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Enduring Inequality: How Social Class Shapes Where High-Achieving Students Apply to College

By

Yang Va Lor

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requirements for the degree of

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Committee in charge:

Associate Professor David Harding, Chair
Professor Cybelle Fox
Professor Tom Gold
Professor Susan Holloway

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Abstract

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Higher education destinations continue to be a significant source of stratification in the United States (Ayalon, Grodsky, Gamoran, and Yogev 2008; Gladieux 2004). Among high-achieving students, research studies consistently point to the significance of social class in shaping where they attend college: students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to end up at less selective institutions compared to their higher income counterparts with similar academic qualifications (McPherson and Schapiro 2006; Hoxby and Avery 2012; Hill and Winston 2006). A key reason for social class differences in access to selective colleges is that few highly able, socioeconomically disadvantaged students actually apply to such institutions in the first place (Radford 2013; Hoxby and Avery 2012; Lopez Turley, Santos, and Ceja 2007). Yet, the process through which social class shapes college application choices among such students is not well understood.

This dissertation draws upon in-depth interviews with 46 high-achieving students from the San Francisco Bay Area to examine how social class shapes where students apply to college. It reveals how inequality is maintained when students from lower-class backgrounds (lower-SES) limit their choices of colleges to selective and nonselective institutions close to home in California whereas their middle and upper-middle class (higher-SES) counterparts apply to the top selective colleges across the U.S. More specifically, this research identifies two mechanisms of social stratification by showing how institutions and families of the middle- and upper-middle class work to procure advantages by cultivating dispositions among their children for specific types of higher education opportunities, specifically leading colleges and universities in the form of mostly private selective colleges across the U.S. First, I show that higher-SES students attend schools in which they are exposed to a college-going culture that expects them to only apply to the top colleges across the country. In contrast, most lower-SES students attend high schools and participate in programs in which college is one of multiple paths after high school. Lower-SES students are encouraged to attend a four-year college in California, regardless of academic quality. Second, I demonstrate that family upbringing and experiences foster an understanding of

college among higher-SES students as an opportunity to leave their families and immerse themselves in a different part of the country. In contrast, most lower-SES students understand college as a continuation of family interdependence that requires them to take into account the real and perceived needs and wishes of the family, which places geographic limitations on where they can apply and attend college

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher Education Expansion and Differentiation

The system of higher education in the U.S. has undergone tremendous expansion, prompted largely by the post-World War 2 economic boom and, in particular, by provisions in the GI Bills that subsidized higher education learning (Roska, Grodsky, Arum, and Gamoran 2007; Bowles and Gintis 1976). The growth of public universities, the legislation against discrimination, the use of affirmative action, and the development of student-aid policies have reduced inequality in access to four-year institutions. However, most of the expansion of higher education has occurred at the level of community colleges, which may serve to increase inequality within higher education even as it improves equality in access to some type of postsecondary education (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Karabel and Astin 1979). While postsecondary education became open to virtually all high-school graduates by the end of the twentieth century, the emergence of an educational hierarchy and a split between elite and mass forms of education has constrained student opportunities. The mass sector developed a diversified range of lower-status academic institutions and vocationally oriented programs, while the elite institutions maintained academic focus and selectivity, resulting in a highly stratified system of U.S. postsecondary education (Karabel and Astin 1979).

Research on educational stratification has sought to make sense of how the expansion of higher education, evidenced in the growing proportions of people completing increasingly higher levels of education, has impacted the association between social background and educational attainment. Such research has found that despite educational expansion, there has been remarkable stability in inequality of educational opportunity between social classes (Lucas 2001; Raftery and Hout 1993). In their analysis of thirteen industrialized nations, including the U.S., Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) find that the distribution of educational credentials has shifted upward in these countries and consequently the average level of educational attainment has risen, a sign of educational expansion. However, there has not been any significant change in the effects of social origin on educational attainment in most of the countries. Raftery and Hout (1993) contend that educational expansion will lead to reduction in the effects of social origins on educational attainment only at those levels of education in which the participation rate of the advantaged group is saturated (close to 100%). In contrast to Raftery and Hout (1993), Lucas (2001) argues that advantaged groups will still obtain advantages even if participation rates from their groups are saturated at a particular level of schooling. Lucas (2001) argues, "socioeconomically advantaged actors secure for themselves and their children some degree of advantage wherever advantages are commonly possible" (1652). Thus, social class differences can still exist even when children from privileged backgrounds are all attending college; advantaged individuals will still have better higher education opportunities than their disadvantaged peers.

Social Class Differences in Access to Higher Education

Due to the expansion and differentiation of the U.S. system of higher education, where students go to college matters as much as whether or not they go (Gladieux 2004)**.** Prior research has uncovered social-class differences in where students begin college, whether they enroll full-

time, and their chances for completing a degree. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely than their more advantaged peers to start at a four-year institution, take a full course load, and complete a bachelor's degree (Alexander, Holupa, and Pallas 1987; Karen 2002; Cabrera, Burkum, and La Nasa 2005). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to enroll in public community colleges, a starting point from which the prospects for earning a bachelor's degree are low (McPherson and Shapiro 2006; Ayalon, Grodsky, Gamoran, and Yogev 2008). Only one out of five students from the bottom socioeconomic quartile enroll in a four-year institution within two years following high school graduation, compared to two out of three from the top income quartile (Gladieux 2004). The disproportionate concentration of low-income students at community colleges has been raised as a concern. Although they have increased access to higher education, community colleges have been criticized for hindering educational attainment (Dougherty 1994; Brint and Karabel 1989). For instance, only about one-third of traditional age community college students earn an associate or a bachelor's degree within eight years of completing high school (Karen 2002; Alexander et al. 1987).

While attendance at community colleges and nonselective higher education institutions may impede students' ability to finish college, matriculation at a college of high quality eases passage through the system of higher education. Students who attend selective colleges are more likely to graduate on time, to receive a graduate or professional degree, and to have higher earnings compared to those who attend nonselective colleges (Bowen and Bok 2000; Carnevale and Rose 2004; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009). Moreover, graduates of selective colleges disproportionately occupy political and economic leadership roles in society (McPherson and Shapiro 2006). This is especially the case for students who attend top private selective colleges, also known as highly selective or most selective institutions, such as Ivy League universities and top liberal arts colleges. For instance, McPherson and Shapiro (2006) show that the educational backgrounds of Presidents of the United States for the past 20 years and of current Supreme Court Justices can be tracked back to highly selective private institutions. Bowen et al. (2009) find that high-achieving students have an 89% graduation rate when they attend colleges ranked "most selective" and just 59% when they attend colleges ranked "least selective." Similarly, Bowen and Bok (2000) distinguish between three tiers of selective colleges and they find that graduation rate increase as the selectivity of the college rises. Bowen and Bok (2000) find that the most selective group of colleges, which are private institutions, tend to be residential, to have relatively small enrollments, and to have financial resources to afford smaller classes and more support services. Indeed, research has shown that top private colleges spend more per student and subsidize student costs at a much higher rate than other selective colleges (Carnevale and Rose 2004; Hill and Winston 2010). In contrast, public selective colleges have lower graduation rates, which Bowen and Bok (2000) attribute to larger enrollments and less assistance in the form of need-based financial aid. Among all selective colleges, less selective institutions typically have smaller budgets and spending per student (Hoxby 2009). This translates into less academic support which has been shown to reduce graduation rates (Webber and Ehrenberg 2010).

The value of attending a selective college, especially a highly-selective private college, cannot be understated. Thus, it is important to understand how students end up in these colleges. Previous research has demonstrated that even when the effects of academic ability are taken into account, there are systematic differences among social classes in access to higher education (Karabel and Astin 1975; Hearn 1991; Lopez Turley, Santos, and Ceja 2007). Karabel and Astin

(1975) find in their study that college quality, as measured by selectivity and affluence, is significantly related to social class. Hearn (1991) shows that students from lower-income families are likely to attend lower-selectivity institutions, regardless of their levels of academic ability, achievement, and expectations. More recent research has focused on the issue of access to leading selective colleges in the United States. Lopez Turley et al. (2007) find that while the influence of parents' education and income on the likelihood of applying to any college has remained about the same across cohorts, its influence on applying to a four-year college or selective college has increased across cohorts. Hill and Winston (2006) find that only a small fraction (10 percent) of students at the nation's leading private college and universities come from the bottom two quintiles of the U.S. family income distribution—the bottom 40 percent. Using testing data from the SAT and ACT, Hill and Winston (2006) find that those who score well—the highly able students—more than 10 percent do come from low-income families. The problem that Hill and Winston (2006) identified is what is known as academic undermatch—when a student's academic credentials permit them access to a college or university that is more selective than the postsecondary alternative they choose (Smith, Pender, and Howell 2012; Hoxby and Avery 2013). Academic undermatch is more common among those students from low socioeconomic status families, those who live in rural areas, and those whose parents have no college degree (Smith et al. 2012).

The extent of academic undermatch as it pertains to attendance at selective colleges is covered comprehensively in Hoxby and Avery's (2012) study of the high school class of 2008. In their highly publicized study, Hoxby and Avery (2012) find that the vast majority of high achieving students who are low-income do not apply to any selective college or university. Among low-income, high achieving students, the majority (53 percent) exhibits what they called income-typical behavior—they apply to schools whose median standardized test scores are at least 15 percentiles below their own and to at least one non-selective college. Only a tiny portion (9 percent) apply to college in a manner that is somewhat close to what is recommend to what their high-income counterparts do. This latter group applies to at least one match college, at least one "safety college" with median scores not more than 15 percentiles lower than their own, and apply to zero non-selective college.

Similarly, Radford (2013) reveals that social class strongly shapes how students go about identifying colleges to attend such that students from less affluent schools are less likely than their affluent peers to apply to selective institutions. Drawing upon data from a web survey of approximately 900 public high school valedictorians who graduated from five states between 2003 and 2006 and interviews with a subsample of 55 students from the survey, Radford (2013) finds that 50 percent of low-SES and 42 percent of middle-SES valedictorians abandoned the possibility of attending a most-selective private college by not filing an application to at least one such institutions. In contrast, only 20 percent of high-SES valedictorians eliminated this type of elite college from consideration (113). Radford (2013) concludes that to explain why low-income, high-achieving students are less likely to enroll at highly selective institutions, we need to recognize that the "the divergence by SES is set in motion in the application stage" (151).

Explanations for Social Class Differences in College Applications

The two prevailing frameworks for understanding the decision-making of individuals are rational choice theory and habitus. Both frameworks have been used to explain social class differences in the college application behaviors of students. In what follows, I review each of

these frameworks and make the case for why they are inadequate for explaining the process by which social class shape the college choices of students.

Rational Choice

Rational choice models are popular among economists and scholars in other fields for making sense of how individuals make decisions. As such, they serve as a useful approach for scholars of higher education to examine how high school students decide where to apply to college. While there are several variants of rational choice models, what they have in common is their assumption that decision-making involves an evaluation of the costs and benefits of engaging in some particular action. Applied to high school students' college choice decision making, rational choice models represent high school students as individuals choosing among different educational options on the basis of an evaluation of these options' costs and benefits (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Brand and Xie 2010; Beattie 2002). Rational choice scholars predict that prospective students decide whether to attend college and select among a range of institutions if their expected current and future benefits outweigh the anticipated costs (Kim 2012; Grodsky and Jones 2007).

Rational choice models expect that students have complete information about the different options available to them such as a college's attributes, its costs and benefits (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Brand and Xie 2010). In most cases, rational choice scholars expect a particular decision (e.g. attending one college over others) given the objective or actual costs and benefits of that choice. While most applications of rational choice models to college choice decision-making have primarily focused on costs and benefits in financial terms, a few have emphasized the importance of non-financial factors such as perceived social fit with the college, its location, and its special academic programs (Hamrick and Hossler 1996; Dillon and Smith 2009). Consequently, there does not seem to be much agreement over what these costs and benefits are as different studies utilize different factors to represent the costs and benefits of colleges. Moreover, other rational models assert that it is not only an assessment of costs and benefits that matters, but also the probability of success that influence what decisions students make (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Morgan 2005; Grodsky and Jones 2007).

Rational choice explanations about why low-income, high achieving students are less likely to apply to elite institutions primarily center on the lack of two types of information: information about the different quality of colleges and information about the financial costs and financial aid of these postsecondary institutions (Plank and Jordan 2001; Kelly and Schneider 2011; Smith et al. 2013; Radford 2013). The former type of information refers to knowledge about the different types of college available, knowledge about one's own abilities relative to other college students, and knowledge about the consequences of attending different quality of colleges (Dillon and Smith 2009). Hoxby and Avery (2012) conclude that low-income, high-achieving students rarely apply to selective colleges because they lack information about the availability of financial aid at such institutions that would help offset these colleges' high sticker prices. Plank and Jordan (2001) explain that many low-SES high school students and their parents make decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information about costs and available financial aid. As a consequence, these students decide that some postsecondary schools are financially unfeasible based on their perceptions of prohibitive expenses and scarce aid. Evidence of differential access to college information based on social class is found in studies such as Grodsky and Jones' (2007) research that examines pattern of inequality in the

distribution of cost information among parents. They find that socioeconomically disadvantaged parents and minority parents are less likely to provide estimates of college tuition and, when they provide estimates, they tend to make larger errors. According to Dillion and Smith (2009), while both information and finances play a role in predicting which students are most likely to end up poorly matched with their college, lack of information about the different types of college is the more important constraint.

While most rational choice analyses focus on the costs and benefits of attending different types of colleges, a few have emphasized the need to take into account the subjective probability of success as another important factor (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Goldthorpe and Jackson 2010; Morgan 2002; Morgan 2005). Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) develop a rational choice approach that explains educational expansion and persisting class inequality as the product of individual decisions made in light of the resources available to, and the constraints facing, individual students. Known as relative risk aversion, this approach represents children and families as acting rational, choosing among the different educational options available to them on the basis of evaluations of their costs and benefits and the perceived probabilities of successful outcomes. According to this perspective, families seek to ensure that their children do not experience downward mobility by helping their children acquire a social class position that is at least that of the parents. Parents achieve this by employing an educational strategy that maximizes the chances of their children acquiring a position in their social class. Thus, class differentials in educational attainment by students of similar abilities are quite rational according to Breen and Goldthorpe (1997). For students from less-advantaged backgrounds, taking up more ambitious educational options typically entails a greater degree of risk, in terms of potential costs and benefits, than it does for students from more-advantaged backgrounds. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) assert that it is rational for working class students to require a relatively high probability of success as a condition for pursuing more ambitious options.

Similar to Breen and Goldthorpe (1997), Morgan (2002; 2005) offers a model of educational decision-making that emphasizes the importance of subjective probability of success. According to Morgan's model, students confront a choice upon completing high school of whether to leave school or continue with college. They choose the choice that maximizes their subjective probability of future success. Such a decision requires that students and their parents estimate the probability of success and failure associated with different choices based on a subjectively constructed belief distribution which is shaped by a range of factors, most notably the quantity and quality of the information available. Student and parent perceptions of postsecondary opportunity and the likelihood of the student's success should he or she go to college influence two processes of postsecondary planning, prefigurative commitment and preparatory commitment. Prefigurative commitment represents one's future orientation toward a certain action and is expressed in occupational and educational aspirations while preparatory commitment consists of actions which students partake to increase the likelihood that they will be able to achieve the objects of their prefigurative commitments.

The rational approach provides a useful perspective to understand how high school students decide where to apply and attend college. This approach has focused our attention to the role that the absence of accurate information about differences in college quality and financial costs of postsecondary educational institutions play in relegating high-achieving, low-income students to colleges whose academic reputation is well below that of these students' ability level. However, rational choice models do not adequately address how differences in social background impact how students utilize whatever information they have available to make

decisions. Rational choice has been critiqued for its inattention to how calculations of costs and benefits may vary depending on students' social, economical, or cultural background (Brand and Xie 2010; Beattie 2002; Kim 2012). Brand and Xie (2010) argue that the college decision is not a straightforward balancing of costs and returns, but that it is heavily influenced by social and economic background. College-going behavior is governed not only by rational choice but also by cultural and social norms and circumstances. Others argue that the mechanism influencing college attainment may differ by social background. For some individuals from socially advantaged backgrounds, college is a culturally expected outcome (Beattie 2002; Smith and Powell 1990). For this group, college is less exclusively and intentionally linked to economic gain than it is for people in less advantaged groups, for whom a college education is a novelty that demands economic justification. Moreover, to assume that higher income students make more rational decisions because they have access to a greater quantity and quality of information about higher education ignores whether such information actually figures into the decision-making of these students.

Habitus

While rational choice scholars conceive of decision-making as the result of rational utilitarian choices made by actors occupying different class positions, social and cultural reproduction theorists associated with Pierre Bourdieu argue that some of these decisions can be explained largely in terms of unconscious cultural processes that bring social destination into conformity with social origin (Hatcher 1998; Bourdieu 1990, 1999; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). Social reproduction scholars contend that for some students, particularly those from socioeconomically advantaged families, the decision of whether to attend college or where to apply to college is not based on an evaluation of the costs and benefits of different options. Instead, it is more like a non-decision in that it is assumed or taken-for-granted by these students and their families that they will attend college after high school or that they will only apply to a select group of colleges. Other options or alternatives are not even considered by these students. According to Bourdieu (1990; 1999), this is the case because individuals can make decisions or engage in particular actions without the need to consciously resort to some underlying rational logic as to why that path of action is appropriate. Rather, they follow their dispositions which allow them to make reasonable and rational decisions because these dispositions are compatible with the conditions of their social and economic environment.

Bourdieu (1990; 1999) points out that while the process used to make these decisions may not be "rational" in that individuals do not deliberately calculate the costs and benefits of different options, the decision itself is often rational in that it is the one that best serves the interests of individuals in light of the constraints and opportunities present in their social environment. According to Bourdieu (1990), individuals move around in their social world without the need to "engage in rational computation to reach the goals that best suits their interests. All they have to do is follow their dispositions which, being adjusted to their structural class positions, 'naturally' generate practices adjusted to the situation" (108).

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is captured in his concept of habitus. Habitus is a set of dispositions that incline agents to act and react in certain ways. It is a "system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action" (Bourdieu 1977: 40). Habitus provides individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives. It gives them a 'feel for the game', a sense of what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not, a

'practical sense' (Bourdieu 1999). These dispositions are acquired through a gradual process of inculcation in which early childhood experiences are particularly important. Through a myriad of processes of learning and training, the individual acquires a set of dispositions that becomes second nature (Bourdieu 1999). The dispositions of the habitus are a reflection of the social conditions within which they are acquired (Bourdieu 1999). Generated by an individual's place in the social structure, habitus represents the internalization of the social conditions associated with membership in a particular social class. These dispositions predispose individuals to conform their actions and decisions to the objective conditions (structural constraints and opportunities) of their class positions. By internalizing the social structure and one's place in it, an individual comes to determine what is possible and what is not possible for his life and develops aspirations and practices accordingly (Dumais 2002).

While Bourdieu's concept of habitus seems to suggest that individuals need not to consciously resort to some underlying rational logic to make decisions, it is incorrect to assume that this applies to every decision. Instead, habitus is most relevant to explaining everyday, routine actions, and not necessarily major decision like what to do after high school or where to apply and attend college. Yet, what one social or economic group deems as routine or taken-for-granted (e.g. attending college) may not seem so natural to other groups. Speaking of the distinction between rational choice and habitus, Hatcher (1998) states, "Rational choice theory has concerned itself with 'choice' in terms of key institutional transition points. The concept of habitus addresses not the exceptional but the routine" (21).

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction has been critiqued for its overly social deterministic view of behavior; it does not sufficiently address how it is that individuals can engage in decisions or practices that deviate from their habitus. The role of deliberate decision-making is vastly under-estimated by Bourdieu, and his refusal to accept this leads him inextricably into deterministic explanations (Hatcher 1998; Nash 1990). As such, rational choice provides a complementary perspective at uncovering processes by which people conform to their social environment and mechanisms by which people deviate from the habits and norms of their upbringing.

Conceptual Framework: Culture and Cognition

Though the rational choice and habitus approaches each provide a different perspective at understanding the decision-making process, they have limitations. Rational choice offers a very individualistic understanding of decision-making, emphasizing the importance of information and assuming that individuals from different social and economic backgrounds interpret information the same way. By conceptualizing decision making as primarily an individual endeavor, rational choice explanations overlook how students are embedded in social or cultural contexts that may make some choices more likely and others less likely. Habitus, on the other hand, offers an overly structural and deterministic account that leaves little room for understanding how individuals can diverge from what is expected in their social or cultural environment. Moreover, both rational choice and habitus frameworks do not adequately account for the processes by which the social backgrounds of students structure their decision-making process. Both frameworks tell us more about students' social backgrounds and the nature of their decision-making and less about the process by which social class give rise to different types of decision-making.

What is needed is a framework that shows how the constraints of the social environment

influence the understandings of college that students have and the decisions they make. In this study, I draw upon a culture and cognition framework to address this gap in the literature. A culture and cognition framework depicts decision-making not as a matter of deliberate (rational) versus unconscious (habitus), but about how people perceive the world and act upon these perceptions (Lamont et al. 2014). People from different structural positions attach different meanings to the same phenomenon, which then leads them to act in different ways in response. A culture and cognition framework shifts the focus to the shared categories and classification systems individuals utilize to perceive and make sense of their environment (Lamont et al. 2014). This framework contends that it is not simply a matter of having access to information, but also of how students from different structural positions make sense of this information within the context of their own understandings of higher education. Cultural processes operate not only at the level of individual cognition, but also inter-subjectively, through shared scripts and cultural structures (Lamont et al. 2014). A culture and cognition framework provides analytical leverage over rational choice and habitus because it takes into account both the individual and the structural environment and it provides the conceptual tools to uncover the processes by which structure influences individual choices. By focusing on the subjective understandings of individuals, a culture and cognition framework will enable an analysis of how social class-based experiences and family relationships inform students' understandings of higher education and how students employ those understandings in making college application decisions.

A culture and cognition framework reflects the changes in the study of culture, which has shifted from a focus on values and motives as the engine of social action to a series of conceptual tools that emphasizes the different ways in which culture enables or constrains social action. Summarizing these new approaches to the study of culture, Vaisey (2010) writes, "These 'new culture' scholars have rejected the idea that culture operates by shaping motives and instead argues that culture makes some action possible and others difficult or impossible by constituting one's repertoire of skills and knowledge" (78). Moreover, this new approach towards the study of culture has distanced itself from viewing culture as a coherent, consistent system and has instead emphasized the fragmented and eclectic nature of culture (DiMaggio 1997). Consequently, this new approach to the study of culture has produced multiple definitions, resulting in six different but sometimes overlapping perspectives on how culture shapes social action. These six different concepts— frames, repertoires, narratives, symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institution—each highlight particular aspects of culture that makes some action more likely than others. Each of these concepts further elaborates on how some aspects of students' social backgrounds and experiences shape how they understand society. In this dissertation, I draw upon three of these concepts—frames, narratives, and institutions—to explain how social class shapes how students make the decision to attend college and where to apply for college.

Frames

Research studies that draw upon cultural frames rely on a conception that can be traced back to the works of Goffman (1974) and the social movement literature (Benford and Snow 2000). Goffman (1974) explains that frames represent "schemata of interpretation" that allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life and the larger society (21). Benford and Snow (2000) similarly define frames as "an interpretive [schema] that simplifies and condense the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects,

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situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (80). Both of these definitions emphasize the importance of interpretation in how people perceive and act upon the world. The idea behind frame is that people's perception of events shapes how they behave. Individuals may perceive the same events differently based on the different prior understanding and experiences they bring to the situation. By highlighting certain aspects of social life and hiding or blocking others, "frames can be thought of as a lens through which we observe and interpret social life" (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010).

Empirical applications of frames have revealed that how people frame their social world shapes how they act. Examining participation in a Latino housing project, Small (2002) shows that individuals' descriptions or framings of their neighborhood influenced whether they participated in the local activities of the neighborhood. Those who conceived of the neighborhood as a community, a neighborhood with a significant history of political and social involvement, continued that tradition by participating in local activities. Meanwhile, individuals who perceived the neighborhood as merely projects, low-income area with no notable history, did not. Harding (2007) examines frames regarding teenage pregnancy in disadvantaged neighborhoods and finds the existence of both mainstream frames that highlight the potential for a teenage pregnancy to derail schooling and alternative frames that highlight the adult social status that comes with childbearing. As a result, adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhood have more options for conceiving of their circumstances, which can impact teenage pregnancies. Young (2004) finds that the relative degree of isolation of black men shaped their framing or interpretation of the issues of stratification, inequality, and prospects for mobility. The men who experienced greater social exposure across race and class lines tended to emphasize social conditions. The more socially isolated men tended to blame black men themselves for their plight.

Research on education has also contributed to a greater understanding of the role of frames in shaping the behaviors of high school students. While these studies do not explicitly draw upon or engage with the concept of frames, their findings help to shed light on how frames can constrain or enable certain actions. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that how black students perceive academic achievement shapes the amount of effort they exert in school. They assert that due to structural discrimination in the form of inferior schooling and job ceiling, some black Americans develop a coping mechanism that associates academic achievement with "acting white." This framing of academic achievement as "acting white" causes a social and psychological situation that diminishes black students' academic effort and thus leads to underachievement. While their "acting white" thesis has been debunked by many researchers as a cause of black underachievement (Tyson, Darity Jr., and Castellino 2005; Carter 2006), Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) focus on how different interpretations of academic achievement may give rise to different behaviors is a valuable contribution to the conception of culture as frames. MacLeod's (1987) study of two teenage male groups reveals that the group who subscribed or framed the opportunity structure as essentially an open one that rewarded hard work and effort was more integrated in schools and positive about the future. The other group who framed the opportunity structure as closed due to class-based obstacles was more likely to drop out of school and was more despondent about their future. These studies point to the existence of different frames for interpreting the same social phenomenon, and how certain frames increase the likelihood of one action over others. By understanding the frames that students of different social class backgrounds utilize to make decisions about pursuing higher education, we can gain a better understanding about the process and nature of their decision-

making.

Narratives

While narratives are similar to frames in that they both cognitively shape how people interpret their social world, narratives are stories with a "causally-linked sequence of events" (Small et al. 2010). They have a beginning, middle, and ending, and are stories that people tell that express how they make sense of their lives. Narratives consist of three elements (Ewick and Silbey 2003). First, a narrative relies on some form of selective appropriation of past events and characters. Second, within a narrative the events must be temporally ordered. This quality of narrative requires that the selected events be presented with a beginning, middle, and an end. Third, the events and characters must be related to one another and to some over-arching structure, often to an opposition or struggle. The temporal and structural ordering ensure both "narrative closure" and "narrative causality," which is an account about how and why the events occurred as they did.

Narratives provide an account of how individuals view themselves in relation to others and are therefore central to how individuals construct social identities (Abelmann 1997; Small et al. 2010). They affect one's action because individuals choose actions that are consistent with their personal identities and personal narratives. People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives—however fragmented, contradictory, or partial (Somers 1994). "This perspective shows that action is not an automatic response to incentive: it is made possible within the context of narratives around which people make sense of their lives" (Lamont and Small 2008). A narrative approach assumes that social action can only be intelligible if we recognize that people are guided to act by the structural and cultural relationships in which they are embedded and by the stories through which they constitute their identities (Somers 1994). The narratives people tell about themselves and others reveal how they make sense of their experiences, constraints, and opportunities. Ewick and Silbey (2003) argue that narratives "locate characters in time and space, describing both what enables and what constrains action…they point to the sources and limits of agency that exist within social structure" (1342). Narratives reveal the subject's consciousness of how opportunities and constraints are embedded in the normally taken for granted structures of social action. Narratives can contribute to a better understanding of college-choice decision-making by highlighting how students make decisions that reflect the narratives they have about themselves and the social world.

Institutions

Institutions represent the concept used to describe what organizations are and how they operate. Institutions refer to the "formal and informal rules, procedures, routines, and norms, as socially shared cognitive and interpretative schemas, or more narrowly yet, as formal organizations" (Lamont and Small 2008: 98). This definition consists of three conceptions of institutions: as formal rules of behavior that are codified as laws or regulations, as norms of appropriate behavior that are codified through informal sanctions, and as taken-for-granted understandings that structure how individuals perceive their circumstances (Small et al. 2010). The three conceptions of institutions allow researchers to examine the different ways in which organizations influence the way individuals think and behave. While each conception

emphasizes a different aspect of examination, what they all have in common is the idea that organizations operate via socially shared cognitive and interpretive schemas. In other words, within each organization, there are shared system of understanding and rules (e.g. schemas) that influence how individuals make sense of their surroundings and their decisions. The concept of institutions thus draws our attention to the ways in which action is structured by shared systems of understandings and rules (Dimaggio and Powell 1991).

Socially shared cognitive and interpretive schemas involve sorting individuals and groups into categories that are arranged usually within a hierarchy. The consequence is the creation of shared classification systems through which individuals perceive and make sense of their environment (Lamont et al. 2014). This sorting process both opens and closes opportunities, and enables and constrains individuals' life course trajectories. One of the processes by which sorting occurs is evaluation. Evaluation refers to a "cultural process that…concerns the negotiation, definition and stabilization of value in social life…This process involves several important sub-processes, most importantly categorization ('determining in which group the entity…under consideration belongs') and legitimation ('recognition by oneself and others of the value of an entity')" (Lamont et al.:593). The cultural process of evaluation results in one or more hierarchy that separates appealing options from less desirable ones. Lamont et al. (2014) argue that, "evaluation is a process that results in winners and losers, for example, through rankings, or the differential allocation of desirable resources" (594). Schemas therefore reflect the product of a process of evaluation that involves the categorization and legitimation of entities. In the case of this research, the entities of interest are colleges.

The concept of institutions enables me to describe the processes by which schools and programs shape the schemas or configuration of colleges that are presented to students. By looking at schools and programs through the lens of the institutions concept, I will identify the configuration of colleges presented to students in their high schools or programs, describe how the structure or conditions of each institution give rise to this specific configuration, and then elaborate on the process by which these configurations of colleges interact with students' own experiences and understandings to shape their college application choices. Configurations of colleges reflect the cognitive and interpretive schemas used by students to make sense of colleges; these configurations involve the formation of categories of college options that are considered appropriate for students within their institutions.

Methodology

This research is based on 46 in-depth interviews with high-achieving students from the Bay Area in their senior year in high school. To be considered high-achieving, students needed to have SAT scores above 1260 or ACT scores above 28 and an unweighted GPA of at least 3.7. Higher-SES students were recruited primarily from two schools through the use of snowball sampling. At each of the two high schools, I reached out to students in school clubs and via flyers that were posted on school campus, resulting in 20 interviews. The remaining three higher SES students from this study were recruited via flyers that I posted around Berkeley and Oakland. Lower-SES students were recruited primarily from their participation in several college preparation programs for low-income and first-generation college students. A handful of lower-SES students were recruited through their schools by way of teachers forwarding my research to their students.

Most students were interviewed twice, with the first interview being the primary one that

inquired about how students applied to college and the second one being the follow-up about where students will attend college. The first interview consisted of questions about students' individual and family background, their approach to higher education, their preparation for college, their exploration of colleges, and lastly, where they applied to colleges. These interviews were conducted at libraries and cafes. They lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, but most averaged 1.5 hours. The second interview was over the phone and lasted anywhere between 15 and 30 minutes.

Twenty-three of these research participants were categorized as lower-SES and twenty-three were categorized as higher-SES. Lower-SES students were defined as students whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree and were not working in a professional occupation. Among lower-SES students, all but three students had parental incomes under $50,000. These three students had family incomes between $50,000 and $75,000. These students were still categorized as lower-SES based on the lack of a higher education and the absence of a professional occupation among the parents. Moreover, these students participated in programs for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Consequently, lower-SES students in this research refers to poor, low-income, working class, and first-generation college students.

Higher-SES students were defined as those students for whom at least one parent has a bachelor's degree or higher and was working in a professional occupation. Among higher-SES students, all students had family income above $75,000 except for two. One student reported his family income as between $25,000 and $50,000 and the other stated his family income was between $50,000 and $75,000. These two students were still categorized as higher-SES students based on the backgrounds and current circumstances of their parents. One student was living in an affluent community; both of his parents are college graduates from China but only his father was currently working. The other student also attended school in an affluent area; his parents are both college graduates, but his father was forced into retirement making his mother the only working adult. As a result, higher-SES students are from families that are considered middle- and upper-middle class.

Among the lower-SES sample, there were three African Americans, fifteen Asian Americans, and five Hispanics. For the higher-SES sample, there was one was Hispanic, twelve Asian Americans, eight whites, and two multi-racial students. There were more females than males in each SES group. Except for the three African American students and seven (out of eight) white students, all other students in the study had at least one parent who is an immigrant. Some of these students are themselves immigrants. All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

To analyze my data, I transcribed and then coded the interviews. The codes were developed to reflect the areas of inquiry in my in-depth interview questionnaire. As mentioned previously, the areas of interest included student background and activities, family background, school background, and student experiences in different phases of the college choice decision-making process from college exploration and college preparation to college application. My codes were developed to capture students' responses to these areas of interest. For instance, codes such as family background, family involvement, and family obligations were used to capture the influences of the family on the lives and decision-making of students. In another instance, when it came to students' responses regarding their criteria for selecting where they would submit college applications, I applied codes that reflect the different factors such as distance, application requirements, admission requirements, college size, and rankings.

Data analysis after the coding process consisted of the identification of social class

differences in how students applied to college. I examined the frequency and content of codes by social class. I also focused on the different factors such as family, schools, programs, and community in shaping student experiences as they explored colleges, prepared for college, and applied to college. While the brunt of the analysis took place after the coding process, I also drew upon the memos that I wrote at different stages of the data collection process. Throughout the interview process, I wrote memos that summarized patterns around how students applied to college, and how these patterns differed by social class. Together, these memos and the analysis of codes pointed me towards how schools, college preparation programs, and families play pivotal roles in shaping where students apply to college. While the analyses yielded themes around how students approached the college choice-decision making process, it was the concepts from the culture and cognition framework that informed how I interpreted the process by which social class gave rise to differences in decision-making.

Overview of Dissertation

To examine how social class shapes where high-achieving students apply to college, I compared the processes used by high-achieving students from different social class backgrounds in the Bay Area, California when deciding where to submit college applications. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 46 high-achieving students, I find that students from lower-SES backgrounds tend to limit their choices of colleges to institutions within California while students from higher-SES backgrounds applied to top colleges across the U.S. As table 1 shows, among twenty-three lower-SES students, only seven applied out-of-state. In contrast, higher-SES students applied to in-state colleges as well, but they also submitted applications to out-of-state universities, especially Ivy League and liberal arts colleges. Out of twenty-three higher-SES students, twenty-one students applied to out-of-state colleges. By only applying to colleges close to home and in California, lower-SES students applied primarily to large public selective universities (University of California [UC] universities) and nonselective public colleges (California State University [CSU] colleges). In contrast, higher-SES students are more likely to apply to selective private colleges across the country like Ivy League universities, top liberal arts colleges in the East Coast and Midwest, and major public and private research universities across the U.S. My dissertation is structured around answering the question of social class differences in application to out-of-state colleges.

Table 1: Social Class and Types of Colleges Applied

	Total Subjects	# Applied to In-State Colleges	# Applied to Out-of-State Colleges	# Applied to at Least One Out-of-State Liberal Arts College	#Applied to at Least One Ivy League University
Higher-SES Students	23	23	21	14	15
Lower-SES Students	23	23	7	4	3

In Chapter 1, I examine how students from different social class backgrounds decide that

they will attend college upon completion of high school. I show that that higher-SES students frame college as inevitable and a natural progression of schooling. As a result, the decision to attend college requires little deliberation and students assume from a very young age that they will attend college. College becomes something that is to be completed; it is not up to students to decide whether college is the right path. This is because higher-SES students grow up in families and communities in which almost every adult has completed college. In contrast, most lower-SES students frame college as one of multiple options. The completion of high school represents a key transitional point. As such, the decision to attend college is often one that has to be contemplated as the right path. This is because lower-SES students grow up in families and environments in which college is one of several options available to them after high school. Consequently, the decision to attend college actually represents a conscious decision that students must justify as the right path for them. Indeed, most lower-SES students point to key moments in middle or high school when they decided that they will attend college based on knowledge about colleges or experiences in college environments.

Chapters 2 and 3 tackle the question of how social class shapes whether students apply to out-of-state colleges. In Chapter 2, I show that high schools and college preparation programs shape the choices of students by establishing boundaries around which colleges are considered appropriate for students. Higher-SES students attend high schools in which every student is expected to go on to a four-year college. The inevitability of college is supported by a school environment in which students are presented with a *selective colleges anywhere* schema by which selective colleges, especially private ones, from across the country (e.g. top University of California (UC) research universities, selective private liberal arts colleges, and Ivy League universities) are promoted while low-ranked and nonselective colleges (e.g. California State University (CSU) colleges, two-year colleges, and low-ranked UCs) are stigmatized. In contrast to higher-SES students, most lower-SES students attend high schools and participate in college preparation programs in which a four-year college was among one of multiple post-high school options. As a result, these students are exposed to a configuration of colleges that reflect an *any postsecondary education* or an *any four-year college* schema. In the *any postsecondary education* schema, students are encouraged to pursue any additional education after high school, whether it is vocational/trade schools, two-year colleges, or four-year colleges. In the *any four-year college* schema, any type of four-year colleges (e.g. UCs and CSUs), regardless of selectivity or rankings, is emphasized while two-year and vocational schools are discouraged. In both of these two configurations, out-of-state colleges are rarely discussed and essentially ignored. As a result, higher-SES students are able to consider colleges across the country whereas most lower-SES students are limited to deciding amongst California colleges.

In Chapter 4, I show that whereas schools and programs shape what colleges students are exposed to, family upbringing and experiences influence college choices through its impact on students' understandings of college and their perceptions of how much autonomy they have over their decision-making. Adopting narratives of interdependence or independence, students chose to present stories to answer questions about who they are and where they are heading. Lower-SES students spoke about dealing with family struggles and structural constraints, whereas higher-SES students told stories of how their parents set them up to make decisions about what they want to do growing up. Students were not just speaking about a single point in time. They referenced their experiences and upbringing during childhood, throughout middle and high school, and up to the point when they decided where to apply to college. While the over-arching theme of the narrative among higher-SES students was that of autonomy, it was that of

constraints grounded in child/parent interdependence for lower-SES students. This focus on interdependence limited lower-SES students to applying to colleges close to home in California. In contrast, higher-SES students highlighted the initiative and autonomy they had in their lives, which enabled them to consider applying to colleges across the country.

In the conclusion in chapter 5, I review the contributions of each of the three concepts in advancing our understanding of the influences of social class on the decision-making of individuals. Following this, I discuss potential interventions that can encourage higher numbers of lower-SES, high-achieving students to apply to the nation's top colleges. I end with suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Social Class Differences in How Students Choose to Attend College

This chapter examines how lower- and higher-SES students talk about when they came to the conclusion that they will continue onto college after high school. Though all students in the study are college-bound and have submitted college applications, the process by which they reached the decision to pursue higher education largely reflects their social class background. Whereas the responses of higher-SES students reveal a great deal of homogeneity in terms of when and how they came to the decision, the responses of lower-SES students reflect a diverse set of paths toward that decision. What is revealing about these responses is the certainty expressed by higher-SES students at a very young age about their inevitable matriculation to college. In a sense, the decision to continue to college represents a non-decision among higher-SES students because college attendance is not something to be deliberated upon but rather something that is assumed. College represents merely another step in their schooling and does not require the weighing of different options. This understanding of college attendance as inevitable is primarily the result of family socialization.

Unlike higher-SES students, most lower-SES students come to view college attendance with conviction and confidence later during their adolescent years. It is not that the parents of lower-SES students do not hold high expectations for their children to attend college. They did. Lower-SES parents actually expressed such expectations more explicitly to their children than higher-SES parents, whose expectations remained implicit for they assumed that their children would automatically follow in their footsteps. For lower-SES students, however, these expectations were often insufficient because their parents knew very little about college and students received little exposure to college during childhood. As a result, most lower-SES students referenced particular moments in middle and high school as to when they became certain that they would go on to college. These moments reflected different degrees of confidence about the satisfaction and accessibility of college. Lower-SES students needed to make sure that they would enjoy the structure and social environments of college or that they would be able to gain admission into college. These knowledge and experiences came about through the intervention of extra-familial factors like teachers, academic programs, and college preparation programs.

The Nature of Decision-Making

Research has demonstrated that there are social class differences in how students decide to attend college (Kim 2012; Grodsky and Jones 2007; Avery and Hoxby 2004; Beattie 2002; Biggart and Furlong 1996). The decision-making of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is often viewed through a rational choice lens, in which students are depicted as making a conscious decision to pursue higher education. Rational choice represents high school students as choosing among the different educational options available to them on the basis of evaluations of their costs and benefits (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Brand and Xie 2010; Beattie 2002). Rational choice predict that prospective students decide whether to attend college and select among a range of institutions if their expected current and future benefits outweigh the anticipated costs of their choice (Kim 2012; Grodsky and Jones 2007; Avery and Hoxby 2004). Information is key to decision-making within the rational choice framework and the four critical domains of knowledge consist of the cost of attendance, the availability of financial aid, the likelihood of admission, and the academic and personal resources needed to finish college

(Grodsky and Jackson 2009).

In contrast, advantaged students from middle and upper-middle class families are portrayed as automatically attending college with little to no deliberation about their decision; this perspective reflects the social reproduction perspective that is linked to the concept of habitus, which depicts decision-making as a largely unconscious process. The concept of habitus illuminates the process by which social reproduction can take place routinely and unplanned (Hatcher 1998). Advantaged students grow up in social and cultural environments in which only one or a set of options is perceived as the appropriate choice. As a result, they resort to this default option when confronted with the decision; they do so without any conscious deliberation of the various options. Speaking of the decision-making of middle class students, Ball et al. (2002) concluded that these students' "decisions often involved accepting one option rather than choosing between many" (33).

Brand and Xie (2010) argue that the college attendance decision is not a straightforward balancing of costs and returns; instead, it is heavily influenced by social and cultural norms and circumstances. Indeed, research has demonstrated that the perceived benefits of college differs by social class background, which then impacts students' college attendance decision-making. Kim, DesJardins and McCall (2009) find that students from different race and income groups respond differently to aid packages in their application and enrollment decisions. Heller (1997) finds that the enrollment decisions of low-income and minority students are more responsive to changes in tuition and state grants than those of whites and students from upper-income levels. Beattie (2002) shows that young men from low and average SES origins behave as rational choice models predicts. When returns to schooling are low, their predicted levels of enrollment are similarly depressed, but when returns are high, their probability of enrollment rises. Young men whose families are more advantaged enroll at a relatively high rate regardless of the level of returns that attending college may bring them.

Social background not only influence how information is processed among students, but also the nature of their decision-making. For some students, the decision of whether to attend college is hardly a decision at all; they know from an early age that they are going to attend college and do not seriously consider the possibility of doing otherwise (Grodsky and Jackson 2009; Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Horvat 2001; McDonough 1997). Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) argue that in contrast to the assumption that students make conscious, utility-maximizing decisions about their educational careers, many students assume from a young age that they will attend college, exhibiting what they called a college-going habitus. A college-going habitus take for granted that the goal of college is both proper and attainable without serious consideration of the alternatives. They do not arrive at their decision by carefully weighing the costs and benefits of a postsecondary credential but rather by default; attending college is something they always assumed would occur (28). Biggart and Furlong (1996) find that students from lower-middle class and working class backgrounds have a more explicitly instrumental orientation towards continuing school: staying on at school was a rational choice in the competitive labor market. For those from predominantly middle class background, they assumed they would continue on in school. Du Bois-Reymond (1998) argues that young people from working class backgrounds have to reflect on the available options and justify their decisions about going to college; their decision-making process involves doubts and is very deliberate. In contrast, individuals from well-to-do backgrounds are driven by an absence of decisions; these individuals talk about going to college as if it is inevitable.

These studies primarily limit their analysis to differences in the nature of decision-

making. Moreover, different frameworks are used to describe the process for different social class groups. In this chapter, I specify the process by which social background shape how students understand college and how this understanding results in different types of decision-making for students from different social class. As a result, I not only define the nature of decision-making among both groups of students but I also explain the source of it by linking it to students' social class backgrounds.

Frames of College Attendance

In contrast to previous research that tend to characterize decision-making as a rational process that involves a deliberate evaluation of various options (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Morgan 2005) or as an unconscious process that relies on inculcated dispositions (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Bourdieu 1999; Du Bois-Reymond 1998), I argue that the process by which students decide that they will attend college is better explained by the meaning that students attach to higher education. How students understand higher education shapes the nature and process of their decision-making. I draw upon the concept of frames. The premise behind frames is that decision-making is a matter of how individuals perceive the social world and how they act upon these perceptions (Lamont et al. 2014). In other words, if we want to explain why people act or behave the way they do, we have to understand how they perceive themselves, their surroundings, and the social world. Frame is a concept that captures these perceptions; perceptions are key to explaining decision-making. Frames are thought of as the "lens through which we observe and interpret social life" (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010); they represent different ways of understanding how the world works. Frames, by their very nature, are selective; that is, they highlight certain aspects of social life and minimize or block others. The frames by which students from different social class backgrounds use to make sense of higher education explains why some individuals engage in a conscious decision about college attendance whereas others take it for granted.

I show that higher-SES students frame college as inevitable and a natural progression of schooling. As a result, the decision to attend college requires little deliberation and students assume from a very young age that they will attend college. College becomes something that is to be completed; it is not up to students to decide whether college is the right path. This is because higher-SES students grow up in families and communities in which almost every adult has completed college. In contrast, most lower-SES students frame college as one of multiple options. The completion of high school represents a key transitional point. As such, the decision to attend college is often one that has to be contemplated as the right path. This is because lower-SES students grow up in families and environments in which college is one of several options available to them after high school. Consequently, the decision to attend college actually represents a conscious decision that students must justify as the right path for them. Indeed, most lower-SES students point to key moments in middle or high school when they decided that they will attend college based on knowledge about colleges or experiences in college environments.

While the nature and process of students' decision-making about college attendance differed based on their social class backgrounds, both higher-SES and lower-SES students drew upon overlapping rationales to make sense of why they were going to pursue higher education. One rationale is the internalization of expectations from adults. For higher-SES students, this was the internalization of an implicit expectation about college attendance from primarily their family. They saw that their parents and other adults around them have attended college and they

came to expect this for themselves without anyone telling them explicitly. For lower-SES students, this internalization was primarily due to extra-familial individuals like teachers and program staff. A second rationale is by linking college completion with social and economic mobility; students who referenced this discussed how a college degree opens up opportunities to enhance upward mobility. This is what I label as the social mobility rationale. A third one is that through accumulated knowledge about or experiences at colleges, students learned that college could be an enjoyable experience, socially or academically. I label this as the college satisfaction rationale. Finally, the fourth rationale is that through learning more about college requirements, students became aware that they are eligible or have a very good chance of gaining admission into college. I label this the academic evaluation rationale. These rationales themselves are not mutually exclusive. Both group of students, especially lower-SES students, employed multiple rationales in their discussions about their decision-making. However, given that higher-SES students assumed that they will attend college, the rationales they brought up were meant to validate their taken-for-granted attitude towards college attendance. In contrast, for most lower-SES students, who framed college as one of multiple paths after high school, these rationales formed the basis of their conscious decision to pursue higher education.

Lower-SES Students

Most lower-SES students frame college as one of multiple paths after high school. Unlike the frame of higher-SES students which is evident in their response to the specific question of when students became certain that they will attend college, the frame of most lower-SES students is not directly obvious from their response to the same question. Instead, the frame of lower-SES students can be gathered indirectly from students' discussions about their family and community backgrounds and from the rationales that they bring up to justify their certainty about college attendance. This is because higher-SES students respond to the question about college attendance by making the point that the decision to pursue higher-education is something they never thought about; they assumed they will go on to college. Their responses reveal their frame regarding how they think about college attendance. For most lower-SES students, because they do not assume that they will attend college, their responses communicate the events during a specific period in their lives that convinced them they should pursue higher education. These responses of lower-SES do not directly tell us about their frames; they tell us that lower-SES students do not frame college as inevitable like their higher-SES counterparts. Instead, the frame of most lower-SES students can be found in the doubts, hesitancy, and uncertainties that they express regarding college attendance. These apprehensions show that college is viewed as not the only option for them after high school; it is one of multiple options. The multiple options are revealed in lower-SES students' discussions about what adults in their communities and families do for a living. By discussing how these people's paths influence their own, it shows that lower-SES students considered other options before college became a certainty. The elimination of these other paths is evidence of their frame of college as one of multiple options.

Most lower-SES students talked about coming to the understanding that they will continue to college after high school as involving some outside intervention in the form of teachers, academic enrichment programs, or college preparation programs. Lower-SES students come from households in which neither parents have completed a four-year college. Even though some students have older siblings who have gone to college, their knowledge of college remained limited growing up. As such they relied on extra-familial factors in convincing them

that college was the path for them; these students needed affirmation beyond the family. Some students came to this conclusion through the internalization of expectation from teachers and program staff. For these individuals, the expectation of college from someone outside the family was sufficient to motivate them to attend college. Most students, however, needed to learn more about the college process and to gain some familiarity with the social and physical environments of colleges. Others needed confirmation that they have the necessary academic credentials to be accepted into college. In contrast to the majority of lower-SES students, a handful of lower-SES students expressed that it was their parent's expectation that was the primary reason they decided to pursue higher education. While many lower-SES students draw from more than one rationale to make sense of their decision to continue onto college, I organize the responses of students by their primary rationale in what follows.

Internalization of Expectations from Participation in Academic Programs

Several lower-SES students came to the understanding that they would attend college after high school as a result of their participation in academic enrichment programs in elementary and middle school. For these students, their participation in these programs fostered expectations that they would attend college. While they knew very little about college at this time, they came to internalize the expectation that college was the path for them. John is one such student. Neither of his parents has completed college but he has three older siblings who have gone on to college. People in his community and neighborhood work in low-wage jobs and some own small businesses. John's discussion about how his parents' jobs in the restaurant industry impacted his focus on his education reveals his frame about college. He recalled,

> They know they don't want me to have these lifestyles. They want me to escape this community...Because I was still so young, it sort of shaped the way I saw school and that I needed to do good in school because it was going to be my escape.

The fact that he has to consciously eliminate the path of his parents, which is a life of physically demanding jobs, shows that he recognized that other paths are possible, even if it is not something that he wants to pursue. Despite committing himself to doing well in school, he only became certain of college attendance later on during his middle school years. It was his elementary school teachers and academic enrichment programs that put him on the path towards college at a young age. Through the recommendation of an elementary school teacher, John's parents put him into a summer academic program hosted at the local university. John participated in this program from elementary to middle school. When asked to identify when he became certain that he would attend college, John referenced his involvement in the program:

> **Interviewer:** When did you become pretty sure that you were going to go to college after high school?
>
> **John:** I think it was once I started doing all those programs that I feel like I was going to college because it was sort of me thinking that if I'm doing all these and I don't get into college, I would be really disappointed. It was also because I saw myself ready for college because my parents put all of these things, resources into me that I'll be able to go to college and be successful.

Interviewer: Was it a particular moment or was it over this period of time that you felt that?

John: I think it was over this period of time. Because I've always tried my best to be on the top of my classes and then it was also because everyone else kept seeing me as the college bound student, I started to see myself as that also.

John's participation in the program served as the catalyst in solidifying his desire to attend college. The program itself did not specifically teach about college. Instead, the program was primarily concerned with preparing students to excel in their classes. John, however, connected his participation in the program with college attendance by making sense of why he and his parents have put so much effort into preparing him to do well academically. In addition to his awareness of this investment, John's decision to pursue higher education was also bolstered by the expectations of the program staff that he was college bound. In doing so, John internalized the expectation of college attendance, in which he came to see himself as a hard-working student who will go to college.

A similar process unfolded for Meiying as well. She is the oldest of two children. Neither of her parents have completed college and both work in labor-intensive jobs. As a result, while she understands that one can still manage to get by even without a college education as her parents have done, it is a path with limited options. College for her came to represent the path offered her the most opportunities:

Because my parents didn't go to college, they couldn't do anything. They couldn't do what they want. If I get a good education, I could have more career opportunities. I could make choices I want to make and choose what I want to do. I believe college is the option that would let me have many different choices in the future.

Meiying rules out the possibility of following in the footsteps of her parents, evidence of her frame of college as one of multiple options. While she has come to view college as a means to achieve social mobility, it was through programs that paved the path for her. Starting in middle school, Meiying began participating in multiple academic enrichment programs, some offered through her school and others through a Chinese school in her community. In these programs, she would learn Mandarin and complete worksheets on academic subjects. It was through these programs that she decided she would go on to college after high school:

Interviewer: When did you become pretty sure that you were going to go to college?

Meiying: Middle school.

Interviewer: Tell me what happened then? What led up to that?

Meiying: I don't know. Since I've been exposed to so many after-school programs, summer programs, academic programs, I feel like after high school it's what I need to do.

Interviewer: Do they tell you that?

Meiying: I think they kind of expect me to. I think it's just like college after high school that's what I'm expected to do.

Like John, Meiying also connected her participation in academic programs to college attendance as well. Given how much of her life revolves around academics, it was not difficult for Meiying to imagine a life that involves more schooling even after she finishes high school. While she did not know much about college at this point, her involvement with academic programs, specifically the college expectations, enabled her to see college as something for her as well. In doing so, she internalized the expectation of college attendance. While students like John and Meiying internalized expectations of college attendance, it is not to say that they assume they will attend college like their higher-SES counterparts. Instead, lower-SES students come to inhabit this mindset of college attendance through their awareness of why it is that they are investing so much effort into academics, their conscious effort to avoid the predicament of their parents, and the support of academic program staffs.

College Satisfaction Rationale

For individuals like John and Meiying, the expectation of college itself was sufficient to motivate them to attend college when combined with their participation in academic programs. Most lower-SES students, however, needed specific information about college or even experiences on college campuses. This information and experience came about during their high school years. In high school, students learned about college requirements, what it is like to attend college, and some even got the opportunity to experience life as a college student through summer residential programs at local universities. Through this, students came to learn that college can be a satisfying experience for them, a necessary step in their decision to attend college after high school.

Jack is one such student who needed more information about what college was like before fully committing to the idea of college attendance. As an individual who has had to balance school with household responsibilities, Jack is unsettled about the future. He states: "I think about a lot of things about my future. I think about a lot of outcomes. I see how these multiple endings could happen now." This quote demonstrates his frame that college is but one of multiple options. The multiple options that exist is apparent in his discussions about the aspirations of his friends:

We have same and different ideas. We all want to be successful in a materialistic fashion. All. Maybe not all. Those who plan to go to college want to enjoy it. I have a few friends who don't plan on going to college at all. They plan on not attending college ever and going to work directly or finding some occupation they can be happy with. A friend of mine is excited about going to boot camp for the Navy. I respect that. If he's happy with it, go for it. We all have different goals, but we all want to be happy.

As a child, Jack's mother introduced him to college as something that he needed to complete, but he did not give serious considerations to it. This expectation was not sufficient to convince him of why he should go to college. He recalled "I saw college as a concept rather than a campus. It was a concept. High school was when it became real. I learned about it." In high

school, college became something he could grasp because he learned about what it was like:

Interviewer: So when did you become pretty sure of going to college?

Jack: Junior. Sophomore year was when I wanted to go to college for myself. Junior year is when I decided that I needed to go to college for myself.

Interviewer: Let's talk about sophomore year? What happened?

Jack: AP Bio. Again it was just that opportunity to learn and me actually being interested in something for once. I used to go with the flow, motions of school. Go to class, pay attention in class, take notes. Do the homework. Get good grades, hopefully an A. AP Bio made me want to learn what was happening, pay attention, and take extensive notes. If I didn't still understand, I used to let it pass. But now, I wanted to understand.

Interviewer: So up to this point, you went with the flow but you hit AP Bio and something clicked?

Jack: I was interested in Bio and that helped. It was just the structure of the class that really caught me. I thought that this AP class, if this is like college, I will like it. I like these kind of more interactive, more critical thinking classes.

Interviewer: How did you connect AP Bio with college? How did you know that you will do this in college?

Jack: My teacher. I just told her, "I really like this class." She said, "This is AP." I'm like, "Yeah, doesn't it just means that I get college credit." She was like she tries to structure the course like college. She just described to me how most college classes work and that kind of intrigued me. Her description intrigued me and I enjoyed it and I felt if college is like this, I want to be there.

It was Jack's experience in an advanced placement class that convinced him that college will be a satisfying experience. Through this advanced placement classes, Jack was able to link the structure and content of a satisfying high school course with the learning that goes on in college classrooms. This connection made college much more tangible. In doing so, the class became a turning point in that it solidified his decision to continue on to college after high school. Whereas previously he was doing well in school for the sake of getting good grades, the experience in this class connected his academic effort to going to college. As a result, college as one of multiple options was transformed into the right path for him through this class.

While learning about what college was like motivated students like Jack to become certain of college attendance, other students needed actual experiences on college campus. These students participated in college preparation programs that took them on college campus visits or put them into summer residential programs on college campuses. Marcus is one such student. His frame of college as multiple paths is informed by his childhood experiences and his mother's journey to pursue a college degree when he was in high school. As a kid, he did not know much about college. He remembered: "At first, I thought high school, then that was it…I really wasn't

thinking about going to college until high school." By the time he was in high school, his mother had begun taking classes at the nearby university. Yet, despite having a parent who attended college, he still found it difficult to learn about college from her: "I had a lot of questions about how college is. I can't connect with my mom. She had a job and four kids. Her experience is different from my own experience."

His participation in a college preparation program allowed him to have many of his questions answered and it gave him the opportunity to spend quality time on a college campus. This experience helped him decide to pursue higher education:

> **Interviewer:** And when did you become pretty sure you were going to go to college after high school?
>
> **Anthony:** After my first summer in UB [the college preparation program]. After that, my mind was made up. I can't get a job after high school. I couldn't do that. That would kill me and stuff.
>
> **Interviewer:** Something particular happened that summer?
>
> **Anthony:** I lived in the dorms for six weeks without my parents [and] it was a blessing. Walking on campus, it felt good. It wasn't so structured like high school. Go to this class for an hour, go to class. We would have time between class in college to chill and talk about worldly problems. And it just felt right; this is what I wanted to be at.

Anthony's participation in the summer residential program showed him that college can be a satisfying experience. His knowledge of college up until this point was from watching movies. He recalled learning about college from watching shows that portrayed college as "frat parties, that work was hard, and that it was expensive." By being on campus for six weeks and living the life of a college student, he found the college experience to be enjoyable. This knowledge combined with his pessimism about being able to acquire a job to his liking right after high school cemented his decision go straight to college. Anthony drew from a college satisfaction rationale and a social mobility rationale to make sense of his decision to pursue higher education. In doing so, Anthony eliminated the path of going straight to the labor force after high school, a reflection of his frame of college as one of multiple options.

Social Mobility Rationale

Many students discussed how their increased knowledge of college convinced them that a college degree would open the door to opportunities for upward mobility. Students who linked college attendance with social mobility drew upon a comparison between their family background and the prospect of a better life with a college degree. These students were aware of the economic difficulties their families and friends confront because of limited job opportunities which they attribute to the absence of a college degree. For these students, it was less about seeing college as an enjoyable experience and more about viewing college as tied to economic mobility. This was the case with Madison, who became certain of college attendance due to her participation in a college preparation program that helped her better understand college and the economic value of a college education:

Interviewer: When did you certain about going to college?

Madison: Junior year. That's when I started learning about the different systems and options. CT [a college preparation program] would encourage us to think about majors. That's when I started thinking about what I wanted to do in college and after that. I feel like I knew a little bit more than my peers because I was in CT. Because of that, I was a lot more focused.

Interviewer: What did you think about college at this point in junior year?

Madison: There was a point when I didn't want to go to college. I was like, "College isn't the route for everyone." I was like, "What if it's not the route for me." I was just really reluctant to go to college. They are just trying to take our money. I could just get a job and start doing things. I thought about it and looked at my family, and thought about how much it would benefit me in the future. And how it would help me broaden my horizon.

Coming from a family and community in which few people have completed college, Madison was understandably hesitant about the prospect of pursing a higher education degree. She harbored negative preconceptions about college. The fact that she questioned the prospect of college represents her frame that college is one of multiple options. She considered going straight into the labor force after high school. However, she recognized that without a college education, it would be especially difficult to live a comfortable life. Examples of people struggling to provide for themselves and their family is pervasive in her community. Her parents struggle to find work, let alone any good-paying jobs because "they don't have an education." Outside of the family, she observes that "a lot of my neighbors they struggle to pay their bills so they have to steal and rob." This recognition that she must complete college to avoid the struggles of her family and community paved the way for her to be more accepting of college. The openness towards college enabled her to take advantage of the college preparation program, which exposed her to the structure of higher education and the requirements needed to gain admission. By linking college with economic mobility, Madison was able to justify why attending college is something she must do. Her observations convinced her that college was a necessity, and the college preparation program helped her to see college as an attainable goal.

For Marcus, it was witnessing how the lack of a higher education made it difficult for his parents to find viable job opportunities that pushed him towards college. His parents both attended college, but did not finish. The family has moved around the country multiple times. Even when his father found a good-paying job, his father was subjected to racism. This memory instilled Marcus with the importance of going to college so that he can have more opportunities:

Interviewer: When did you become pretty sure that you were going to go to college after high school?

Marcus: It was when we lived in Denver, Colorado. Basically, my dad, while we were there, we were making racks. Lots of money. My dad, at the time, he was working as a manager at Whole Foods. When he got the job, he was very happy. As time went on, everyone there felt my dad was lower than them because he was black. He always come

home with stuff like that. I knew that I wanted to go to college because for me, I appreciated my dad for going through all that and accepting everything that they spat him so he could feed his family but I knew that when I got older, I didn't want to go through that. I figure that college was, that was it. That was the place to be. Go out there and I could get a higher education.

Interviewer: Having witnessed what your dad went through, you felt college would allow you to avoid that?

Marcus: Not necessarily help me avoid it. I knew that if I was on the job, it could happen anywhere, whether I go to college or not. The main thing that I thought about was if I'm making all that money, if I choose to quit a job, I can quit and get a new one. The way that I view it is that I'll be making a lot of money so at that time because I'm making a lot of money, I can quit and find another. My dad, he didn't have that opportunity.

The excerpt above demonstrates how Marcus recognizes his father's path as a possibility; his father was able to make good money from a job without a college education. This shaped his frame of college as not the only option. However, the lack of an education limited opportunities for his father when confronted with a distressing work environment. As a result, Marcus came to see college as the path that will provide him with the best chance to deal with workplace harassment. Marcus does not view a college education as something that will immune him from racism. He acknowledges that he can be the target of racism anytime and anywhere. However, a college degree would provide him with more opportunities for good-paying jobs so that he can move on from workplaces that subject him to racial hostility.

Maria also linked going to college with improved job prospects as well, a connection that convinced her of the importance of a college degree. She currently lives with her mother, who works at a shopping center. Her family receives government assistance to supplement her mother's earnings. Here, she talks about how she came to the conclusion that she would go on to college:

Interviewer: So when did you become very sure that you were going to go to college after high school?

Maria: At the end of my freshman year, I was like, "I'm going to college no matter what." I'm in high school, I can't just work, that's boring. I don't want to do that. I don't want to just work. I don't want to be in the labor force doing extra work that I don't need to be doing to earn a salary or wages that I can't even sustain myself with.

Interviewer: Do you remember what happened freshman year that got you to be like that?

Maria: So, when I was a freshman my boyfriend was a senior…He graduated when he barely turned 17. And I saw him graduate but then after he just worked so I was like I don't want to do that… But I think the main thing was just seeing him not going to college was like, "What are you doing with your life?" I mean, I'm not going to leave you because you didn't go to college, but I don't want to do that. I think that was the main thing for me.

Maria recognized the difficulties of finding good-paying jobs without a college degree. She saw the struggles her mother and boyfriend endured because they were unable to find a job that paid well enough. Maria does not want to face these struggles herself and views college as the way to avoid these issues. Thus, she eliminates this potential path of working right after high school, a reflection of her frame of college as one of the multiple options available to her. Like other lower-SES students who draw upon a social mobility rationale to make sense of their decision to pursue higher education, Maria expresses optimism at what a college degree would do to help her find a job that she likes and one that pays well. It is this comparative evaluation grounded in their observations of the economic struggles of their families and friends and the prospect of a college degree for economic mobility that solidifies lower-SES students' desires to pursue higher education. These students recognize that college is one of multiple options after high school from what they observe of their parents and their communities, but they come to see college as the option that will enable them to avoid the predicament of their family and friends who are struggling.

Academic Evaluation Rationale

Some lower-SES students were interested in college but they were unsure if they could get into college. Consequently, college occupied a tentative position in their future until they became certain that they have the credentials to get into college. This certainty would come about through learning about college requirements and finding that they meet these criteria. In doing so, these students engaged in a process of academic evaluation in which they compared their academic credentials to the admission requirements of colleges. Carlos represents one of these students who needed confirmation that he had the requisite academic credentials to get into college. He lives with his father, a construction worker, and two brothers. His father's occupation has influenced him tremendously in why he wants to go to college. He recalled how he once wanted to give up on school as kid:

> I once told him [my dad] I didn't want to go to school anymore and it was the quickest response he ever told me, "Tomorrow morning, I want you to get up and I want you to work with me." That's all he told me. That night, I kept thinking about how I would feel going to work with him rather than going to school, where I feel it's easier for me.

Seeing the physical toll that construction work has on his father made Carlos think twice about missing school. In addition, his observation of the inconsistent pay for his father led him to eliminate the labor force route after high school, a reflection of his frame of college as one of multiple options: "I have to keep going to school. It's not that I'm going to school because my dad told me too but because I have to get my family to a better position than where they are right now." While working hard in school became an area of focus, it was not during his later years of high school that he became certain of college attendance:

Interviewer: When did you become pretty sure that you were actually going to go to college?

Carlos: I was pretty sure during my junior year. They've always said that as a sophomore, your junior year is the most important year because it's the year that they actually look at

for college. After I ended junior year, I had good grades. I was like I could make it and I just need to finish this last semester of my junior year. Now I am here, about to finish my last semester of high school, I'm college bound.

In the absence of a family member who could guide him through the college process, Carlos had to wait until high school to figure out what he needed to do to get into college. Once he figured this out and realized that he met the criteria, college attendance became a real possibility. Like Carlos, Paul also became certain of college once he learned he qualified given his grades and scores. His mother works at a restaurant and his father is currently unemployed. He grew up hearing about college, but he knew little other than it was something that came after high school. He became convinced of his ability to get into college while in high school as well:

Interviewer: When did you become certain about college attendance?

Paul: I was not certain. I think starting high school. I was like "I'm going to college no matter what. I'm doing so well. I can't fall back."

Interviewer: What happened to give you that belief?

Paul: Doing well in school and doing more than I expect it. The formula is very good grades and activity records and good test scores. I combine these three and that's there's all to college.

Whereas other lower-SES eliminated non-college paths before becoming convinced of college attendance, students like Paul had to overcome doubts about their ability to get accepted. For these students, these doubts constitute their frame of college as one of multiple options. Their doubts reveal that alternative paths besides college exist. In the specific case of Paul, knowing his own academic credentials and learning about the college requirements confirmed to him that he was going to get into college.

For a few students, it was through the act of applying, of receiving acceptance letters, or of signing up to attend a particular college, that college attendance became real for them. Natalie is one such student. She lives with her mother, who works as a cashier at a local shop, and she attends what is considered the top public school in the city. Given the competitive nature of her high school, she had a pessimistic view about her ability to get into a good college, revealing her frame that college is not necessarily the only option. Here she discusses how she initially thought about college given her family background: "It was something since nobody in my family has even graduated from college. It kind of felt like, oh, that's not something for us. We do different things." It was not until she committed herself to a college after getting acceptance letters from multiple colleges that she became certain that she would be in college following high school:

Interviewer: When did you become certain about going to college? Like you knew that after high school, you are going to attend college?

Natalie: I was always skeptical that I would get into college. Everyone made it seem like it's something that you probably can't reach. What really hit me that I was going to go to college was that moment when I hit the I accept button to [UC] Davis and I was like, "I am

going to college." I knew I had to finish high school first but I knew I was going to graduate. So that really hit me. This summer I'm like, "I'm going to college, oh my god."

Interviewer: You said it sounded so far-fetched, tell me more about that? What were people saying?

Natalie: You see these American dreams and quotes and you only see these middle class kids going to college. You don't see kids in the slums going to college. They don't advertise that. Being low-income, my mom didn't go to college. She dropped out and it just makes it seem so much farther than it actual is.

For Natalie, her understanding of college attendance is influenced by an awareness that she is low-income and that she attends a high school in which upperclassmen have encountered difficulties in trying to get into the colleges of their choice. She recognizes that the image of someone going to college does not reflect people like her who come from low-income backgrounds. Given that she attends a competitive high school and students are aiming to get into top colleges, she links getting into college with getting into a top college. This understanding of college exerts even more pressure upon her and thus she is unsure of her ability to make it to college. It is only when she accepted her spot at a nearby university that she became certain that she will become a college student.

College as Inevitable: Internalization of Expectations from Families

While they are among the outliers, several lower-SES students took for granted the idea of college attendance from a very young age. These students were unable to pinpoint a moment or time when they consciously decided that they would attend college; instead, they knew for as long as they could remember that they will continue to college after high school. For these students, the expectations of their parents were sufficient for them to internalize the idea of college attendance. Lily is one such student. Her father works as a clock assembler and her mother is unemployed. When asked about when she decided she would attend college upon completion of high school, she responded:

It was always there in the back of my head. I never had a moment where I never thought I wouldn't go to college. It was always expected in my family. My dad is big on education. He himself was immersed in going to school and college even though he didn't go to college. He enlisted in the army for the Vietnam War. He instead encourages his kids to do that in place of him, to live the life he didn't get to live. The only two kids he has that would be able to do that is my sister and me. My sister is done with her BA. With me, I plan to do exactly what he expects.

Lily has a frame of college attendance as inevitable. She attributes this focus on college attendance at an early age to her father's dedicated to education. Her parents know of college, but almost nothing about college life or the process of applying to college. Yet despite knowing little about college from her parents, Lily knew from a young age that college was something she wanted to attend. In reflecting on her earliest recollections of college, she fondly remembered developing an interest in becoming a doctor in third grade via an afterschool program. Her father

father bought her a pair of stethoscope to play with at home. It was through a discussion with her parents about becoming a doctor that she linked her career interest with attending college.

Shawn is another student who took for granted the idea of college attendance as well. He lives with his grandma and mother. He did not realize that his family receives government assistance in the form of food stamps until he applied for financial aid to go to college. This was due to the fact that his mother wanted to be protective of him regarding their family hardships. He states, "She did a lot of things to shield me from the harsh reality of life." Like Lily, he was pretty sure of college attendance all along:

> **Interviewer:** When did you become pretty sure that you were going to go to college after high school?
>
> **Shawn:** I always knew I was going to college.
>
> **Interviewer:** Tell me more?
>
> **Shawn:** I was on this narrow minded path since I was a kid, I'm going to a college. I didn't know what a college was. That's pretty much the standard route for me, for Asians. You are going to go to middle school, high school, college and then get a job.

Shawn expressed an understanding of college as just a merely another step in the process of schooling that he must go through before entering the workforce. Whereas other lower-SES students took into account in their class background in trying to make sense of college attendance, Shawn felt he was just like any other kid at his mixed-income public school. His class background was not an important part of his identity because it was concealed by his mother. As a result, his identity as Asian is what is most visible to him and because of the stereotype of Asians as high-achieving students who go on to college, he sees himself in the same light and assumes that he will go to college just like other Asian students.

Higher-SES Students

Almost all higher-SES students took for granted the idea that they would attend college. Many expressed bewilderment at the question about college attendance because pursuing higher education represented the default option. Rarely did these students talk about being encouraged to go to college. Their families and communities assumed they would go to college. And students themselves internalized this implicit expectation. In doing so, higher-SES students framed college attendance as inevitable and a natural progression of their schooling. Students made sense of this frame of college attendance by referencing the college-going culture of their family and community. When students brought up rationales for why college attendance was important, it served primarily as validation for their taken-for-granted attitudes towards college attendance rather than the source of their decision to pursue higher education. This is in contrast to their lower-SES counterparts whose rationales actually formed the basis of their decision to attend college. In what follows, I analyze the responses of higher-SES students, paying particular attention to the elements of their frame and when applicable, the rationales they bring up to make sense of college attendance.

Macy is a higher-SES student who comes from a household in which both of her parents

are college graduates, holding advanced degrees in their respective fields. As a child, Macy fondly remembers visiting colleges with her parents and meeting their college friends, who all talked warmly about their experiences in college. As a result, Macy formed a positive opinion about college at a very young age. Macy draws upon this experience to make sense of why she always assumed that she would attend college:

> **Interviewer:** When did you become certain about going to college? That after high school that college is next?
>
> **Macy:** I think that has always been the case. Just because it's always been the case.
>
> **Interviewer:** As a kid?
>
> **Macy:** First time I went to Boston College when I was a lot younger and my dad was like, "I went to college here." I'm sure if one of us [children] expressed interest in not going to college, my parents would want to have a dialogue about it just to try to figure it out. That's never been the case. It's something that we have always wanted to do.
>
> **Interviewer:** Why do you think that's the case?
>
> **Macy:** I don't know. I guess it's word of mouth. Our parents got really good experiences and have lifelong friends who have visited us and like, "This is my best friend from college. We always have all these great memories," and they would tell us all these stories that were very fun like, "We work very hard. Hard work paid off. We work at a job that we are excited to work for every day." I guess we all understand that in today's world it's hard to be successful without having a college degree… Not going to college is not something that we talk about. Both my sister and brother, we have always wanted to go to college. It sounds very fun. It's a very great experience so we haven't really discussed that.

For as long as Macy could remember, she knew she would be attending college after high school. She points out that pursuing higher education is something that she wants for herself, indicating that college is not necessarily something that was pushed on to her. College was not imposed upon Macy because there was no doubt in the minds of her parents that she would attend college. There was no need for Macy's parents to convince her that college was right for her. Instead, by exposing Macy to college experiences early on, Macy's parents facilitated her internalization of the implicit expectation of college attendance. Through these experience and interactions related to college, Macy formed a positive impression of college as a satisfying experience. She understands college as fun, enjoyable, an opportunity to meet lifelong friends, and a necessity to become successful. In doing so, she draws upon the college satisfaction and social mobility rationales to make sense of college attendance. These experiences should not be viewed as factors that convinced her to attend college because she already assumed she would attend college. Instead, these experiences reflect the reasoning that she draws upon to validate her taken-for-granted attitude about college attendance. Indeed, Macy speculate that had she or her siblings considered not attending college, her parents would have talked to them about it. However, because college was assumed, neither parents nor children needed to explicitly justify why college is the right or appropriate path.

Another instance of a higher-SES student drawing upon the family to make sense of her frame of college as inevitable and a natural progression of school is Yuna. Yuna was born in the U.S. but grew up in Japan with her parents and older sister. At the beginning of high school, she left Japan to live with her aunt in the Bay Area to continue her schooling. Both of her parents are college graduates. Her family environment has shaped how she thinks about college attendance:

Interviewer: So when did you became certain you were going to college?

Yuna: I always knew I was going to go to college. I don't think I even thought about not going to college. But recently I heard a lot of stories about people who are taking a year off to do volunteer work or travel or something. That sounds like so much fun. But I don't think I can do that because I don't know what I want to do to make up for that time.

Interviewer: That's so interesting, you never thought about not going to college?

Yuna: Because I think it's a family thing. It's parents urging their children to go to a college and it seems like a crazy idea not to. You don't know what you are doing with your life. So I feel like since I was born, I was already expected that I go to a college.

Interviewer: Can you remember things when you were younger that push you to go to college?

Yuna: Since my sister went to college, I guess. It seems like a faraway thing but it seems like something I was going to have to do. I knew I was going to go to college.

By discussing college attendance as something that she has always knew would happen, Yuna frames college attendance as inevitable. She draws upon her family to make sense of why it is that she has assumed she would pursue higher education. Both her parents completed college and her older sister also attended college as well. Given this family history, Yuna could not imagine another alternative beyond matriculating to college. With no viable alternative to college, Yuna did not consider anything but college after high school. To make sense of why she has this taken-for-granted attitude about college attendance, Yuna draws on a social mobility rationale to discusses how her family and social context stigmatizes those who do not pursue higher education as individuals lacking ambition or goals in life. Unlike Macy who brings up experiences to demonstrate why attending college results in many positive outcomes, Yuna brings up how not pursuing college can result in negative outcomes in the form of stigmatization.

Nick is the child of parents who both hold graduate degrees in their respective fields. As scientists, Nick's parents exposed Nick and his sibling to plants and science, which they learned through multiple camping and hiking trips. In answering a question about his parents' expectations, he revealed how he viewed college attendance:

Both my parents want me to go to college. I think that was always an assumption rather than "We hope you go to college." It was, "You will be going to college." Not in a pretentious way, but it's expected. My mom definitely said, "When you go to graduate school, whenever you do." It depends on what I do. Maybe I have a new interest in college that won't translate into higher education after undergrad. I think whatever I do, they are

going to support me.

Nick's excerpt further reveal how parents of higher-SES students talk to their children in a way that reflects their implicit expectation of college attendance. Nick and his parents did not talk about college attendance because they both assumed that Nick will pursue higher education after high school. The idea that Nick will attend college is viewed as a forgone conclusion such that his mother has already broached the topic of graduate school with Nick. This understanding of college represents his frame of college attendance as inevitable.

Whereas most higher-SES students primarily attribute their understanding of college to family socialization, other students also spoke about their family and the influence of the social environment that extends beyond the family. These students talked about the pervasive but implicit expectation of college attendance that follows them throughout their lives in multiple social spaces. Anna is one such student. Anna's parents are immigrant from Europe and both hold graduate degrees. She describes herself as hard-working and extremely ambitious such that her parents have had to encourage her to relax. Anna grew up in a very competitive academic environment, one in which almost every individual continues on to college. Given this environment, it was not surprising she talked about the social environment when responding to when she became certain about college attendance:

Interviewer: When did you become certain about attending college after high school?

Anna: I've always known that I wanted to go to a four-year college. It's always something my parents talk about because why not I guess. It's shown up in conversation. I spend a lot of time on the internet basically my entire life and a lot of colleges show up. I remembered being six or seven [years old], we have to fill out a survey. "What do you want to do after you graduate from high school?" And I was like four-year college for sure. No matter what, I'm going to a four-year college. The environment that I grew up in, which is not good for everyone, but for me it was highly beneficial. I'd always known that it was happening.

Interviewer: You say the environment expects you to go to college. Tell me more about that?

Anna: Basically, college preparedness was the primary goal of a lot of my educators, basically from kindergarten up, honestly. It always seems like something that was inevitable. Everyone was like, "Go to college because why wouldn't you? That's how you get a job, get a good job, that your children are fed." I think I'm so desensitized to that because I've been around people who go to college my entire life

Anna has always known that she would attend college, a reflection of the framing of college attendance as inevitable. This frame was made possible because college attendance is pervasive in almost every aspect of her life, from conversations with her parents to the websites she encounters online to the environment in her schools. This widespread understanding that students in her environment will attend college is reinforced by her constant contact with people who have gone to college. Because college attendance is an accepted fact for almost everyone, anyone who even entertains doing anything else is viewed with consternation. To makes sense of

why she assumed she would go to college, she draws on a social mobility rationale in which she links college attendance with success. For Anna, the absence of a college degree involves a life of difficulties and misery.

Jaime is a higher-SES student. Both of her parents are college graduates. She also has an older sister that is in college as well. She is well aware that she grows up in a community in which academic excellence is expected and students are encouraged to not only go to college, but to matriculate to top colleges. Given this environment, it was not surprising for Jaime to also see that as the path for her as well:

Interviewer: When did you became certain that you were going to attend college?

Jaime: It never really was a doubt. It was something that was expected.

Interviewer: Interesting. Tell me more? What happened? What made you feel like that?

Jaime: Both my parents went to college. Our whole family has gone to college. Pretty much everyone in [our community] goes to college. It's seen as the next step. My parents have been saving money so that I can go to college my whole life. It's just seen as the next thing that I am going to do.

Interviewer: What did you know about college growing up?

Jaime: I knew it was something you do after high school and something expected of me and my peers. It was seen as another step. Other than that I don't know. It wasn't something that ever stress me up growing up. I didn't know too much about it. I think just knowing that it's another school you go to, and it's a lot harder, and another step.

Jaime brings up another element in the frame of college attendance as inevitable and a natural progression of schooling. This element is the view expressed by Jaime about college as merely another step in her schooling. In an environment in which her family and many in the community have attended college, she came to expect the same for herself. Even with little knowledge about college, she was very confident that she would attend college given that people around her have done the same. Thus, the behaviors of adults around her helped her frame college as something that she must do, something that is inevitable. This frame is visible in her references to college attendance as "another step" and "the next thing that I am going to do." College does not necessarily imply a key transitional point, one that requires deliberation. Instead, college represents another step in the process of schooling for Jaime. The inevitability of college is further supported by the fact that her parents have set aside a fund for her college expenses.

Jennifer, the daughter of a couple who are both college graduates, also points to the role of social forces outside the family when discussing when she became certain that she will attend college. Like other students, she framed college attendance as inevitable, but drew upon slightly different rationale to make sense of her understanding of college:

Interviewer: Tell me about when you became certain that you will attend college?

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Jennifer: I always expected to go to college. I knew that I would probably go to college and go through what everyone else was doing. Apply to college because there's a stigma against not going to college. I thought I'm going to apply to college and major in business which is something I don't want to do. It came up that there was something I was looking forward to in college, a job or profession in my 30s and 40s. It kind of made me active and more motivated to go to school and college. I mean I've always was going to go there anyway.

Interviewer: Tell me more about that--that you are always going to college? People around you doing that or your parents telling you that?

Jennifer: I think most people in America think that if you really want to succeed in life, you should go to college. It's a big stepping stone. It's a necessary path to earn a high paying job usually. So yeah, I've had that feeling. Plus, I've worked so hard. I think one of the reasons we are taught to pursue college it's been ingrained in me to work hard so I can get in to college.

For Jennifer, who grew up surrounded by people who have all gone to college, college attendance represented just another step in her schooling. While what Jennifer describes can be taken to mean that these external forces (in the form of stigma imposed on those who do not pursue higher education) are what persuaded her to attend college, this is actually not the case. She, like other higher-SES students, take-for-granted that they will attend college. As a result, there is no need for encouragements or motivations to push them to attend college. By invoking the stigma attached to not going to college, Jennifer is merely drawing upon a social mobility rationale to justify her taken-for-granted stance towards college attendance.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that social class background shapes how students approach the decision about going to college. Though all students applied to college, higher-SES and lower-SES students engage in two very different processes of decision-making. Whereas higher-SES student assume from a very young age that they will attend college, most lower-SES students become certain of college attendance much later in their adolescent years. Whether one should go to college represents a non-decision among higher-SES students whereas it is a decision that has to be deliberated by lower-SES students. Drawing upon the concept of frames, I argue that higher-SES students frame college attendance as inevitable and a natural progression of schooling. By framing college attendance as such, higher-SES students assume that they will get into college and that college is merely another step in their educational journey. In contrast, lower-SES students frame college attendance as one of multiple options after high school. The end of high school represents a key transitional point for lower-SES students who must decide whether they should pursue college, go straight into the workforce, or take another path. In doing so, lower-SES students need to convince themselves that college is the right path for them. Consequently, most lower-SES wait until middle and high school to become certain of college attendance. This certainty comes about as they accumulate knowledge about their ability, college admission requirements, life in college, and the economic advantages of attending college.

The different nature of decision-making is revealed in how students talk about college

attendance. Because higher-SES students take-for-granted that they will matriculate into college, their responses reflect an effort to understand why it is that they always assumed they would go to college. As such, the section on higher-SES students is more focused on their frame of college attendance as inevitable and a natural progression of schooling. For most lower-SES students, their decision-making involves a process that unfolds over time during their middle and high school years. As such, the section on lower-SES students is less about their frame and more about what transpired over this period that convinced them that college is the right path for them. In other words, the section on lower-SES students tends to be more about their rationales.

Like previous research, this chapter identifies how the nature of decision-making among lower-SES students resembles that of the rational choice framework in which students deliberately and consciously choose to attend college (Brand and Xie 2010; Beattie 2002; Kim 2012). In contrast, the nature of decision-making among higher-SES corresponds to that of social reproduction theorists in that the decision is largely unconscious; these students take-for-granted college attendance (Grodsky and Jackson 2009; Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Horvat 2001; McDonough 1997). For instance, Du-Bois-Reymond (1998) argue that individuals from disadvantaged background are driven by an absence of decision and that working-class students have to reflect on and justify college attendance. In this chapter, I go beyond just identifying differences in the nature of decision-making by also analyzing the process by which social class background give rise to these two types of decision-making. I show how social class experiences and observations give rise to socially shared understandings about college attendance in the forms of frames. Frames reflect how social background influences different understandings of college attendance. These understandings are essential to understand why it is that lower-SES students have to make a deliberate decision about college attendance whereas higher-SES students simply take college attendance for granted. As a result, the concept of frames explains the decision-making processes of both lower-SES and higher-SES students.

In addition to explaining how social class backgrounds shape the nature of students' decision-making, I also examined the rationales that students draw upon to support their decision. Higher-SES draw upon these rationales to validate their taken-for-granted stance towards college attendance, whereas lower-SES students justify why college attendance rather than another path is right for them. Within each rationale, each group of students tend to bring up different elements. Overall, for higher-SES students, their rationales are based more on a set of implied or indirect expectations whereas for lower-SES students, it is largely based on accumulated experiences and observations. For instance, among students whose decision to pursue college reflect the internalization of expectation rationale, higher-SES students speak about how it is through their families that they come to expect college attendance even when they are not specifically told to do so. Among lower-SES students, even though parents encourage students to consider college, college attendance did not become a real possibility until the intervention of extra-familial factors in the form of school and program staff. College attendance is implied for higher-SES students in this rationale, whereas it has to be cultivated and fostered among lower-SES students. In the social mobility rationale, higher-SES students tend to speak about the stigma attached to those who do not attend college as lacking ambition or direction in life. In contrast, lower-SES students reference actual experiences that they themselves encountered or observations of family and friends struggling to make ends meet that pushed them to see college as the way to avoid these predicaments. For the college satisfaction rationale, higher-SES students tend to reference the experiences of their family members and they expect that they will have a similar and enjoyable time. In contrast, lower-SES students

speak about actual college experiences such as visiting a college or living on a college campus for the summer. In total, the responses reveal that higher-SES students seek to replicate the experiences of their parents whereas lower-SES students seek to avoid the predicaments of their family and friends.

Chapter 3: Institutional Influences in Where Students Apply to College

In this chapter, I focus on the role of institutions, specifically schools for both lower- and higher-SES students and college preparation programs for lower-SES students, in shaping application to out-of-state colleges. I draw upon the concept of institutions, which refers to socially shared cognitive and interpretative schemas, to examine how schools shape the college choices of students. The concept of institutions enables me to describe the processes by which schools and programs, as formal organizations, shape the schemas or configuration of colleges that are presented to students. By looking at schools and programs through the lens of the institutions concept, I will identify the configuration of colleges presented to students in their high schools or programs, describe how the structure or conditions of each institution give rise to these specific configurations, and then elaborate on the process by which these configurations of colleges interact with students' own experiences and understandings to shape their college application choices. The configuration of colleges reflect the cognitive and interpretive schemas used by students to make sense of the college landscape; these configurations involve the formation of boundaries around college options that are considered appropriate for students within their institutions.

I argue that institutions like high schools and college programs help students recognize appropriate choices by setting boundaries around which colleges are acceptable. I show that the population of students served along with the constraints and resources in each institution delimits the realm of college possibilities that are offered to students. This takes place via ongoing practices that are bounded by socially shared cognitive and interpretive schemas of appropriate colleges. Schemas of appropriate colleges consist of classification or categorization systems of colleges. These schemas are necessary to help school staff and students narrow or focus on particular sets of colleges, rather than viewing all types of available colleges as viable, which can be overwhelming. In each institution, certain groups of colleges are presented as appropriate while others are shunned as beyond students' reach or below their capability.

Higher-SES students attend high schools in which every student is expected to go on to a four-year college. The inevitability of college is supported by a school environment in which students are presented with a *selective colleges anywhere* schema whereby selective colleges, especially private ones, from across the country (e.g. top University of California (UCs) research universities, selective private liberal arts colleges, and Ivy League universities) are promoted while low-ranked and nonselective colleges (e.g. California State University [CSUs] colleges, two-year colleges, and low-ranked UCs) are stigmatized. In contrast to higher-SES students, most lower-SES students attend high schools and participate in college preparation programs in which a four-year college was among one of multiple post-high school options. As a result, these students are exposed to a configuration of colleges that reflect an *any postsecondary education* or an *any four-year college* schema. In the *any postsecondary education* schema, students are encouraged to pursue any additional schooling after high school, whether it is vocational/trade schools, two-year colleges, or four-year colleges. In the *any four-year college* schema, any type of four-year colleges (e.g. UCs and CSUs), regardless of selectivity or rankings, is emphasized while two-year and vocational schools are discouraged. In both of these two configurations, out-of-state colleges are rarely discussed and essentially ignored. There are a small number of lower-SES students who are exposed to a schema of colleges that reflect those offered to higher-SES students. These lower-SES students participated in programs geared specifically towards helping high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds attend the nation's top colleges or they

attended high schools with other higher-SES students.

While these schemas structure how students think about higher education, students do not unthinkingly accept these schemas of college. Instead, students engage in their own process of classification and categorization by drawing upon their understandings, knowledge, and experiences to determine which ones among the appropriate colleges are the right fit for them. The key difference between appropriate and right colleges is that appropriate colleges denote a range of acceptable colleges for a group of students from a specific institution, while the right colleges represent a subset of those appropriate colleges that is reflective of the preferences of each individual. To demonstrate how students shift from the appropriate options to the right choices, I examine the role of information and experiences in two specific realm: college preparation programs and high schools in this chapter and families in the next chapter. Beyond the institutions covered in this chapter, students also made sense of higher education through narratives grounded in their family experiences and upbringings. While institutions shape the information about colleges that students receive in the form of schemas, families exert an influence by shaping the narratives students have about the level of autonomy in their decision-making, which comes to influence how far from home students can consider for college. Students' decision-making reflects not just their own considerations but also that of their family as the next chapter will show.

The Influence of Organizations on Decision-Making

High schools convey particular views of higher education opportunities to their students (Mullen 2009; Reay, Davies, David, and Ball 2001; McDonough 1997). McDonough (1997) finds that the structure and resources of the school devoted to college preparation—timing, availability, and support for college advising—and the normative structure of the schools shaped the extent to which college options were emphasized. Some schools are primarily focused on getting students to consider four-year public and private universities while others channeled students into two-year colleges (109). McDonough (1997) develops the concept organizational habitus, defined as "the impact of a social class culture on individual behavior through an intermediate organization, in this case, the high school" to describe the process by which schools structure students' college choices (156). Organizational habitus makes possible individual decision by setting boundaries around the search parameters: different schools offered different view of the college opportunity structure. In implementing the schools' organizational response to college planning, counselors create a worldview that "serves to delimit the full universe of possible college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations" (89).

Similarly, Ball et al. (2002) show that the institutional habitus of schools, which consists of embedded perceptions and expectations, make certain choices obvious and others unthinkable. These embedded perceptions and expectations of the school are constructed over time and in relation to school friends, teachers' advices, and the learning experiences. Among students, certain sorts of choices or considerations take on an obviousness that is difficult to evade. For instance, in interviews with high-SES students about their college choices, Ball et al. (2002) find that the starting point was whether to attend a particular prestigious university and not a consideration of the different college options.

Research suggests that the availability of resources to promote knowledge and understanding of college is positively related to the socioeconomic status of students at the school attended (Perna 2006). High schools attended by higher-SES students tend to provide

more extensive guidance counseling support through the college application process. Mullen (2009) shows that students attending higher-SES schools are more likely to benefit from guidance counselors tasked with guiding students through each step of the college process. By explicitly working towards preparing and sending their graduates to top colleges, these schools help instill a set of high expectation in their students. For instance, choosing an Ivy League college becomes a normalized part of these students' high school experiences (Mullen 2009). These expectations then carry over to the peer culture and decisions about which Ivy League institutions to aim for often become a decision made among friends. Levine and Ndiffer (1995) find that that low-income students who made it to elite colleges tended to come from college preparatory schools. Prep schools provided more knowledgeable adult support from guidance counselors and teachers on matters such as financial aid, testing, and deadlines. Moreover, representatives of highly selective universities visited the prep schools annually. Among the organizational features that account for the higher-SES and college preparatory school advantages are a more demanding curricula, a narrower range of nonacademic classes, and a college-going culture that ingrains in students an expectation of postsecondary participation (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller 2008; Grodsky and Jones 2010).

Radford (2013) reveals that the lack of comprehensive college counseling in high schools enables social class to strongly impact how students go about identifying colleges such that students from less affluent schools are less likely than their affluent peers to apply to selective institutions. Radford (2013) shows that high-achieving students from public and lower-SES schools are at a disadvantage when it comes to getting exposure to a spectrum of college options. She finds that students at these schools who aspire to attend private, out-of-state, or selective colleges generally receive the inspiration to do so from sources outside of their schools. She attributes the lack of information about private, out-of-state, or selective colleges to the schools' efforts to cater their college exploration to the average student rather than the top students. Similarly, Perna (2008) finds that resource constraints in public and low-income schools reduce the availability of counselors for one-on-one meetings, shifting the focus of counseling to the needs of the schools' typical or neediest students.

Where top colleges choose to recruit is also reflective of the socioeconomic status of the school as well. Research indicates that admissions officers from selective colleges tend to concentrate their visits at schools and communities that have lots of students with the academic preparation and social backgrounds that make them likely applicants (Avery and Levin 2009; Zemsky and Oedel 1983). Hill and Winston (2010) conclude that inadequate attention to geography by elite colleges in their search and recruiting activities has contributed to a bias against low-income students. They find that selective schools adopt a strategy that makes it difficult to recruit low-income students. Radford (2013) and Avery and Hoxby (2012) both find that elite universities tend to recruit in areas close to where they are located and in large urban areas with high concentrations of high achieving students. As a result, students in such areas are more likely to be exposed to elite colleges, helping them cultivate a desire to attend a highly selective institution.

Next, I examine how institutions in the form of high schools and college preparation programs shape the college choices of high-achieving students from different social class backgrounds. I draw upon the experiences of several students to demonstrate how these institutions shape the schemas of colleges that students utilize to make their decision about where to apply to college. I first discuss the case of lower-SES students before examining that of higher-SES students.

Lower-SES Students

Most lower-SES students attend schools with primarily other lower-SES students. At such high schools, a four-year college is among one of many post-high school options. These students are encouraged to attend any four-year college within California, regardless of their status or rankings. This consisted primarily of public colleges like those from the UC and CSU system. In addition to four-year colleges, two-year colleges and vocational/trade schools are also presented as available options for students. Thus, these students are exposed to an *any postsecondary education schema*. While this schema is typical for students from schools with predominantly lower-SES populations, there are some students who were exposed to a schema of colleges that resembled those presented to higher-SES students. These lower-SES students attend high schools with other higher-SES students or college preparation programs that served specifically high-achieving students.

In addition to high schools, lower-SES students also relied on college preparation programs to help them decide where to apply to college. Each lower-SES student participated in multiple programs geared towards preparing disadvantaged or low-income students for college. These programs provided students with in-depth information about colleges. Most of these programs emphasized colleges in California, while a few included out-of-state institutions, especially liberal arts colleges. General college preparation programs offered a schema of colleges in which any four year colleges is encouraged. This consisted primarily of in-state colleges like the UCs, CSUs, and some private colleges. Out-of-state colleges were ignored and two-year colleges and vocational schools were de-emphasized. This results in an *any four-year college* schema. Specific college preparation programs that only recruit high-achieving, low-income students offered a *selective college anywhere* schema of colleges in which the top competitive colleges across the country are encouraged while less competitive ones are de-emphasized. Within this schema, in-state colleges like the top UCs and private universities are encouraged while out-of-state private colleges across the country, especially top liberal arts colleges, are also promoted as well. For lower-SES students, only those college preparation programs that specifically sought to place high-achieving students in the nation's top colleges made a concerted effort towards exposing their students to colleges across the country. For other programs, the population of lower-SES students are much more general, consisting of any college bound students. Thus, the focus of these programs are more on getting students into college, less about exposing them to all types of colleges. As a result, top colleges that are out-of-state were not a high priority.

While schools and programs draw upon the general backgrounds of their students to evaluate what colleges are appropriate for their students, students themselves also engaged in their own process of categorization to determine which colleges are the right fit for them. For many lower-SES students, familiarity and comfort with the environment of the college and its surroundings was a key factor. Thus, some students only applied to those colleges that they had visited, those that were close to home, or those that resided in-state. Lower-SES students who applied to out-of-state colleges were likely to have positive experiences in out-of-state environments. These experiences help them evaluate out-of-state colleges as not only appropriate but also desirable options.

Application to In-State Colleges Only: The Absence of Information about Out-of-State Colleges and the Lack of Experience in Out-of-State Environments

Lower-SES students who did not apply to any out-of-state colleges tend to fall into one of two groups. One group is of students who were only exposed to in-state colleges through their schools and college preparation programs. For these students, it did not occur to them to consider out-of-state colleges because they knew very little about such colleges. In other words, the schemas of colleges to which they were exposed ignored out-of-state, sending a message to students that such options were not appropriate for them. The second group of students were those who were exposed to out-of-state colleges but did not seriously consider such options because they were not comfortable with the prospect of living in an environment that they deemed too different from where they grew up. This second group of students were offered schemas that promoted out-of-state colleges, specifically liberal arts colleges. However, while their programs deem out-of-state colleges as suitable for these students, the students themselves did not find these colleges desirable due to perceived fears that resulted from the lack of experiences in out-of-state environments.

The experience of Martina is reflective of students who were introduced to schemas of higher education that consisted of only in-state options. She attends a low-income school with limited academic opportunities. According to the California Department of Education, almost ninety percent of students at her high school participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program, an indicator of the percentage of students from lower-SES background. The school is comprised mostly of Black and Hispanic students. Martina's high school has experienced a great deal of turmoil with administrative turnovers and the continual hiring of inexperienced teachers. When asked to describe her school, she responded, "There are very few AP [advanced placement] classes and I struggle with challenging myself."

Martina faced challenges not only in the quality of instruction at the school, but also in the college preparation process as well. She received limited exposure to colleges via her high school. When the school did present about colleges, it was primarily about eligibility requirements and less about the consequences of attending one type of colleges over the others. She recalled being exposed to a configuration of colleges that consisted mostly of art schools and other colleges that she had not heard of before: "A couple of UCs and a lot of schools that I really didn't know like Alameda Art school. It was a lot of arts schools. And then a lot of schools that aren't well-known." Thus, the school deemed colleges and vocational/trade schools as appropriate options for its students. As a result, she was exposed to an *any postsecondary education* schema through her high school. This configuration of colleges reflects the socially shared interpretative schemas by which students at the school use to make sense of their options after high school. Students come to view these options as suitable pathways for them. This schema or configuration of colleges is a direct result of the conditions of the school. The school is characterized by a high concentration of students from lower-SES backgrounds. Moreover, the school struggles to deliver quality instruction as evidenced by frequent changes in school leadership and the hiring of inexperienced teachers.

Had Martina depended only on her high school, she would have been making a decision about what to do after high school based on the schema of colleges that suggested that four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and vocational schools were all appropriate options. However, like many lower-SES, high-achieving students, she was involved with multiple programs that assisted students with college preparation and exploration. One of the program is UB, a federally funded

program, whose mission is to prepare first-generation and under-represented students for college. Martina was able to spend several weeks during the summer at the nearby research university, where she lived in the residential dorms and took courses. Moreover, she visited multiple colleges throughout California.

In contrast to her high school which offered both college and vocational school pathways, the program narrowed the realm of possible options after high school to colleges and they stressed four-year colleges, ranging from public UCs and CSUs to private colleges. Whereas the high school schema contained a broader set of options after high school, the program's schema emphasized only four-year colleges. As a result, she was exposed to an *any four-year college schema* through the program. The program's schema of appropriate colleges is based on the background of students in the program. Students are only admitted into the program if they are college-bound; that is, they have the grades to get into college. Thus, the program limits its focus to college options. However, because the focus is on getting students into colleges, and not necessarily top colleges across the nation, only California colleges were offered as appropriate options.

While the program classified California's four-year colleges as appropriate options for her, Martina also engaged in her own process of evaluation to decide which among those appropriate options were the right ones for her. To do so, she drew from her experiences and understandings to make sense of the appropriate options. Among her chief criteria in selecting which college she would apply to was that she had visited the college. Below, she recounts this process of deciding where to apply:

> **Martina:** I only wanted to apply to the ones that I have been to. I feel like it didn't serve any purpose for me to apply to schools that I've never been to because if I got accepted, I really wouldn't go there because I don't know what the school was like. So I only applied to schools that I have visited before.

> **Interviewer:** What concerns do you have about schools that you haven't visited?

> **Martina:** I feel like there's some certain schools that people are applying to that I would be, like, I would have to get to know the school before I apply there. I didn't like doing research about it because it was kind of like more stats and I actually wanted to feel what it was like on campus.

Through the UB program, Martina gained in-depth knowledge about colleges via workshops and visits. While the program helped her develop a schema of appropriate colleges, she herself engaged in a process to determine which colleges among those deemed appropriate were right for her. She brought her own experience to the decision-making process by only applying to schools that she had previously visited. In doing so, she narrowed down the list of appropriate four-year colleges to those that reflected her own preferences. For Martina, college visits gave her a sense of comfort about the type of environment she would be getting herself into. In the absence of a visit, just knowing about the college, its demographics and characteristics, was not a sufficient reason to apply to that college. Due to the fact that Martina only visited colleges in California, she ended up applying to four UCs, four CSUs, and three privates (USF, Stanford, and Pepperdine), all colleges in California.

John represents another student who was exposed to a schema of colleges that consisted

of only California colleges. He attends a school that is comprised mostly of Asian and Hispanic students. Eighty percent of students at the high school are in the free and reduced price lunch program. John is well aware of the negative perceptions that others have of students at his high school: "Commonly at my high school, there's that stereotype that a lot of Burbank High School kids will go to community college." Many students at his high school struggled through the college applications. He recalled, "They were overwhelmed by not knowing which college to apply to and how to apply for it." Fortunately, John did not encounter such issues as he actively sought out school resources. He asked his college teachers about their experiences in college. Through this, he learned about Stanford and Berkeley. These interactions increased his interests in these two schools: "They gave me honest answers. And that's what makes me want to go those colleges." The school's career center proved to be the most helpful in exposing him to colleges. Most of the information he gathered about colleges from his school came by way of the presentations that were given by college representatives at the career center:

> The career center, every two weeks, they had a guest college come in. I remembered they had [UC] Berkeley, UCLA, [UC] San Diego, back to back. And then they'll always get a representative to come and talk to the students to have the students get a better understanding of the application and stuff like that. It really was informative to get to know the UCs better because it was the most overwhelming [application] so to have someone come and talk to us it made it seem less scary to apply.

In addition to the UCs, the career center also brought in representatives from the CSU. Only a few private colleges made it to his campus. Consequently, John was exposed to an *any four-year college* schema. All the colleges he learned about were four year colleges from the UCs to the CSUs and some private colleges. By bringing these colleges to campuses, the school deem them as appropriate options for their students. John drew from this schema to make decision about where he should apply to college. To narrow down the list of appropriate options to the right choices that reflected his own preferences, he drew upon a set of criteria that emphasized financial cost, distance from home, and academic programs in engineering. Speaking of distance, he responded about his desire to stay close to home: "I sort of like local schools, UCLA being the most maxed, preferably Berkeley and Stanford." While out-of-state colleges were not part of the schema at his school, he did briefly consider some Ivy League colleges, but the lack of exposure and the absence of information about financial aid for low-income students steered him away from applying:

> I think it's how society really blows up those [Ivy League] colleges…They make it seem super difficult and then even though it's just over-exaggerated, it is just that feeling that it might true. Especially movies and shows and everything. They make it seem like to get into Harvard, it's hard. It's going to cost so much money and even though you're low-income, you could be affected.

In the end, John applied to four UCs, four CSUs, and a couple of in-state private universities, including Stanford. Sofia is another example of students who was exposed to a schema that essentially recognizes only in-state colleges. Sofia attends a college preparatory high school for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. At this school, two-thirds of the students participate in the reduced-price lunch program. She transitioned over to this more competitive

high school in the 10th grade. This school represents a significant upgrade in the level of academic rigor from her previous school:

> It was a big difference. So at [my previous high school], when I was there I felt frustrated because I would finish my work very fast. I felt I wasn't learning anything. The classes were very big so it was hard for the teachers as well. When I transitioned to Anthony Prep, it's very small so it has small class sizes so you get to meet all the teachers. It's a college prep school so it's really challenging but I like it... I learned a lot.

At the school, students are required to get into a four-year college so they are constantly being reminded about the requirements to get into such colleges. In fact, all students are required to submit at least a college application to a four-year college. Despite the focus on four-year colleges, the school primarily emphasizes CSUs. She states, "At my school, they concentrated more on the state school so we had to do all the state schools [CSUs] first. Sometimes at school, I would just focus more on the UCs instead of the state schools." As a result, she was exposed to an *any four-year college* schema via her school. Her participation in UB, the college preparation program exposed her to more colleges beyond the CSU. This program enabled her to learn about and visit several UCs:

> We got introduced to UC Berkeley so we are very familiar with Berkeley. But in SoCal, they took us to different UCs, privates, and state schools so we got a chance to see the different campuses.

Despite not being introduced to out-of-state colleges by way of her school or the college preparations, Sofia and other lower-SES students were not ignorant about top out-of-state private colleges. They knew about it and some, like John and Sofia, entertained thoughts of applying to them. However, when these colleges are not part of the schema that students are exposed to, such colleges do not receive the attention they deserve, and students come to view such colleges as not for them. Here, Sofia recounts her thought process about an out-of-state college:

> I was going to apply to Penn [University of Pennsylvania], but I look at the area and it's way too far and I don't really see myself that far. I like California… I don't want to get out of my community or California. I don't want to go far away. I don't mind going a little far away. But I really don't want to go out of state. I just see myself here where I grew up.

Sofia ultimately applied to four UCs, four CSUs, and a couple of private universities, including Stanford. In addition to distance from home, among the criteria that she considered was the availability of financial aid, the majors, and whether she will fit in as a student of color. She states, "I saw some of the rankings but in the end, it's like where do I see myself at."

In contrast to the previous students, some lower-SES students were encouraged to pursue out-of-state colleges, but it was still insufficient to convince them to submit college applications to those colleges. Andrea represents one of those students. Andrea attends a school that has over 75 percent of its students enrolled in the free or reduced-price lunch program. However, the school is considered a middle tier public school and draws students from different parts of the city. Being at a slightly better school afforded Andrea more resources and commitment from the school towards college preparation and exploration. Through teachers and school assemblies, the

school sought to instill a college-going mindset among their students. The school brought in individuals to speak about specific colleges during assemblies, impressed upon students the UC requirements so that students "knew them by heart," and it also held college fairs, which had representatives from the UCs, CSUs, local private colleges, and historically black colleges. The school also took students on college visits to nearby UCs. Consequently, Andrea was exposed to an *any four-year college schema* that consisted of preferences geared primarily towards four-year colleges in California. With the exception of a couple of historically black colleges, out-of-state colleges were ignored. Two-year colleges and vocational schools were viewed as unsuitable options for students at her high school.

Yet, despite attending a school that devoted more resources towards college preparation and exploration, Andrea did not seem to have any significant leverage over that of other lower-SES in the types of colleges she was exposed to. Andrea still learned primarily about California colleges. Andrea, however, was part of CT, a privately funded college preparation program that aims to get more high-achieving, low-income students into some of the nation's selective colleges. Given its mission and the type of students that it admits, the program works to help students recognize college possibilities beyond those that exist in California. In the program, she was exposed to a *selective college anywhere* schema. Andrea became exposed to a wider array of four-year colleges. In particular, she learned about a host of out-of-state private colleges, many of which are liberal arts colleges. With the CT program, the schema of college reflected an emphasis on competitive four-year colleges within and outside of California. Within California, UCs were encouraged along with highly-ranked privates like Stanford and USC and small liberal arts colleges like Occidental College. CSUs, two-year colleges, and vocational schools were ignored. Outside of California, the focus was on small liberal arts college across the South, Midwest, and East Coast.

Though she was exposed to out-of-state liberal arts colleges, Andrea was not directly interested in it. While the program helped her to recognize such colleges as appropriate options, she evaluated the desirability of those college choices by bringing in her own experiences and understandings:

> **Andrea:** I always knew that I wouldn't want to be in Oakland but I probably wouldn't want to be out of California.
>
> **Interviewer:** Is there a reason for why you don't consider out-of-state colleges?
>
> **Andrea:** I guess weather wise. It's really cold out there.
>
> **Interviewer:** You've been out there before?
>
> **Andrea:** I watch a lot of travel shows. Actually I've never been to the East Coast which is weird. The idea of New York kind of scares me. It feels like really large, rich buildings and dark alleys.
>
> **Interviewer:** Other things besides the weather that makes you throw out going out of state?
>
> **Andrea:** I think also culture wise. California, there are so many of us. We are really

diverse.

Interviewer: What do you worry about going outside of California?

Andrea: I guess attitude wise. People in California are pretty open minded. I like that sort of environment so I'd rather be in that environment for a little until I want to go out and look at things.

Andrea engaged in her own process of evaluation to determine which colleges were the right fit for her. She saw a major departure in terms of social and physical environment between California colleges and out-of-state colleges. California represented proximity to racial and ethnic diversity and open-mindedness, attributes that she preferred. She was concerned about the weather and culture of people outside of California. In doing so, Andrea drew upon an evaluative frame that separates California colleges from out-of-state colleges based on environmental and social desirabilities. Her lack of experience beyond California made her rely on the media to form unfavorable opinions about the prospect of attending an out-of-state college.

Shawn also attends a very good public high school that is socioeconomically mixed. His school actually has college counselors devoted towards helping students identify and apply to college. While the ratio of students to college counselors is so large that it is difficult to meet with them, Shawn was once called into a counselor's office to talk about colleges that might fit him. He recalled, "One of them pulled me in with my friends. 'What's your SAT, GPA? You are an okay fit.'" At the school, students like him are exposed to a *selective college anywhere* schema. Students are encouraged to attend a four-year college, but there is a hierarchy of preferred colleges. Here he discusses the colleges that are considered inferior for students of his ability:

> I think the stigma of being a CSU is one of the reason…Okay...it's because the rankings system is CC, CSU, UC. It's more known that UC are higher ranked than CSU. They are harder to get into…At the CSU, the GPA is lower and SAT is a lot lower. That's one of the reasons why people don't want to go there.

While lower-ranked colleges like the CSUs and two-year colleges are considered off-limits, top colleges across the U.S. and even outside of the U.S. are considered appropriate options. This is evident in how he talks about where students applied to college:

> Some people are applying to all the UCs as safeties and the privates like Duke, Claremont McKenna, Rice, just a lot of the Claremont colleges like Harvey Mudd. Those and some that applied to very prestigious universities. I have some friends that are applying overseas as well. I have one that is apply to a French university, [and] NYU, someone is going to UBC [University of British Columbia]. It's all over the place.

Yet, when it came to his decision, he only applied to all the UCs except one. He avoided the CSU because of the stigma attached to it given that he was a high-achieving student. But he did not follow the paths of some of his peer in submitting applications to out-of-state colleges. The reason against doing so was concerns about costs and the culture outside of California. Regarding financial concerns, he stated, "I didn't want to go out of state. I don't want to pay out

of state tuition." Regarding the life outside of California, he stated, "I lived in California all my life. People on the East Coast, I heard are very rushed. People are really relaxed here."

The cases of the students previously discussed is reflective of most lower-SES students in this study who did not apply to any out-of-state colleges. The schemas of colleges that most students had to work with from their high schools or programs ignored out-of-state colleges. In doing so, these institutions categorized such colleges as not appropriate for the type of students in those institutions. As a result, these students rarely gave any serious considerations to the possibility of applying to out-of-state colleges. Some students did have out-of-state colleges as preferred options in their schemas of colleges, but they did not apply to out-of-state colleges because they felt unprepared to live in an environment in which they perceive the way of life as drastically different from their current situation. These students often are making these evaluations of out-of-state environments based on the limited understanding of such places. Next, I draw upon the cases of two lower-SES students who applied to out-of-state colleges to analyze how they came to that decision. These two lower-SES students were introduced to schemas of colleges in which particular types of out-of-state colleges were considered as appropriate for them. What distinguishes them from other students who possessed similar schemas of colleges but did not apply to out-of-state colleges is that these two students had experiences in out-of-state environments. The experiences and understandings they brought to their decision-making from being in out-of-state environments gave rise to an evaluative frame that depicted out-of-state colleges as not only appropriate but also desirable options.

Application to Both In- and Out-Of-State Colleges: The Role of Out-of-State Experiences

While being involved in programs that encouraged lower-SES, high-achieving students to apply to mostly out-of-state private colleges was not enough to convince Andrea and a few others to apply to such colleges, it did persuade four other students to apply to it. These students also learned about such colleges from programs as well. One such student is Madison. Madison attends a school in which 85 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Given the challenges that her school faced in getting students to graduate from high school, it was not surprising that she rarely brought up the support of her school in the college preparation and exploration process.

While she did not receive much assistance from her school, she recognized college possibilities from where previous alumni had attended college. She noted that students who went on to college attended UCs and other in-state colleges and that "rarely do people go out-of-state" for college. Like other lower-SES students, the schema of colleges from her school consisted of an *any postsecondary education* configuration. Given this high school environment, it would be difficult to imagine how Madison would end up applying to out-of-state colleges. Madison's decision to apply to out-of-state colleges stemmed from her participation in many programs that not only exposed her to a *selective college anywhere* schema but also gave her opportunities to experience activities and colleges outside of California. One such program took her backpacking in Seattle and then in Virginia. According to Madison, the program "helps low-income students gain experiences that are usually out of reach." Another program took her abroad to Nicaragua and Peru to learn about social and environmental issues affecting people in those countries. These experiences away home have allowed her to embraced being in situations or places different from her own:

Interviewer: Tell me about that? About your first time away from home or out of the country?

Madison: Before Peru, we went to D.C. to learn about the government and that prepared me for my trip to Peru. It was my first time away from home. In D.C., we went with a group to tour the Hill and visit different monuments. Basically, I got to work with people from different parts of the country. We all have different views; issues like fracking and gay marriage came up. It was hard to work with people who have different mindsets but I guess from that, I learned to accept that people are different and to agree to disagree.

Interviewer: Every summer, you were out of the Bay Area?

Madison: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me more about D.C. experience being away from home?

Madison: It's important for people from Asian backgrounds to go and see what's out there. My parents were over-protective; they have such limited ideas. Growing up in that environment, you are limited to different ideas and you don't know what's out there. I thought it was important that I stepped out and discover things on my own.

Through her experiences of being in environments outside of California and outside the country, Madison had a different understanding than most lower-SES students about what it means to live amongst people whose way of life or beliefs do not resemble her own. Unlike other students who framed out-of-state colleges as undesirable because of cultural differences, Madison viewed these cultural differences as opportunities for growth and maturity. These out-of-state experiences proved to her the importance of moving beyond one's comfort zone for the purpose of self-discovery. This understanding shaped how she viewed the desirability of out-of-state colleges that she was exposed to via the programs.

Her out-of-state experiences made her receptive to the prospect of attending colleges outside of California. Her involvement in CT, the college program that seeks to enroll low-income, high-achieving students in the nation's top colleges, spurred her interest in small private colleges outside California. CT offers students a *selective college anywhere* schema that includes competitive colleges in California and throughout the country. The program helped Madison recognize colleges outside of California as appropriate options for her. However, had it not been for her out-of-state experiences, she would not have seriously considered such colleges. The experiences and understandings that resulted from her trips outside of California allowed her to evaluate these colleges within a context that made them desirable. In addition to being introduced to private colleges outside of California, she was able to participate in several trips to out-of-state colleges. These visits solidified her interest to attend small colleges:

Madison: My sophomore and junior year, CT took me to Seattle for a college tour so I visited Seattle University, and Washington University. Different colleges. That's when I realized I wanted to be at a small college. I had an epiphany about wanting to go to a small school. I didn't know what a small school meant. I don't want to see the same people every day. In a school of three thousand you won't see everyone in a day,

honestly.

Interviewer: Seattle University is a small private college?

Madison: Yeah. I wasn't interested in it but I like how the campus was set up. It's just like the person who was working for the school, her personality and the way she engaged with us, it was more intimate and closer than my connections to other people at the larger schools. That was really important to me. I want to be able to talk casually with my professor. I guess just walking around a small campus, I don't have to walk as far. I just like being close to everything.

Interviewer: Other colleges that you visited out of state?

Madison: My junior year, I visited with CT, UPenn and Swarthmore. That was another time I realized I wanted a small school, but on the East Coast. I put all that together. I compared being at UPenn versus Swarthmore. The environment at Swarthmore felt more intimate and closer to me. UPenn is not exactly small, it's big for a private college. And then there's a fly-in program so I visited Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania, an all-women's college. I really thought I wanted to go to an all-women's college so I almost committed to them on the spot. I think it's important for students to know what's out there, to actually visit those colleges. It's so different to read about it versus visiting them.

Like her previous experiences outside California, these visits to colleges cultivated her interest in attending college outside of California. These college visits helped her to understand what it meant to attend a small private college. The intimacy of small colleges motivated her to prioritize these colleges in her college application. As the excerpt above demonstrates, she initially perceived small colleges as similar to a high school, where she would run into the same people every day. However, the visits helped dispel this notion and she learned about the benefits that can accrue from attending such a college. Madison ended up applying to almost 30 colleges, consisting of in-state colleges (UCs, CSUs, private colleges) and multiple out-of-state private colleges, particularly liberal arts colleges. When asked about her comfort in considering out-of-state colleges, Madison indirectly referenced her experiences of traveling to places outside of California and the country, explaining the personal growth that comes with such experiences:

I always want to experience something new. That's been my personality. I know there's a lot out in the world and I want to know. Berkeley and Oakland are so close. I know that I won't grow as much even though it might be a better choice. I know I'll grow more as an individual and person. If I was close to home, I'll be with the same friends and do the same thing and I wouldn't grow as much.

In the case of Madison, through her involvement in CT, she was able to draw upon of a schema of colleges that viewed colleges across the country as appropriate options for her. In her own evaluation of the desirability of out-of-state colleges, she did not rely just on information provided to her by the program regarding these colleges. Instead she also took into consideration her own experiences traveling outside of California. These experiences enabled her to evaluate out-of-state college positively and to frame them as right colleges for them.

Anthony is another lower-SES student who also applied to out-of-state colleges. Anthony attends a school that is predominantly African American. Over 80 percent of students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program. He is well aware of the school's reputation as being a bad and violent school. He disagrees with this perception, stating:

> There's violence around the school but not inside of it. It has a reputation of being violent. There's fights and violence but it doesn't get into the school. People think it's a bad school but that's not true…Now we have legitimate AP teachers, it has improved since I've been here.

Through college fairs at the school and around his city, Anthony was exposed to a schema of colleges that not only included in-state four-year colleges, but also out-of-state colleges like private research universities and historically black colleges. While he recognized such colleges as appropriate options for him, it was his participation in the UB program that allowed him to evaluate out-of-state colleges more positively, thus setting up a classification of out-of-state colleges as not only appropriate but also desirable options. The UB program provided him with a wealth of knowledge about the college process, information that was not disseminated to students at his high school. Via this program, he was able to go to Hawaii for one summer and participate in a similar program out there. This trip helped to spark his interest in exploring different places, an experience that was key to his decision to apply to out-of-state colleges:

> **Interviewer:** Tell me about those experiences?
>
> **Anthony:** Hawaii was funny. It was really slow compared to everything else. They even say I talk too fast. This is normal for California people. They say, "You talk too fast, walk too fast, think too fast." Said, "I talked weird, food I eat is weird." It was a culture shock but it was fun. I enjoyed the life, it was peaceful. It was fun learning about different places.
>
> **Interviewer:** Some students experience this and it makes them hesitant to go back. For you it's different?
>
> **Anthony:** It's fun. I don't know. It's so different from what I'm used to. I don't like the same thing over and over again. That's really boring to me.

Anthony's summer in Hawaii allowed him to experience a different way of life. The pace of life and the people he interacted with in Hawaii interrupted what he had been familiar with. In doing so, the culture shock he experienced also disrupted the monotony of life. He came to embrace the changes that came along with being in a new environment. This understanding of what it means to live away from home in a new environment made applying to colleges beyond California more desirable. He applied to a prominent private research university in New York and several historically black colleges (HBCUs). Like Madison, it was his experiences in out-of-state environments that played an important role in why he decided to apply to out-of-state colleges. Having been in different environments beyond California, he felt comfortable at the prospect of moving across the country to attend college.

Schools and programs helped both Anthony and Madison to recognize college outside of California as appropriate. However, recognizing such possibilities does not mean that they will apply to it. To apply, they both had to evaluate such colleges as a right fit for them as well. For Anthony and Madison, the necessary second step of classifying out-of-state colleges as desirable came about largely because of their experiences in out-of-state environments. While they initially experienced culture shock in these environments, they eventually learned to accept and embrace living in a new environment and engaging with people who come from different backgrounds. They recognized that by putting themselves in new situations, they are also opening themselves up to further opportunities for growth and maturity. This newfound perspective provided them with the comfort that they can successfully adjust to living in out-of-state environments, a necessary element in their reasoning for applying to out-of-state colleges.

Application to Both In- and Out-Of-State Colleges: The Role of High Quality Schools

While most lower-SES students attended schools that consist primarily of other lower-SES students, three lower-SES students attended schools with predominantly higher-SES students. This included two students who attended what is considered the top public school in the city and one student who attended a private school. These students were offered schemas of colleges that resembled those of the higher-SES students in this study. This consisted of schemas in which competitive colleges in California and across the country were considered as appropriate options. In California, this included the top UCs and private colleges. Beyond California, this included competitive private research universities and small liberal arts colleges. As a result, these lower-SES students made sense of higher education via a schema of higher education that classified both in and out-of-state competitive four year colleges as appropriate for them. Of the three students who attended these high-quality schools, two applied to out-of-state colleges. While these students did not have out-of-state experiences, they attended schools in which application to out-of-state colleges were common. The two students who applied to out-of-state colleges were able to draw upon their experience attending a higher-SES school to evaluate out-of-state colleges positively. In particular, they were able to draw upon their experiences in high school to alleviate their fears and to help them make sense of the benefits that can accrue from attending an out-of-state private college. The case of the student who attended the private high school will be used to demonstrate how high quality schools shape lower-SES students' decisions to apply to out-of-state colleges.

Shen participates in a national program that works to increase the preparation of low-income students for college, beginning in middle school. His program is based out of a small private K-12 school, Northside Prep. The program has a special relationship with the school. Each year, two incoming freshmen students from the program are selected to attend the private high school by way of a scholarship. Shen was one of the students selected to attend the private high school as a freshman.

At the high school, where tuition is more than twenty thousand dollars a year, students are expected to matriculate to a four-year college. Students meet in groups and individually with the school college counselors starting in their junior year to talk about college preparation and college options. At the school, Shen was exposed to a *selective college anywhere* schema in which competitive colleges were encouraged; this included in-state UCs, in-state private colleges, and out-of-state small liberal arts colleges and private research universities. Other options such as in-state CSUs were ignored or de-emphasized.

For Shen, gaining recognition of these colleges was an important first step in getting him to consider them. In addition to hearing about such colleges from the school, he also relied upon other sources of information to legitimate the schema of colleges that he was presented from the school. This included taking into the account the colleges attended by past students and the colleges that visited his high school. While these out-of-state colleges were presented as appropriate options, Shen needed to view such colleges as a right fit for him. Despite having never traveled outside of California, he was able to evaluate such options positively. For one, knowing that alumni have attended some of the out-of-state liberal arts colleges gave him a sense of comfort in that if they enjoyed it, he can expect the same because he is from the same high school as them. Below, he describes the experience of learning about colleges from his school and alumni:

> **Shen:** At exposing me to colleges, the school was very helpful because Northside Prep is a college-preparatory school. It is supposed to make students go to college. It helped me a lot, not only academically but it gave me exposure to other students that went to school. For example, a graduate of Northside Prep that went to Carleton, I am going to talk to her on the phone about her experience at Carleton. By going to Northside Prep, you have exposure to other students that went to these colleges so if you ever wanted to go to one of these colleges, you could talk to the students that went there. And talk to them about, for instance, how was your experience at Carleton college?

> **Interviewer:** How helpful was that?

> **Shen:** It was good. Not only was I able to learn about what Carleton is like, I was able to learn about their experiences at Carleton and how they enjoyed being at a liberal arts college. So the people at Northside Prep are very helpful in guiding you towards a college that fits best for you.

In addition to knowing that alumni had attended out-of-state liberal arts colleges in the past, he was also attracted to such colleges because of their generous financial aid package for low-income students, something he learned about from the financial aid night at his high school. He ended up applying to a couple of CSUS, four UCs, an in-state private universities, and multiple out-of-state liberal arts colleges (e.g. Carleton, Vassar, Wesleyan, Swarthmore). Shen's experiences at Northside Prep played an important role in his decision to apply to out-of-state liberal arts colleges. Below he discusses why he thinks low-income students rarely apply to top colleges across the country and how he himself was able to overcome some of those self-doubts:

> **Shen:** It's probably because they are scared to. You don't know because you are low-income. When I was applying to Northside Prep, it was the same thing. I didn't want to go to a high society school because I would feel like I am different. I want to be with my group of friends. When I was applying to Northside Prep, all the friends that I had made in the past, I had to abandon them to go to Northside Prep.

> **Interviewer:** Do you have the same feelings when you think about applying to these top colleges?

Shen: Yeah, it's the same feeling but now the experience at Northside Prep, because when I was applying to Northside Prep, my expectations of all my classmates was that that they are all stuck up, rich, and all smart. But that's not the case. Even though I'm low-income, I'm able to do well at this highly competitive school.

In the exchange above, Shen discussed how attending Northside Prep forced him to give up his neighborhood friends and deal with people who come from different backgrounds. The experience of having to leave his neighborhood school for a private college preparatory school gave him the confidence to apply to top colleges across the country. His initial fear in applying to out-of-state competitive liberal arts colleges was grounded in doubts about his ability to succeed academically at these top colleges and whether he will fit in socially. Both of these fears were squashed by his successful transition into the private high school. He reasons that if he can succeed at Northside, he stands a very good chance of being able to thrive at these out-of-state liberal arts colleges. Thus, while his school helped him to recognize out-of-state colleges as appropriate options, it was his favorable experience at the school that helped him to evaluate out-of-state schools as not only appropriate but also desirable options for him. The experience at Northside Prep taught him the value of a small school environment, which is reflected in liberal arts institutions: "Most of my schools are liberal arts schools because I like being in a small knit community, knowing my professor so if I got into a private school, I like private school more than I like public school." Information about out-of-state colleges was important. However, it was also the context in which he received that information. He learned about these colleges in a context in which alumni, people that he can relate to on the basis of having shared the same high school experience, have attended such colleges.

Higher-SES Students

Higher-SES students attend high schools in which almost every student go on to college. Students at these high school are presented with a *selective college anywhere* schema in which competitive colleges across the country are framed as appropriate options. This includes top UCs and private colleges in California and highly-ranked liberal arts colleges and private research universities in the Midwest and East Coast. While these colleges are encouraged, other options are stigmatized as inappropriate. Community colleges, vocational/trade schools, and almost all CSUs were eschewed by the school and students. When deciding where to apply to college, higher-SES students draw upon these schemas to make sense of the college landscape. These schemas of colleges came out of a community in which most parents are college graduates and students are not only expected to go to college, but to matriculate to a competitive or prestigious university in the country. These schemas of colleges are presented and reinforced by the following factors: college presentations at the high school, a history of alumni and peers applying to such colleges, and the suggestions of college counselors. These factors help to legitimate the schemas of colleges that are presented to students. Higher-SES students often looked to their peers and alumni to decide where to apply to colleges and these choices are reinforced by matching suggestions from counselors and college recruitment visits at their school.

Whereas lower-SES students came from multiple high schools throughout the Bay Area, the majority of higher-SES students in this study attended one of two high schools. One high school, which I will call Franklin High School, has twenty-one percent of its students in the free

or reduced priced lunch program. The school is well known for its academic rigor. Two students in the sample came to the U.S. just to attend the high school. One is from China and the other is from Japan. The other higher-SES high school which will be called Everton High is also known for its academic rigor as well. At Everton High, only 1 percent of the students participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program. The experiences of several higher-SES students will be used to demonstrate how schools shape the college application choices of these students.

Scott is a student who attends Everton High, a relatively small school with about 200 students in each grade. Everton High is the only high school in his community. Scott has been with the same group of 200 students for about 10 years. In a school in which college attendance is an accepted fact, there is immense expectation for students to do well. This expectation is reflected in the competition among students for top grades and test scores. This culture of high achievement is fostered by the school and amongst students according to Scott:

> The high school, as a whole, everyone turns in their homework. Everyone comes to class every day, almost. It's like a lot of competition for grades; it's like self-motivation. People would want to get good grades, not for their parents, not for anything, but for themselves…The average GPA is a 3.6 or something. I don't know. The point is it's everyone, you do not admit you have a C, it's source of shame. It's very competitive but also very supportive. You are not always going to do to your best but you always expect to do better in the future.

The condition of the school, characterized by its competitive nature and the inevitability of college after high school, influenced the schemas of colleges that students are exposed to via their high school. Students learned about colleges from school staff like teachers and counselors, college recruitment visits to the school, and the college choices of their peers and alumni. Counselors are available to meet individually with students to help them identify colleges. Moreover, the school also offers a web-based program that allows students to enter their academic credentials to view suggestions of colleges. Through these avenues, students are offered a *selective college anywhere* schema of colleges that prioritized competitive colleges across the country as appropriate options. No college is beyond the reach of students at the school. Scott recalled how students have attended colleges all over the country: "It's all over the place. For my journalism class, we make a map of where everyone goes, and the pins are across the board." While there are no geographic boundaries as to where students can go for college, there are shared feelings among the students regarding certain types of colleges that are considered inferior and thus should be avoided. The exchange below sheds light on the classification of colleges at the high school:

> **Interviewer:** What are some colleges that are shunned by Everton students?

> **Scott:** University of Phoenix, basically the online colleges. That's not an Everton thing. I'd say there are like some pretentiousness and pride so kids, it's a wealthy community, so some kids get into Stanford on the family's money or the family's legacy. Some other kids get into Princeton and those kids are usually snobby and they are looked down on. UC Riverside and UC Merced, Cal State besides Cal Poly [San Luis Obispo], and if you go to community colleges, those are looked at as those kids who screw around. I mean, it's just like if you spent four years in high school, people expect you to do better than

that.

Interviewer: What colleges do Everton students usually go to?

Scott: UC Berkeley. A lot of kids go to UC San Diego. Berkeley is always a lot of people's goals, whether or not they get in. [UC] LA is popular. University of Oregon is a safety for everyone. They [University of Oregon] like Everton kids. They are fairly generous. They have a good relationship with the school. The counselor is familiar with the admissions officer. It's like if you need a safety [college], you go to University of Oregon. And they are happy to take our out-of-state money. And Cal Poly, not engineering but in general, is fairly popular. University of Washington has a growing number. It's a recent trend though. Northwestern, in a class of 200 students, four kids are going there. The point is that it's a lot, it's not a small amount.

The sentiment depicted above is echoed by other higher-SES students in the study as well. Students matriculate to colleges across the country. Yet, only some options are categorized as appropriate choices. Lower-ranked colleges and universities are avoided while competitive and highly ranked institutions are viewed as highly desirable. These restrictions and suggestions reflect a process of evaluation that is necessary in helping students narrow their options of appropriate college choices. The result is a shared understanding of appropriate colleges based on the prestige and reputation of the colleges.

Scott drew from this shared understanding of appropriate options, expressed as schema of colleges, to make his decision about where to apply to college. In deciding which colleges constituted a right fit for him, Scott drew upon his experiences and preferences to narrow the realm of appropriate college options. Having grown up in a small community and attended a small high school, Scott wanted something different: a larger school where he could meet more people and one located outside of the Bay Area. Below, Scott discusses how his experiences has shaped how he decides which colleges are right for him:

Scott: All the schools I applied to with the exception of Reed, I think they are all over 20,000 students. Obviously they are big. After that, it's just so obvious. Boston [University] and NYU, they host you over night. They have a whole program for an entire weekend of schedules and schedules. Oh, look at us, we really want you to be here. The public schools are more like, "You can come here." They are much more self-motivated. They are much more like UWash, UCSC, you can come here, it's not about...they don't need you to come.

Interviewer: You prefer one approach over the other?

Scott: As much as the handholding is as easy as they make things, for the hands-off, that's just more realistic for life. I don't need high school again where your teachers are asking you about how your project is going. It's interactive. I'd rather just do my own way.

As the exchange above demonstrates, he understood larger schools as giving students more flexibility but also strengthening students' discipline, something he felt was lacking in

smaller campuses. He believed larger schools will provide him with the skills to navigate life after college. This understanding, based on his experience in high school and some college visits, played an important role in his evaluation of what colleges were right for him. In the end, Scott applied to one CSU, multiple UCs, an in-state private universities and several out-of-state public and private research universities. In the case of Scott, his school helped him recognize appropriate colleges across the United States. In evaluating which colleges were right for him, he drew upon this shared understanding of appropriate options and then his own specific experiences to further classify these appropriate options. Like other students in the study, he did not take the configuration of colleges exposed to him at his high school at face value. Instead, he made sense of it based on his own particular set of experiences.

While some higher-SES students applied to out-of-state colleges in a manner similar to Scott in that their college choices consisted primarily of large research universities, another group of students instead sought out smaller private universities, specifically liberal arts colleges. Others applied to both types, and their reasoning reflect those of each groups of students. The example of Macy will be used to examine how the decisions of students who applied to liberal arts colleges came about. Macy attends the other higher-SES school, Franklin High. Like Everton, Franklin High is known for having very good schools in its community. Parents move their families to the area just so that their children can attend the schools there. It is also a small school and highly competitive school, as evidenced by Macy's observation:

> High school has always been stressful because Franklin has always been a bit cutthroat. People are always like, "What did you get on the test?" It's nothing where being smart is nerdy. You are always trying to be better than everyone else. All my friends we study together and we all want to succeed. Last year Math Analysis was graded on a curve and people would tell you how they studied or things like that. But people always want to succeed and do well as a whole. There are some slackers and they are anywhere you go.

In describing the college destinations of past and present students at the high school, Macy also presents a *selective college anywhere* schema of colleges that spans across the U.S., consisting of many types of competitive colleges. There is a shared understanding among students at the school that some colleges are more appropriate than others. Below, Macy responds to the question of where students from her high school attend college:

> Across the board. A lot of people, say there's about 220 people per class at Franklin and probably 20 of them. 5-20, I'm not sure, maybe go to the junior colleges and then they'll switch to a four-year UC or something like that. A few people do that if they have been struggling. A lot of people go to pretty good schools, ranging from the UCs. Some people go to [CSU] Chico but not very many. We are pretty smart. It's hard when you are applying to college because some of my reach or target schools are some people's safeties. All the school that I apply to there are several of the kids who are applying and competing into my school because everyone's smart…A lot of students have parents that went to Ivy League. And probably Wisconsin and Michigan, and big schools which have a high percentage. I don't know. It's across the board. A lot of people's parents go to UCLA and Cal. These schools are kind of local. UC Davis maybe, maybe no. Basically really good school. They get exposed to the whole spectrum of colleges in the U.S. Stanford is also another one.

Above, Macy discusses how colleges are classified at her school. This classification forms the schema that students draw upon to think about their college options. Community colleges or what she calls junior colleges are viewed as only for those who are struggling at the school. Even four-year CSUs are considered as borderline acceptable. Instead, students apply and attend highly-ranked schools including UCs, in-state private universities, Ivy league universities, and large out-of-state public universities. One way in which students are exposed to such colleges is through college recruitment visits at her high school. Macy is among the higher-SES students who relied on college recruitment visits to learn more about colleges. Here, she discussed the types of colleges that come to make recruitment pitches at her high school. The colleges range from UCs to Ivy League universities to liberal arts colleges:

Interviewer: What other schools actually recruit at Franklin?

Macy: So many. Northwestern. Just a huge range. Becknell, Villanova. Trying to think of the ones that I went to. Some from Ohio. NYU. I don't know. All those huge range of schools, a lot of very good schools. A lot of the UCs. I didn't go to the UC ones.

Interviewer: Any Ivy Leagues?

Macy: Yeah, for sure…Maybe like Dartmouth. I don't really remember. I didn't sign up for any of that. A lot of ...UPenn, Amherst, Middlebury. Hamilton. Those kinds of schools. A lot of liberal arts school. A lot of people from Franklin go to liberal arts school. I think it's because we go to a small school and a lot of kids feel comfortable at school. I know that Michigan, a lot of people apply to Wisconsin, those big academic schools. A lot of these schools also come and recruit. Just a lot of schools like that. Duke. Tulane. Just a lot of very good schools. I remember when the McAlester admissions guy came, I was like, "My brother goes there." I told him my name and he's like, "Is your brother Mike? I read his application." He's like, "I really liked him. I heard baseball is going very well [for him]." He knew my brother personally. It's kind of an extra thing that we have. It was nice.

Macy's school, like that of Scott's school, exposed her to a wide variety of colleges. Liberal arts colleges, which have small student enrollment, are popular among students at her school because they resemble the experience that students have in their small high school. While the school helped her recognize these choices as appropriate options, she drew upon her own experience to make sense of which ones were right for her. Macy's interest in liberal arts colleges shaped how she approached the college exploration and application process. Most liberal arts colleges are located outside of California. Thus, she made it a priority to apply to schools outside of California:

Interviewer: There's so many colleges. What process did you go through to narrow down to a list?

Macy: I don't want to go to school in the South so I crossed them out. I didn't really want to go to school in California but I applied to UC Davis but I cancelled that now that I am not going there. I wanted to experience something new for four years. Get a change of

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pace. Get a fun new cool experience. I was looking at school in the West Coast, Midwest, I didn't really want to go to a huge school. A middle or smaller school, a mid-size school is my ideal one. Softball, I was thinking I want to play softball, which is mostly at a small school and I don't really mind that. That's how I narrowed it down.

Interviewer: You mostly looked at the small schools?

Macy: Yeah, kind of small. I didn't want to go to a huge school. I like the idea of having small class sizes. I think I will learn a lot better.

In the excerpt above, Macy's experience at her high school shaped her interest in out-of-state colleges, specifically liberal arts colleges. She attends a small high school and seeks out colleges that possess some of the qualities of a small institution. She found these qualities primarily in liberal arts colleges, institutions that have a prominent profile at her school because of their recruitment visits and the large number of alumni that attend these colleges. In the end, she ended up applying to one small in-state private college, one out-of-state public university, an out-of-state private research university, and eight out-of-state liberal arts colleges. Her college application process demonstrates how school as institutions set boundaries around the type of colleges are appropriate to students. Students select from colleges within this range of acceptable colleges and they do so by drawing upon their experiences.

In addition to choosing among liberal arts and research universities, higher-SES students also considered distance from home as well. In contrast to lower-SES students, most higher-SES students preferred colleges located far from home. Like Macy above, Jacob is a student who made sense of the *selective college anywhere* schema by focusing his efforts on applying to colleges beyond California. Jacob attends Franklin High. He describes his high school as a pipeline to the UCs. He states, "If you look at the number of students going to the UCs, it is high. It's been encouraged through high school that with academic success, I should apply to UCs." While the UCs are emphasized, private colleges are also encouraged as well. During the fall and winter, admission officers from the UCs and private colleges, especially liberal arts colleges from out-of-state, make their way to the school. While he submitted applications to the UCs, he was set on attending a private college. He stated:

I was much more focused on private schools. I imagine myself moving out of California and getting new experiences and perspective. And the most logical way to do that was to go to a private and not a public school.

His emphasis on private colleges outside of California is shaped by his interest in following the footsteps of his older brother. He accompanied his mother and brother to visit colleges when his brother was applying to colleges. His brother ultimately attended a school in the Midwest. Based on these college trips and conversations with his brother about life in the Midwest, Jacob was intent on attending college outside of California. In the end, he submitted applications to several UCs, several Ivy Leagues, and some liberal arts and research universities in the Midwest. Speaking about this desire to follow his brother to the Midwest, he stated:

I love California. I can imagine moving back when I'm older. So many things to see and weather's great. At the same time, I visited other places in the U.S. as a college student. I

really want to be in a different place and get truly different perspectives outside of just being on a campus. People in California, once you come here, you don't want to leave. You are like in a bubble. I thought the best way to really challenge my view is to go somewhere else. Missouri is definitely less liberal. There might be people with similar cultural and political view, but I want to challenge the beliefs that I have and maybe that will help me make better decisions than staying in California.

Even the few higher-SES students who stated their intention of staying close to home still applied to out-of-state colleges, although their choices were limited to colleges in the Northwest. Daisy is among the few who preferred colleges close to home. She attends Everton High. When asked to describe her school, she stated, "A lot of people move here to have their kids go to Everton High School...We have a 98 percent continuance to college rate." The focus on college preparation is evident in the availability of college counselors, who meet with student to help them identify colleges. During their junior year, students are introduced to the school's program that helps students search for colleges based on their academic profiles and preferences. Like other higher-SES students, Daisy learned about college possibilities from the colleges that visit her high school as well as the application behaviors of past students. Here, she describes a *selective college anywhere* schema, in which top colleges across the U.S. are within grasp of students at her high school:

> There are no colleges that are significantly beyond the scope of Everton kids. Our school is a pretty high-achieving school. There are people who go to less prestigious school but there are also people who go to Brown and MIT and Harvard. It's exciting but it's not huge news if it happened. If we were a less well affluent inner city place, I don't know if this is true. If you are in a high school in a less affluent part of town, it might be surprising if someone gets into Harvard. But we often have a few who gets in to Harvard or the Ivy League and they may not go there because it's expensive but it's not a shocker. Ivy Leagues are not shocker.

While recognizing that any college is possible for students at her high school, she engaged in here own evaluation to decide which ones were among the right fit. Unlike other students who applied across the country, Daisy preferred to stay as close to California as possible. Here, she discusses this preference:

> Some people stay in California and some people don't. There's no particular focus on staying local or on leaving. It's like every person's preference. I know I want to stay close because I have issues with being in the wild unknown…I generally want to stay in state… It had to be in or near California or be very impressive.

Unlike lower-SES students who rejected out-of-state colleges because they have never traveled outside of California, Daisy has visited some places but is not particularly fond of them. She rejected anything in the Washington D.C. area because she was once there and found the summer to be "absolutely unbearable." Moreover, she resisted any school in the southern U.S. because of the "politics and climate." Perhaps, most important in her decision is her personality. As someone who admits to being shy, Daisy feels overwhelmed in the presence of others. She states, "Being around other people in social situation is exhausting for me especially when

there's more than a few people." Yet, despite her dislike for engaging with new people and her preference for staying close to home, she applied to an out-of-state college in Oregon. It's a small liberal arts college. Speaking of this choice, she said: "It's in Oregon, it's the furthest away from home that I applied." She found it through a search on the school's college search engine, in which there was a 97 percent match with her test scores and preferences. In addition, the application was simple, no essays were needed, and the application fees were waived. Other students at her schools have been admitted there in the past, which makes it less intimidating even though it is outside California. Moreover, the prospect of a liberal arts education was appealing: "I kind of wanted to apply to some liberal arts places because I was only applying to UC at the point where I was like I should apply to more to some places where I would have a better chance of having a more well-rounded education." In the end, Daisy applied to several UCs, one CSU, one in-state liberal arts, and the Oregon liberal arts college. Daisy's case points to the importance of schema. Schema represents not just exposure to information about colleges, but also knowledge that past students have attended such colleges, which makes colleges less daunting as academic or social transitions. Thus, while Daisy is shy and hesitant about new environments outside of California, she still applied to a college in Oregon because she knows that previous students from her high school have gone there.

While the decision-making of four higher-SES students have been discussed here, the process by which they reach these decisions via the influence of their schools reflects largely the process taken by other higher-SES students as well. Higher-SES students are offered a broader scope of four-year colleges in their schemas of colleges than their lower-SES peers. To decide which ones are the right fit for them, higher-SES students looked to their high school experiences and college visits. Most students preferred to attend college outside of California. Beyond distance, higher-SES students can be divided into three groups based on their application to out-of-state colleges: those who apply primarily to large public and private research universities; those who apply mostly to small colleges, particularly liberal arts colleges; and those who apply to both types of institutions. Scott represents the first type while Macy represents the second type. Higher-SES students make decisions about where to apply to college based in part on the schemas of colleges to which they are exposed and whether or not they want a college environment that resembles that of their high school environment. Scott wanted a large university where he could experience new things beyond that of a small school feel, whereas Macy wanted a continuation of the small school setting of her high school environment. Unlike lower-SES students who relied primarily on college preparation programs, higher-SES students were heavily influenced by school. This can be seen in the weight students attribute to the college recruitment visits at their school, the college destinations of alumni, and their peers' application choices as factors in where they applied to college.

Discussion

In this chapter, I drew upon the decision-making of several high-achieving students to demonstrate patterns around how schools and college preparation programs influence where students apply to college. The process by which these students reached their decision about where to submit college applications generally reflect the ways in which others students in the study also made their decisions. Higher-SES students attend high schools in which competitive and highly-ranked colleges in California and across the country are viewed as appropriate options. As a result, applications to out-of-state colleges were a common occurrence. In contrast,

most lower-SES students attend schools and participate in college preparation programs that only presented colleges in California. Some lower-SES students, specifically those in high-quality schools and those in programs geared towards getting high-achieving students into the top colleges across the country, were exposed to a schema of colleges that included out-of-state colleges as well. Even when presented with a configuration of colleges that included out-of-state colleges, lower-SES students who did apply to out-of-state colleges tend to have experiences in out-of-state environments. These experiences were instrumental in shaping their desire to apply to out-of-state colleges.

Institutions shape the choices of students by imposing boundaries around which colleges the institutions consider appropriate for their students. Institutions provide students with socially shared interpretative schemas or scripts with which to make sense of the social world, specifically their available options after high school. Schemas help students narrow down options to a manageable set. What is considered appropriate varies by the mission of the institution and the population of subjects served by the institution. In schools in which very few students go on to attend four-year colleges, e.g. lower-SES schools, students are exposed to a greater variety of post-high school options. This includes vocational/trade schools, two-year colleges, and four-year colleges that are in close proximity to the high school or within the state. In high schools in which most students are expected to matriculate to four-year colleges, e.g. higher-SES schools, students are exposed to schemas of four-year competitive colleges across the country, ranging from small private liberal arts colleges to large public universities. The same mechanism operates within college preparation programs for lower-SES students. Programs that enroll any college-bound students have a mission of ensuring that their students attend four-year colleges. As a result, they primarily expose their students to public four-year colleges in California. In contrast, programs that specifically enroll higher-achieving students emphasize schemas of colleges that consist of competitive colleges across the country.

While institutions impose boundaries around which options are appropriate and therefore acceptable for students to aspire to, student themselves do exercise some level of agency in choosing what options are the right fit for them. Distinguishing between appropriate and right options recognizes that the suggestions of institutions are mediated by each individual's understandings, experiences, and preferences. Students are not merely passive recipients of the configuration of options that are transmitted to them from their schools or college preparation programs. Instead, they are agents who also try to make sense of these appropriate options based on the experiences and understandings they bring to the decision-making process. Although students do exercise agency in choosing the colleges that are the right fit for them, it is a restricted agency. Students are choosing, but based on a set of confined choices set by the institutions.

Chapter 4: Family Influences in Where Students Apply to College

In this chapter, I examine how family upbringing and family experiences shape where students apply to college. Whereas high schools and college preparation programs influence the different types of colleges that students are exposed to in the form of schemas, family experiences shape how far from home students think they can go for college. Drawing upon the concept of narratives, I show how different elements of students' family experiences cultivate understandings among students about their relationship with their family and the level of autonomy or constraints in their decision-making. These understandings then come to influence whether students aspire to pursue out-of-state colleges or whether students confine their choices to in-state colleges. Narratives reflect the stories that students tell that express how they make sense of their lives. Narratives can tell us how students are making decisions about college choices with respect to how they understand themselves in relation to others—specifically their family. As the previous chapter on institutions alluded to, distance from home is a consideration of both lower-SES and higher-SES students. The discussion of narratives in this chapter will help shed light on why that consideration is an important factor in students' decision-making.

I show that most higher-SES students understand college as an opportunity to leave their families and immerse themselves in an environment in a different part of the country. This is made possible by the fact that higher-SES students perceive a great deal of autonomy in their lives and with regard to their college choices. When discussing their decision-making processes, higher-SES students present a narrative of independence regarding what they have done to prepare for college and where to apply. They emphasize aspects of their upbringing and experiences that demonstrate how they exercise initiative in making decisions about what activities they should participate in. They downplay the influence of their parents in making these decisions, and they see themselves as individuals who are autonomous in choosing their directions and college options.

In contrast, most lower-SES understand college as a continuation of family interdependence and they view making decisions about college as an undertaking that required taking into account the real and perceived needs and wishes of the family. These students speak of experiences and considerations that reflect a narrative of interdependence between themselves and their parents that is grounded in the mutual concern that they have for one another as the prospect of college looms. This narrative includes stories that reflect some combination of students' awareness of the sacrifices and struggles of their parents to support the family, students' family responsibilities while in high school, students' anticipation of their role in the health and success of their family in the future, and parental pressures for students to stay close to home for college. Due to these experiences, students recognize the importance of mutual support between themselves and their parents in any future success, reinforcing the belief that the fate of students and parents are intertwined.

Social Class Differences in Family Experiences

Research on social class influences via the family demonstrates the importance of understanding how family experiences and relationships shape students' decision-making over and beyond that of access to information. Studies reveal that the upbringing and experiences of socioeconomically disadvantaged students tend to result in an emerging sense of constraint while those of middle and upper-middle class youth lead to a greater sense of choice and autonomy

(Kohn 1959; Kohn 1963; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Lareau 2002; Calarco 2014). For instance, Lareau (2002) concludes that interactions in working class families in which children are expected to conform to parents' directives lead to the development of a sense of powerlessness and frustration among children when dealing with professionals and institutions. In contrast, middle class children are encouraged to speak up and share their thoughts and feelings, leading to a sense of entitlement that makes middle class children think they can manipulate situations to suit their preferences. Calarco (2014) demonstrates how social class upbringing influences students' decision-making when it comes to seeking assistance in the classroom. She finds that middle class children are more likely than working class children to assert themselves in classroom and that they receive more assistance as a result.

The development of a sense of autonomy among middle class children is also evident in how parents draw upon the interests of students in the selection of activities. Chin and Phillips (2004) find that children of middle-class parents lead highly structured lives centered on activities that are customized according to the needs and interests of the children. Lareau and Weininger (2010) show that middle class parents tend to stress the importance of self-direction by placing children in situations in which they must make and justify their decisions. Stuber (2009) argues that this type of upbringing fosters a set of cultural dispositions that encourages students to seek out extra-curricular activities and new experiences as a way to test their independence.

Whereas middle-class children grow up in families in which they are given opportunities and experiences to develop their sense of control and autonomy, socioeconomically disadvantaged students grow up in families in which they develop a sense of constraint in their decision-making. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students often have to take into account their family's well-being. Some students even have to shoulder family responsibilities. Several studies have found that a strong obligation to assist the family can involve responsibilities and activities that compromise the ability of young adults to pursue postsecondary schooling (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Desmond and Lopez Turley 2009). Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) and Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) find that young adults who believed in the importance of assisting their parents and siblings were more likely to live with their parents and contribute financially to their families. Louie (2004) finds that while both working-class and middle-class students exhibited a strong sense of obligation towards their family, only working-class students were forced to contribute financially to their family while in school.

Research specifically on college choices among socioeconomically disadvantaged students demonstrates the relevance of family constraints. Desmond and Lopez Turley (2009) find that a cultural preference privileging family goals over individual goals, which they term familism, discourages some Latino/a youth from applying to selective colleges if they must leave home. Ovink and Kalogrides (2015) find that familism is not just a Latino phenomenon but one that is shared by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Mullen (2011) explains that students from poor and working-class backgrounds rarely considered out-of-state colleges because of cost and the importance of maintaining family ties. Lee and Kramer (2013) argue that low-SES children have to contend with how leaving for college will impact their relationship with their peers, family, and community. Stuber (2009) shows how the value placed by first-generation college students upon the importance of family solidarity and staying close to home can make it difficult for students to take advantage of opportunities located far from home. These studies point to the need to seriously account for the influence of families in students' decision-making.

Narratives of Interdependence Among Lower-SES Students

Lower-SES students recounted stories that reflected what I call a narrative of interdependence. These stories included students' awareness of the sacrifices and struggles of their parents to support the family, students' family responsibilities while in high school, students' anticipation of their role in the health and success of their family in the future, and parental pressures (direct and indirect) for students to stay close to home for college. While not all of these themes came up for every student, some combination of these themes emerged in lower-SES students' discussions about their upbringing and experiences. Due to these experiences, students recognized the importance of mutual support between themselves and their parents in any future success. Consequently, lower-SES students viewed making decisions about college as an undertaking that required taking into account the real and perceived needs and wishes of the family. This framing imposed geographic constraints on many lower-SES students such that they only viewed California schools as viable options.

Interdependence Grounded in Immediate and Anticipatory Family Obligations

Some lower-SES students were forced to contend with family responsibilities while in high school and they drew upon such responsibilities to make sense of the college choice decision-making process. These students anticipated family responsibilities to persist beyond high school and to potentially interfere with their college plans. As such, they have had to modify their plans accordingly to address these potential responsibilities when they are in college. Jack, the son of Chinese immigrants, is among those students whose upbringing and family experience reflect a narrative grounded in immediate and anticipatory family obligations. His father passed away during his junior year in high school and his mother works around the clock as an in-home caregiver. As a consequence, Jack has to carry on many responsibilities on behalf of his mother. This theme of having to intervene on behalf his mother continued throughout high school. While he views these responsibilities as an inconvenience, he understands that is something he must do for his mother who raised him:

> **Jack:** Yeah, I really don't like it [family responsibilities]. I know it's partially my responsibility to help her because, as her son, she's helped me as a mother…I help my mom to relieve this guilt of having to take care of me. She works so much and for so long and I respect her for that. I understand it's all for me. I don't like to but I do my best to help her.

> **Interviewer:** Knowing that, how does it make you feel about your own life?

> **Jack:** It gives me a guilt because she's working very hard as an immigrant [and she] doesn't understand English. She's working really hard to support us. I know that she relies on me a lot. Honestly, it is still a major issue weighing on me. What will she do if I go to college? She wants me to go to college. I want to go to college. The issue is I don't know when I go to college, what will happen to her when she needs me. What if there's important mail or information like legal crap and she doesn't have anyone except me and I'm miles away.

Jack acknowledges the sacrifices his mother has made for him. He has depended upon her for where he is at in his life. His mother, at the same time, has also relied upon him to keep the family functioning as it does. This narrative of interdependence, his mother's support of the family and his own contribution to the family, shapes how Jack thinks about his future. The prioritization of his mother's needs in his decision about college is demonstrated in the following exchange when Jack is asked to reflect on the implications of his family responsibilities for his college and career trajectory:

> **Jack:** That's the reason why I didn't apply to colleges out of state. I only applied to colleges in California. Only Stanford, the rest are California public schools. I know it'll be closer and in a sense easier to help my mom than out of state.
>
> **Interviewer:** Outside of California, [is it] harder to help your mom?
>
> **Jack:** Yeah, in state, I feel like I'll have a few good friends who will allow me to borrow money or drive me back to help my mom out for a bit. Worse comes to worse, I always have this surplus amount of money to buy a ticket home. Out of state is not an option and plane ticket is not an option. I'm going to [certain] college for economic reasons.

As a result of this narrative of interdependence in how he makes sense of his upbringing and experiences, Jack feels constrained in his decision making about where he can attend college. For Jack, college means a continuance of family relationships and the possibility that he may be called upon to assist his mother while in college. Consequently, he has to confine his college choices to places where he can reach home within drive-able distance. In the end, Jack applied to five UCs, four CSUs, and Stanford, all colleges in California.

Meiying, the daughter of Chinese immigrant parents who work as a factory worker and a carpenter, is also another student who has had to support her family while in high school. This has been more of the case since her mother developed a work-related injury during her junior year in high school. Meiying has had to speak to her mother's boss about her mother's worsening condition. She also accompanies her mother to see the doctor. Her father works very long hours so Meiying has had to take care of the family. She drives her brother to school and to his activities, buys groceries, cooks, and does other household chores around the house. Her mother recently left to China to receive treatment. This has caused her to occasionally question the prospect of attending college far away from home:

> I don't know how I feel about going away from home. I do hope that my mom gets better after she comes back. I have been taking care of her and my brother this year so if I go away next year, I guess my mom would have to take care of my brother or he'll have to take care of himself…I don't know how my brother will take care of himself. Even though he's one year younger, I do most of the housework. He doesn't really do much around the house.

Unlike Jack, Meiying also has to contend with the fact that her parents insist that she stay close to home for college, a common theme especially among female students. She recalls her mom telling her "there's no point in going to a school if it's far away just because it looks nice. As long as the school has a good education, then you should just go to that school." Her parents

want her to stay close so they can support one another. This is also an instance of the inter-dependence narrative. The exchange below further illustrates this narrative of inter-dependence:

> **Meiying:** They want me to stay local. They want me to stay close to home so like Berkeley. But I actually like [UC] LA better than [UC] Berkeley. I guess it comes down to financial packages. They tell me straight up that, "If you get accepted to LA and Berkeley, you are going to go to Berkeley." And then my mom said she'll bring me food every single week so they still want to take care of me.

> **Interviewer:** Stay close to provide you food or something else?

> **Meiying:** Since they are very protective of me, they always make sure that I am safe. I think they want to continue looking after me in college. If I go far away in college and something happens, they can't get to me because they don't speak English and they don't know how to communicate with people around them. I think it's better for me to be around them and help them when they need help.

Meiying's narrative of interdependence results from her responsibilities while in high school, her parents' insistence that she attends college relatively close to home, and her own understanding that she needs to be available while in college to support her parents. Rather than view college as an opportunity to be completely independent of her parents, she views college as a continuance of the family-child dependence that has guided her throughout high school. This narrative imposes limitations on realistic colleges, forcing her to only consider colleges in California. She ended up applying to four UCs, four CSUs, and two private colleges.

Interdependence Grounded in Anticipatory Family Concerns

Most lower-SES students do not have to actively support or intervene on their parents' behalf while they are in high school. Even with little to no current family obligations, these students still feel tied to their parents' well-being and they worry about their family as they ponder their future. These worries about family also constitute narratives of interdependence. One such student is Carlos, the son of Mexican immigrants. He lives with his father and two older brothers. While Carlos is committed to the idea of becoming the first person in his family to graduate from college, he has concerns about what that means for his family. He does not have family responsibilities, but he depends on his father for moral and social support. Moreover, recognizing how hard his father has to work as a construction worker, he is concerned about his father's health while he is away at college. This narrative of interdependence, the belief that children and their parents are connected to the well-being and success of one another, has factored into Carlos' thought process about where he should attend college:

> I feel if I go far away, I'm going to miss my dad. I'm going to miss what he does. My dad cooks. I'm going to miss my dad's food. I'm going to miss the presence of my dad. Me and my dad, we always laugh so I feel like those jokes and laughter I'm going to miss a lot. And then with his job, I don't know [if] at the end of the day, when I go back home from school I'm never certain if he's alive or something bad happened. When I go to college, I won't know until I call him when he comes home. I'm kind of scared because I

can never know if my dad's okay or if he's not okay.

The emotional support of his father and his concern about his father's well-being play a significant role in how Carlos thinks about his future and where to apply to college. He sees the struggles his father goes through each day as a construction worker to provide for the family. He is afraid for the safety and well-being of his father while he is away at college. Like other lower-SES students, Carlos' discussion of his upbringing and college choice decision-making is filled with concern and saturated with constraints about where he can go to college after taking into account the needs of his family. Given this awareness, Carlos reasons that he should stay relatively close to home while in college so that he can check up on his father and so that he can come home if needed to relive the stress of college. Carlos ended up applying to four UCs and four CSUs.

Marcus, the son of African American parents, is another student who is worried about his family when he thinks about the prospect of college. Both of his parents briefly attended college but did not finish. Born and raised in New Orleans, he and his family have lived in Colorado and other cities in California before settling in the Bay Area. In total, they have had to relocate nine times in search of more stable employment for his parents. His parents have worked in a variety of jobs from cooks to clerical workers. At one time, they were homeless for eight months. These experiences have shaped how he thinks about the importance of his family:

We are close because my parents they only have a high school degree and they are always working. Me and my brothers, we are close because we don't have anyone to depend on. We move around too much so we need each other. We depend on each other because my parents are always working. We developed a tight knit relationship with each other. I say we are pretty close.

The importance of maintaining relationships with family members is also reinforced explicitly by his parents, who attribute their precarious financial situation to the lack of strong bonds with extended family:

I think the biggest thing that they have tried to enforce is that when we get our own family is to make sure that we become close to our relatives because they are saying that having access to relatives and getting to know them would have helped us on multiple occasions. We wouldn't have had to move so much if we had relatives help us out in certain situations. Because we didn't have that, we had to move where we could to find money.

This experience with poverty, dislocations, and reliance on one's family has deeply affected how Marcus thinks about college. As someone who is interested in studying engineering, with an emphasis on robotics, he is well aware of the importance of going to a school that specialize in that field. However, his family upbringing and experiences have cast doubts about where he can attend college. His family recently moved to the Bay Area to be closer to other family members. But even here, he still continues to be troubled by family issues. Below, he reflects on his decision against applying to out-of-state colleges, specifically to his dream school of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), an elite private research university:

Marcus: At the moment, I'm more keen on going to a UC because of all the deaths or things in my family. I still want to go to MIT, it's still my number one choice but I have to put that aside for when I go for my graduate degree. At the moment, I'm going to try to stay in state.

Interviewer: You say you want to stay close to home? Tell me more about that?

Marcus: As I stated earlier, there's been a whole bunch of deaths in my family. My grandpa died about two months prior and my grandma died yesterday. My uncle has stage four cancer and he's going to die soon. And so then, I want to be there to support them. As of now, my studies have to come first. The things I want to do like getting my little brother to go to college, it's not going to give him a good reason to go if I don't finish.

Interviewer: What kind of support do you anticipate providing if you stay in California versus being in the east coast?

Marcus: As of now, I don't think there's much I can offer or do. Or wait for times to heal their wound. Right now, I think I feel it's better for me to be in the vicinity to help out than leave.

Despite the countless obstacles and issues that he and his family has endured, Marcus remains steadfast in his commitment to attend college. However, his experiences have forced him to push off more ambitious goals like attend MIT. His narrative of interdependence, expressed in his awareness of the importance of a close-knit family for overcoming crises, grounded his decision to only apply to colleges in California. He anticipates family issues to linger and in doing so, he recognizes the importance of being near home while in college so that he can provide social or emotional support if needed. He applied to four UCs and four CSUs.

Some students not only anticipated family difficulties while in college but they also faced opposition from their parents against pursuing higher education far away from home. Jay is the son of Chinese immigrants. His mother stays at home and father works in a warehouse. Unlike other lower-SES students, Jay has many extended family members who have attended and graduated from college. Yet, despite his family being more familiar with the college process than other lower-SES families in the study, he still anticipated obstacles in where he could attend college. This anticipation was grounded in his observation of the geographic constraints imposed upon where his older cousins could attend college and his own struggle with his mother over the same issue. Below he recalls these constraints, alluding to the instance of a cousin trying to convince his parents to allow him to attend MIT:

The family members want the children to go to the best schools, but also be relatively close. When he got accepted, he knew it was a good opportunity and he also got in to [UC] Berkeley. His mom didn't understand, "Why go all the way to Massachusetts when you can stay in the Bay and go there?" It's a great opportunity. They had this argument about whether he can go or not. His older brother had to intervene to explain to his mom. This is a wonderful opportunity for him. He's the one or one of the few from the family

that went to college out of the UC system. His mom didn't really want him to go away. He comes home maybe twice or three times a year. She didn't want that. She wanted to see her son pretty often at least.

The failure of the parents in Jay's extended family to distinguish between various types of colleges played a role in their resistance against letting their children attend college across the country. Yet, the larger issue is that parents are afraid of letting their children go through an experience alone that they themselves are unfamiliar with. Jay rationalizes the resistance of parents by referencing how "They are not ready for you to grow up completely. They want to watch over you even though you are an adult." Students like Jay come to eventually internalize these worries as well and it shapes how far from home they think they can attend college. This is the case with Jay, who applied to four UCs, four CSUs, and an in-state private university. This narrative of interdependence, expressed in the anticipation of ongoing dependence between child and parents beyond high school, shaped his college choice decision-making:

> It's more convenient for the both of us. Say if I get homesick, being in [UC] Santa Cruz, it's only an hour and a half from Oakland if they want to see me or I want to see them or if there's a family emergency, it's a lot more convenient than if I went out of state or to SoCal [Southern California].

It was more likely the case that students who faced family resistance towards pursuing higher education far from home were female students. Maria is the child of Mexican immigrants. Her family relies on government assistance, in the form of food stamps and subsidized housing, to supplement her mother's meager wages. Recognizing the difficulties her family has faced, Maria is set on making her mom proud. She proudly asserts that she will go to college and become the "first one to want to aspire to something higher than just staying home." While the struggles of her mother have motivated her to obtain a higher education, Maria is aware that family issues can be a potential obstacle:

> **Maria:** What if school gets hard? What if my family needs me? I can't just drop everything and leave. But honestly, I think I could do it. Cause my mom, she might need help and stuff, but she needs to understand that I am going to be away. There has to be another way for her to get help. My brother is going to be there, too. I just have to be prepared to be worried and stuff but be prepared to keep moving forward. If I stay stuck on those worries and stress, it's not going to get me anywhere.

> **Interviewer:** Tell me more about the family thing? You say you might worry about your family?

> **Maria:** So what if my mom gets sick. She has hypertension so I worry about that all the time. My brother, he's 14. What if there's peer pressure and he becomes involved with something. What if my little siblings get injured? I always think about different situations. What if a family member passes away? I recently had that and that was really hard because I was finalizing my senior project and obviously I had to take time to go to the funeral and all that stuff. I just think about different situations and as much as I wish I could just come back and everything will be okay. Let's be realistic, I can't just drop

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everything and leave it. We have to move on. Just like how I have moved on from all of my other struggles. I just have to be prepared. That's what I think about.

Given what has transpired in her life with her family's economic and health issues, Maria already anticipates that similar issues may arise in the future. Yet, she remains confident in her ability to overcome them when they do surface. Still, these past experiences and the concerns it brings have already impacted where she thinks she can go to college. When asked about what was important to her in deciding where to apply to college, she responded:

Maria: Honestly, I thought about financial aid, and how close it is and I thought about, like, how academically well are they doing. That's what I thought about.

Interviewer: When you think about a college, what makes you feel like it's good because it's close?

Maria: Being close to home is just, I guess if I ever needed help or just even emotional help, my mom will be there. Just being close to my mom is really valuable for me.

In addition to anticipating family issues and feeling the pressure to stay close to home to support her family, Maria has also received pushback from her family when she told them about the possibility of attending UCLA:

My mom she was like, "You will go to Berkeley. You will get in." So she was like, "So you can be close and stuff." They know I'm her first kid going to college and I don't think she's ready to say bye…She was like, "Berkeley's a good school," just because she's not ready to let me go especially alone to a new city, new place. She's like, "Don't walk to bad parts of LA because there's different parts of LA. I lived over there." It's complicated...They were really encouraging me to stay.

Maria's narrative of interdependence, grounded in her recognition of family's economic situation, her worries about the health and well-being of her family, and her mother's fears about letting her leave home for college, placed constraints on where she could attend college. Given the difficulties of justifying to her mother and herself about applying to UCLA, it was not surprising that Maria did not give any serious consideration to out-of-state colleges. As a result, Maria applied to only in-state universities: four UCs, four CSUs, and a couple of private colleges.

Lily, the daughter of Asian immigrants, is another student in a similar situation to Maria. However, unlike Maria, Lily strongly considered applying to out-of-state colleges. Lily's father is a retired clock assembler and her mom stays at home to care for the family. Due to her parents' old age, Lily is worried about their health. This is in spite of the fact that she has older siblings who live nearby. While having older siblings can reduce present day obligations among lower-SES students, it does not alter anticipated family responsibilities. When asked about future obstacles that could impact her goals, her family factored prominently:

As of right now, the only obstacle is losing my parents because they are getting older. I'm the youngest in my family and my sister is ten years older than me. [My parents] have

seen everything that needs to happen in my sibling's life and for me I'm just getting started. One thing I don't want to happen is to lose them along the way. I want to be there to share the moment with them, to be successful in school and later on in my career.

At one point, Lily seriously entertained the idea of out-of-state colleges, including some Ivy League schools. However, her parents resisted that idea and then she began to have doubts about her ability to live far away from home. According to Lily, her parents pressed her to choose schools close to home so that they could drive to see her and she could come home whenever they called her. Here, she reflects on the considerations that were taken into account when deciding where to apply to college:

> My decision was also made based on how far away from them I will be. Number one they are getting older, I want to visit them as much as I can and to come back home when there's an emergency. And vice versa. Because they are afraid something might happen to me. They say, "If you are across the country, how are we going to get to you when an emergency happens" …One thing they always remind me of is my whole high blood pressure. It comes up whenever I'm at it. "Being two hours away, if something happens, we can come visit you at the hospital if you are there. But if you are eight hours away, what if no one drives us?" My dad is getting older and his driving is weaker so he can't make the trip out there with my mom. That was the main point in my decision.

Lily's narrative of interdependence as expressed by her acknowledgement of her family's economic struggles, her anticipated health concerns, her parents' resistance to her going out of state, and her own concern about being near her family in case of an emergency shaped where she applied to college. Lily deliberated with her parents and made the decision that she would only apply to California schools. She recalled, "Eventually, it was that I would only apply to schools within California but my compromise was that I would apply to schools in So-Cal [Southern California] and Nor-Cal [Norther California], which was more spread out, instead of being in one general area." She applied to four UCs, four CSUs, and three in-state private colleges.

Whether many lower-SES students' concerns about their family will be realized is yet to be seen, but it has taken its toll on many lower-SES students who have had to contend with the possibility that issues like death or other family emergencies may get in the way of their future plans. Many lower-SES students often have to support their parents. The anticipation of these family obligations shapes where students think they should attend college. Even students without any current family obligations still feel the need to support their parents while in college. The anticipation of family support also affects how students think about their college choices, especially how far away from home they can be. These students fear that an emergency might befall their parents while they are away at college. Thus, they feel the need to choose a college close to home so that they can be available to assist when needed. In other instances, parents discouraged their children from considering colleges that are more than several hours' drive away from home. These elements of the narrative of interdependence framed students' understanding of college as continuing the interdependence already established between child and parent. This understanding worked to limit students' college choices to in-state colleges.

Heterogeneity Among Lower-SES Students

The majority of lower-SES students (18 out of 23) talked about their experiences and upbringings that reflected a narrative of interdependence. Those students who did not possess a narrative of interdependence did not anticipate their family to be a cause of concern or a source of obligation in the future. It was not the case that their families did not have any challenges. They did, but these students did not anticipate it affecting them in the future. One student, Sarah, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, did not perceive any geographic restrictions because she was seeking to be far away from her family due to family conflicts:

> There's a lot of family problems. I try to stay away from my step father because there's just family problems. I guess I don't want to be in that situation where there's argument and stuff and I try to avoid. So yeah because I'm not going to be near them, I don't feel like I should be near them… I love my mom but I don't know there's a lot of family problems that I try to avoid.

The absence of a narrative of interdependence does not automatically mean that students will apply to out-of-state colleges. If they do not know much about out-of-state colleges or are unfamiliar with out-of-state environments, they will not apply to such colleges as in the case of Sarah, who only applied to California colleges. Anthony, the son of African American parents, also does not possess a narrative of interdependence. His parents actually encouraged him to go outside of California for college. However, it was only after he had taken trips to Hawaii through a program for low-income students and visited family members in Louisiana that he became comfortable at the prospect of living away from home. In addition to in-state colleges, Anthony also applied to private research universities on the East Coast and historically black colleges outside of California. Below he recounts how his out-of-state experience proved to be a turning point in his application to colleges beyond California:

> At first, I was hesitant about going out of state but after I went to the south and Hawaii and I was like I'm going out of state, it's said and done. I still applied to CA schools as back up but I was set on out of state.

In a couple of cases, students are still able to apply to out-of-state colleges even when they project a narrative of interdependence. These students usually have multiple experiences being in environments, particularly beyond California, that are very different from their communities. One such student is Madison, the daughter of Asian immigrants, whose parents insist that she stay close to home for college. Despite the doubts and the fears that her parents instilled in her about the inconveniences of living far away from home for college, Madison made sense of out-of-state colleges through her own experience of being in different in different parts of the U.S. and abroad. Through several non-profit organizations, she has traveled to Washington D.C., Seattle, Virginia, Peru, and Nicaragua. As a consequence, she has a different take on what it means to go to college far from home, which makes applying to out-of-state colleges a desirable option:

> My parents were over-protective; they have such limited ideas. Growing up in that environment, you are limited to different ideas and you don't know what's out there. I

thought it was important that I stepped out and discover things on my own.

Narratives of Independence among Higher-SES Students

In comparison to lower-SES students, higher-SES students expressed a narrative of independence that reflected an understanding of college as an individual endeavor, enabling them to consider applying to colleges across the country. Most higher-SES students framed college as an opportunity to explore a new environment in a different part of the country. This is made possible by the fact that higher-SES students perceive a great deal of autonomy in their lives and with regard to their college choices. This narrative of independence emphasizes the student's initiative, and the fact that students and not their parents choose the types of opportunities or activities they become involved in. It also emphasizes curiosity, which can be initiated by the parents or students, but involves the student gaining exposure to a new set of experiences. This often happens through family vacations, camps, or other organized activities that result in students developing an interest about places and things beyond their local environment. The third aspect that distinguishes student narratives of independence, and the one that all students emphasized, is autonomy. Students discussed how they are the ultimate decider in selecting what they want to do, and they emphasized that when it comes to choosing an activity or a college, it is entirely up to them and not their parents. These three aspects of a narrative of independence – initiative, curiosity and autonomy – shape how students understand their past and how they think about their future, specifically about where to apply to college and what criteria to use in their college search.

Scott's case exemplifies the centrality of initiative and autonomy in higher SES-students' narratives of independence. His mother received a bachelor's degree from a four-year college and his father briefly attended college before dropping out to start a business. Scott, the son of a multiracial couple, fondly remembers his father working with him in elementary school to help him overcome his speech impediment. While Scott recognizes his parents' involvement early on in his life, Scott emphasizes his own initiative in directing his life while in high school by referencing how he was the one who took the steps needed to register for his coursework. This can be further seen in the following exchange when Scott talks about his parents' support during the college application process.

> **Scott:** My dad never went to college so he doesn't involve himself too much. My mom, they are relatively hands off with me. I'm the only person who filled out the FAFSA and college applications by myself. The College Board. FAFSA. Since I was very young, they were like, "Fill out the paperwork and we'll sign the check for you. Just tell us what you are doing and why." I learned a lot of these things by myself.

> **Interviewer:** What did you think of that growing up, given that other kids have parents who are more hands on?

> **Scott:** On the one hand, it was a bit intimidating. On the other hand, it was relatively liberating in that I understand how paper works, you have due dates, you have to manage your own deadlines, turn in stuff for yourself. That's very...I hate to use the word, but it's very adult of me...something I learned very early on. That was just expected in the real world. No hand-holding. I have no complaints. I feel like I am better off for it…I think

they're hands-off because they trust me. They set me up initially. I wouldn't call them hands off in elementary but when I got to middle school, I was a Boy Scout. This is the thing. For instance, I used to fly out to San Diego to visit my grandparents. From an early age I packed my bag. They just tell me what to do. It's like, "What do you want to do for the summer." I'm like, "I want to do this and this over the summer." "So circle them on the booklet and tell me what weeks you want to do what." It's like I knew, I chose what I did by myself and I organized it. They just provided help, finding me a ride or something.

Scott brings up instances in which he was the one in charge of deciding what to do to demonstrate this independence from his parents. He minimizes financial support he received from his parents to be able to participate in activities and he views the lack of parental involvement in his decision-making a sign of his maturity. This is different from how lower-SES students speak of the college application process. They view the lack of parental involvement as a constraint in that they are unable to depend on their parents for guidance, while higher-SES students like Scott frame it as an instance of their independence or autonomy. Thus, the childrearing approach of his parents helps Scott develop a sense of independence. He still depends on his parents in that they pay for his activities, but Scott is more focused on the fact that he is encouraged to choose his activities, which gives him a sense of freedom and independence. Being able to choose what he wants to do reflects his autonomy.

His sense of independence is further supported by the lack of any geographic restrictions placed upon him by his parents. He remarked that attending a college far away from home was not an issue because he never expected to come home except during the holidays and school breaks. Moreover, being far away from home was a key criterion in his college search because he wanted to maintain his independence from his parents while in college. He stated that "I just want my parents to not be able to say, why don't you come home for the weekend. That was my only requirement for distance… I expected to be out of state. And I would say that a majority of students [from my high school] applied to out of state." These comments are reflective of his understanding of college. Whereas Scott views college as an opportunity to detach from his family except when he needs to go home for holidays, lower-SES students often have to worry about the need to be home during unexpected family emergencies. Scott is unconcerned about such things or the cost of a plane ticket. The narrative of independence is what allows him to think about college possibilities beyond California and across the country. Scott ended up applying to one CSU, multiple UCs, an in-state private university, and multiple out-of-state public and private universities on the West Coast and the East Coast.

Unlike Scott, Lan's parents were more active in shaping his direction in life. His parents decided to move the family to the U.S. from China so that he could take advantage of the educational system from high school through college. Yet, despite the greater involvement on the part of his parents, the consequence was not a sense of constraint but rather a developed sense of curiosity accompanied by a sense of autonomy in his decision-making. His curiosity enabled him to consider opportunities and colleges across the country with few concerns. For instance, Lan occasionally accompanies his father, an editor for a Chinese-English environmental website, across the country and even abroad when his father gives lectures at university campuses. The result is a developed sense of curiosity:

I think they've [my parents] always tried to expose me to different things, especially my dad. He takes me on his trips to see different parts, see different things. I get to see his

environmental work in Tibet. So you know he's showing me that I can do whatever that I like to do. That's also good for college. I think generally they are pretty open. They didn't force me to do anything that I didn't really want to. I'm very happy about that.

Lan makes it clear that he does not feel coerced by his parents to go on these trips. Instead, he views them as opportunities to explore and to be exposed to new things and places. In doing so, he puts his autonomy at the forefront. This developed sense of curiosity motivated him to become involved with an organization at his high school called BuildOn that takes students around the world to build schools in developing countries. With this organization, Lan has traveled to Nepal and Haiti. These experiences have shaped his desire to move out of his local environment for college. He rationalizes his decision in the following way:

> I think just expanding my horizon. Maturing as a person. Learning practical skills. I feel like I am pretty mature, I think for myself but I don't have any practical skills that I can apply in a job situation. Getting some of that, expanding, getting to know the world better. I just think it brings a lot of different opportunities. If I don't go, I would be stuck [in the Bay]. Not much going on in here.

Lan frames college as an opportunity to move beyond this comfort zone and to experience as much of the world as possible. This framing is made possible by his trips across the country and around the world and his upbringing, which has instilled a sense of curiosity of faraway places and a sense of autonomy about choosing his path. Lan specifically targeted many colleges outside of California that would enable him to satisfy these expectations. When asked about some of the characteristics he looked for in a college, he replied: "I knew that I wanted to go somewhere on the East Coast so I looked at mostly East Coast schools." Lan applied to five UCs, six Ivy Leagues, three out-of-state and one in-state liberal arts college, and another private out-of-state university.

Anna comes from a household in which both of her parents, who are European immigrants, have a Ph.D. Her parents foster her curiosity and sense of independence by encouraging her to explore her interests. Anna views her parents as relaxed, laid-back, and hands off. They encourage her to have fun and give her the freedom to figure out what she wants to do with her life. She reflects on her upbringing:

> They didn't tell me. I don't think they ever forced me to do anything. I'm lucky. I got to figure that out for myself. I think they got this from Europe or something. They are like, "You will get to what you want to do when you get to college. You can do anything and it's completely fine. You don't have to figure it out until you are 21." … Because of that I have the freedom to figure out for myself what is it that I want to do. It's helpful because I would stick to this and be more motivated to do because it's my idea and not someone else's idea.

In the excerpt above, the themes of curiosity and autonomy are present. Anna's parents encourage her to explore different interests and leave it up to her to decide what to explore. She brings up an example of her initiative to show that she is in control of what she does and that her parents are primarily supporters, and not decision-makers. While her parents encourage her to explore her different interests, Anna is adamant that it is not them but she who initiates these

activities, a common theme in the narrative of independence among higher-SES students.

Through her parents' social connections, Anna was able to explore Europe. According to Anna, "I've been to most of Europe, including Hungary. I haven't yet traveled outside of Europe and the U.S. It is annoying to me because there is so much to see." While some visits have been with her parents, her recent trips have been by herself. She was in Switzerland for a whole summer during her most recent trip. These experiences away from home combined with the cultural logic her parents utilize to raise her leads to a developed sense of independence. Her upbringing, particularly her travels, has shaped her curiosity for new environments and a sense of independence away from her parents. This sense of independence gives her the freedom to choose but also the comfort of knowing that she will not be apprehensive if she chooses to attend a college far away from home. When asked about her level of comfort being away from home, she responded,

> I didn't think about it as I'm going away from home. It's like I'm just going someplace different. I'm comfortable there, you can say. But it didn't feel like that…I have absolutely no problem going to school there [far away]. I want to go on adventures. I want to experience the world. That means I have to leave California. I love traveling to new places so I'll be fine.

Instead of viewing her attendance at a college out of state or out of the country as being away from home and her family, Anna frames it as an opportunity to be exposed to a new set of experiences. This framing is made possible by her narrative of independence, which has been shaped by her upbringing and her experiences in Europe traveling with her parents and by herself. Anna applied to over twenty-plus colleges, including in-state colleges like the UCs and private colleges, out-of-state colleges such as Ivy Leagues and liberal arts colleges, and out-of-country colleges in England.

While most higher-SES students portray their parents as hands-off or only moderately involved as the experiences of the previous respondents demonstrate, a couple of students described their parents as being heavily involved in their lives, especially in the college application process. Emily is one such student. Based on how she discussed the involvement of her parents in her life, could be viewed as one who does not possess autonomy, yet she sought to portray herself as such by offering instances in which she deviated from the expectations of her parents and by downplaying the role of her parents in the college application process. Emily is the daughter of Chinese immigrants, both of whom are professionals in their respective field. She has had arguments with her parents about her grades and extra-curricular activities. She recalls "They want all As…I've had to fight to do extracurricular...They wanted me to focus more on my studies." Despite these issues with her parents, she does not anticipate her family to be an obstacle:

> I would say that they [my parents] were never really an obstacle. What they say is somewhat discouraging but I don't think I listen to my parents as much as other kids listen to their parents. My parents and I are separated by language barriers. Communication has always been really tough. Sometimes we say you think that way and I think this way. It's different cultures, generations. We've never really connected. It's okay if you feel this way because I feel this way.

Emily reduces the conflict between she and her parents to a matter of cultural misunderstanding that results from communication problems. In doing so, she does not perceive her family to be an issue that shapes how she makes her decisions. Despite the heavy involvement of her parents in the college application process, as evidenced by their hiring of a private college counselor for her, she talks down her parents' influence by dismissing their contribution:

> They didn't really prepare me. It was me getting myself through to college. Everything else, once again, I can't explain. I just thought it was known that to get into a good college, I need to succeed in high school.

By minimizing the influence of her parents in her own decision-making, she is able to project a sense of independence and autonomy. This projection of autonomy and independence is further reinforced by her portrayal of her parents as relatively ignorant of the college application process. However, it is not just a matter of minimizing the influence of her parents that shape her college choices. Her middle class upbringing provided her with multiple opportunities to travel beyond California with a chorus group based out of San Francisco. She has traveled to New York and Italy to perform with this group. This experience only further enhanced her desire to be away from her family for college and to look forward to starting afresh in a new environment. In the end, she applied to in-state and as well as out-of-state colleges that include the UCs, Ivy League universities, several liberal arts colleges in the Midwest, and other private research universities across the country.

The type of narrative students adopts when describing their families and their futures shape the constraints or autonomy they perceive in deciding where they can attend college. Because higher-SES students express a narrative of independence and a cultivated sense of curiosity, they are not bothered by the prospect of going across the country for college. They speak of it in glowing terms, as it represents an opportunity to explore a new environment and be away from their parents. Lower-SES students, who offer a narrative of interdependence, are concerned about the issue of distance in their selection of colleges. They do not have the luxury of considering colleges across the country; instead, the distance between their home and college is one of the key criteria they bring up. The narratives students express also reflect their understanding of college. How students understand the meaning of college shapes the locations of colleges that they seriously considered. In contrast to lower-SES students, who tend to frame college as a new phase in their life that still requires their close attention to the needs and support of their family, higher-SES students view college as an opportunity to go into the world unencumbered by their parents or family obligations and to experience distant places and new environments.

Discussion

To explain this difference in applications to out-of-state colleges by social class, I show how students' decisions about where to apply to college are intimately linked to the experiences of their social class background. I show that the way students perceive their relationship with and responsibility to their family in the present moment and once they are in college affects whether or not students deem an out-of-state college to be a viable option. Students' narratives about their lives are shaped by the involvement of their parents in their lives, the absence or presence of

family struggles, and the absence or presence of parental restrictions on where students can attend (or apply) to college. These three sets of experiences, a product largely of the family's social class, mold what role students think they will play in the family during and beyond college. This in turn influences their understanding of which colleges are appropriate for them to apply to.

In the narratives offered by students from each social class, both highlighted certain aspects of their upbringing or experience. These narratives reflect students' understandings of their social and economic circumstances; they are how students interpret their upbringing and experiences. While lower-SES students project a narrative of interdependence, it could be argued that lower-SES students, given what they have had to overcome to become high-achieving students, are just as prepared to be independent as higher-SES students. However, the immediate and anticipated family responsibilities that lower-SES students face, while preparing them for adulthood, also puts an immense weight on their shoulder when they are making decisions about their future. In the stories they told, lower-SES students rarely focused on their resilience or independence and instead spoke more about interdependence and family obstacles. For instance, rather than view the lack of involvement of their parents in the college application process as a sign of their independence or autonomy, many lower-SES students interpreted it as a drawback when they compared themselves to middle class children who are more likely to receive parental support. More importantly, it is less about what lower-SES student neglected in the construction of their narratives and more about what they emphasized. Lower-SES students frequently spoke about their anxieties regarding their family's well-being and how their absence during college can exacerbate family issues. More than anything else, it is this emotional concern for their family that discourages lower-SES students from considering colleges far from home.

Conversely, even though higher-SES students chose to highlight themes of independence and initiative, their lives could also be construed as dependent upon their parents. Indeed, studies of middle and upper-middle class families consistently show that parents are heavily involved in the lives of their children; as a result, their children dependent upon their parents' social, cultural, and economic capital to help them procure advantages in educational settings (Hamilton 2016; Lareau 2002; Lareau and Weninger 2010; Calarco 2014). While dependence can be a valid argument, it is a claim based on the behaviors of students, and not how students interpret their experiences. How students understand their experiences can be different from how others perceive it (Weiss, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). In this study, higher-SES students interpret their upbringing and experiences as one that demonstrates their autonomy and they project this understanding to their college choice decision-making. While they mentioned their parents' financial and academic support throughout their lives, this was overshadowed by their emphasis on their own initiative and independence in making their decisions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I explained how social class shaped where high-achieving students apply to college. By comparing the application decisions of students from lower- and higher-SES backgrounds, I found that what distinguishes the college application choices of one group from the other is not the selectivity of the colleges, but the geography and type of selective colleges. Students from both groups applied to at least several selective colleges, but higher-SES students were more likely to apply to out-of-state and private selective colleges, especially Ivy League universities and liberal arts colleges. The reason that application to selective colleges was not affected by the social class backgrounds of students is due to the system of public higher education in California, which is comprised of three tiers of colleges. The top tier is the UC system, which has ten campuses, and offers admission to one of its campus to any high school senior in the state who graduates in the top eighth (12.5%) of their high school's graduating class. Among the ten campuses, five are considered selective according to Barron's Profile of American Colleges: UC Los Angeles, UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UC San Diego, and UC Santa Barbra. Every student in the study, regardless of social class, applied to the UCs and in their applications included at least one selective UC campus. The other two tiers are the California State Universities (CSUs), which admit the top one-third (33%) of California's high school graduates and Community Colleges (CCs), which are open to any individual. None of the colleges in CSU or CC tiers are considered selective colleges. Due to the selectivity of a handful of California's UC campuses, California represents a best case scenario for socioeconomically disadvantaged students in that they are likely to apply to at least one selective college just by submitting applications to the top in-state public universities. Social class differences in college applications could be more substantial in states or regions in which in-state or nearby universities are not among the pool of selective colleges.

Despite the fact that lower-SES students in California are applying to selective colleges, they are not applying to the same types of selective colleges as their higher-SES counterparts. By limiting themselves to California colleges, lower-SES students are applying to more non-selective colleges and overlooking private selective colleges, particularly Ivy League and small liberal arts colleges. The resources and benefits of attending a selective private college are more pronounced than those available at a selective public university. At selective private research universities and small liberal arts colleges, the student bodies are much smaller and these colleges spend more per student than at selective public universities (Carnevale and Rose 2004; Hoxby and Avery 2012). As a result, at selective private colleges, class sizes are smaller, students have more opportunities for interactions and research with faculty, and lower-SES students often end up paying less overall for their education than their peers at selective public universities (Hoxby and Avery 2012; Bowen and Bok 2000; Hill and Winston 2006). Moreover, individuals who attend selective private universities with small enrollments have significantly higher earnings later in life when compared to those who attend selective public universities (Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999).

To explain social class differences in applications to out-of-state colleges, I show how students' decisions about where to apply to college are intimately linked to their family experiences and to the configuration of colleges that they are exposed to via their high schools and college preparation programs. In doing so, this research demonstrates how social inequality is maintained and reproduced when higher-SES families and institutions cultivate dispositions among their children for specific types of higher education opportunities in the form private

selective colleges across the U.S. By focusing on the decision-making process among students, I show how students' decisions about which colleges to apply to are not merely a straightforward consideration of the costs and benefits of various college options. Instead these decisions are intimately linked to students' social class backgrounds. In other words, students' decisions are informed not only by their knowledge of different types of college institutions but also by their understanding of the type of social experiences they have accumulated and what they want to pursue while in college. Choosing where to go to college is as much about the institutional qualities of colleges as it is about the particular type of lifestyle that students want to pursue, a reflection of their social class experiences and upbringings. Next I reflect on how the concepts from the culture and cognition framework illuminate the processes by which social class shapes the decision-making of high-achieving students. Then I discuss the implications of this research for understanding processes of stratification, potential interventions to encourage lower-SES students to apply to the nation's top colleges, and directions for future research.

In chapter one, the introduction of this dissertation, I examined the two prevailing theoretical frameworks for explaining decision-making. One is the rational choice approach, which emphasizes the role of information and depicts decision-making as being based upon a deliberate evaluation of the costs and benefits of various options (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Brand and Xie 2010; Morgan 2002). The other was that of the social reproduction approach associated with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which posits that decision-making can be an unconscious process (Bourdieu 1990, 1999; McDonough 1997). I argue that while these prevailing frameworks provide valuable insights into the decision-making process, the explanatory power of each framework is limited to a specific range of decisions. Rational choice is well-suited for explaining decision-making that comes about during key moments or periods of transition in which individuals must consciously weigh their different options. Habitus is relevant for understanding the decision-making of routine or mundane activities (Hatcher 1998). Moreover, each of the two frameworks places specific emphasis on different levels of the decision-making process. Rational choice is more concerned with the decision-making process at the level of the individual whereas habitus is more interested in uncovering the social and cultural constraints. As a result, the process by which the constraints of the environment factor into each individual's decision-making is inadequately examined by each of those approaches. I argue that what is needed is a framework that has the conceptual tools to explain decision-making during both ordinary and exceptional periods. Moreover, this framework also has to be able to explain decision-making at both the level of the individual and that of the structural or cultural level.

The framework that I used to address the gaps in the rational choice and habitus approaches is that of culture and cognition. As its name suggest, this framework examines decision-making at the level of individual cognition as it pertains to how each individual process their own specific information and experiences as well as at the level of the environment or culture in the form of socially shared systems of classification or categorization. The key premise behind the culture and cognition framework is that decision-making is a matter of how individuals perceive the social world and how they act upon those perceptions (Lamont et al. 2014). These perceptions are rooted in the socially shared scripts and cultural structures that individuals bring to bear in the decision-making process. These mental scripts or structures inform students of the meaning and significance of the decisions they have to make and of the available options. In this dissertation, I applied drew upon three of the concepts from the culture and cognition framework to analyze how different facets of students' social class backgrounds

influence their decision-making. Each of the concepts highlights a specific realm that affect the decision-making process. All three concepts examine both the individual (cognition) and the intersubjective (cultural) levels of the decision-making process.

In chapter two, I drew upon the concept of frames to explain how students decide that they will attend college. This is the chapter that specifically addressed the deliberate (rational) versus unconscious (habitus) decision-making debate. Through the concept of frames, I show that explanations for the decision-making processes by individuals from different social class can be better understood by how students frame college attendance rather than by reference to the nature of the decision (e.g. conscious vs. nonconscious). Frames represent the inter-subjective cultural scripts that shape how individuals from different social class make sense of college attendance (Lamont et al. 2014). As socially shared scripts, frames are a reflection of the social constraints of the environment. Frames set the parameters around which decisions are made with regards to college attendance. I show that because higher-SES students frame college attendance as inevitable and a natural progression of schooling, they do not need to deliberate as to why college is the right path. Lower-SES students, on the other hand, frame college attendance as one of multiple paths after high school and the conclusion of high school represents a key transitional point that requires a careful weighing of the different options. Whereas rational choice and habitus direct their attention to the nature of the decision, the concept of frames allowed me to explain how it is that different forms of decision-making are possible. While the frames that students have of higher education are reflective of their social backgrounds, individuals from both groups processed their decisions in their own ways by drawing upon multiple and overlapping rationales to justify college attendance.

The process by which students reach their decisions about attending college has implications for understanding how choices are sustained. Higher-SES students know from a very young age that they will go to college; yet, decisions that are made at such a young age can be undone. However, in a context in which almost everyone has gone to college, it is unlikely that other paths besides college are viewed as appropriate or viable for students from such backgrounds. While non-college paths are minimized within higher-SES students' social and cultural environments, the path of college attendance is reinforced in multiple spheres from their schools to interactions with family and community members. In contrast, the path towards college attendance for lower-SES students is fraught with uncertainties. Most lower-SES students become certain of college attendance towards the latter years of their adolescence. In an environment in which multiple paths after high school are available and students do not know for sure whether they will attend college until later in high school, lower-SES students are at risk of not following through with their aspirations to attend college. Without teachers or college preparation programs that are intent on preparing students for college, lower-SES students may come to view other non-college paths as being the right one for them. The existence of multiple alternative paths puts any one plan (e.g. college attendance) in danger of completion. This is because students can easily shift from one plan to another and they do not possess as much knowledge as needed to complete any one path (Harding 2007; Harding 2011)

In chapter three, I examined how institutions shape the college choices of students. I show that institutions in the form of college preparation programs and high schools exert a powerful influence over the choices of students. Students are making their decisions about where to apply to college from a pre-selected set of options determined by these institutions. The influence of institutions is evident in the concept of schemas. A schema demonstrates how information is evaluated, resulting a hierarchy of colleges that are deemed appropriate. Within

each high school or college preparation program, students are presented with a configuration of colleges that identifies the acceptable options. Students are making decisions not from among all the available options but from among those that their institutions have decided are worthwhile. As a result, students are making sense of the college landscape through information that is interpreted through their counselors, alumni, and the colleges that visit their high schools. When there is overlap among these different contexts with regards to the set of appropriate colleges to aspire to, it is likely that students will apply to college in a manner that follows the information they have received about colleges. However, when there are inconsistencies among such contexts, it is harder to predict how students will act based on just the colleges to which they are exposed.

By focusing primarily on the conditions and structure of institutions, previous studies about how students arrive at their decisions neglect the meaning-making that individuals engage in as they try to make sense of which options is the right ones for them (McDonough 1997; Ball et al. 2002; Radford 2013; Mullen 2009; Levine and Ndiffer 1995). While individuals are choosing from a narrow set of options based on the institutions in which they are embedded, they may be able to overcome such restrictions if they possess experiences and knowledge that undermine the evaluation criteria. In other words, despite the powerful influence that institutions exert on individuals, it is possible that individuals can escape the confines of the institutional schemas if they have the experiences and understandings that allow them to positively evaluate options outside of those imposed by the institutions. In the absence of experiences and knowledge that will allow them to hold alternative interpretations of what is appropriate, students will likely follow the prescriptions of the institutions.

In chapter four, I drew upon the concept of narratives to explain how family experiences shape the college choices of students. Narratives represent the understandings students have about their relationship with their parents and families. Through narratives, I show that the importance of family considerations in where students apply to college cannot be reduced merely to a value devoid of any concrete experiences. It is not that lower-SES students do not have any interest in applying to top colleges that reside beyond California. They do. But their experiences and observations puts constraints on where they can realistically attend college. The opposite is true for higher-SES students, many of whom developed an interest in attending college far from home because of the positive experiences and observations that they have accumulated over the years about living away from home. Both groups value top colleges, but only higher-SES have the experiences needed for them to make sense of top colleges outside of California as viable options. The concept of narratives captures how parenting among most higher-SES families combined with students' repeated exposure to new experiences and environments over time help to strengthen their children's confidence about their ability to thrive far from home. These multiple experiences lead to the development of a narrative of independence among higher-SES students that embolden them to seek out colleges far from home. Among lower-SES students, exposure to a life of economic deprivation, family responsibilities, and family health concerns lead to the development of a narrative interdependence that puts pressure for students to pursue colleges close to home.

Financial resources are a key contributor to these narratives. Higher-SES students have been able to participate in different activities or go on various trips because their parents provide them with the financial means to do so. Even when they are considering colleges far from home, higher-SES students expect to come home for the holidays and they do not anticipate any financial difficulties. There is an understanding among higher-SES students that their parents can

always make the trip to see them even if they cannot come home. Most importantly, higher-SES students assume that their parents will not need their help. For lower-SES students, financial means complicate matters quite a bit. As lower-SES students think about the prospect of being outside of California for college, they anticipate having to come home during an emergency or during the holidays. They and their family lack the financial means to pay for these trips. As a result, this puts immense pressure on lower-SES students if they are seriously considering out-of-state colleges.

Potential Interventions

Social inequalities rooted in families and schools play a major role in perpetuating social class differences in where students submit college applications. While reducing inequalities among families and schools represents the most straight-forward approach towards eradicating social class differences in application to the nation's top colleges, it is a difficult undertaking that requires tremendous political will. However, several interventions supported by the findings of this research can increase the applications of lower-SES, high-achieving students to the nation's top colleges. What the research in this dissertation show is that in order for any intervention to be effective, it must affect how students understand colleges. Merely providing information to lower-SES students about the nation's top colleges is not sufficient. Even among higher-SES students, individuals are not making decisions about where to apply to college based just on information alone. Family experiences shape their understanding of college as an opportunity to immerse themselves in a new environment, which makes them receptive to out-of-state colleges. Moreover, higher-SES students are learning about out-of-state colleges within a context in which alumni, peers, and sometimes parents have attended such colleges. Thus, when it comes to lower-SES students, it is important for information about out-of-state colleges to be conveyed by individuals that these students can relate to. Lower-SES Students need to see and hear from other socioeconomically disadvantaged students who have succeeded at these institutions. They need to understand that these elite institutions are for them and they can thrive here despite coming from a disadvantaged background.

Beyond the context of information, experiences are a critical component in changing the way lower-SES think about the possibility of pursuing higher education beyond California. Selective and highly selective colleges interested in recruiting lower-SES, high-achieving students should do more than provide information about their institutions to students. Funding programs that provide subsidized travel and residential programs for lower-SES students at their institutions would be a step towards addressing the constraints these students face. The lived experience of being at these institutions will also help students develop greater knowledge and comfort about being in these comparatively "foreign" social settings, allowing them to transcend some of the limits of their prior environments and experiences. These interventions will not necessarily address the deeper constraints that some students and family face, but they can help to change how lower-SES students understand college and their ability to thrive in an environment far from home.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample of students interviewed in this study may result in some limitations. For instance, students from lower-SES backgrounds consisted of mostly individuals from Latino and

Asian backgrounds, with the overwhelming majority of students (20 out of 23) being children of immigrants. Future research on this topic should investigate the extent to which narratives of interdependence are prevalent among non-immigrant, lower-SES students. It may be the case that narratives of interdependence still exist among such populations, but other aspects of interdependence are emphasized rather than those found in this study. Also noteworthy, there were a handful of higher-SES students who were children of immigrants, but they did not project a narrative of interdependence, which means that such barriers are most likely not due to just to immigrant status alone but also social class. In addition, students from this study are from the Bay Area, a region that is home to two selective private and public colleges. Moreover, California is home to several more selective colleges, albeit different from the elite institutions that occupy the East Coast. Further research should look at how students from regions in which in-state colleges are not among the highly ranked institutions make decisions about which colleges to apply to.

Data about how schools and college preparation programs operate to influence the college choices did not come directly from staff of these institutions. Instead, the data came from interviews with students. It may be the case that students interpreted the actions of these institutions differently from how the staff of these places would have intended. However, since the concern of this dissertation is about how student make sense of the prescriptions of the school and less about the intent of the school, the data collected here is still valid for understanding how institutions influence students' college-choice decision-making. Future research should examine how the intentions and practices of school staff are interpreted by students.

Among lower-SES students, many were recruited from their participation in college preparation programs. It may be that there are high-achieving students, lower-SES who do not participate in college preparation programs, and thus had to rely on their schools and other sources (e.g. family, mentors) for most their college preparation and exploration needs. Given that the high schools of lower-SES students tend to have fewer resources devoted towards exposing students to college options, it may be the case that these students face greater hurdles in applying to college. This study may actually paint a more optimistic picture of the college application behaviors of lower-SES students because most of the lower-SES students in the study received additional assistance outside of the school from college preparation programs. Future research should look into the college application behaviors of high-achieving, lower-SES students who did not benefit from participation in college preparation programs.

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Interview Questionnaire

<u>Individual and Family Background</u>

1) Individual Background

1. Tell me about yourself and your high school.

2. Tell me about the activities you are involved with in school and out of school.

3. What kind of things did you do during your summers?

2) Expectations and Aspirations

1. Let's talk about your future goals and plans. What do you want to achieve or accomplish in the future?

2. What do you need to do to reach these goals?

3. What are some obstacles that might stand in the way?

3) Family Background

1. Tell me about your family.

2. How much education has each of your parents completed?

3. What kind of jobs do your parents have?

   a. Is this something that they want you to follow in their footsteps?

   b. What are their expectations of you?

4. How would you describe your family's economic background? Would you say it is: lower class, working class, middle class, upper-middle class, or upper class? Why this category?

5. How does your family's economic background compare to other families in your neighborhood or school?

6. What do people in your community tend to do after high school?

College Preparation and Application

4) **Individual/Family Approach to Higher Education**

1. Tell me about when you first started thinking about the idea of college, that college is something that comes after high school.

    a. What did you know? From whom?

    b. What did you think about college at this point?

2. What colleges did you hear about growing up?

    a. What did you know about each college?

    b. What did you think about these colleges at this point? Any preferences?

3. When you became certain or pretty sure that you were going to attend college?

5) **Preparation**

1. What did you do in high school to make sure you would get into a good college?

    a. Tests? Classes? Activities?

2. What did your parents say or do to help you get into college?

3. On a scale of 0-10, 0 being having no knowledge at all to 10 being very knowledgeable, how would you describe your parents' understanding of college?

    a. Types of colleges? College admissions? Financial aid?

4. What support did you receive from your school?

5. Other activities or individuals that helped you?

6) **Exploration**

1. Talk about the colleges you learned during high school.

2. Tell me about when you started researching or looking into colleges.

3. Walk me through the process you went through to come up with a list of potential colleges that you might apply to.

     a. Who or what did you consult to come up with this list?

     b. What colleges did you look at?

     c. What were your impressions or thoughts about each of these colleges?

4. What characteristics were you looking for in a college?

7) Application

1. Where did you apply?

2. Describe how you came to decide on each of these schools.

3. Describe to me the application process for each of the schools.

4. Who helped you apply to these schools?

5. Were there other schools that you considered, but did not apply to? Why?

8) Attendance Decision

1. Tell me about what it was like to hear back from these colleges.

2. How did you feel about these decisions?

3. Walk me through what happened from the time you found out about your acceptances to when you decided where to attend college.

4. Who did you talk to about where you should go for college?

5. What did your parents say to you?

6. What factors were important to your decision?