Katie said she understood that she would have received financial aid had her mother filled out the FAFSA, but added that she would not have gone to Wentworth even if the cost was the same as CCV after aid. “I would still go to CCV just to see if I would want to attend college,” she said. In response to a question about whether she would have considered

attending a more affordable in-state college like Castleton, Johnson and Lyndon, she said “yes,” but that no one suggested she apply to those schools. “I think I would have felt like going to one of those if I applied for financial aid and if the money was like low enough,” she said. When told that those schools had rolling admissions and would still accept her, however, Katie said she “didn’t want to deal with the stress of getting into other colleges and being rejected” and that it “feels great to know that I actually got accepted to the only school that I fully applied to.” When asked if she applied for any scholarships, Katie said “no,” because she read in a VSAC book that “there’s not any scholarships that I can apply for in my major (computer science) unless I’m over the age of 20.” Although she never spoke directly with a VSAC counselor about that issue, she said VSAC kept telling her to “apply for financial aid and get in touch with them,” but that she “kept forgetting to do the paperwork.”

Katie said her final decision was based on a major conversation she had with her father later in the year, and that although her guidance counselor was helpful when she “actually went for help” she admitted to “not going most of the time.” When pressed about why she valued her father’s opinion over that of someone like a professionally trained and educated guidance counselor, she said the following:

I would say that it has to do with, like, trust in that person. You trust them to say the right thing to motivate you and have you think about your decision before you finalize it... he’s (her dad) also very supportive, like having a supportive friend. It’s more like on a personal level, just having someone to support you. I don’t trust my mom. She’s not very supportive.



Katie finished by saying that she felt pressure from both parents to make a decision and that her mother lobbied hard for her not to go live with her father. “I’m glad it’s over,” she said. “I feel relieved.” Her final plan was to move in with her father and work as a dishwasher at a restaurant and “maybe take classes at CCV.” “My dad is thinking of getting a pullout couch so I’ll have a bed,” she said. “I mean I don’t need like my own room. I basically just need an area to sleep and a table that we have. I won’t be there 24-7.”

Similarly, Joan was accepted to the only college that she applied. Despite calling Castleton her “dream school” and saying that she would “definitely enroll if accepted,” she instead decided to get a job at a restaurant in a nearby town and remain living with her mother for the following reasons:

I heard back from Castleton and I got in, but there have been some family setbacks and stuff, so I decided I’m going to take a gap year and go next year because there’s just so much family stuff that happened that I can’t... I just can’t ... people need my help. My grandmother needs my help... I just... my family is kind of falling apart right now and they definitely need a stable person.

When asked if she felt pressure from her mother to stay home, Joan said “no” and that it was her choice. She explains that her uncle, who she describes as a “bad person,” sold the family auto business and kept the money, leaving the rest of the family in a difficult financial situation:

It’s my decision. I just really feel like I need to be there for my grandmother and for my family. Family has always been a big thing for me. Life has played out, I

don't know, like, I have to be there for them. I mean like they've been there for me.

Joan still dreams of playing soccer at Castleton "after a gap year" and plans to play in a local women's league in the meantime to stay in shape. She may also take some classes at CCV that will count toward Castleton. When asked if she is worried that her family issues may not get resolved in time to enroll the following year, she admits to that being a concern: "Yea, I worry about that, that it will become a permanent gap year, but I don't think it will be because I think that I can be one of those who can defy the odds."

In retrospect, Joan says she received "good advice and help" from her school guidance counselor, but explains that it would have been helpful if the process started before her senior year:

I wish I could have taken a class earlier that talks me through college and ... like have a mandatory class for juniors and sophomores. That way, by senior year you know what you are going for and understand what it's all about, like the process. I didn't even know there was the whole FAFSA thing. I didn't even know what the FAFSA was until this year.

Joan said that when she called Castleton to tell them that her mother refused to fill out the FAFSA, they told her to "work on her mother," but that they would accept her without a completed FAFSA, despite needing it eventually. "Even if I had a class that let me know about the FAFSA, I still would have had problems getting my mother to fill it out," she said.

Toward the end of the final interview, Joan re-affirms her plans to stay home and help her family, but then adds that she is also considering moving to Worcester, Massachusetts, where she has other family members who “also need my help right now.” Coincidentally, her boyfriend recently accepted a football scholarship to Ana Maria College, located about eight miles from Worcester. She has not ruled the possibility moving there to “help my family and be near my boyfriend.” Six months later in October of 2017, Joan confirmed that she was still living with her mother and working at a local restaurant.

Madonna, on the other hand, had sent her deposit to Ana Maria College, where she plans to major in health sciences before transferring into nursing. Unlike Katie and Joan, Madonna received consistent encouragement and support from a wide range of individuals such as her soccer coach, VSAC counselor, grandmother, principal and school guidance counselor. It was the encouragement of her father, however, and the aforementioned conversation with him after the holidays that she attributes to her ultimately deciding to enroll in college:

We had a conversation and he told me that I really need to go to college. I just sat there and I was like, ‘you know what?’ I’ve always had an interest in nursing. It’s always, like, something I’ve wanted to do. He never went to college and he regrets it. He basically has like ‘you are so smart and I see you going to college, finishing college... Cam (her younger brother) may or may not go and Kent (her older sister) won’t go to college, so he really stressed me to go I guess.

Madonna's father, Johnny, said he did not want his daughter to go down the same path he did after high school, which he explains in the following passage:

It's very important how education comes into play in life. As a dropout of high school myself in 11<sup>th</sup> grade who had to go back and get my GED, I worked as a laborer in dead-end jobs and got laid off at the worst times. You know, anyone can find a job. You can work at Dunkin' Donuts, McDonalds; they are all important jobs. People need to eat, but I told (Madonna) to make a difference. She's strong minded, immature, but strong willed and dedicated. I said to her 'if someone said to you that if you work real hard for four more years to have the rest of your life be pretty comfortable, isn't that a great trade off?' I wish if I could do it all again I would have taken my own advice and gone to college. I wish I had someone to lay those tracks down for me and make it simple and break it down. She ultimately made the choice for her and I just told her to do something that's important to you, do something that's important to society. We're all in this together. Let's help. Go to school. They can't take education away from you and that's the truth, ya know?

In retrospect, Madonna thinks her previous desire to attend cosmetology was "because I had a boyfriend that's here, and I really like doing hair." Following the conversation with her father, she said she "thought about how much more money nurses make than hairdressers" and realized that she "needed the structure of college." Unlike Joan, Madonna decided not to stay in town and try and help her mother. "I've dealt with my

mother, helping her way too often,” she said. “I got to the point where I had to move out of her house. I have to be selfish at this point.”

Sid said during his final interview that he never seriously waived about going to college, despite moments of trepidation when thinking about becoming a border patrol agent. Once he filled out the Common Application, it became more a question of “where” he would attend college rather than “if.” Steady reinforcement from his parents that college was the best option also helped keep him on the college track, he said. Sid was leaning toward Castleton over Paul Smith’s in May because it was the cheapest option and it had a good criminal justice program. Sid, who was attending Castleton in October of 2017, explains the college decision-making process in the following way:

I came close at one point to not applying (to college) in the early stage, but once I got past the application part, it was mostly scholarships that were a pain.

Applying to college wasn’t too bad. It took me literally like five minutes to apply to Castleton and I got accepted in like 40 minutes or within the week anyway.

In response to a follow-up question on January 7, 2018 about whether he liked Castleton and planned to return for the spring semester, Sid wrote that he “decided to drop out and go into a trade... either plumbing or electrician and most likely not with the border patrol.”

### **Group III: College Conflicted (Case Analysis)**

**Introduction.** Two students began their senior year “leaning” toward entering the workforce, but had not ruled out the possibility of attending college. Sinead, who would be a first generation college student, was born in the US not long after her parents arrived

after escaping war-torn Bosnia. Mick, who is the other member of the College Conflicted group, has a father with an associate's degree and a mother who started college, but did not finish. Sinead has a 3.2 GPA and Mick has a GPA of "around 3.4." Sinead describes her family as having "struggled financially" while growing up. Mick, who identifies as white, describes his family as "middle class."

**College aspirations/expectations.** Sinead describes herself as "one of those kids who thought they would go to college somewhere between kindergarten and my first few years of high school." That changed during her junior year when she started thinking about other options. She explains why in the following statement:

I started thinking about where I was going to go and what I was going to go for.

Now I have a car that I'm paying for, so I'm kind of deciding not to go to college right after high school and thinking of working and being financially stable before

I start school... I would say that I'm focused on moving on without college

because I've never really liked high school and I don't like how much homework

I have. I'm more of an ant-social person who likes to focus on my work.

When asked if she has plans to apply to any colleges in case she changes her mind later in her senior year, Sinead said that "it's a possibility" because if she does go to college it will more than likely be locally at CCV or VTC (Vermont Technical College). She is leaning toward waiting a year, however, because she wants to work and save money first. She is thinking of majoring in "accounting, laboratory work or equine studies," but "doesn't want to waste money" until she is sure what she wants to major in. Sinead is "thinking about doing computer data entry at Blue Cross/Blue Shield or National Life"

after graduation or “working at Petco” because she “likes animals.” Sinead said her priorities have changed since she bought a car last year. She had to quit playing soccer, for example, so she could work four days a week at Subway in order to make her monthly car payment. “I’m not sure yet what I’ll end up doing, but I’m not going to work at Subway much longer,” she said. Sinead is also considering a number of other options including moving to Kentucky where she was born to live with relatives and establish residency before applying to the University of Kentucky, because “they have a great equine studies program.” She is also thinking about moving to Florida if her parents decide to relocate there because she heard “you can go to college for free if you live there for a year.”

Mick started his senior year in a similar place as Sinead in terms of considering a number of potential post-secondary options. He has inquired more about attending college, however, and signed up for the College Board, met with his school guidance counselor to talk about “early action and to get information on certain colleges.” He also looked into the requirements for becoming game warden. “I was kind of on the fence about college then (last year), but now I’m thinking about going into the workforce after high school, and then through the workforce, taking college classes,” he said. When asked if he feels pressure to apply to college after revealing that most of friends are going to college, Mick said, “It’s always a thought to go to college, but probably after a year.” When pressed on whether he might apply to a few colleges in case he changes his mind, Mick says the following:

That's kind of a hard question, because I'm talking to my father and aunt, who work for the State of Vermont, and my cousin about her position with the State. She didn't go to college either, but said that if you did (go to college) you could, ya know, go a little further.

Mick has looked into the different pathways to becoming a game warden and heard from his friend's father that graduating from the Vermont State Police is the best non-college route. He explains that by doing so he could become a police officer if he changes his mind about becoming a game warden:

He (his friend's father) basically explained that you can go through the academy and then start low like as a sheriff or something, and that you can then move up. I like the law enforcement field from what I know about it. I would go into it and then become a game warden, because I've always liked the game warden idea. Hunting is my biggest hobby so that would be a good one. My only concern is that I wouldn't be able to hunt as much because they work lot during hunting season.

Mick's reasoning for attending the police academy instead of going to college to become a game warden is strictly financial. "I would rather not accumulate a lot of college debt," he said. He reiterates that he is not opposed to going to college if the State wanted to pay for him to take classes after hiring him as a game warden. "I'll probably have to work and would take classes if they asked me to," he said.



**Postsecondary plans remain fluid.** By the second meeting in December, Sinead and Mick had both changed their postsecondary plans. Those plans still did not include college, however, but rather different job opportunities following graduation. Both students now seem almost entirely focused on entering the workforce, which has resulted in even less reliance on their school guidance counselor for information. Instead, they are relying exclusively on family, friends, working professionals in fields they are considering entering, and the internet for guidance and information. Sinead wants to apply for a job at a local credit union where her friend works, and eventually become an accountant. She explains her change in plans in the following way:

My plans are always subject to change, but I've been to a bunch of doctor's appointments lately and had some random conversations with people, and I've talked to my parents, and I think I'm going to be an accountant. I'm going to do, like, these online classes. There are some that are free so I'm going to start with those and then start the ones that cost money after. You get a certificate after you complete the course. I want to do them before I actually make up my mind, and then I was thinking to maybe go to college after like a year or so 'cuz I don't know if we're planning on it or not, but we (family) may be moving to Kentucky.

When asked what organization is offering the online accounting courses, Sinead said she does not remember, but that "you just type in 'free accounting courses' and there's so many that pop up... almost 100,000 people do it."

Sinead has brought up her older sister, who lives at home with their parents, on multiple occasions as an example of someone who went down a postsecondary path that she does not want to follow. She explains why:

My sister ended up in a bad situation. She got right out of high school and started putting things on credit and now she's behind because she had a kid. That's why I don't really want to go to college right after school, because my car payment is gonna get transferred into my name in May and it's like \$18,000 that's gonna be on me. If I did go to school it would be even more (debt). One year of college is like the cost of a car.

When Sinead went to the school guidance counselor with questions about potential job opportunities, she said she felt supported in that endeavor. "I definitely think that they (guidance counselors) are here for us beyond the point of just academics," she said. "She did say that schooling (college) is like something that I could do, but I shut her right down [laughs]."

By December, Mick seems to have abandoned his plans to become a game warden and is now focused on working in the medical field. He is looking into becoming an orderly, nurse or "someone who transports patients around." His friend, who works at a nearby elderly care facility, suggested he apply there to see if he likes working with patients. Mick said he is seriously considering it, but wants to "keep his options open." His parents are supportive of his desire to work in the medical field, but his father and brother are urging him to look into getting his commercial driver's license (CDL) so he can work for a local trucking company transporting materials to construction sites. Mick

said he did some research and talked to his brother about getting his CDL license and heard that there is high demand for CDL drivers. “Basically, you study for it, pay to go take the test, get your CDL license, and then if you want to from there, you can go take another test and try and get your bio hazard license,” he said. Mick has looked into buying his own tractor trailer truck at a cost of around \$80,000 and starting his own business. He quickly dismissed that idea, however, deciding that he “isn’t ready to invest that kind of money” and instead plans to drive for a local company or get a different job and save money. “I want to get a job first, probably at Ben & Jerry’s on the (production) line just to get money and then take CDL courses and things like that,” he said. “There’s high demand for third shift down there and it’s like \$22 an hour.”

Like Sinead, Mick’s postsecondary decision-making making process has been heavily influenced by his family. His older brother, he explains, has played an especially significant role in his life.

In high school, when my brother was a freshman, he got in an accident and was paralyzed, and so I think that kind of took away his desire to go to college for him. So when he was a senior he went to work as a parts designer for a plastics company. He still does some of that, but he also got an excavator right out of high school and him and I do a little bit of excavating. He doesn’t have any movement from the waist down, but he uses hand controls that work fine.

Mick attributes his desire to work with machinery and to pursue his CDL license with his exposure to excavating and construction while working with his brother:

Working with him and getting into construction has definitely affected my decisions and is something I like doing. I think being exposed to it (excavating) helped because it just gave me a sense of what I can do, and what I'm good at, and what I like... things like that. I haven't experienced nursing, so I don't know if it's good or bad or if I like it or hate it. Trucking and all that stuff, I've actually done it.

**Parental influence.** As Sinead and Mick begin to narrow their postsecondary options, it became clear that college would not be among them. Sinead reveals that she and Mick have been dating for more than a year, but that their relationship is not playing a role in their post-secondary decision-making process. Mick later concurs with that statement. Sinead's parents have long expressed a desire for her to attend college, but more recently have supported her decision to enter initially the workforce. "They are supportive of me going to school," she said. "My sister didn't go, so they really want me to go. They didn't want me ending up like they did and not go to school, so they are like trying to push me and even said that they would pay for CCV if I went." Sinead said she does not want to "burden her parents" financially by having them pay for college, and would rather work first, save money, and maybe go to college later. She worries that her father, who is a crane operator at a granite shed, might "roll over and die because he works so hard." The idea of adding to the financial stress of her father and mother, who runs a house cleaning business, is not something she is willing to do because they "already struggle with making payments." She describes her desire to help her family in the following way:

I've seen the things that they've gone through and I kind of just want to step up and help. They have had a tough life. It's like the one thing I want to do is, like, work and be able to help my dad with payments and things because he struggles sometimes. I mean at first, like with my sister, he really wanted her to go to college, but then as time went on he realized that you don't need college, like a degree to get a job. He started kind of laying back a little bit, so he didn't push as much for me to go college

Mick said his parents are supportive of whatever he wants to do, although his father and brother have been encouraging him to pursue non-college options. "My mom supports me in my decisions," he said. "She's fine with whatever I choose." When asked who has had the most influence on his postsecondary plans, Mick said the following: "My dad for sure and probably my brother since he got me into construction and hauling and things like since I started working with him in 2010."

**The final decision.** Sinead begins her final interview by happily sharing news that she received an offer from a local community bank to work as a teller. "Yup, a teller," she said. "A personal banker. It's what I want to do." She sounds relieved to have finally made a decision about her future and is looking forward to making some money to help pay her bills and help her parents. She describes her feelings in the following way:

I guess I kind of grew up a little faster than some other people and I've seen that like life is hard and that you need money to survive. Like I have a car and I just bought an Apple computer and I put it on credit and I need to pay for that... it's just (sigh) that money is kind of a necessity in life. I'm just not the kind of person

who wants to go to college, but if I have to go to further my career in let's just say banking or accounting, I mean I will take classes if necessary.

When asked who she relied on most to make a final decision about her postsecondary plans, she expressed the following sentiment:

I would say that my father was definitely one of them just because I want my dad's opinion on what he'd like to see me do and what would make him proud. I asked my boyfriend's mom for help because she knows a little bit more than my father just because speaking (he speaks mostly Bosnian) is hard for him. I'm sure my dad would like to see me go to college and get a degree in something or a certificate, but it doesn't always happen that way.

When asked why she would rely on her boyfriend's mother for advice as opposed to a school guidance counselor or someone who works in banking, Sinead said she trusted her opinion because she has a lot of experience working in different jobs and cares about her future. "She just kind of helped me understand where I fit best just because she knows me pretty well," she said. "I know she wants to see me succeed and she's had a lot more jobs than my father has, so she kind of knows how it goes I guess."

Sinead finishes her final interview with the following insight about how learning a strong work ethic from her parents played a surprising role in her *not* wanting to attend college:

If I didn't start working at the age of 15 I definitely *would* be going to college. I think it's that work ethic that I developed at such a young age that has made me want to work and not go to school. My sister has been a big influence because I

don't want to be in debt like her and have kids at too young an age not be able to work. She's proud of me and we get along, it's just that I don't want to be in her situation.

As of October of 2017, Sinead was working at a local credit union as a teller.

By Mick's final interview, he had applied for a job that he saw on Craig's List with a local trucking company as a non-CDL tractor trailer driver. "My dad showed it to me three or four days ago and thought 'I may as well apply,'" he said. Mick also applied for an assembly line job at Ben & Jerry's and is waiting to hear back about which 12-hour shift they want him to work.

I like my weekends, so I'm leaning toward the trucking job, because it's something I like to do. It will probably come down to the pay just because Ben & Jerry's states it's pay at \$18.50 for the night shift, but if they (construction company) offered me the same then I'd work there.

When asked why he worked so hard to earn good grades in high school even though he knew he probably was not going to college, Mick said that he "enjoyed school" and that he "pushed himself," especially during his junior year. "I just have a strong work ethic when it comes to things like that," he said. If someone asked him why he ultimately decided not to go to college, Mick said the following: "I'd just say that I didn't really find an occupation that I needed to go to college for that I liked, and because the CDL is really what I like to do."

As of October of 2017, Mick was working for a local company as a surveyor.

## **Cross-Case Analysis**

When multiple cases are chosen as part of a qualitative case study, a typical format is to provide first a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis, as well as assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case (Creswell, 2013). The following section is a cross-case analysis of the previous three within-case analyses conducted on the following groups: College Confident; College Considering; and College Conflicted. A number of similarities and differences between the groups are discussed using a comparative cross-case analysis methodology as they go through the college decision-making process during their senior year as they are presented with a plethora of information from a broad range of sources. Key themes that are explored include the importance of level of college aspiration entering their senior year, parental influence, the attainment of information, how students process and weigh new information from a wide range of sources, and who students chose to confide in when making a final decision about their future.

## **College Aspirations Versus Expectations**

One of the first differences to emerge between the three individual case studies after initial interviews was the varying levels that students aspired or expected to attend college. Those differences, which were influenced by the initial request of guidance counselors to select students with varying levels of college going desire, would become the basis for the development of the aforementioned groups: College Confident; College Considering and College Conflicted. As previously stated, the difference between



*aspiring* and *expecting* to attend college is that students who aspire are “hoping” to attend college, while students who expect to attend are fully expecting to do so. All of the students in the College Confident group entered their senior year fully expecting to attend college in the fall. Members of this group used words or phrases like “expected,” “never questioned,” “assumed I always would” or “for as long as I can remember” when talking about their long-held commitment level to attend college. In stark contrast, students in the College Conflicted group used phrases like “I’m still considering all my options,” “college is unlikely at this point” or “I’m more focused on finding a good job” to describe their post-secondary plans. Somewhere in between those two groups were members of the College Considering group, who were searching for information on both the college-going process and potential job opportunities. Only one of these students (Sid) expected to attend college, despite having “fleeting thoughts” of becoming a border patrol officer.

Ultimately, students who expected to attend college entering their senior year did so the following fall, while those that aspired to attend college had mixed results. In the end, all four members of the College Confident group went to college; two of the four members of the College Considering group went to college with the other two entering the workforce; and both members of the College Conflicted group entered the workforce.

### **The Critical Role of Information**

It is difficult to measure how significant of a role the level of commitment to attend college by members of each group entering their senior year played in their final decision. However, there is no question that it affected the types of information they sought regarding their post-secondary plans, and perhaps more importantly, who they

sought it from. Not surprisingly, members of the College Confident group sought information focused almost exclusively on the college application process. They relied most heavily on school guidance counselors, VSAC counselors, college search websites, parents and external college help organizations for assistance with procedural functions like filling out the Common Application and FAFSA, writing college essays, and applying for grants. For the most part, the information they received in this area was helpful in terms of meeting deadlines with the exception of Liv, who mistakenly applied to the University of San Diego instead of the University of California at San Diego (UCSD). The same could not be said for the quality of information students in this group received when trying to build a list of colleges that was commensurate with their academic ability. As shown in the individual case study analysis, that process seemed disorganized and chaotic at times without any identifiable strategy other than plugging search criteria (size, location, etc.) into a college match program. Liv said she compiled her college list “in like a day” after “30 schools popped up on the screen.” “I don’t know how to just go out and find a school, because there are so many and I can’t tell the difference,” she said. At one point, she started eliminating schools based on whether she liked the name of the school, mascot or school colors. “I had no idea how to narrow it down,” she said. The result was that Liv was accepted to only one of the eight schools (UVM) to which she applied. Ella suffered a similar fate after compiling a college list based on information she received as a student in Questbridge, which included Ivy League schools and other top-level institutions, but no apparent backup or safety schools. She later admitted that her mother was insistent that she keep the Questbridge schools

even after she was eliminated from the program, and that she never sought advice from her school guidance counselor. Consequently, Ella was not accepted to any of the seven schools that she applied, resulting in a late application to Castleton in April, where she is currently enrolled with a 3.75 high school GPA and 1,300-plus SAT score. She did not want to go to school in Vermont. In the end, the four members of this group were accepted to 5 of the 20 colleges to which they applied, with two students being accepted to only one school each, despite applying to 16 schools overall. Though it was never a question of “if” they would go to college, “where” they ultimately enrolled was either well below their academic level or not among the top half of the schools on their list. Nonetheless, students in this group remained steadfast in their pursuit of information focused on helping them attain their ultimate goal of being enrolled in college in the fall of 2018.

Comparatively, students in the College Considering group sought a combination of information on both colleges and potential job opportunities. Madonna, for example, spent most of the first part of her senior year seeking information on what is required to become a hairdresser. Sid sought a combination of information related to the college application process and jobs that paid well and did not require a college education such as a U.S. border patrol agent. Joan, who had not given college much thought until later in her junior year when her grades improved, said she was scrambling to find information about the college application process and felt “way behind.” At the same time, she was talking with her uncle about becoming a surfing instructor in Maine and looking into other possible job opportunities. “I think my high school could do more to help kids

understand what college is all about,” she said. Joan still managed to complete her application to the only college she applied (Castleton) with the help of her guidance counselor. Katie also completed the only college application she attempted to Wentworth, while also considering non-college options like moving in with her father and working locally. Surprisingly, neither of them applied to any other schools with Joan saying that if she went to college it would be to Castleton, which she called her “dream school.” Katie said she was pleased with only being accepted to Wentworth and did not want to deal with being rejected by any others schools. Both students said they weren’t really exposed to other college options, although they were aware that they might be able to get into other colleges. Sid eventually focused exclusively on information related to college. Madonna, who decided not to pursue cosmetology school over the holidays, switched her focus to finding information on the college application process. With the help of her guidance counselor, VSAC counselor and school principal, she applied to eight colleges with rolling admissions within a few weeks.

The College Conflicted group was unique in that they sought information focused almost exclusively on finding a good job. The sources of information they relied on most were family members and friends, although they did utilize job-related services offered by the guidance counselor’s office. This resulted in Mick frequently changing his post-secondary job plans, which shifted from a patient transport/orderly position at a local health care facility, to a production line worker at Ben & Jerry’s, to a CDL driver, among other considerations including an underwater welder. Though he remained unsure about which job he would pursue following graduation, Mick did not reconsider going to

college at any point after his initial interview in the fall. Sinead also sought job-related information primarily from family, friends and local business professionals working in fields she was considering entering after graduation. She heard from a friend that there was an opening at a local credit union where she planned to apply, and ideally work while taking online accounting classes to eventually become an accountant.

Ultimately, the quality of information received by students in each group, when they received it, and who they received it from played a major role in where, and if, they decided to attend college. Research shows that socioeconomic factors mediate students' access to information about college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, Tierney (1980) reported that low-socioeconomic status (SES) students had fewer information sources than upper-level SES students did. Leslie, Johnson, and Carlson (1977) found that that low-SES students relied on high school counselors as the single most likely source of information about college. Interestingly, Cabrera and La Nasa, (2000) found that even though low-income students may be limited in their access to a variety of sources of information, availability of high school-based academic information resources seems to level the playing field. Results from this study support that finding in that students from all three groups received similar levels of information during the first half of the school year as they filled out applications. In some ways, the three students from lower SES families who qualified for VSAC counselors received more accurate information and support than students from higher SES families. Aiden, for example, relied heavily on Liv for information via her VSAC counselor. However, as will be discussed in the next section,

students began to rely more heavily on their parents for information and guidance in the second half of the school year, effectively sabotaging the efforts of guidance counselors.

### **Information/Guidance Shifts to Parents**

Midway through the second half of the school year as students begin to firm up their postsecondary plans, an interesting shift occurred regarding where members of each group now sought information, and who started offering unsolicited advice. In all three cases, parents now played the most critical role in the post-secondary decision-making process of each student. Prior to this point in their senior year, students relied most heavily on guidance counselors, VSAC counselors and other school officials for information related to filling out resumes, college and job applications, the FAFSA and other process-related procedures. Now that students in each group began receiving college acceptance letters and job offers, they sought guidance and advice – as opposed to information and data – primarily from one or both parents. The type of advice that was received – in some cases for the first time – and the motivations behind it, looked very different across the three cases.

For students in the College Confident group, parents remained the most consistent by supporting and reinforcing their long-held belief that college was the best route for their child. Liv's mother, both of Adam's parents, Ella's mother and both of Jimmy's parents had pushed their children to go to college since "as long as I can remember" as Liv put it. That support never wavered even when thoughts of pursuing other post-secondary options entered the conversation like when Adam considered skipping college and "working at a ski shop in Burlington." Whenever any of the students in this group

considered veering off the college-bound track, albeit it rare, a parent was there to steer them back on it. Not surprisingly, parents of children in this group were excited when college acceptance letters arrived. They made sure their children sent in the necessary documentation to ensure enrollment the following fall. Liv's mother explained in the following statement that the college bar was set high starting with her first child:

Early on my children set high standards for themselves with my oldest being valedictorian, so she set the bar high and my children are competitive. Our VSAC counselor showed me how to do it (college application process) and then I showed my kids and they took over, although I still guided the process along with her (VSAC counselor). If one of my kids said they didn't want to go to college we'd have a nice discussion.

For students in the College Considering group, being accepted to college was received quite differently by their parent(s) for a variety of reasons. Some parents of students in this group were apathetic or unsupportive of their children going to college, and in some cases, actively worked against their child's efforts to leave home and enroll. In the cases of Madonna, Joan and Katie, their mothers weighed-in for the first time after the holiday break when they realized that their daughters were not only seriously considering attending college, but had actually been accepted. In particular, Katie was experiencing major pressure from her mother to stay home and help watch her younger siblings. In lieu of that, Katie said her mother would rather she "went to Wentworth and went into debt" than go live with her father in a nearby town. When asked if she thought her mother would prefer any option over her moving in with her father, Katie said "yea,

she hates the fact that I might live with him, so there's a lot of drama right now." Further complicating Katie's college decision-making process is that her father's suggestion that she consider not going to Wentworth because it costs \$49,000 dollars, and instead come live with him and get a job, so she can save money and attend the local community college. The high cost to attend Wentworth does not account for financial aid since Katie's mother, who has parental custody, refused to fill out the FAFSA. At this point, Katie is clearly stressed and wants to "just get it over with," adding that her parents said she would "feel better" if she would just make a decision. Decision theory shows that poor decisions are made when individuals are pressured to make quick decisions under social pressure or time constraints that interfere with a careful consideration of the options and consequences (Reason, 1990). Unfortunately, Katie's mother is exacerbating the situation by pressuring Katie to stay home and help raise her younger siblings.

Equally stressed was Joan, who is feeling major pressure from her mother to "forget about college" because it "costs too much." Her mother also refused to fill out the FAFSA, which Joan thinks is part of the reason it took so long to hear back from Castleton, and why the cost was higher than expected. Prior to being accepted, Joan said her mother was "kind of oblivious to it all," but now that she has been accepted is trying to sabotage her efforts to attend her "dream school." Joan's father has not been in her life for many years, so he is not involved in the process. Her step-father, who went back to college to get a degree to become a drug and alcohol counselor, quietly supports her decision to go to college, but "would not go against my mother if it came down to it," according to Joan.



Madonna's mother, who was previously "not that involved," according to Madonna, is also weighing-in on her decision to attend college now that she has been accepted to multiple schools. "I've dealt with her for a long time," she said. "I need to get away. I watched my mom when I was a kid just sit on the couch and do nothing for half my life and I don't want that for my family." A main difference between Madonna's situation and that of Joan and Katie is that her father, who lives in New Hampshire, is very supportive of her going to college. He describes his support in the following way:

I'd say she (Madonna's mother) had a bad stretch for a while and put them (her children) through a rough patch, but I was always the voice of reason. If (Madonna) was upset, she could call me and I let her talk. That's my job. I'm dad. I got big shoulders. I can handle it. She says 'you are the only one I can talk to daddy.' I kind of laid it out for her and told her that she needs to go to college so she can depend on herself. What if I die next month? What are you going to do then? You can't depend on a husband, because he can leave, ya know. Then what are you gonna do? If you want to depend on finances from other people, look at your momma. Always has her hand out: help, help, help. Me? No, I'm gonna work. Hopefully (Madonna) will keep on the right track, because college is the only track she should be on.

Among all of the students in the College Considering group, Sid had the easiest time making a decision regarding college, due in large part to his parent's support. In some ways, his parents were more similar to those in the College Confident group in that they generally supported his college-going aspirations, despite not directly opposing his

looking into becoming a U.S. border patrol agent. Sid said his parents kept him on the college track even though it “probably wouldn’t bother his mother” if he found a good job that he “didn’t need to go to college for.”

The role of the parents of students in the College Conflicted group was more nuanced in the sense that they were supportive of whatever post-secondary option their child decided to pursue. With both Mick and Sinead having been focused primarily on entering the workforce after high school, their parents’ input did not change as dramatically as those in the College Considering group when they heard that their child had gotten into college. In the case of Sinead, her father, who grew up in Bosnia, wanted her to become the first in their family to go to college. He even offered to pay for her to take classes at a local community college, but eventually relented when she emphasized her strong desire to get a job at a local credit union. Sinead is concerned that her father works too hard at the granite quarry, helping his wife with her cleaning business and supporting her younger sister. “They are supportive of me going to college,” she said, but adds that they “already struggle with making payments. I have a car payment and don’t want to add to the stress by having them pay for college.”

Mick also has parents who support him going to college or getting a job after high school. Since his focus has been primarily on entering the workforce, his parents have supported that endeavor. Although he did not talk in depth about the impact of his brother becoming paralyzed in high school on his own post-secondary plans, it was clear that Mick cared deeply about his brother and enjoyed working with him on his excavating business. Despite Mick saying that his decision to enter the workforce was not influenced

by his brother, who he helped take care of since his accident, it is hard to envision a scenario where he would move very far away from brother to attend college.

In many ways, the shift by students to more of a reliance on at least one parent as decision-time approached should come as no surprise based on existing literature. Among the factors predicting students' early educational plans, parental encouragement is the strongest (Hossler et al., 1999). Most literature on the influence of parents on the college going process has focused on the positive aspects of their involvement. However, the role of parents in this study ranged from positive to apathetic to negative varied by group. The involvement and support of parents of students in the College Confident group clearly had a positive impact on their decision to enroll in college. Not so for three of the students in the College Considering group whose parents, who had at least one parent who negatively impacted their attempt to enroll in college. Not surprisingly, as will be shown in the next section, the postsecondary decisions made by students depended heavily on the parent they chose to confide in most, and their respective opinions about college.

### **Decision Time: Confiding in a 'Trusted' Individual**

In the end, when it came time for students in each of the three groups to make a final decision about their future, they all confided in at least one parent before doing it. The timing may have been different, but the influence – both negative and positive – of their parents, ultimately played the biggest role in the final decision of all 10 students to attend college or enter the workforce. For students in the College Confident group, the support and urging of their parents to go to college started when they very young and

never wavered, according to students in the group. Their respective decisions to attend college was more of an afterthought than a decision as the college-going drumbeat drilled into them by their parents unconsciously played in their head.

As for members of the College Considering group, making one of the most consequential decisions of their young lives would not be so easy. Some of the parents of students in this group were vehemently opposed to their child going to college, while others were highly supportive. Joan, who was accepted to Castleton, may have faced the longest odds of ultimately enrolling in college with her mother “being unsupportive” and her father not around to counter her negative reinforcement. In the end, the pull to stay home and help her family proved too much to overcome. “It was my decision,” said Joan. “Life has played out. I don’t know, like, I have to be there for them (family). I mean like they’ve been there for me.” Katie, who also felt immense pressure from her mother to stay home and help raise her younger siblings, ultimately confided in her father, who convinced her to move in with him, work locally, and take a few classes at the local community college (she was not enrolled as of October 2017). Katie said she thinks most kids her age has someone in their family that they trust the most to steer them in the right direction. “He’s (her dad) very supportive,” she said. “... it’s more like on a personal level, just having someone to support you. I don’t trust my mom. She’s not very supportive.”

Madonna also confided in her father, who she said convinced her to go to college after a heart-to-heart conversation one night following a particularly bad day dealing with her mother. “We had a conversation and he told me that I really need to go to college,”

said Madonna, who was enrolled at Santa Ana College as of October 2017. “I’ve dealt with my mother, helping her way to often. I have to be selfish at this point.” Madonna’s guidance counselor said the conversation with her father completely changed her mind and that she was in her office applying to colleges the next day. “She loves her dad and has a great relationship with him,” she said. “He is a really great guy and it is really important to (Madonna) that she makes him proud.”

As for Sid, his parents remained supportive of his decision to attend college, which he ultimately did in the fall of 2017. He followed the college-going advice his parents had been giving him throughout his academic career, though it sounded slightly less directive than the advice given to members of the College Confident group. In retrospect, Sid’s decision was more about *where* he would attend college rather than *if*, despite occasionally looking into potentially good paying jobs that did not require a college degree. In the end, he decided to major in criminal justice at Castleton after his mother suggested he apply there because it might be cheaper than Paul Smith’s College. “I came close at one point to not applying (to college) in the early stage, but once I got past that it was mostly (about) scholarships...,” he said.

Interestingly, students in the College Conflicted group received the least direct pressure from their parents to pursue a specific post-secondary path, yet they may have had been influenced most by them. Sinead’s parents initially wanted her to go to college, but became supportive of her decision to work locally as a bank teller after she convinced her father that “you don’t need college, like a degree, to get a job.” Sinead said her decision to not to go to college was based on a work ethic she developed at a young age

by watching her father labor to pay the family's bills, which she wants to help with now that she can work fulltime. She explains her love of work and desire to help her family in the following way:

If I didn't start working at the age of 15 I definitely *would* be going to college. I think it's that work ethic that I developed at such a young age that has made me want to work and not go to school... I've seen things that they've (parents) gone through and I kind of want to step up and help. They have had a tough life. It's like the one thing I want to do is, like, I want to work and be able to help my dad with payments and things because he struggles sometimes.

Mick's parents were also supportive of whatever post-secondary path he chose to pursue. His father finished his college degree after working for the State of Vermont for a number of years, which is a path Mick seems interested in pursuing, mainly because it would save him from incurring college debt. His early exposure to excavating with his brother and other construction-related jobs "showed him what he was good at" and played a role in his decision to go directly to work after high school as he explains in the following statement:

Working with him and getting into construction definitely affected my decisions, and it's something I like doing. I think being exposed to it helped me because it just gave me a sense of what I can do ... and what I like ... things like that.

The final decisions by both Mick and Sinead to work locally may have been impacted by the fact that they were dating, although both said they would have supported whatever decision the other made, regardless of how far apart those choices would have put them.

Despite guidance counselors and others school officials explaining the consequences of not going to college or having a post-secondary plan involving some form of training leading to a decent paying job, students seemed impacted most by the influence and actions of their parents. A consistent effort by school guidance counselors and VSAC counselors to provide students with helpful information did have a positive impact on their decision-making process, according to members of each group. “Getting a reality check” as one of the guidance counselors put it, can have an impact on a student who is not getting one from their parent(s):

If they (students) are able to make a living off of the things they want to do and it does not require college, then fantastic. Because if at that point, they are planning on making \$10 an hour, then I need to play a fun little game called ‘life,’ where you show them the reality of how much they will make a week. We break it down monthly and we talk about rent, we talk about utilities, we talk about insurance, we talk about car payments. Are you going to have kids? Are you going to get married? And the next thing you know they look and they have like \$30. That is their reality check. It sucks. So then we reassess. You know, this ‘I don’t really care what I do, I’ll just find a job’ doesn’t work... it’s not the most comfortable conversation, but listen, I’m here to help you figure this out, so use it. Otherwise, you don’t get it and you are going to just have mom or dad nagging at you.

One of the most important questions addressed in this study is whether the above conversation between a guidance counselor – or any other school official for that matter –

and a student carries as much weight as the one between a student and their “nagging” parent(s). Based on the small sample size in this study, the answer appears to be no.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As previously stated, decision theory was the primary theoretical framework applied to this study. Aspects of aspirational research and enculturation were also taken into consideration. Overall, the study was not theoretically driven, however, and was more in keeping with the approach by LeCompte & Preissle (1993), who asserted that qualitative research is not explicitly driven by theory, but it is situated within theoretical perspectives. That said, there were a few instances where students from each of the three groups made choices that are worth analyzing through a decision theory lens. Perhaps the most pertinent aspect of decision theory to this study is the concept that when an individual is faced with too many choices or with a process that is perplexing, people frequently go with the path of least resistance, often referred to as the default option (Castleman et al., 2015). This concept may have applied to some of the students in the College Considering group who struggled with choosing between multiple postsecondary options including whether and where to attend colleges and entering the workforce. Consider the case of Katie, who felt competing pressures from both parents with one encouraging her to go to college and the other to stay home and work. Both parents encouraged her to make a choice about her future, because she would “feel better if she just made a decision.” In the end, after she decided not to attend college and move in with her father, Katie said she was “just glad to get it over with,” which falls under the aforementioned “default option” referenced by Castleman (2015). Though students in the



College Conflicted group also faced multiple choices, Mick and Sinead were more focused on choosing between jobs, which they ultimately both did. In the end, when students made final decisions, some were clearly overwhelmed by the enormity of making a decision, which according to Castleman, Baum, and Schwartz (2015) causes our brains to employ strategies that lead to poor decision-making as a defense mechanism.

The role that emotions played in this study was significant, and in general, can have a significant impact on decision making, especially “immediate emotions.” As the intensity of immediate emotions intensifies, they progressively take control of decision making and override rational decision making (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). This may explain some of the seemingly rash decisions made by Katie and Joan not to attend college as well as Madonna’s last-minute choice to apply to eight colleges after having an emotional conversation with her father. Further, decisions made under social pressure or time constraints interfere with a careful consideration of the options and consequences (Reason, 1990). One could argue that every student in all three groups experienced both social pressure and time constraints when it came to making final postsecondary decisions. Clearly student decision making is complex and not quite so straightforward as, say, a simple benefit-cost model would suggest (Castleman et al., 2015). Decision-making models such as these contain built-in assumptions, for example, that all students have access to complete information about the various options available to them. How would we expect low-income students – who are often the first in their families to go to college – to have a good idea of what each postsecondary option has to offer? (Castleman

et al., 2015). The answer to that question varied greatly for members from each group depending on who was providing information and the intent behind it.

Making theoretical links to the role of educational aspirations and enculturation in the college decision-making process proved more difficult. The one-year time limitation of the study made it challenging to gauge the length of time and level of intensity that each student had aspired to attend college, based only on retroactive questions. However, it was apparent that students in the College Confident group, who claimed to have wanted to go to college “for as long as they could remember,” had the strongest, most sustained plans to attend college, fully “expecting” to do so. In contrast, college going aspirations of students in the College Considering and College Conflicted group fluctuated over time and continued to do so well into their senior year, resulting in mixed college attendance. As for enculturation, it was difficult to ascertain whether the rural cultures of each community played a role in students’ decision to enroll in college. Despite research showing that the more isolated a group is from others, the more pronounced certain traits become over time, it was difficult to identify any traits that were specific to the small towns in this study that affected whether student decided to enroll in college.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Discussion of Findings**

Despite some observers questioning whether everyone should attend college, higher education is undoubtedly essential to the social and economic prosperity of individuals and society (Perna, 2006). Yet, many high school graduates do not in fact continue their education after high school. Other students plan to attend college through most of their high school years but then, for a variety of reasons identified in previous chapters here and in current literature, delay matriculation or never enroll (Hossler & Gallagher, 1999). Research exploring the actual college decision-making process to see how students deal with the factors known to prevent college enrollment such as lack of parental support and socioeconomic status is more limited. The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to help fill that gap in the literature by examining high school students in rural Vermont as they go through this understudied process. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, observations and document analyses. The sample population and units of analysis consisted of 10 students at two rural high schools in central and northern Vermont. Six secondary participants included two guidance counselors, two parents, a principal and a VSAC counselor. The main reason for telling the stories of the 10 students in this study was to bring the college decision-making process to life by offering on-the-ground insight based on year-long interviews into how students actually deal with obstacles known to derail postsecondary enrollment. Individual case analyses of each group of students (College Confident, College Considering and College Conflicted) was performed to produce evidence for guidance

counselors, school administrators, parents and local and state policymakers interested in helping realize their postsecondary dreams.

The conclusions drawn from this research emerged from the study's research questions and findings. Research questions included:

1) What factors play a role in the college decision-making process of high school students in rural Vermont?

2) How do students weigh these factors as they experience them at different stages of their senior year while trying to decide whether or where to attend college?

3) What impact does the level of college going aspirations by a student entering their senior year have on their final postsecondary decision?

4) What role does information play in the decision-making process of seniors as they decide whether or where to attend college?

5) Who do students rely on most for information and guidance during the college application process and when making a final decision about whether or where to attend college?

Consequently, the following findings and themes are addressed in this chapter: 1) The Role of Aspirations Versus Expectations, 2) The Impact of Information on Postsecondary Choice, 3) The Consequences of a Non-Linear Process, 4) and Key Influencers on Final Postsecondary Decisions. What follows is a discussion of these findings and subsequent conclusions drawn from this study. The discussion is followed by recommendations for school practitioners, local, state and federal policymakers and future research.

## **The Role of Aspirations Versus Expectations**

Researchers, educators, and policymakers frequently look to the educational expectations of young people – that is, their belief about their likely educational attainment – to gauge their future success (Jacob & Linkow, 2011). Measuring student aspirations, however, has proven challenging for researchers, though some have shown that students who are able to maintain high aspirations for college attendance during the high school years will increase the likelihood of high educational attainment (Campbell, 1983; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Sewell, 1971; Sewell & Shah, 1978). One of the limitations of this study is that it started tracking students at the start of their senior year. By that time in the college decision-making process, fewer than 75 percent of students in Vermont still “aspire to attend college (VSAC, 2014).” Ideally, this study would have started with interviews of students at the beginning of high school or earlier to identify why some opt out of the process prior to their senior year. That said, the most precipitous drop in the number of students who decide they no longer want to attend college occurs just before or during their senior year (VSAC, 2014). An important finding of this study was that the level of college going aspirations or expectations a student held entering their senior year played a significant role in how they conducted their postsecondary search and whether they ultimately enrolled in college. As stated earlier, the difference between aspiring versus expecting is that if you aspire to attend college you are “hoping” to do so, whereas if you expect to attend college you are “expecting” to do so. Every student in the College Confident group expected to attend college “for as long as they could remember,” and ultimately did so. In every case, these expectations were

established early in their academic career, spurred primarily by the unwavering support of at least one parent. By the time they started their senior year when this study began, it was a matter of “where” they would attend college rather than “if.” Aside from a brief flirtation by Adam to skip college and work at a ski shop, none of the four students ever seriously wavered, and eventually enrolled in four-year colleges. Comparatively, the college going aspirations of students in the College Considering Group were just that – aspirations. Despite none of the members of this group fully expecting to attend college, their levels of college going aspirations varied, which ultimately mattered in terms of who enrolled in college the following fall. One could argue that Sid, for example, was the closest member of this group to having expectations of going to college. His parents provided a steady stream of college going messaging, although Sid said they “would support whatever decisions he made.” Madonna, aside from considering enrolling in cosmetology school, aspired to attend college earlier in the year before starting to expect on some level that she might. The fact that both Sid and Madonna, who teetered between aspiring and expecting to attend college, ultimately decided to enroll in college, supports the finding that the level of college going aspirations versus expectations a student has entering their senior year was an accurate predictor of postsecondary outcomes.

Further, the levels at which Joan and Katie aspired to attend college entering their senior year also proved predictive of their postsecondary plans. They entered high school aspiring to attend college, and although their levels of aspirations fluctuated throughout, at no point did they expect they would attend college, and ultimately decided not to go. For Mick and Stevie (College Conflicted), who were focused on entering the workforce

and probably aspired least to attend college, it should come as no surprise, then, that they chose to enter the workforce. In fact, one could argue they actually “expected” to enter the workforce and only loosely aspired to attend college.

One conclusion drawn from this study that students who enter their senior year “expecting” to attend college most likely will, while students who “aspire” to do so most likely will not, provides a new piece of information to this strand of research. The six students who entered their senior year either fully expecting to attend college or at least expecting to do so on some level enrolled in college the following fall. The remaining four students who aspired to attend college on varying levels chose not to go to college.

### **The Impact of Information on Postsecondary Choice**

A major concern for leaders in higher education is that informational asymmetries could exist in the market for higher education, in that students lack information on which colleges are available, how to take standardized tests, what preparatory classes are needed, and how to apply for admission and financial aid (Horn et al., 2003). A lack of information is likely the most severe for students with few college-going peers or college-educated parents and for those who attend high schools with few college counseling resources (Avery & Kane, 2005; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016) such as those located in rural areas. One of the most important findings to emerge from this study was the critical role that information played in the overall college decision making process of each student. Students received a lot of data, but not always right kind of information at the right time from guidance counselors and parents. A main conclusion drawn from this finding is that students in each group ultimately based final postsecondary decisions on

information that was sometimes inaccurate, occasionally misleading or was not commensurate with their academic performance or skill set.

Students in each of the three groups sought different types of information based on their postsecondary goals, which in some cases involved both college and work. Members of the College Confident Group focused exclusively on building a list of colleges and information on how to gain acceptance. Research shows that students may under-match by choosing to attend schools that do not meet their academic potential, or overmatch if they choose to attend schools that are beyond their academic aspirations or ability (Howell & Pender, 2016). Students in the College Confident students never got the chance to attend a college that “overmatched” their academic ability because they applied to colleges they had very little chance of being accepted to. The information they received from guidance counselors, VSAC counselors, external college support organizations and family members resulted in the building of a college application list filled with “reach schools,” but that contained very few “match” schools and almost no backups. The result is that the four members of this group were accepted to only 25 percent of the colleges to which they applied. Two of them were accepted to only one college each, despite applying to 16 schools between them. Ultimately, students enrolled at colleges that were either below their academic level or not among their top choices, based on erroneous information given to them from a wide range of “expert” sources. An important conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that being too confident about students who are College Confident could have major consequences. In other words, just because students in this group “expect” to attend college, doesn’t mean they



don't still need help with the college application process. As shown by this study, they are still at risk of not getting into a college of their choice, and in some cases, may not get into any schools on their list potentially resulting in non-college attendance.

Other research in this area finds that better information about college cost and how to complete financial aid applications significantly improves college enrollment outcomes (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). This research finding applied to most of the students in the College Considering Group. At no fault of the guidance counselors, three students were unable to get their parents to fill out the FAFSA, resulting in offers from colleges that did not include need-based financial aid. Some acceptance letters reflected the total cost of attendance including room, board and tuition without discount. These three students came from families with very little financial means, who would likely have received substantial financial aid. Some students made decisions not to go to college based in part on cost information that would have looked very different had someone explained to them how the financial aid process worked. Unfortunately, some of the parents used the inflated offers to derail their child's college-going plans by presenting it to them as the true cost of attendance, which they simply could not afford to pay. Overall, students in this group were bombarded with the most information from multiple sources that was occasionally inaccurate and sometimes intentionally misleading.

Information sought by students in the College Conflicted group was primarily focused on entering the workforce, which in some ways steered them away from going to college. Information they received on potential job opportunities from family, friends and

guidance counselors seemed random and not always in line with their respective skill sets. Ultimately, both achieved their respective goals of “working locally at a job that paid well.” The decisions to become a bank teller and an excavator, however, were based more on suggestions from people in the community rather than on a well thought out career planning process.

One could argue that the school guidance counselors, VSAC counselors, parents and other informational sources in this study were successful in helping put all 10 students in a position to attend college or enter the workforce. The eight students who expressed interest in attending college were accepted to at least one college, while the remaining two who wanted to enter the workforce found jobs immediately after graduation. That said, the main conclusion that students made postsecondary decisions based on information that was sometimes inaccurate, misleading or did not match their academic or employment skill set played a significant role in where students ultimately ended up going. Whether those choices were optimal remains to be seen, though it seems unlikely given the information they were based upon.

### **The Consequences of a Chaotic Process**

One of the primary goals of this study was to find out what the college decision-making process looked like for students as they actually went through it. Previous college decision models like Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three phase model of Predisposition, Search and Choice depict this process as relatively linear, static or step-based in nature. A key finding in this study was that the college decision-making process turned out to be more of a messy, circuitous journey involving multiple stakeholders with conflicting

agendas for each student. Most of the students started their senior year expecting to follow a relatively unfettered path to college or into the workforce. Instead, they experienced a process involving constant information overload, coupled with a series of pushes and pulls from family, friends and school officials. Students in the College Considering group, for example, were being pulled in opposite directions by parents with different ideas about what was best for the future of their child. Every student in this group, aside from Sid, was told that college was the best route to success by one parent, only to be told by the other that it was a waste of time. In many ways this group experienced the most chaos compared to students in the College Confident group, who were being pushed toward college, and students in the College Conflicted group, who were being pushed toward the workforce. In retrospect, it would have been surprising if students in either group chose different paths than college and work given their focus on those respective pursuits. For students in the College Considering group, however, the decision to attend college remained fluid throughout most of their senior year, making them the most “college convertible,” if you will. Unfortunately, the push to attend college from one parent and the pull to stay close to home by the other caused more confusion than clarity, resulting in a hasty, pressure-induced decision.

The finding that the decision-making process was overwhelming, messy, tumultuous and even manipulative was an important one in terms of how it affected the final decisions of students. The conclusion could be drawn that some students made poor final decisions because they were faced with too many decisions based on questionable information and advice while under extreme pressure from family, friends and school

officials. Such a conclusion is in keeping with elements of decision theory showing that when an individual is faced with too many choices or with a process that is perplexing, people frequently go with the path of least resistance, often referred to as the default option (Castleman et al., 2015). It is interesting to note that the previously mentioned college decision models that were linear in nature fit well with earlier decision-making theory that viewed it as a cognitive process – a matter of dispassionately estimating which of the various alternative actions would yield the most positive consequences and maximize the “utility” of those consequences (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). These frameworks failed to take into account the messiness of the decision-making process experienced by students in this study, and the critical role that emotions play in a final decision. As immediate emotions intensify, as they did for members of the College Considering group in particular, they progressively take control of decision making and override rational decision making (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003).

### **Key influencers on Final Postsecondary Decisions**

The sequence of findings in this section started with a discussion about the significance of level of aspirations versus expectations that students had entering their senior year. It was followed by the impact of information on the decision-making process, and how the non-linear, chaotic nature of the overall process resulted in less than optimal decisions. It makes sense, then, to end with a brief discussion and conclusions about how students reached a final postsecondary decision. The most significant finding related to this question was the change in who students relied on most for information and guidance at the start of their senior, compared to the end when it became time to

make a final decision. For the first half of the school year, students relied most heavily on school guidance counselors, VSAC counselors, The College Board, non-profits like Questbridge and college websites to help them build college lists, fill out applications and financial aid forms, write essays and other process-oriented procedures. It could be argued that these individuals and organizations did their jobs in the sense that every student who wanted to go to college was accepted to at least one school, and the two students who wanted to enter the workforce did so. However, as the time to make a final decision approached, a shift occurred where students started confiding more in their parents. In the cases of Katie, Joan and Madonna, the shift was prompted by an intensified interest from their mothers, now that they had been accepted to college and were seriously considering leaving home. Unfortunately, their mother's attitudes towards college ranged from outright hostile, to fairly negative, to apathetic.

In some ways, the most revealing part of this entire study occurred when each student made final decisions about their postsecondary future. There is no question that everything that occurred prior to that moment played a role in their final decisions, yet in the final analysis each student attributed their decision to the advice of at least one parent. In the end, despite expressing a strong desire to attend Castleton, Joan relented to her mother's wishes and did not go. Katie listened to her father and moved in with him, hoping to eventually enroll in community college. Madonna's pivotal conversation with her father in April resulted in a decision to move away from her mother and go to college. Although not as last-minute, all four members of the College Confident group followed the long-time advice of their parents and went to college. Mick and Sinead entered the

workforce with the blessing of their parents even though they would likely have supported their desire to attend college had they chosen to do so.

The finding that students relied on guidance counselors and other school officials in the earlier part of the year, but confided in more in parents when it came time to make a final decision supports the literature that parents and families play a critical role in the educational decisions of students (Hrabowski et al., 1998). Though the finding that parents are the ultimate arbitrators when it comes to their child's future is not new, the identification of the shift in trust from school officials to parents at a critical juncture in the decision-making process is novel. An important conclusion can be drawn that although school officials play an important role in the college decision making process, their efforts could be for naught without the support of at least one parent.

### **Implications**

This study's findings have implications for local, state and federal policymakers interested in creating effective policy that leads to higher rates of college attendance. Implications are based on the findings, analysis and conclusions drawn from this study with a focus on future practice, research and policy.

As shown in this study's literature review, traditional decision theory and college choice models are based on procedural frameworks involving rationale actors making choices based on the maximization of expected utility leading to sensible decision making (Lindley, 1991). The main conceptual contribution of this dissertation is that the college decision process of students in this study was far less linear in nature than traditional models, and was in fact anything but rationale. Students were continually

barraged with new information and pressure from a wide range of sources that made what has been cast as a straightforward, step-based process resulting in a rationale decision quite messy. It looked nothing like Paulson's (1990) economic perspective theory portraying the college choice process as an investment decision in which students weigh the costs and benefits of attending college before making an optimal final decision. If lawmakers continue to create policy based on the same linear decision models aimed at rationale adult actors viewing choice primarily through a cost-benefit lens, it will likely continue to be ineffective. Surprisingly, even the most current college choice models have failed to make significant advancements to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model focusing on the three-stage process of predisposition, search, and choice. Perhaps the most noted modern conceptual models have come from Perna (2006) and Bergerson (2009), which include student's background characteristics; school and community context; proximity to institutions of higher education; and regional and cultural norms toward higher education. The time for a new conceptual model that incorporates all of the complexities involved in postsecondary choice as shown in this study is long overdue. More specifically, a postsecondary choice model that addresses the chaotic decision-making process of students considering whether to attend college, enter the workforce or pursue other postsecondary options. Models that don't include the level of expectation versus aspiration of students; the critical role of information; the influence – both negative and positive – of friends and family; and the decisive role played by at least one parent in the final decision of students would be inadequate.

Interestingly, despite a sizeable body of literature emphasizing the role of cost in

the college decision process, cost of attendance played a minimal role in the final postsecondary decisions of most of the students in this study. In some cases, cost played a role in *where* students went to college, but not *if* they would attend college. This has major implications for policymakers, especially at the state and federal level, who have approached this issue with cost at the forefront of their policy recommendations. Simply lowering tuition would likely not have increased the number of students going to college in this study. Continuing to focus policy on cost rather than some of the other findings in this study like the importance of building college going expectations as early as possible, providing high quality, timely information, and the role of parents in students' final decisions would likely continue to have minimal effect on college enrollments.

**Parental programming.** Findings in this study reinforce prior literature on the importance of parents in the college decision-making process. Yet, students remain the main targets of policymakers attempting to increase college enrollment. Policy efforts that don't focus heavily on the involvement of parents are doomed to fail based on the findings of this study. Some key decision points involving parents were identified in this study that could serve as policy levers for school board member, state legislators and other policymakers. Some early intervention programs involving parents already exist, but not always on a level that this study suggests is necessary. The lack of parental involvement in this study was alarming, particularly in the early stages of the process for some students. In two cases, it was questionable if the parents were even aware that their child was applying to college until later in the application process when they seemed more intent on derailing the process than supporting it. Policy recommendations that do



not include parents prior to middle school would be inadequate and run the risk of negating the college support efforts of guidance counselors late in the process as shown in this study. Achieving early buy-in from parents about the positive aspects of earning a college degree may also be the most effective way to build early college going expectations in their child. One of the primary conclusions of this study was that incongruent college going expectations between a parent and a child rarely resulted in the decision to pursue postsecondary education. Stressing the importance of completing the FAFSA in order to receive maximum financial aid, especially for students with good grades from low-income families is critical to preventing sticker shock based on non-discounted prices. In doing so, parents who were skeptical about the cost of college may begin to view the short-term investment as worth the lifelong benefits for their child.

A novel approach to achieving these policy goals emerged from a discussion with a parent in this study, who encouraged another parent in the community to send their child to college. Given the fear and aversion of some parents to individuals in positions of authority such as school officials, this could be a less intimidating approach. A less formal approach that connects parents who have children in college with parents who are considering sending their own children to college may be most effective. School officials interested in such an approach should be aware of the potential for some parents taking offense to other parents telling them what they think is best for their child. If appropriately matched, however, a parent like Liv's mother, who struggled to make ends meet while raising six children – all of whom went to college – could have a powerful impact on the college going thought process of parents who are unsure about the college

application process, and if a postsecondary degree is worth the investment. Focusing such efforts on parents who are “on the fence” about their child going to college like those in the College Considering group could result in higher college enrollment success rates. A more student-focused model was attempted by an administrator in this study that matched college graduates in the community with students who were considering going to college and in need of a mentor. Including parents in this practice would be critical given the need for parental buy-in as early as possible in the postsecondary decision making process.

**Narrowing the information highway to control the chaos.** A main finding of this study was that students in each of the three groups received different types of information from varying sources that was not always accurate, and in some cases, misleading. Asymmetrical information resulted in students basing decisions on different types of information of varying levels of quality. It also contributed to another key finding in this study highlighting the messy, chaotic nature of the college decision-making process in contrast to previous college choice models depicting it as a more a more straightforward, linear process. Given their interconnectedness, the following recommendations are designed to address both findings in attempt to streamline, as well as equalize, the information that all students receive, resulting in a less confusing and chaotic overall process.

Providing the same fact-based information to parents, students and other relevant parties could help to streamline the overall process, keep everyone on the same page, and reduce the stress and anxiety that leads to poor decision making. One of the ways to

ensure this information continuity would be to offer, perhaps require, courses to be taken by students and their parents or guardian focused on postsecondary success. One of the guidance counselors in this study, who was frustrated with a lack of parental involvement in the postsecondary process, started such a class, strongly encouraging parents to attend with their child. The guidance counselor had parents fill out the FAFSA during the class, while students worked on college or job applications and essays. The same guidance counselor considered starting a mandatory class for sophomores and juniors. Requiring students take a class of this kind every year starting in middle school could help to address false or erroneous information about college process, and improve some of weaknesses identified in this study. Most notably, the building of unrealistic college lists and inflated financial aid packages that do not reflect the actual cost of attendance. The course could be run in conjunction with school efforts to implement Personalized Learning Plans as part of Act 77, which “provide students the opportunity to reflect upon their learning and shape their future, and enables the adults in their lives to better understand each student as a unique individual” (Agency of Education, 2017).

A related theme that emerged from this study that would be an important component to the delivery of information to parents and students was the impact of technology on the way students consume college-related information. One of the guidance counselors in this study said she found success by updating her communications efforts to include multiple forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype and Instagram to contact parents and students about upcoming meetings, and to send new information about the college application process. The use of technology to help

implement and bolster future education policy is a necessary practice and worth exploring by researchers interested in advancing research on the role of technology in the postsecondary education decision making process. Interestingly, when asked about the role of online resources and social media in their decision-making process students in this study did not consider either a major factor. Although most students relied on websites and mobile apps like The College Board, The Common Application, VSAC and specific colleges for information related to applications, potential majors and campus life, none of them cited social media or web-based resources as having a major impact on their final decision. Instead, it was the relationship with an influential adult – not social media or internet-based information – that played the most significant role when it came to making a final decision about whether to attend college or not. It was unclear if this finding was due to the rural nature of the schools in terms of internet connectivity and access, which seemed adequate, albeit slow. It would be easy to assume that increasingly equal access to the internet driven by a shrinking “digital divide” would create a more level playing field for rural, urban and suburban students. In terms of access to information that may well be true. Ultimately, though, when it came to making a final postsecondary decision for students in this study, personal relationships trumped technology. That’s said, the primary focus of this study was not on the impact of social media and the internet, in part because it was not a theme that emerged after multiple rounds of sequential coding. The influence of social media on the college decision-making process is an emerging area of study and clearly deserves further examination.

Although this study did not evaluate specific programs, the VSAC Talent Search

Program seemed highly effective in helping students gain entrance into college, based on interviews and some observation. The three students in this study who were enrolled in the VSAC Talent Search program ranked their VSAC counselor as one of the most significant individuals in convincing them to apply to college, and simplifying the application process, and guiding them through to enrollment. The VSAC Talent Search and VSAC Gear Up programs have been “serving high-potential Vermont middle and high school students who are interested in pursuing education beyond high school” since 1969, according to their website. In keeping an earlier recommendation in this section, Talent Search counselors start working with students as early as sixth grade by providing career and college planning services to students at 40 Vermont schools (VSAC, 2017), who meet income guidelines and have an interest in pursuing education or training beyond high school. These services include counseling support for career and college planning, financial aid assistance and academic support, advising on high school courses, parent events, college visits, and summer enrichment programs. Results of these programs have been impressive. Recent data from VSAC shows that 88 percent of students who participated in the Talent Search program during the 2016-2017 school year, enrolled in an institution of higher education by the fall semester immediately following high school graduation, or deferred admissions until spring. VSAC’s postsecondary enrollment rate in the four years prior ranged between 81 and 84 percent. Similarly, Upward Bound (UB) and Upward Bound Math-Science (UBMS) programs – two federal TRIO programs – have been successful in helping low-income and first-generation students enroll in college. Collectively, 86 percent of UB and UBMS participants in the

2013-14 high school graduation cohort immediately enrolled in a program of postsecondary education. For each high school graduation cohort between 2008-09 and 2013-14, the overall combined UB and UBMS immediate postsecondary enrollment rate was between 83 and 86 percent. Given the success of these programs, an obvious, albeit simplistic policy proposal, would be to increase the number of VSAC Talent Search and Upward bound counselors. One of the more eye-opening comments to emerge from this study came from a VSAC Talent Search counselor when asked how many more students she thought she could get into college each year (from the high school she worked at in this study) “if she could clone herself?” She responded by saying at least three or four more and “probably five or six,” adding that she has to turn down students every year because she exceeds the maximum allowed by VSAC. Helping five or six more students get into college from one high school may not sound like a lot. With less than 75 students in the graduating class of 2016, however, it would not have been insignificant. Expanding it further by applying a similar increase to each of Vermont’s 75 high schools would have a major impact statewide, based on calculations provided for this study by VSAC’s director of research using data from the 2014 Senior Survey. Of the 5,331 seniors in the class of 2014 who completed the survey, 3,207 were enrolled at a 2- or 4-year postsecondary institution by the fall of 2014, accounting for the state’s 60.2 percent college enrollment rate. If three more students from each of Vermont’s 75 high schools decided to attend college it would boost the total number to 3,432, increasing the overall percentage of students enrolled at a 2- or 4- year school to 64.4 percent of the class. In order to meet the national college attendance rate of 68.4 percent for 2014, each of

Vermont's 75 high schools would have needed to send six more students to college. In doing so, Vermont would move from the bottom 10 states for postsecondary enrollment to among the top 25. Increasing the number of VSAC guidance counselors would come at a cost, however – one that state-level policymakers would need to weigh against the potential statewide economic and societal benefits of investing more resources in VSAC.

**Making the case for college.** One of the more interesting revelations of this study came from a guidance counselor who was asked if she thought her primary job was to “get as many students in college as possible.” She responded by saying “no,” adding that she viewed her job as helping as many students as possible to realize their postsecondary goals regardless of whether they include postsecondary education. In many ways, her response was aligned with the goals established by the State of Vermont when it passed Act 77 in 2013. In short, Act 77 is described by the Vermont Agency of Education in the following way:

Act 77 paves the way for schools to “work with every student in grade seven through grade 12 in an ongoing personalized learning planning process that: (A) identifies the student’s emerging abilities, aptitude, and disposition; (B) includes participation by families and other engaged adults; (C) guides decisions regarding course offerings and other high-quality educational experiences; and (D) is documented by a personalized learning plan (PLP).

The description goes on to say that PLPs should be “developmentally appropriate and define the scope and rigor of academic and experiential opportunities necessary for a secondary student to complete secondary school successfully, attain postsecondary

readiness, and be prepared to engage actively in civic life.” Based on that description, the main goal of Act 77 is not to increase the number of high school graduates who go to college. One could argue that striving for students to “attain postsecondary readiness” is good enough since the decision to actually attend college is up to the student and their parents. In other words, as long as students are prepared for college, the state’s job is done, right? Maybe, but without the implementers of PLPs – namely local school officials on the ground like guidance counselors – making a case for why students should go to college, it is hard to imagine that more of them would change their current expectations to do so.

If the goal of state policymakers is in fact to increase the number of college graduates, maybe the language of future resolutions should explicitly say so. It does not have to suggest that everyone should go to college, but if the goal is to increase the number of college graduates in Vermont, why not create legislation that unequivocally states that policy position? If guidance counselors were given such a directive, it might help them feel more comfortable making a case for a college degree to students and parents like the ones in the College Considering Group, who were on the “college fence” about going, and may have just needed more information to push them over it. Based on the documented success of VSAC Talent Search counselors, it would be hard to argue that a policy recommendation involving an increase in their numbers would not have a positive impact on the college enrollment rate in Vermont. However, until the State of Vermont and the Agency of Education take a more definitive stance on their desire to increase the number of college graduates in the Vermont, it might be harder to make the



case for the additional funds required to pay for the increase.

**Playing a role in final postsecondary decisions.** Another significant finding in this study was that final postsecondary decisions made by every student in this study was significantly influenced by at least parent. Some students were encouraged or influenced to go to college throughout their entire academic career, while others never received support from either parent to pursue their college going dreams. As discussed earlier, guidance counselors played a key role in helping students complete the necessary requirements to gain entrance into college. When it came time to make a final decision, however, students turned to the parent(s) they trusted most for advice. In short, guidance counselors were successful in leading students to water by helping them gain entrance to at least one college, but not all chose to drink depending on the influence of their parent and whether they viewed higher education as a worthwhile investment. Creating policy to address this issue is complex, and among the most challenging given the power of parents over the decision-making ability of their child. Being afraid to make a decision against the wishes of the people who support you financially and in other ways is to be expected, as was the case with Katie and Joan. Based on interviews with both students, it seemed more than likely that they would have chosen to go to college if, and perhaps only if, their parents supported their desire to do so.

An obvious recommendation would be to coordinate meetings between parents, students and guidance counselors throughout the year, culminating with a final mandatory meeting to ensure that everyone is on the same page, and making a collective decision based on the same information. American policymakers and the public at large

strongly believe that the route to educational success runs largely through the family, and nonexperimental studies support this conviction (Furtenberg, 2011). Yet the evidence from experimental studies aimed at changing family practices suggests that our ability to alter family processes to reduce inequality is largely inefficient. Intervention programs have had little traction in altering practices in a meaningful way (Furtenberg, Wither Opportunity, 2011). One could argue that involving parents in the college decision process in their child's senior year is too late in the game, based on the findings in this study showing that only students who "expected" to attend college entering their senior ended up enrolling. The previous policy recommendation in this section stressing the involvement of parents as early as possible in the K-12 academic career of their children seems applicable here as well, and worth reinforcing. Unless more college support systems are put in place to assist students who have little or no financial or moral support, it would seem unlikely that students like Katie and Joan would make different decisions.

### **Future Research**

A number of areas for potential future research emerged from this study. As stated earlier, one of the major limitations of this study was that it did not begin tracking students until the start of their senior year. A longitudinal study tracking students at the beginning of high school or earlier could be very effective at identifying key decision points that may shed light on future actions. One area in particular that may shed light on why some students abandon the idea of going to college earlier in high school, especially in rural areas, is the dilemma faced by students to commit to a technical school track or remain on a college-bound path. Spending time in the technical schools at both high

schools would have revealed more about the overall culture of the campus, and if the cultural divide between the “tech kids and college kids” as one student put it, played a role in postsecondary decision making.

Another area of suggested research relates to the earlier recommendation to expand the number of counselors at VSAC, Upward Bound or other college support organizations. Prior to any such increase, a study involving extensive program reviews of each organization would be prudent. My limited observations and discussions with VSAC counselors revealed some interesting practices that would need to be examined further as part of a more robust evaluation of the program’s goals, methods, and outcomes. The claim by one VSAC counselor in this study that she could get five or six more students into college each year if she could clone herself is minimal evidence to base a policy on, and would need to be examined further to see if potentially true at Vermont’s 75 high schools. It would also be worth replicating the study conducted for this dissertation at other high schools to see if the results were similar based on the different characteristics of each high school. More specifically, it would be interesting to conduct a cross case analysis to highlight the differences between some of the state’s more urban school in Chittenden County, for example with more rural ones such as the two in this study.

Finally, it would be worthwhile expanding the annual “Senior Survey” administered by VSAC that elicits responses from the majority of high school seniors in Vermont, including a question for students who are not planning on continuing their education. The 2012 Senior Survey asked, “What is the most important reason for not

planning to continue your education this fall?” A more expansive survey delving deeper into the reasons behind why some students “needed a break (19.4 percent), needed to work (18.6 percent), decided to join the military (9.4 percent) or were simply unsure of their goals (5.9 percent) could produce data trends that end researchers in new directions. A more data-driven study could also bolster qualitative findings or vice versa in a potentially powerful mixed methods study.

### **Researcher Reflection**

I would like to conclude this study with some brief reflections on this long and truly cathartic process. Having grown up primarily in Vermont, I was surprised when I first heard how low the state’s college attendance rate was in comparison to other states. My view was definitely skewed having been raised primarily in college towns by a college professor father and minister mother who pushed higher education for as long as I can remember. However, I did go to high school in rural Addison County at Vergennes Union High School, which in many ways reminded me of the two high schools in this dissertation. As I got to know the students in this study better, I started associating them with specific classmates of mine from high school. Probably half of the students in my high school class went to college while the other half went directly to work on the family farm or in a trade they learned in technical school. In retrospect, just like the students in this study, each of my classmates faced a unique set of circumstances and obstacles that dictated their postsecondary choices. I was aware of some of the hardships faced by my classmates at the time, but it was not until many years later when I heard more about their childhood circumstances that I better understood their plight. As I thought about my

classmates, it struck me that many of the students in my study also faced similarly unique challenges specific to their own lives. When it came time to analyze their interview data, I found myself struggling to identify emergent themes that applied to more than one or two students due to the uniqueness of their respective situations. In a sense, the fact that each student faced a unique set of circumstances that affected their postsecondary choices was a finding in itself. It was then that I realized how difficult it is for policymakers at any level to create legislation that adequately addresses the diverse needs of an entire population.

During this dissertation process, a friend jokingly said to me that if I was such an expert on the subject why did I have only one of four children in college. It was a fair question and one I have been thinking about throughout the entire process. My wife and I both have college degrees and a number of other major advantages that should make it easier for our children to go to college. I often thought: “Who am I to recommend a policy proposal for an entire state when I can’t even create effective policy in my own house?” Our four children are products of previous marriages with our adopted daughter having spent much of her younger life in foster care. They all have their own specific reasons for deciding not to attend college or dropping out, ranging from substance abuse to learning disabilities to major health issues to a desire to work in a profession that does not require a college degree. I mention their postsecondary decision-making processes to highlight a major limitation of this study, but an unavoidable reality of my research: that I could not possibly know or understand the multitude of reasons behind why each student in my study decided to attend college or enter the workforce. Although they were

surprisingly forthcoming with their personal lives and family situations, I am sure I only know a fraction of what they have gone through in their young lives.

All that said, I am confident that this study offers some insight into the complexities of the postsecondary decision-making process that could aid parents, teachers, school administrators and state-level policymakers in their quest to help students make the best possible decisions regarding their future. Given the unique set of circumstances in which each student finds themselves, a more individual, personalized approach is optimal, which of course raises a number of issues related to resource allocation and funding. Ultimately, though, as I think this study indicates, ensuring that all parties receive the same level of high quality information as early as possible from sources that have the student's best interest at heart is a critical piece to this extremely individual, highly nuanced process.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol: Interview I (College Considering)

An examination of the College Decision-Making Process of High School Students in Rural Vermont: A Cross-Case Analysis

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Signed Consent Form: \_\_\_\_\_

(Briefly Describe the Project)

1. Have you been thinking much about what you might do after you graduate from high school?
2. Where would you say you are right now in terms of your postsecondary plans? Would you say you are definitely planning on going to college, leaning toward going to college, but still considering other options or leaning toward entering the workforce, but still considering other options?
3. In terms of college, when do you first remember first thinking that you might want to go to college?
4. Who do think played the biggest role in your wanting to go to college?
5. You mentioned your dad as being supportive of you going to college. Tell me a little about your family background. Did they go to college or enter the workforce after high school? What do they do for a living?
6. Since you are “on the fence” about going to college are you thinking about applying to colleges and also looking into potential jobs in case you decide not to go?
7. Where would you say that you are getting most of your information about college and potential job opportunities?
8. Who has been most supportive in terms of helping you with the college application process or with identifying potential job opportunities?

9. There aren't many colleges close to where you live. Do you feel like it's hard to know what college is really like living so far away from any? Have you had the chance to visit any?
10. Any other concerns about the college search and application process you want to share?

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol: Interview II (College Considering)

An examination of the College Decision-Making Process of High School Students in Rural Vermont: A Cross-Case Analysis

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Signed Consent Form: \_\_\_\_\_

(Briefly Describe the Project)

1. It's good to see you again. How have you been since we talked last? How is the college search going?
2. It sounds like you are making some progress on applying to college. Any colleges in particular that you are considering?
3. You mentioned last time that your guidance counselor has been helpful with the college search process? Has she also been helpful with filling out applications and providing other information about how to get into college?
4. You mentioned last time we spoke that your mom wasn't being very supportive of your plans to attend college. Is that still the case?
5. Where are you in terms of your thinking about going to college versus entering the workforce? You said last time we spoke that you were leaning toward college, but that you were still considering getting a job after graduation. Is that still the case?
6. What do you see as potential obstacles that might prevent you from going to college?
7. How has the actual college application process been?
8. It sounds like your parents are sort of staying out of the process at this point. Is that right, and if so, why do you think they aren't weighing in more about your postsecondary plans?

9. Do you wish they were more involved this entire postsecondary process?
10. Are there any other issues you want to talk about related to your postsecondary plans?

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol: Interview III (College Considering)

An examination of the College Decision-Making Process of High School Students in Rural Vermont: A Cross-Case Analysis

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Signed Consent Form: \_\_\_\_\_

(Briefly Describe the Project)

1. Good to see you. How is everything going? How has the college application process been?
2. Congratulations. It must feel nice having finished at least one application. Do you plan to apply you any other colleges?
3. Do you think you will go to (name of college)?
4. How do your parents feel about your progress so far?
5. Why do you think your mom is starting to weigh-in more now when she seemed less interested before?
6. It sounds like you are starting to get more input from a larger number of people about your postsecondary plans? Is that helpful or making it more complicated?
7. Last time we spoke, you were having trouble getting either of your parents to fill out the FAFSA. Is that still the case, and if so why do you think that is?
8. You sound frustrated with the entire process? Has it been more difficult than you thought? How do you think it could be made easier?
9. You mentioned earlier in the year that you didn't think that being from a rural area was a disadvantage in terms of going to college. Do you still think that?

Do you think you would feel more confidence about going to (name of college) if you visited first just to see if you like the campus?

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol: Interview IV (College Considering)

An examination of the College Decision-Making Process of High School Students in Rural Vermont: A Cross-Case Analysis

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Signed Consent Form: \_\_\_\_\_

(Briefly Describe the Project)

1. Hello. How have you been? Have you heard back from any colleges or made any final decisions about your postsecondary plans?
2. That's exciting news. Now that you have gotten into a college do you think you will go?
3. You sounded pretty excited about going to college all year? What are the main reasons that you have decided not to go?
4. It sounds like your mother played a large role in your final decision? If she was more supportive of your plans to go to college, do you think you would be going?
5. Do you agree with the reasons your mother gave for why you should not go to college? I'm just wondering about cost, for example, and that the total cost of attendance would have been much lower had she filled out the FAFSA.
6. In retrospect, do you feel like you got helpful and accurate information about going to college and the overall college application process from your teachers, guidance counselor, parents and other adults?
7. Now that you decided not to attend college, do you have any other plans for what you might do after graduation?
8. It sounds like your parents have different ideas about your future. Are you getting pressure from both to do different things?

9. You said they encouraged you to just make a decision because you would feel less stress after you did. Did you feel pressured to just “get it over with” as you said last time we spoke?
  
10. In retrospect, how would you describe your entire postsecondary decision making process? Do you have any advice for school official or legislators who are interested in trying to convince more students like yourself to go to college?