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Understanding the Relationship between the Talented Twenty Program and College Aspirations for High Ranking Students at a High Priority School

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TALENTED TWENTY
PROGRAM AND COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS FOR HIGH RANKING STUDENTS AT
A HIGH PRIORITY SCHOOL

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

by

Jeannette Cruz

2011

To: Dean Delia C. Garcia
College of Education

This dissertation, written by Jeannette Cruz, and entitled Understanding the Relationship between the Talented Twenty Program and College Aspirations for High Ranking Students at a High Priority School, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Date of Defense: March 28, 2011

The dissertation of Jeannette Cruz is approved.

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Florida International University, 2011

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION
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Florida International University, 2011

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Professor Leonard B. Bliss, Major Professor

Percentage plans such as the Talented Twenty program purport to assist and motivate high ranking students to attend college and grant access to higher education. This type of plan is particularly important to students enrolled in high priority schools who might not view themselves as potential college students. This study examined the relationship between Florida's Talented Twenty program that begins intervention with juniors and the college aspirations for high ranking students at a high priority school. Numerous studies have established that increased levels of education lead to higher salaries, career mobility, and an increased quality of life (e.g., Bowen, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, Swail, 2000). Given the importance of students' decisions regarding whether or not they will attend college, understanding how and when they make decisions about attending college is important for them, their parents, advisors, and educational administrators.

This research examined students' perceptions and insights via interviews. The overarching research question was: How do high ranking high school students attending

a high priority school in a south Florida district perceive their college opportunities? Sixteen high ranking students, grades nine – 12 from a high priority school in Miami-Dade County participated in the study. Participants were identified by a school counselor and individual semi structured interviews were conducted at the school. Utilizing a student development theoretical framework developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) that centered on students' predisposition, search strategies and choices, data were organized and emergent themes analyzed.

The analysis of the data revealed that in alignment with the framework (a) parents were the strongest influence in the development of these students' college aspirations, (b) these students formalized their higher education plans between eighth and 10th grade, (c) these students actively engaged in academic searches and learning opportunities that increased their chances to be admitted into college, and (d) there was no relationship between knowledge regarding the Talented Twenty program and their educational decisions. This study's findings suggest that interventions and programs intended to influence the educational aspirations of students are more likely to succeed if they take place by the eighth or ninth grade.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Significance of the Study	5
Background	7
Conceptual Framework	9
Research Questions	11
Delimitations	11
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	12
Historical Development and Legal Decisions.....	12
Development of Percentage Plans and Establishment of the Talented Twenty	18
College Choice and Aspirations.....	22
Percentage Policy Analysis	28
The Talented Twenty Program.....	28
National Level	30
Summary	35
III. METHODS	38
Methodological Framework	38
Role of the Researcher	40
Setting and Participants	42
Data Collection and Analysis Procedures	44
Data Collection.....	44
Data Analysis	46
Trustworthiness Measures.....	47
IV. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA	50
Setting.....	50
Participants	52
Annette	53
Jessica	55
Robert.....	56
Sheri	57
Almartha	58
Charlene	59
Jackie.....	60
Thomasina.....	61
Briana	62
Christopher.....	63
Mary.....	64

Shakira	65
Christina	66
Claudette	67
Justin	68
Rianna	69
Themes	70
Development of Student Aspirations	73
Gathering of Information and Search Process	89
College Choice and Attendance Plans	106
The Talented Twenty Program	113
V. DISCUSSION	114
Summary of Study	114
Research Questions	117
Description of Educational Choices and Decisions	119
Knowledge about the Talented Twenty Program and its Relationship with their Educational Decisions	128
Implication for Practice	130
Recommendations for Future Research	132
REFERENCES	134
APPENDICES	143
VITA	152

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
1. Conceptual Chart: College Aspirations and Decisions	10
2. School Profile Chart: School and Enrollment Characteristics	43
3. Phases of Data Collection and Analysis	45
4. A priori and emergent themes concerning the development of college aspirations, opportunities, and college attainment decisions and their relationship with the Talented Twenty Program framework	72
5. Timeline of students' college decision making	118

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For almost five decades, affirmative action efforts have been present on college and university campuses in the United States, as have the various controversies surrounding these initiatives. During the last decade successful legal challenges have limited the use of affirmative action initiatives in some states, forcing colleges and universities to create other means of achieving diversity

In Florida, a percentage plan titled Talented Twenty emerged in 1999 as a voluntary, ostensibly race-neutral method of achieving diversity. The official targets of the program were students attending public schools labeled “high priority” (i.e., low-performing). High priority schools have a high percentage of free lunch eligible students, acute teacher shortages, and large numbers of students served by Chapter I (Education Consolidation and Improvement Act). These low performance schools generally have high numbers of low-income students and heavy minority enrollments. Designed to increase college attendance by students from high priority schools, the Talented Twenty program offers those in the top 20% of their graduating class guaranteed admittance to the state university system. Accordingly, it said to serve as an equalizer for all public high school students in Florida (“One Florida” Accountability Commission, 2002).

Class rank plans, or percentage plans such as the Talented Twenty, purport to send a message to students that if they study hard and succeed in school, they are guaranteed access to higher education. This message is particularly important to underserved students (i.e., low-income, ethnic/racial minority students) who might not view themselves as college material or may have low college aspirations. High priority

schools are frequently found in high-density, low-economic urban development areas where students are less likely to aspire to high levels of educational attainment (Pell Institute, 2004). In 2001, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance reported that nationally, only 6% of low-income students earn a baccalaureate degree compared with 40% of students from the highest socio-economic quartile. The postsecondary enrollment rate for students of the lowest socio economic status (SES) is 11% vs. 48% for high-SES students (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). This disparity deserves national attention and a well-crafted educational initiative to narrow the gap.

Florida educational policymakers posited that with the development and implementation of the Talented Twenty program, all eligible students can aspire to obtaining a college education because they are now guaranteed access to the postsecondary system. At its inception, the rationale put forward by advocates of the Talented Twenty program was that public school students will be motivated to attend college if they perceive themselves as college eligible. After years of program implementation, it is important to investigate the influence this initiative has had on students specifically targeted by the program. Thus, the purpose of the study was to describe and understand how high ranking students attending a low performance school in a state that has a percentage plan for access to a 4-year state institution perceive their college opportunities, process the information received, and make meaning of their educational choices.

At the core of the program's practice, the Florida Department of Education (FDE) established a series of school reports to examine students' class ranks in order to submit Talented Twenty eligibility letters. In the 11th grade, students who are ranked in the top

30% of their class receive notification of their potential eligibility into the program. The expectation is that after receiving this notification, 11th grade students may alter their course selections and improve their grades to increase their academic competitiveness towards college acceptance. In the 12th grade, students who are in the top 20% of their class receive Talented Twenty eligibility letters offering them the chance to be admitted to universities in the state system that previously may have rejected them due to low test scores and/or grades (Selingo,1999).

Getting a college education is commonly seen as a way out of poverty, and is a cornerstone of the American dream (Swail, 2000). Numerous studies have established that increased levels of education leads to higher salaries, longer working lives, career mobility, and an increased quality of life (e.g., Bowen, 1997; Leslie & Brinkman 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In 2009, the unemployment rate rose to 8.2% for individuals with only a high school education vs. 4.1% for college graduates (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2009). Clearly, college attendance and graduation is related to the chances of improving individuals' lives. Given the importance of students' decisions regarding whether or not they will attend college, there is often insufficient or inadequate decision-making assistance available for students and their parents (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). Moreover, many policymakers, educators, and counselors do not fully understand how students make this important decision (Orfield & Paul, 1993). Although a large number of college guidebooks, college rating publications, and college review books are published annually and available online, these are not designed specifically to assist students and their families in understanding the decision making process (Hossler & Litten, 1993). Educational initiatives and the timeline of information given to students

needs to parallel the developmental process by which high school students make their decisions.

Understanding how and when students make decisions about attending college is vital to the development of sound educational policies, in addition to being important for students, parents, and advisors. In particular, understanding how high ranking students at high priority (low performance) schools process information on attending college can be revealing for educational policy making. For example, a better understanding of the role of parents and the impact of information on the decision-making process could help guide public policy to provide additional or different incentives for college tuition savings programs. An improved understanding of the decision-making process and these students' aspirations might enable local and state policymakers to devise more effective programs more in sync with students' developmental stages related to facilitating greater access to postsecondary education. In general, research such as the present study on students' decision-making processes associated with college opportunities may lead to new public policy initiatives or the modification of existing programs.

The present study was undertaken to find out if the Talented Twenty program motivated high ranking students and facilitated greater college access for a group of underrepresented college bound students. It was important to understand how students' perceptions might be changed about attending college, and what these changes meant to them. The intention was to enhance knowledge that can play an important role in resolving some of the current public education challenges, such as making college accessible to disadvantaged populations. Also, findings might guide educators in developing more effective ways to influence more students to consider college.

If educators can obtain a deeper understanding of the decision-making process and an insight into students' perceptions regarding the development of college aspirations, they can make better educational connections and serve disadvantaged populations in more effective ways. This research examined students' insights via interviews to seek potential associations or connections between student development and policy practices. The results of this research effort may improve educational program development in various contexts and at multiple levels of the 9-12 educational system, thereby informing and enhancing opportunities in U.S. secondary schools for students to attend college.

Significance of the Study

One reason this study was undertaken is because studies in the area of percentage plans are limited and further investigation was needed. Within the last 10 years this type of approach has been adopted in three large states: California (4% plan), Florida (20% plan), and Texas (10% plan). Enhancing equity or translating equity into sound educational initiatives for a wider range of individuals is an important and complex undertaking. Given the multiplicity of these needs and goals, finding an alternative to affirmative action admissions in colleges and universities is a complex problem. An ostensibly race-neutral solution, such as the Talented Twenty program, presents challenges due to the fact that race can be strongly correlated to other factors such as socio-economic status (SES). For the most part, high priority schools are located in low socio-economic neighborhoods and populated with a large number of racial and ethnic minority students. Similar to the gap noted in the Terrenzini et al. (2001) study mentioned earlier, the Pell Institute (2004) found that 31% of low income students

compared to 79% of high-income students were enrolled in college or had attended college in 1999-2000. Therefore, it is important to understand how potential recipients of the Talented Twenty program at high priority schools make meaning of it, and what effect, if any; the program has on their college aspirations. In the development of effective educational policies, it is critical for policymakers to understand and take into consideration the basics of student development and how students make their college choices. Educators are accountable and should be responsible for critically examining policies that affect the educational potential of future generations.

This is an innovative study in the area of percentage plans because it was focused on the relationship between cognitive-structural student developmental theories, the development of college aspirations and college related decisions, and educational policymaking. Few studies have narrowly focused on college access rates and the quantitative results before and after a percentage policy was implemented in order to evaluate its impact (Marin & Lee, 2003; Moreno, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2003, 2004). This study focused on understanding participants' developmental and cognitive processes as they interact with the educational policies that impact their future choices.

Since a college education is considered a social escalator for many underserved groups (i.e., economically deprived, racial/ethnic minorities, and women), it is important to examine the impact that programs, such as the Talented Twenty, have on high ranking students attending high priority schools. Understanding how these students perceive, organize, and process the educational information they receive, will contribute to a greater understanding of how they make meaning and use of the program. This relevant

and important knowledge can generate data-based recommendations for academic policies. For example, given that student developmental theories suggest that high school students typically begin developing strong college aspirations in the ninth grade, what does it mean to 11th graders who receive an invitation through the Talented Twenty program to attend college? Students, educators, parents, and legislators will be able to use this study to better understand how high ranking students at a high priority school develop educational aspirations and make decisions about attending college.

Background

The Talented Twenty program emerged in 1999 in Florida, as a political response to the debate regarding affirmative action initiatives. Then Governor Bush issued Executive Order 99-281, by which Florida became the nation's first state to voluntarily ban race, ethnicity, and gender preferences in college admissions policies. This initiative, the Talented Twenty program, guaranteed admission to one of Florida's 11 public institutions for students graduating in the top 20% of their high school class. To be eligible for the program, students must have completed a prescribed 19 unit high school curriculum and take either the ACT or SAT, although no minimum score is required for these tests. The Talented Twenty program was officially designed to cast a broad net, so students attending high priority schools or schools with heavy racial/ethnic minority enrollment would perceive that their chances for admission had improved (Department of Education, 2003).

Efforts to continue offering educational opportunities to diverse groups of students, especially racial/ethnic minority students, and to increase diversity at college campuses for the benefit of all students, have resulted in the creation of the following

percentage plans: (a) 4% in California, (b) 10% in Texas, and (c) 20% in Florida. The key objectives of these plans are to develop fair, creative, and innovative ways to diversify the campus environment, as well as to open doors for talented racial/ethnic minority students, and to enhance their lives through a college education. However, these plans are controversial and have attracted criticism. For example, the continued low level of enrollment of minorities at flagship institutions has been noted (Blum & Clegg, 2003). Talented Twenty procedures, however, might not be in alignment with the process by which high ranking students in high priority schools make decisions about attending institutions of higher education. The timeline of information is inconsistent with the developmental stages of student's decision making processes. The consistency of procedures and timeliness is vital for the development of initiatives that can, in fact, open the doors of postsecondary education to economically disadvantaged students, such as those attending high priority schools.

The administration of the Talented Twenty program is decentralized; no entity is responsible for its administration. Thus the initiative relies on nominal voluntary coordination and collaboration among the school districts, the university campuses, and the Florida DOE and State University System. Basic procedures include the identification of high schools' potential Talented Twenty students while they are in the 11th grade and notification of eligible students in February of grade 12.

The timing of the communication with potential Talented Twenty students and the cognitive-behavioral implications of such information are of great concern. Understanding this process, especially from the students' perspectives, and framing the

issue based on theories of student development and the college decision process was the focus of this study.

Conceptual Framework

College choice models explain how students make decisions concerning their education beyond high school. Models provide further details about the college decision-making process and the stages students move through as they make decisions. Some models are based on economics, psychological or sociology. However, most models are not mutually exclusive; rather, they combined variables to explain the process of college choice. Family background, socialization, school experiences, college exposure, learning opportunities, and student ability have been identified as important variables, among others, in the decision making process. Hossler, Smith, and Vesper (1999) have identified social and economic variables and processes that explain educational choices and how students develop educational aspirations. In their research they identified five stages related to students' aspirations: (a) predisposition, (b) search, (c) choice, (d) financial, and (e) actualization. According to the researchers, most students develop stable postsecondary plans by the time they complete the ninth grade. In their original model, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provided a very general sense of the steps involved in the decision about whether or not to attend institutions of higher education.

The development of aspirations for disadvantaged and underrepresented students need special consideration since family values, cultural characteristics, race, and socio-economic circumstances impact their aspiration in different ways, and perhaps at different times (Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989). The theoretical framework used for this study was drawn from Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) general model of

college choice. Questions driving the study included: Does the present timing of providing students with new information about the Talented Twenty program provide sufficient time for them to make decision or change their aspirations about college attendance and act on it? When do the individuals in this group of students begin to think about going to college and what events help shape their decisions?

I decided that utilizing the Hossler and Gallagher model should provide insight for understanding the process by which students make college decisions (see Figure 1). I assumed that it was vital to hear their voices to understand how and when they make decisions about their educational future. College admissions counselors and high school administrators will be in a better position to provide pre-college counseling, if they have a clear understanding of college choice models and when students are most ready for information and assistance in their decision-making process. The research questions below guided the investigation.

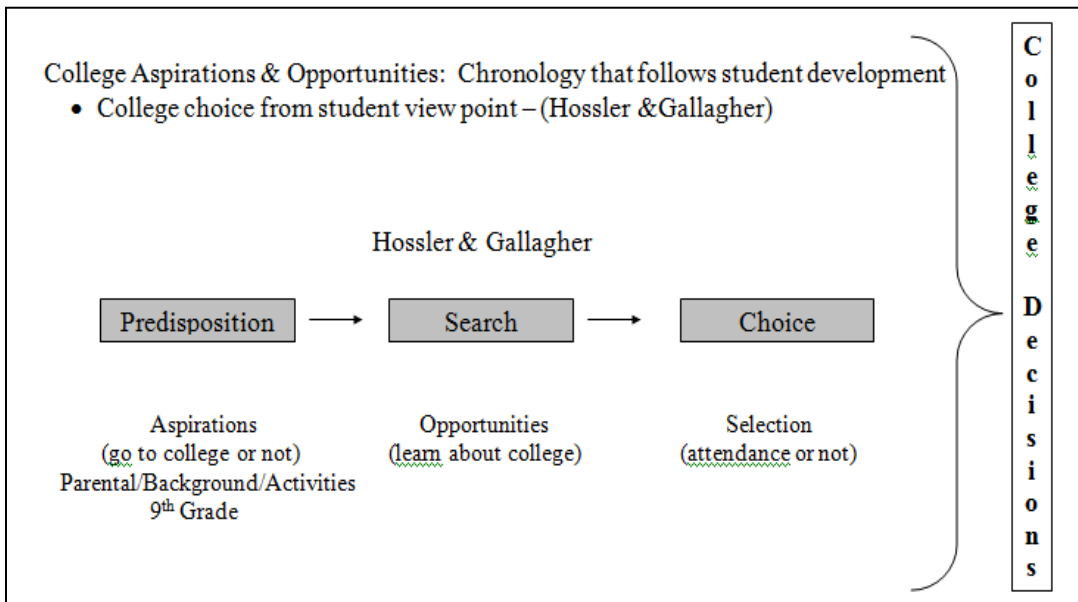


Figure 1. Conceptual chart: College aspirations and decisions.

Research Questions

Specifically, this research was undertaken to answer the following main and subsidiary questions:

How do high ranking high school students attending a high priority school in a south Florida district perceive their college opportunities?

1. How do they describe their educational choices and decisions?
2. What do they know about the Talented Twenty program?
3. What relationship exists between that knowledge and their educational decisions?

Delimitations of the Study

This study was limited to high ranking volunteer students (9th -12th grade) attending a high priority school in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Seniors had been formally identified as being in the top 20% of their class. All aspired to attend (were pre-dispositional to attending) a post-secondary institution to further their education.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In examining academically based journals, books and articles; a number of related topics and historical factors are significant. These include (a) a historical development of law and court decisions and their impact on higher education, (b) the development of percentage plans across the nation and the establishment of the Talented Twenty (T20) program, (c) the development of students' college choices and aspiration, and (d) general program analysis.

Historical Development and Legal Decisions

Responding to social, moral, political, economic, philosophical, and legal imperatives, American higher education institutions have been engaged in affirmative action efforts for more than four decades (Rubio, 2001). On college campuses across the nation, the actual debate over affirmative action policies began with the implementation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, sex, creed, or national origin (Howard, 1997). Affirmative action was seen as a method of addressing the discrimination that persisted in the United States despite civil rights laws and constitutional guarantees. The policy focused particularly on jobs and education, and required that affirmative action be taken to ensure that minorities have the same opportunities for school admission, scholarships, financial aid, salary increases, and career advancement (Brunner, 2001). To this day, affirmative action remains a hotly contested issue in higher education, and recent court decisions are affecting student selection criteria for admission to institutions of higher education.

Some early initiatives such as the *set-aside* (a reserved number of seats for protected groups) resulted in legal challenges to college admissions procedures. For example, representatives of the New York Board of Education, the Manhattan and Brooklyn Archdioceses, and 39 NY metropolitan-area colleges and universities established a program in 1967 to help minority Black and Puerto Rican students gain access to college by providing individualized instruction, small classes, and guaranteed college admission with adequate performance (Howard, 1997). Initiatives like this opened doors for many racial minority students, and simultaneously opened doors for legal challenges. The legal challenges were not because of the special admissions policy itself, since universities have continually utilized special admissions tactics, such as criteria based on gender, athletic ability, special disciplines, alumni legacies and donorship, but because of the focus on race as the sole admissions factor.

Litigation over affirmative action increased in the 1970s, particularly with two important Supreme Court cases involving student affirmative action issues. The first case, *DeFunis vs. Odegaard* (1974), was moot given that DeFunis was about to graduate. Petitioner DeFunis, a white applicant to the University of Washington Law School, sued after he was denied admission claiming that the law school discriminated against applicants of certain races and ethnicities, by admitting minority applicants with significantly lower undergraduate grades and LSAT. The second case, *Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke* (438 U.S. 265, 1978) was reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court. The Bakke case became the landmark university admissions affirmative action case. The case addresses the issue of voluntary affirmative action plans. The following is a synopsis of the Bakke case:

Allan Bakke (white applicant) had applied twice to the medical school of the University of California at Davis, each time just missed being accepted. Since the medical school had a dual-track admissions policy that *set aside* a fixed number of seats (16 out of 100) in each entering class exclusively for applicants who claimed membership in certain disadvantaged minority groups, Bakke felt that he had been the victim of discrimination, and took his case to court. White applicants could compete only for 84 seats, rather than the 100 open to minority applicants. Because Bakke's overall grade point average, his score on various parts of the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), as well as his overall rating by the medical school itself was far superior to those of most of the students admitted under the special minority admissions program, six out of seven members of the California Supreme Court eventually agreed that Bakke had indeed been denied the equal protection of laws (Fourteenth Amendment), and that the school's dual track admissions policy was unconstitutional. The case was appealed at the U.S. Supreme Court, and they concluded that colleges may use race as a factor in admissions decisions, but may not set aside a specific proportion (quotas) of their entering classes for minority students. (Mosk, 1991, p. 159)

In Bakke, the Supreme Court struck down a two-track race-based admission program at the UC-Davis Medical School. In a sharply divided opinion, Justice Powell wrote that while quotas based solely on race or ethnicity were unconstitutional, an admissions program may consider racial and ethnic diversity as a "plus" factor. Based on the Bakke decision, racial and ethnic diversity is only one element in a range of factors a university may properly consider in attaining the goal of a heterogeneous student body (Anderson, 1999). In other words, the goal (outcome) of the attainment of a diverse student body was a constitutionally permissible goal for an institution of higher education, but to "set aside" seats (process) based solely on race or ethnicity was unconstitutional. Regardless of how divided the court was in the ruling, the Supreme Court decision indicates what can be done constitutionally and what is beyond the bounds. After this decision, and through the 1980s, many programs restructured their policies according to the decision and in compliance with the diversity rationale.

Four important guidelines resulted from Bakke: (a) special admissions programs and other initiatives that “set-aside” numbers based solely on race are unlawful, (b) conditions exist under which considerations of race may be proper other than in the context of being a remedy for prior acts of discrimination, (c) the pursuit of diversity may be a legitimate institutional objective only if that objective is not pursued by segregation of applicants into racial or ethnic groups and rating them only against each other; and (d) the proper context for bringing race into the equation is one factor among many in evaluating an applicant against all other applicants on academically relevant criteria.

Affirmative action was defeated on a number of fronts in the 1990s. In July 1995, the Regents of the University of California voted to end all affirmative action programs at all of their campuses. University administrators were no longer allowed to use race, religion, gender, ethnicity, or national origin as criteria for admission to the university or any program of study, beginning in 1997 for graduate schools and in 1998 for undergraduate admission (Wilbur & Bonous-Hamarth, 1998). The regents' vote seemed to fuel the ballot initiative that outlawed state-sponsored affirmative action the following year. In November 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209 by a narrow margin. This proposition abolished all public-sector affirmative action programs in the state in employment, education and contracting.

Another legal case that delivered a blow to affirmative action was decided in Texas during this time period. Cheryl J. Hopwood, a white woman, along with three other applicants, filed suit in 1992 against the University of Texas Law School for reverse discrimination after being denied admission. Hopwood argued that she had been unfairly denied admission because she was more qualified than some minority applicants

who had been admitted, and that she was subjected to unconstitutional racial discrimination (Scott & Kibler, 1998; Van Tyle, 1996). In March 1996, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled for the plaintiffs and prohibited the law school, along with other public higher education institutions in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi, from considering race and ethnicity in admission practices. In July 1996, the U.S. Supreme Court decided not to hear the case because the law school had voluntarily abandoned the admission program in question in April 1994. As a result, the ruling of the Fifth Circuit Court ruling in Hopwood became law in the state of Texas (Scott & Kibler, 1998).

In the past decade, the lower courts remained active in deciding litigation for and against affirmative action in higher education admissions. In *Smith v. University of Washington Law School*, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (2000) upheld the constitutionality of the school's race-conscious admission policy. The court reaffirmed the principle, stated by Justice Powell in the *Bakke* case, that diversity in higher education may be a compelling interest, justifying the consideration of race in admission. The court also found that the admission policy at issue was narrowly tailored to advance that interest.

In a case that failed the constitutional test, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the decision made by the lower court in *Johnson v. University of Georgia (UGA)*. The court ruled that UGA's 1999 admission policy violated the equal protection clause, because it was not narrowly tailored to achieve a diverse student body. UGA's freshman admission policy systematically awarded "diversity" points to every non-white applicant at a decisive point in the process. At this same point, the policy also greatly limited other diversity factors that could have been taken into consideration. The UGA has since

dropped race as a factor in admission decisions. A divide is growing among the circuit courts on whether race may be considered in making student admission decisions, as evidenced in the Hopwood, Smith and Johnson cases (Borkowski, Dreier, & Kobersy 2001).

The most closely watched cases by higher education institutions were the highly publicized cases at the University of Michigan. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the use of affirmative action, but struck down the mechanism of Michigan undergraduate admissions (Schmidt, 2003). In a case involving the law school, the Supreme Court upheld Michigan's policy in a 5-to-4 decision. The majority stated that the law school had a compelling interest in "obtaining educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body," and that its admissions policy was narrowly tailored to achieve that goal (Schmidt, 2003). The majority also stated that Michigan's efforts to maintain a critical mass of minority students did not amount to using an illegal quota. In the undergraduate case, the court did not reject the use of racial preferences to promote diversity on campuses. But the decision held, 6-to-3, that the admissions policy used by Michigan's undergraduate College of Literature, Science, and the Arts was not narrowly tailored to achieve the goal of maintaining a diverse student body.

To date, the highest courts have supported the use of race in admission processes, if the policies that support these processes are narrowly tailored to serve compelling interests in achieving a diverse student body. Research also supports the positive effect a diverse student body has on the campus community (Shuford, 1998). In his four-year study, Astin (1993) concluded that emphasizing diversity, either as a matter of institutional policy or in faculty research and teaching, as well as providing students with

curricular and extracurricular opportunities to confront racial and multicultural issues, are all associated with widespread beneficial effects on students' cognitive and affective development. Similar findings were reported by Pascarella et al. (1996) in their three-year study. They concluded that a nondiscriminatory racial environment at the institution, on-campus residence, as well as participation in cultural awareness seminars, and the extent of their involvement with diverse student peers had a significant positive impact on the students' end-of-year openness to challenge and diversity. Despite the latest developments and court decisions in California, Georgia, Michigan, and Texas, there is a strong movement to abolish higher education affirmative action policies and replace them with a variety of different plans also designed to increase diversity. Some of these alternatives are interesting initiatives described as race-neutral programs. Among them is one policy that had been implemented in a number of states and jurisdictions, the percentage plan.

Development of the Percentage Plans and the Establishment of the Talented Twenty

Race-based admission policies remain in use at many colleges and universities. However, important court decisions (e.g., Bakke, 1978; Hopwood vs. Texas, 1996) and ballot initiatives, and legislation have restricted their use (e.g., California's 1995 Proposition 209, Washington's 1998 Initiative 200, and Florida One in 1999). During the 1990s and the beginning of this century, race-based policies have been under increasing attack and the support behind many of these initiatives suggests a shift in strategies. New policies have been put into effect and a commonly used initiative has been the percentage plan. The core of percentage plans is their utilization of high school academic rank as a primary criterion for college admission to maintain minority enrollment in state public

institutions (Wydick, 2002). Students whose grade point average places them at or above a particular percentile rank are guaranteed admission to one or more state supported institutions of higher education. The academic rank used as the cutoff varies from state to state. California uses a 4%, Texas uses a 10%, and Florida uses a 20% cutoff (Talented Twenty program). In some plans the students are guaranteed admissions into flagship schools, (e.g., Texas 10%), while in others they are admitted into the system as a whole but must be admitted separately into particular campuses (California 4% and Florida 20%).

Texas, in 1996, was the first state to adopt the rank percentage plan (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2004). George W. Bush, then Governor of Texas, implemented the program as a direct bipartisan response to the Hopwood decision. In 2000, California adopted the Eligibility in a Local Context (ELC) policy, otherwise known as the Four Percent Plan.

In Florida, the Talented Twenty program emerged in 1999. This initiative came as a voluntary tactic from the Florida governor in order to abolish the use of affirmative action in higher education admission policies. In California and Texas, similar changes had occurred, but were directed by court decisions or voter referenda. The Talented Twenty program guarantees admission to one of Florida's 11 public institutions for students graduating in the top 20% of their high school class. The Florida's Department of Education official website describes the program:

The purpose is to guarantee admission to students who succeed in their respective K-12 public schools, and to encourage students to strive for better grades and pursue rigorous academic courses. Students eligible for Talented Twenty program are guaranteed admission, within space and fiscal limitations, to one of the eleven state universities. These students

are considered a priority for the awarding of funds from the Florida Student Assistance Grant (FSAG), a need-based grant. Talented Twenty students must meet FSAG eligibility requirements in order to be eligible for priority funding. Please note that while eligible students are guaranteed admission at one of the state universities, they are not guaranteed admission to the university of their choice. (Florida Department of Education, 2008)

To be eligible for the program, students must have completed a prescribed 19 unit high school curriculum and have taken either the ACT or SAT (no minimum score required). The administration of the Talented Twenty program is decentralized, in that no government or educational entity is responsible for its administration. Therefore, the initiative relies on the coordination and collaboration of school districts, university campuses, and the FDOE State University System. The basic process is as follows: (a) school districts are required to provide the FDOE with a list of students who are likely to be Talented Twenty eligible (top 30% at 11th grade); (b) potential students receive notification about their 30% status and explanation of the Talented Twenty program by the spring semester; (c) after the posting of the seventh-semester grades (12th grade) eligible Talented Twenty receive an eligibility letter in February – a follow up to the letter they received as juniors; (d) the FDOE verifies that students have the required 19 credits; (e) the Division of Colleges and University verify that test information (ACT or SAT scores) is on file; and then (f) the Commissioner of Education sends an official letter (See Appendix A) notifying students that they are Talented Twenty eligible (Marin, 2003).

Students who have already applied to the state university system in Florida before receiving the letter, can then contact that institution and inform them of their Talented Twenty eligibility. The universities may have already obtained that information via the

students' files (class rank field). Nevertheless, it is the institution's prerogative to admit the student, depending on that particular year's class admission profile (i.e., SAT scores, ACT scores, rank, and grade point average). In order for a student to get assistance through the Talented Twenty admissions guarantee program, the student must have applied to, and been rejected by, three State University System (SUS) institutions. The Talented Twenty program only guarantees admission to the SUS system, but not to a specific institution. Students must pay all of the application fees unless a waiver is granted. Since there is no single application for the entire system, students are required to send separate applications to each school. There is no coordination of these efforts, as demonstrated by the basic process. Any claim to Talented Twenty rights comes very late in the application process, and does not guarantee admission to a desired campus.

If students are not admitted to any school, even after seeking the assistance of their guidance counselor, they then notify the director of the Florida Department of Education's Office of Equity and Access, who will contact institutions that might accept the student (Marin, 2003). Since the inception of the Talented Twenty program, the director has assisted students who have been denied admission to the SUS. Nevertheless, Marin (2003) explained that there has been no formal attempt made to determine the precise number of students assisted.

Additionally, no mechanism currently exists to accurately monitor the number of students who may not have asked for assistance because they do not understand how to exercise their guarantee. Some students may be unfamiliar with the process and or their right to seek assistance. Since the program does not have an office or a designated individual to monitor and contact eligible students who have not been admitted to any of

the SUS institutions to which they have applied, students are left on their own to determine how to exercise the guarantee, to document what happened to them, and to go to the state committee. There is no formal procedure for someone to follow-up with them. In addition, even if students understand how to exercise the guarantee, by the time they attempt to do so, the entering class may already be filled for the university they want to attend. Marin (2003) contends that as a result, students may not be admitted to the best school for which they are qualified, but instead are admitted to any school that has openings remaining. Ultimately, while the Talented Twenty program was designed to guarantee admission for eligible students, there is little evidence that the program has done anything to change the admissions prospects for Florida's public high school students through its current mode of administration.

College Choice and Aspirations

Over the past four decades, increasing attention has been focused on the processes by which students develop educational aspirations and make decisions regarding college attendance (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Perna, 2000). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2008) defines aspirations as strong desires to reach something high or great. Young people's aspirations guide what they learn in school, how they prepare for adult life, and what they eventually do (Walberg, 1989). Indeed, studies on college attendance have focused more on the development (process) of educational aspirations than upon the achievement of those aspirations (outcome).

Investigators in the field have compared and analyzed variables such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, school level, parent's level of education, academic achievement, and other characteristics in their studies and correlated those with students'

aspirations regarding postsecondary attendance (Gallotti & Mark, 1994; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; 1994 Hossler & Stage, 1992). Having a better understanding of the nature of college choice, and how students develop college aspirations, provides college and university administrators, as well as public officials, a way to understand enrollment patterns. At the present time, college admissions practices call for earlier contact with potential students while educational policymakers are concerned over the rising cost of attendance. These dual challenges are forcing researchers to develop models that effectively examine the phenomenon of college choice. The theoretical work on college choice has been divided into three categories: economic, sociological, and studies that combine these two disciplines (Jackson, 1982). In addition, empirical research on college choice has addressed a variety of aspects of this process, including postsecondary educational aspirations, high school guidance counseling, postsecondary plans, and the effects of financial aid.

College choice has been defined as a process a student experiences as he or she makes the transition from high school to college (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) contend that college choice takes place in three stages: (a) predisposition, (b) search, and (c) choice. Predisposition, the earliest stage of the college choice process, is the stage during which some students develop aspirations for college attendance (Hossler et al., 1989). Aspirations have long been considered an important psychological aspect of a student's propensity towards college attainment. A student who is able to maintain high aspirations for college attendance during the high school years increases his or her likelihood of high educational attainment (Campbell, 1983; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Sewell,

1971; Sewell & Shah, 1978). The second stage of the college choice process, search, is the stage at which students gather information to assist in their evaluations of various characteristics of institutions to identify a good personal fit. This information also moves a student in the direction of making a stronger commitment to college attendance (Hossler et al., 1989). The third and final stage of college choice, the actual choice stage, is generally reached by a student who has gained a sufficient base of information on different colleges to help eliminate alternatives from the choice set. Having a base of knowledge allows the student to focus on one institution that will meet the student's individual needs (McDonough, 1997). It is important to note that a student may opt out of the college choice process at any stage (Hossler et al., 1989).

Pitre (2006) examined African American and white ninth grade students' aspirations for college attendance utilizing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice. Two groups of students, one African American and the other white, in four high schools, were studied to determine if the groups were equally likely to aspire to attend college. The study was designed to provide findings that have implications for policy formation related to African American students' preparation for, and navigation of, the college choice process.

Utilizing cross tabulations, with Pearson chi-square analysis of variance (ANOVA), and logistic regression, the study revealed that both groups had similar aspirations for college attendance, even though African American students had lower levels of academic achievement. That study also introduced a measure of student perceptions of how well high school was preparing them for college. The results demonstrated that students who held negative perceptions of how well the school was

preparing them for college were also less likely to aspire to college attendance. The findings of that study need to be considered carefully due to paradoxical information regarding students' aspirations and achievement. While the aspirations of both groups showed no significant difference, the academic preparation of African American students in the study did not correspond with academic training that might lead to college attendance. The significance of this particular finding is that it may be an indication that these students lack information related to college admissions criteria, and general knowledge of the college choice process.

According to Hossler and colleagues (1999) academic achievement is an important aspect of college choice in that it affects students' ability to maintain their aspirations for college. In addition, parents, teachers, and counselors are more likely to support the aspirations of those students who display higher levels of academic achievement. Even so, the aspirations that the students in that study displayed reflect a desire to excel. That core desire for further educational attainment provides an opportunity for parents, teachers, school and college level administrators, and the broader community, to help these students develop their aspirations and make their choices.

In another study, Sommer (2002) used the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS 1988) to examine how early aspirations and attitudes of students and their parents affected postsecondary attendance. For that study, information from 8th and 10th grade students was used, and that study combined sociological and economic variables. Three logistic regression procedures were carried out using (a) attendance at any postsecondary institution, (b) attendance at a 2-year college, and (c) attendance at a 4-year institution, respectively, as the dependent variables. The study found that eight

grade students who aspired to a postsecondary education were 16% more likely to have enrolled in postsecondary training than students with no such aspirations. In addition, students who attended 2-year schools were 6.42% more likely to have had postsecondary aspirations in the eighth grade than all other students. Finally, the study revealed that students who attended 4-year schools were 20.55% more likely to have had postsecondary aspirations in the eighth grade than all other students.

In all three cases, students from families in the highest income were more likely to attend some type of postsecondary education than students from low income families. The differences between high and low income students were most pronounced for 4-year college attendance. Analyzing all sociological and economic variables in the study, the decision to attend any institution was most influenced by SES, student aspirations, college reputation, and college expenses. In general, parental influence, including their aspirations, education, and preparedness for college, had a smaller influence on college attendance decisions than did student and institutional characteristics. What is noteworthy here is that students' aspirations is the only variable of these four that is a characteristic of the student and the only one that can be changed through educational interventions. An important issue, then, is the length of time required to change aspirations towards college and when these interventions should begin.

Earlier studies on student college choice focused on high school students (e.g., Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983). However, researchers have begun to speculate that college attendance decisions may be made as early as elementary school or middle school (Schmit, 1991; Sharp, Johnson, Kurotsuchi, & Waltman, 1996). Considered in the larger context of social mobility, college attendance and completion of the bachelor's degree has

been equated with American middle class. Particularly for students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education due to any of a number of background characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender, low socioeconomic status [SES]), background, or disability), receiving college information and developing earlier college aspirations can make a difference in future SES status. Early college decisions carry significant outcomes, especially at high priority schools.

Pitre (2006) suggests that in addition to strengthening systemic ties between high schools and colleges for the purpose of assisting students in the college choice process, it is important to begin developing college aspirations at an early stage (8th-9th grade level). Pitre's study suggested that student aspirations for college attendance need the adoption of a pre-kindergarten through higher education policy (P-16). The P-16 policy approach may be a more effective means for assisting African American students, other racial-ethnic minority groups, and economically disadvantaged students in preparing them for life beyond high school. Leaders at the K-12 school and district levels must emphasize that schools are responsible for providing information related to college attendance in a timely manner. Teachers, administrators, and counselors need to play an earlier and more active role in promoting student achievement, academic choices, and developing aspirations. Elementary and secondary schools, as well as colleges, need early awareness programs for potential eligible students and their parents. These programs should be designed to effect long-term, systemic changes in the culture and climate of schools, rather than only intervening for an identified need on a short-term basis. As a result, these types of programs will decrease the distance between the "rungs on the ladder" of educational aspirations and social mobility for students who have been historically

underrepresented in higher education. These suggestions for early intervention in the development of college aspirations of students contrast strongly with the procedures and policies of the Talented Twenty program where students are only informed about the benefits of the program in 11th grade and are not finally informed that they are eligible to participate until they are in 12th grade.

Percentage Policy Analysis

Little empirical data exist about percentage programs' effectiveness in terms of students' college participation (Cole, 2003). Studies in the area of percentage plans are limited and further investigation is needed. In the absence of empirical evidence, anecdotes have dominated public opinion and the policy discourse surrounding the Talented Twenty program. Educational researchers and policy analysts have been interested in the educational quality and program effectiveness. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on an understanding of those policies from the students' perspectives. Moreover, a gap in appropriate timing exists between procedures for these percentage plans and the existing body of knowledge regarding student development theories. There are critical transition points in students' pathways to postsecondary education that need to be considered when developing educational initiatives, especially initiatives that address disadvantaged populations, such as percentage plans.

The Talented Twenty program

Florida educational officials claimed that the impact of the Talented Twenty program for minorities and disadvantaged students would be significant and promising. Some policy analysts declared that the greatest impact of the Talented Twenty program may be the symbolic message it sends to students, families, and schools officials – “a

talented twenty (T20) student should be a college student” (U.S. Department of Education – Office for Civil Rights, 2004, p.76). Proponents claimed the Top 20 is more than a numbers game, that it --“is a program that benefits students at poorer schools who have striven to do their best but still needed assistance in admission to the university system. Under this program, we are reaching out to more minority students than ever before” (Hebel, 2003). Then Governor Jeb Bush and others asserted that in the long haul, people would see the number of African American and Hispanics attending college increase (Bush, 2000). In addition, they maintained that because of the policy, a higher number of minority students in Florida were taking pre-college tests and advanced classes in high school, in order to prepare for college entrance (Kumar, 2002).

On the other hand, opponents contend that the 20% program is only a political tactic. Percentage solutions were designed to circumvent court decisions, laws, and political pressures that opposed admitting students via affirmative action (Blum & Clegg, 2003). In addition, Berry (2000), argued that the Florida plan, the Talented Twenty, is unacceptable because it lacks specific plans for improving the primary and secondary schools most minority students attend. Basically, program administrators receive information from schools and send letters to students without any specific program or college preparation plan. Unfortunately, the promises made about the Talented Twenty program have proven to be largely illusory (Marin, 2003).

Roach (2002) claimed the program did not have any effect on student access to higher education and that the Talented Twenty program admitted students who would have been admitted anyway. In a Florida study, Marin (2003) reported that students in the top 20% of their classes in 2001-2002 did not need the designation of “Talented

Twenty” in order to gain admission to a public institution in the state. In her study, she rejected the claim that the plan assisted students that otherwise would have been denied access to higher education.

In reviewing the Talented Twenty proponent’s claims, there seems to be a lack of understanding in terms of student development of college choice and aspirations. The Talented Twenty program processes are not synchronized with student development stages, as described in Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The identification of potential Talented Twenty students at the 11th grade and eligibility at 12th grade comes very late in the college decision processes, according to student development theories. The student pathways to college are considered multi-stage process, including educational aspiration formation, academic preparation, and actual enrollment in college, a process that could start as early as the 8th or 9th grades (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001).

National Level

At the national level, some educators and administrators claimed that the initial results of the percentage programs showed positive potential and that the full advantages of these types of programs would be felt only after a full implementation and several classes of students have been able to benefit from them. One percentage plan advocate, Ward Connerly (2003) argued that percentage plans motivate and light a fire under all students, since students know they can get to that designated percent.

Under Texas’ 10% plan, school authorities have reported positive results due to the implementation of numerous out-reach programs in high poverty school districts (Roach, 2000). At the same time of those reports, the Texas University System reported

increases in student diversity. However, the program is also responsible for admission caps, due to the high number of applications, especially at the University of Texas-Austin campus. Olivas (2007) discussed the problem that due to the high demand of eligible applicants in the Texas school system there were too many so called “excellent” students and that the University of Texas (UT) needed to create additional flagship campuses with the same quality as UT-Austin. In Texas, the “10 percenters” are guaranteed admissions into the school of their choice. In 2006, 71% of the Texas freshmen class were “10 Percenters,” compared to 41% in 1998, the year the plan was implemented. The plan has increasingly dominated admission decisions at UT-Austin.

Thompson and Tobias’s (2000) historical study of Texas noted that even though there was no clear evidence that the plan would recruit a significant number of underrepresented students, as affirmative action had, it had the potential to increase the admission of this population in the Texas public system of higher education. The plan was designed to counter some of the effects of high school racial segregation. Former governor of Texas, George W. Bush, signed the 10% law and the program passed as a referendum in a state election. One of the rationales for the program was that students should not be penalized because their parents could not afford housing in affluent areas with low-priority (high-performance) schools. Ten Percenters would come from high-priority schools too. Nevertheless, from the beginning, a major challenge of the plan was the issue of addressing the inferior education and the inequalities that minority and low-income students experienced at the K-12 level. For example, at UT-Austin, the flagship system institution in the University of Texas system, approximately 50% of the freshmen class came from 50 traditional feeder schools in the state which were predominantly

White and wealthy school districts. Ultimately the plan's success was dependent on the development of universally high quality elementary and secondary systems, and this is a major limitation of the plan.

At UT-Austin, some administrators wanted to end the program. The major concern was that the program takes away too much control over who they admit to their classes. Critics of the Texas plan have argued that admitting students based on one criterion is wrong. They also maintained that percent programs are not necessarily the same as admitting diverse groups of students with a variety of characteristics, including that of belonging to underserved minority groups (Berger, 2006). Studies have discovered that minority enrollment in states that implemented percentage plans have declined (Niu, Tienda, & Cortes, 2006; 2003; Tienda, 2003). They present evidence that these types of programs have had only a modest effect on increasing diversity at state institutions. They concluded that percentage plans are not a "one-size fits-all" solution.

Percentage plans need more careful examination to determine if they are viable and effective alternatives to previous affirmative action policies designed to promote and maintain racial and ethnic diversity in institutions of higher education. Some researchers have attempted to evaluate the impact of earlier court rulings in an effort to find guidance. Garcia (1997) evaluated the impact of the 1978 Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke case on college admissions practices. Garcia (1997) found mixed results and concluded that in the California University System, individual campus autonomy and context dictated the admissions policies of each institution. A seminal study by Bowen and Bok (1998), *The Shape of the River*, produced conclusions supportive of race-based preferential policies. Their longitudinal study, using more than

80,000 students from the *College and Beyond* cohorts included in the 1951, 1976, and 1989 databases of African Americans at 28 elite colleges and universities, highlighted the accomplishments and success of affirmative action policy beneficiaries. The detailed statistical analysis in that study focuses on the in-college and after college experience of these students. Additionally, in a study at the University of Washington, Finnie (2000) analyzed the admissions record for the last 10 years to provide new insight and further documentation about the effects of the abolishment of affirmative action admission policy, Initiative 200, in the state of Washington. The author found that the 1999 ban on affirmative action had a disproportionately negative impact on the admission of underrepresented non-Whites. Additionally, first generation in college and low income students were the most negatively impacted by the new rule.

Studies in the area of percentage plans are limited and further investigation is needed. Within the last 10 years percentage plans have been adopted in three major states: California (4% plan), Florida (20% plan) and Texas (10% plan). However, Baranda (2003) affirmed that, despite social and legal attempts to remove institutional barriers and the creation of new initiatives, there remains a persistent disparity in the college attendance patterns of U.S. youth. This disparity is based on gender, racial-ethnic identification and privilege. Perhaps, new initiatives need to better account for students' self perceptions, students' awareness of the policies, and a better alignment of the initiatives' processes with student development theories. A clear understanding of student development is needed to design better alternative programs, as these programs affect the lives of so many students and may greatly improve society.

Given that other states, university systems, and institutions are interested in alternative admissions plans, it is important to disseminate accurate information about new options – their components, how and if they work, and their effects on institutions and students. Without accurate information, states and higher education institutions could implement ineffective policies that have no significant effect on underrepresented students, or that may reverse earlier progress in higher educational access. An ostensibly race-neutral solution such as the Talented Twenty presents challenges given the fact that race can be strongly correlated to other factors such as socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how students who are the targets of the policy make meaning of it, and what effect if any the policy has regarding their college aspirations.

Based upon previous student development research (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) this study endeavors to describe and understand how high ranking students attending a high priority school that has a percentage plan for college access, perceived their college opportunities, processed the information received, and made meaning of their educational choices. An examination of percentage programs through these variables and their relation to students' aspirations, is not only important, but is an educational imperative.

Aspirations reflect individuals' ideas of their "possible selves," what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Realizing aspirations requires the investment of time, energy, and resources – both from the young person and from others (Sherwood, 1989). Complex issues, such as equality in education, can be informed by examining the extent to which

the educational system creates opportunities for the development of educational aspirations.

Summary

Higher education has been addressing affirmative action for more than four decades; from set-aside policies to major U.S. Supreme Court decisions. Although the current legal status supports the use of race-based affirmative action policies, the use of quotas is forbidden. Regardless of legal decisions, there is a strong movement to abolish higher education affirmative action policies and replace them with a variety of plans, among them the “percentage plan.” California, Texas, and Florida have implemented such plans aimed at increasing the diversity of student populations at their public postsecondary institutions.

Studies in the area of percentage plans are limited and investigation is needed. Particularly, it is important to know how users of these policies at high priority schools are affected, and what effect, if any, the percentage programs (e.g., Talented Twenty) has regarding their college choice and aspirations. Researchers have increasingly focused on the process by which students develop educational aspirations and how they make decisions regarding college attendance. The collection and analysis of experiential data are important for educators and administrators; to assist students transitioning between high school and college, and for the development of educational policies.

A gap exists between procedures of these percentage plans and the existing body of knowledge regarding student development theories. On one hand, proponents of the Talented Twenty program claim that these types of plans (a) send a message, especially to underserved students, that if they study hard they will be granted access to higher

education; and (b) plans are an alternative to existing affirmative action policies. On the other hand, opponents argue that these type of policies: (a) have no effect and students admitted under the plan would have been admitted anyway; and (b) procedures and implementation lack an understanding and synchronization in terms of students' development.

Researchers have increasingly focused on the process by which students develop educational aspirations, and how they make decisions regarding college attendance. Quantitative studies have compared and analyzed variables such as race, SES, gender, school levels, parental educational levels, academic achievement, and other characteristics in an effort to correlate those with students' aspirations. From these quantitative studies, researchers have identified four significant trends. First, that the early development of aspirations (8th grade) increases a student's likelihood of attending college. Second, that students who are able to maintain high aspirations for college attendance during the high school years increase their likelihood of high educational attainment. Third, higher levels of SES increase a student's likelihood of college attendance. Fourth, programs that intervene with students at an early age, especially for underserved students, are most effective in developing college aspirations.

Understanding how and when students make decisions about college is vital to the development of sound educational policies, in addition to being important for students, parents, and advisors. In particular, understanding how high ranking students at high priority (low performance) schools process information on attending college is critical and revealing for educational policy making. By obtaining a deeper understanding of the decision-making process and an insight into students' perceptions regarding the

development of college aspirations, educators can make better educational connections and serve disadvantaged populations in more effective ways. This research examined students' perceptions via interviews to understand associations on the subject of student development and policy practices. The strategies used to obtain and analyze this data are described in detail in Chapter III. This effort can improve the quality of teaching and learning, and guide educational policy development in various contexts and at multiple levels of the 9-12 educational system, thereby enhancing opportunities in U.S. secondary schools.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study was designed to understand the relationship between the Talented Twenty program and the college aspirations for high ranking students at high priority schools. The following questions framed the study: (a) How do high ranking high school students attending a high priority school in a south Florida district perceive their college opportunities? (b) How do they describe their educational choices and decisions? (c) What do they know about the Talented Twenty program? and (d) What relationship exists between that knowledge and their educational decisions? This chapter contains (a) the methodological framework, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) the setting and description of participants, (d) the data collection procedures, (e) data analysis, (d) trustworthiness measures, and (f) interview guide.

Methodological Framework

Qualitative research describes and analyzes individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions (McMillam & Schumacher, 2001). This type of research investigates people's understandings, and the meanings people give to their experiences and their process of interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As an interpretive approach, this research explores how individuals experience and interact with their social world and the meaning it has for them (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative studies are important for policy development, educational practice improvement, and the illumination of social issues (McMillam & Schumacher, 2001). The current Talented Twenty program does not appear to be consistent with either theory

or empirical findings concerning the development of student college aspirations (e.g., Hossler, Smith, & Vesper, 1999). The findings of this study should be of interest to those responsible for program improvement. This is important, because despite the presence of programs such as the Talented Twenty program, high-ranking low-income students at high-priority schools are less likely to aspire to attend higher education than higher income students (Pell Institute, 2004). Educators need to understand students attending high-priority schools in order to better serve them. This study investigated how and when a group of these students develop and act on their college aspirations.

This study used a basic interpretive qualitative design for its methodological approach. Merriam (2002) stated that in a basic interpretive study the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon. This meaning is mediated through the researcher as the primary research instrument. The strategy is inductive and the outcome is descriptive. In conducting this type of research, the discovery and understanding of a phenomenon, a process, and the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved are essential and critical for any type of effective analysis.

Exploratory studies, such as the one proposed that examine a topic in which there has been little prior research, (e.g., grade levels of students as related to the functioning of percentage plans), are designed to lead to further inquiry. This study focused on a description of student perspectives and aspirations at four different grade levels in a high priority school to inform educational practice and policy regarding the Talented Twenty program. Within this context, a number of questions were relevant. What does being eligible for the Talented Twenty program mean to these students? How does the flow of

the program information relate to their college aspirations? How do these students make decisions related to college opportunities?

Since this study focused on students' perceptions, aspirations and development of choices, all involving changes in behavior theoretically related to their chronological age and cognitive emotional maturity levels, a grade related cross-sectional design was utilized. Bordens and Abbot (2008) explained that cross-sectional designs allow the selection of several participants from each group, not needing to follow the same participant at different ages, but assuming that students' experiences are similar at each stage. This allowed the researcher to obtain useful and valuable data in a relatively short period of time.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2005), it is essential that personal values, assumptions and biases be examined. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) refer to this process as reflexivity, a central concept in qualitative research, referring to the dynamic interplay between the researcher and what is being investigated. Qualitative researchers fully acknowledge that bias cannot be eliminated. Instead of attempting to eliminate bias, experts such as Gunaratnam (2003) suggest "interviewers must also scrutinize their own ideological frameworks, research tools, and practices through reflexivity" (p. 94). Creswell (2005) also states "The qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry, and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study" (p. 182). Therefore, the following is a synopsis of my past experiences, knowledge and attitudes about the topic that were relevant to this investigation.

I am a Hispanic woman who grew up in Puerto Rico and lived on the island for 22 years. Education has always been of great value in my family. My mother completed a college degree and my father attended vocational school. They always encouraged in me a desire for a college education. I attended, for the most part, private religion-affiliated schools. I obtained a bachelor's degree in the field of psychology from the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico, and soon after that was admitted to Iowa State University (ISU) where I completed a master's degree in counseling education.

Since 1989, I have been working in higher education in the United States of America. From 1989 to 1991, I worked at the Office of Minority Students Affairs at ISU. From 1992 to 1997, I worked as an academic counselor for the Minority Business and Teacher Preparation Program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UW-W). From 1998 to 2006 I worked as an administrator of TRIO Programs (Student Support Services Program) with the office of Multicultural Programs and Services at Florida International University (FIU). Currently, I continue to work at FIU, as an administrator with the office of Enrollment Information Services.

The years of experience that I have in the higher education system have resulted in a broad knowledge base in student development, the education of the student-at-risk, and student services (i.e., financial aid, enrollment, admission, and student affairs). The interest that I have in the education of underserved students comes with years of experience working in the field. Not only am I a member of several minority groups in the U.S., but the core of my work has been in the education of underserved populations. For this study, it was important for me to maintain this conscious awareness of who I am and the potential that some aspects of my subjectivity might have an influence on how I

conducted the study. Taking field notes and keeping a reflective researcher journal helped me do this.

Setting and Participants

The research location was Miami Edison High School. The school is a high priority (i.e., low-performing) public school located in Miami, Florida. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the school's 2007-2008 school's profile indicates that 90% of the student population was Black and 56% was free lunch eligible (see Figure 2). Miami Edison High School is part of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS), a public school district serving Miami-Dade County, Florida. At the time of the study it was the largest school district in Florida and the fourth largest in the United States. The district was also the second-largest minority public school system in the United States, with 62% of its students being of Hispanic origin, 26% African American, 9% Non-Hispanic White, 1% Asian or Pacific Islander and less than 2% of other minorities (Dade School District Data, 2009). According to the "One Florida" Accountability Commission (2002), the Talented Twenty program was designed to further college access by guaranteeing access to Florida's public postsecondary institutions to high school students attending high priority schools. The characteristics that defined these types of schools were: (a) high percentage of free lunch eligible students, (b) acute teacher shortages, and (c) large numbers of students served by Chapter I.

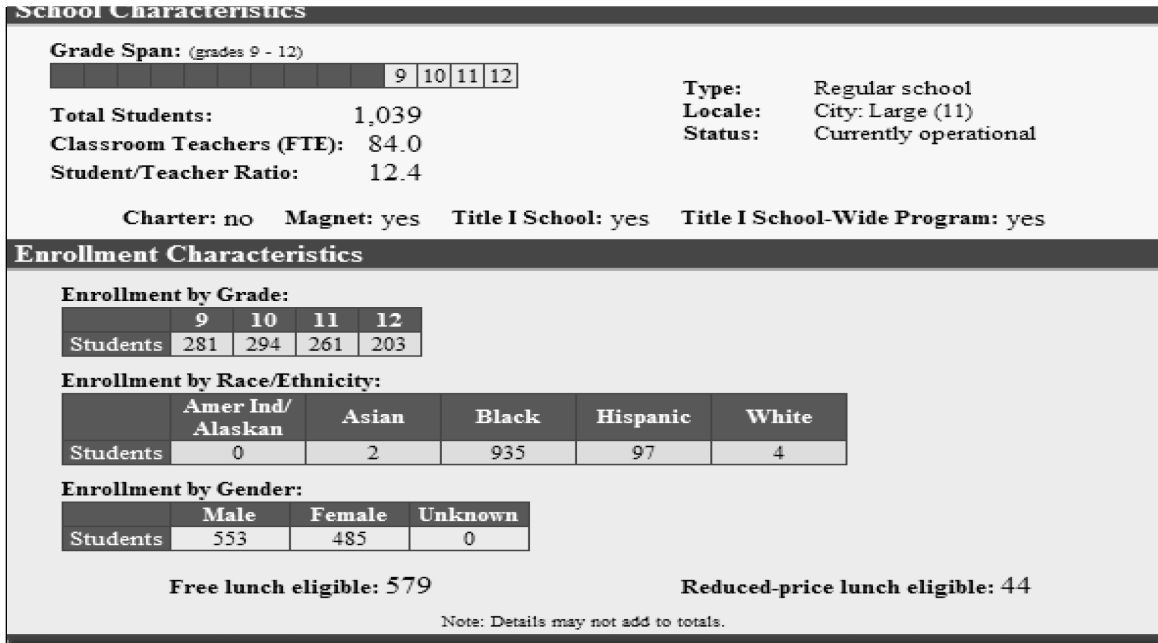


Figure 2. School profile chart: School and enrollment characteristics. (dadeschool.net, 2009)

Participants for this study were high ranking students attending 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade at Miami Edison Senior High School. The selection of these grades levels was based on the theoretical model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) concerning the development of postsecondary plans and aspirations. High ranking students were identified by school administrators after all entry and access authorization and documentation were approved. Selection of potential participants was based on academic ranking per grade level (top-down). The administrators allowed me to conduct an initial presentation about the study to voluntary groups of high-ranking students they organized. I made three presentations explaining the details of the project and recruiting participants.

This sampling strategy selection was purposeful; a non-probability approach utilized frequently when conducting qualitative research. This approach allows the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). In this particular

study, it was critical to select a high priority school, with the specific attributes that correspond to the Talented Twenty program target population. The power and logic of purposeful sampling is that a few cases studied in-depth yield many insights about the topic or phenomenon being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The sample include all identified students at different grades and then participants were selected based on considerations of time, availability of participants, and individual and/or parental consent. A total of 16 participants, four per academic level, constituted the sample size for this study.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data Collection

A general schema for data collection and analysis was developed that included several phases: (a) planning, (b) data collection including interviews and beginning of encoding and data analysis and member checking, and (c) in-depth analysis after leaving the field (see Figure 3). The planning phase included the development of the proposal; obtaining university authorizations; site authorizations and appropriate consent forms; and development of an intake form and interviews questions.

The first step in planning this study was to obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board of the university and the Miami-Dade School District. General guidelines for review boards typically include three ethical principles: (a) respect for the person, (b) beneficence (weighting risk vs. benefits), and (c) justice (Cresswell, 2003). The risk in this study was minimal since participants would only be answering questions (see Appendix B) and talking about their experiences related to college plans or aspirations. An informed consent form was developed for parents and an assent form for participants,

since minors would be involved in the study (see Appendix C). Consent forms had to be signed prior to the start of the data collection.

Phases of Data Collection and Analysis - Timeline				
Planning	Beginning of Data Collection	Data Collection and Initial Data Analysis	Member Checking	In-Depth Data Coding, Analysis, and Interpretation
Obtain Authorization	Intake Form	Interviews	Member-checking	Coding
Obtain Access	Interviews	Transcripts	Continued Analysis	Final Analysis
Obtain Consent		Initial Discovery of Themes		Interpretation
Researcher Journal				
May-September 2009	November 2009 – April 2010			January 2010-February 2011

Figure 3. Phases of data collection and analysis.

The data collection phase involved the administration of an intake form to collect basic demographic information about the participants and additional information that assisted with the development of participant portraits or vignettes. At this phase, the establishment of rapport with students and trust was vital for the success of the study. One in-depth interview (digitally recorded) per student was then scheduled and conducted. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and was professionally transcribed. Transcriptions were shared with each participant personally to get feedback from that individual about the transcript’s accuracy as well as to provide an opportunity to get additional information. Initial contact with students was made and interviews were conducted during the academic year from November 2009 through May 2010.

Data Analysis

“In qualitative research, data analysis is *simultaneous* with data collection” (Merriam, 2002, p. 14). As soon as the researcher conducts the first interview the analysis of data begins. This iterative method allows for adjustments as interviews are being conducted and facilitates the collection of more useful data. From reading the first few transcripts this researcher found out that some questions from the interview needed to be more specific for the students to better understand what was being asked. Some interview questions were made more specific and interviews that followed contained more descriptive examples. For example, when the first few students answered “I don’t know what it is” to the question, “Have you heard about the Talented Twenty program?” I revised the question to ask they had ever received a letter in reference to their being in the top 20% of their class and if they had ever received a brochure describing the program.

Concepts and themes emerged from individual interviews and were compared across interviews. Transcripts were manually coded using colors for different themes and categories.

As transcripts were completed by a transcriptionist, I read them and assisted in the transcribing of inaudible segments by listening to the full audio file and filling in the gaps. As I read the transcripts, I simultaneously began taking note of interesting points and making comments on them about potential connections and codes. After all the transcripts were received I continued to make margin notes and began more formally coding each transcript, identifying segments or units of meaning.

When this process was completed for all 16 transcripts, I created an enumeration table. Students were each given a number and color coded by grade. This use of color facilitated the viewing of the data and assisted in developing codes that were associated with specific grade levels and facilitated answering questions about the students' experiences. For example, had all seniors gone on college visits? Were all juniors participants in the Upward Bound Program? In addition, segments or units of meaning from the transcripts were listed on this table. The table showed which students spoke about which segments. In the two part table, evidence for both a priori and emergent themes were simultaneously tallied.

Next, each student transcript was assigned a number and a color. A copy of each transcript was printed in the appropriate color.

Going back to the original and colored transcripts, the segments reflecting the codes that were used to develop the emergent themes and demonstrate the a priori ones were copied and pasted into a new document. The new multi-colored document was organized so that each theme contained the relevant transcript segments.

Later, another multi-colored table was developed to facilitate data management and to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. This table contained each student's demographics and also included each transcript number, pseudonym, and student transcript color (see Appendix D).

Trustworthiness Measures

Trustworthiness is an essential component of qualitative research. Findings should reflect the reality of the experience. However, it should be noted that in qualitative research, the understanding of reality is really the researcher's interpretation

of participants' interpretation or understanding of the phenomenon of interest; in this case the relationship between the Talented Twenty program and the development of students' college aspirations. Various strategies were used to enhance the opportunity for the development of mutual understanding between the participants and the researcher in the description of events, and the meaning of these events.

In this study the following strategies were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings: (a) triangulation, (b) member checking, (c) peer review, (d) researcher reflexivity, and (e) rich –thick description (Merriam, 2002). Data gathering triangulation was attained by interviewing multiple participants at each grade of high school and also through recording observations of each participant in a research journal. This provided multiple sources of data. Member checking is a common strategy in which the researcher shares transcripts with participants, offering them an opportunity to both check accuracy and add more information. In this study, students were given paper copies of their individual transcripts and I explained to them that they should read and make any adjustments they felt would better represent their thoughts and ideas. No one retracted any statements in their transcripts. Most of the students made minimal revisions, such as correcting a name or re-writing an answer using better English.

My peer reviewer was an FIU colleague, a TRIO programs director who had extensive experience working with at-risk high school students in the Miami area. She has broad knowledge in the area of student development and was familiar with concepts analyzed in this research project. With over 20 years of experience in programs that serve as a pipeline from secondary to postsecondary education, my peer reviewer examined transcripts that did not contain coding comments I made during data analysis.

She read 10 transcripts and using my code list did her own enumeration. Although she had the opportunity to add codes, she did not. In a later discussion, she mentioned that the codes were “right on target”. Based on her experience in the field, her opinions and conclusions were helpful to me as I analyzed and interpreted the data. The consistency between our interpretations lent credibility to the findings.

Since the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research, special precautions were established in order to enhance the reliability of results. As indicated above, in this study I maintained record keeping of additional observations and personal accounts inside and outside the field (school) by keeping a research journal with my reflections regarding the study. This process assisted in the interpretation of the data. As I analyzed and interpreted the data, I referred to my journal entries, transcripts, field observations, and even to the interview recordings to develop explanations that would be “congruent with reality as understood by the participants” (Merriam, p. 27). For example, after observing in the main office how a teacher organized a group of students in a 5000 Role Models leadership program, my field notes led me to find out more about the program. This experience led me to have greater insight about the values reinforced in the school.

In addition, I provided rich-thick description of the participants and the context of the data collected about them. The process entailed the development of a portrait or vignette of each participant. This provides the reader with relevant information to determine how closely this study matches their area of interest and/or resemblance to individuals or a group to which findings can be transferred. Chapter IV includes further description of the data and the conclusions drawn from this information.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data and results of the study about understanding the relationship between the Talented Twenty program and college aspirations for high ranking students at a high priority school. Prior to the findings, individual profiles of each of the 16 research participants are presented as a way of introducing and giving the reader a glimpse of the unique personal characteristics of each participant. Finally, the themes that emerged from the data as a result of the interviews with these participants are presented and discussed as they relate to the a priori themes.

The Setting

The research location was Miami Edison Senior High School. The school is a high priority (i.e., low-performing) public school located in Miami, Florida. As noted in Chapter 3, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the 2007-2008 school profile indicates that 90% of the student population was Black and 56% was eligible for free lunch (see Figure 2). Miami Edison Senior High School is part of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, a public school district serving Miami-Dade County, Florida. It is the largest school district in Florida and the fourth largest in the United States. The district is also the second-largest minority public school system in the country, with 62% of its students being of Hispanic origin, 26% African American, 9% Non-Hispanic White, 1% Asian or Pacific Islander and less than 2% of other minorities (Dade School District data, 2009). According to the “One Florida” Accountability Commission (2002), Talented Twenty program was designed to further college access by

guaranteeing access to Florida's public postsecondary institutions to high school students attending high priority schools. The characteristics that define these types of schools are: (a) high percentage of free lunch eligible students, (b) acute teacher shortages, and (c) large numbers of students served by Chapter I (Education Consolidation and Improvement Act).

Observations from the researcher's journal indicated that the school administration as well as the academic staff were very courteous and seemed to be dedicated to the students' needs. They showed a genuine interest in this study by authorizing me to conduct informational/recruiting presentations and assisting in participant selection. Students were active participants in the meetings and asked specific questions about the study. For example, they want me to explain in detail my role as the researcher and what I would do with the information compiled from the interviews. Also, student showed signs of respect concerning teachers and administrators by arriving on time to the interviews and having the proper documentation (passes). I noticed students always asked for permission to be dismissed from interview sessions. School staff knew the students by their first names. In casual conversation both before and after the interviews, most participants commented on the positive attributes of the school staff. I felt welcome, safe, and in a place where education was of high value.

On any typical day of the study I arrived at the school by 8:30 a.m. and was immediately greeted by parking security personnel. They asked about my day and made a positive comment regarding the day or the weather. Inside the school, at the security point, I was again greeted by exceedingly polite security staff. They checked my school credentials, and escorted me to the main office while conversing about the main events of

the day. At the main office I waited for the counselor to escort me to the College Advising Program (CAP) office where I met students and then walked with them to a private office for the interview process. At the end of interview, the student and I walked together to the counselor's office. Students at that point asked to be dismissed; and the counselor gave them proper documentation to return to regular classroom activities. After that, the counselor and I confirmed or set-up my next visit. The CAP advisor was fundamental in the progress of this study. I appreciated her assistance in selecting the study participants and in the follow up regarding the proper authorizations for them to be excused from their classes to meet with me. She was extremely dedicated to students' needs; and in the same way, students spoke very highly of her assistance regarding their academics and college plans.

Participants

Sixteen high ranking students attending ninth through 12th grade at Miami Edison Senior High School participated in this study. As discussed in Chapter 3, the selection of these grade levels is based on the theoretical model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) concerning the development of postsecondary plans and aspirations. High ranking students for this study were identified by school administrators after all entry and access authorization and documentation for this study were approved. Selection of potential participants was based on academic ranking per grade level (top-20%). Table 1 is a summary of demographic information about each participant, which is provided here to offer a comprehensive look at the participant demographics. A brief description of each participant, in alphabetical order of their pseudonyms by grade level, follows.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Information and Basic Demographics

Name	Age	Grade	GPA*	Upward Bound Participation	Family Origin
Annette	18	12	4.59	No	Bahamas/Haiti
Jessica	17	12	4.68	No	Haiti
Robert	17	12	4.60	No	Haiti
Sheri	17	12	5.05	No	Jamaica
Almartha	17	11	4.79	Yes	Haiti
Charlene	16	11	4.72	Yes	Haiti
Jackie	18	11	3.76	Yes	Haiti
Thomasina	17	11	4.43	Yes	Haiti
Briana	16	10	3.16	No	Haiti
Christopher	15	10	3.61	Yes	Haiti
Mary	16	10	3.34	No	Haiti/Bahamas
Shakira	16	10	3.71	No	Jamaica
Christina	15	9	2.75	No	Haiti
Claudette	15	9	3.30	No	United States
Justin	16	9	2.50	No	United States
Rianna	14	9	3.50	No	Haiti

**4.00 GPA scale. Some students have more than 4.00 grade point average due to Advanced Placement and Honors courses, which are weighted more heavily than regular classes.*

Annette

At the time of the study, Annette was an 18-year old senior student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was born in the Bahamas, but considers herself Haitian since her mother's background is Haitian. Annette is the youngest of three children and the first in her family with college attendance plans. Although she considered herself a procrastinator, her academic and college plans were in complete order. She said:

Oh no, that's one thing I don't play about. Right now I'm finished with the college application process, I'm done, all I have to do is, I feel as if I have to take my ACT I'm studying for that, I'm looking over my math very seriously, that's the part, because I need to improve math scores.

She applied to four universities: Clark University, Florida State University, University of Florida, and Florida Agricultural Mechanical University. She wanted to attend Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia, but considered to be too expensive and indicated that she cannot afford the cost.

At the time of the study, she had searched for financial aid opportunities such as Florida Bright Futures, Free Application for Federal Student Aid, Gates Millennium Scholarships, and others. When at college, Annette plans to major in political science. She stated, "You know I was watching this guy on TV, he was the ambassador to China, and I wanted to be an ambassador to China!" When asked to describe why she wants to major in political science, she added:

To study political science, you have to have a general idea of how the government works, the political system, and the areas involved. Need good writing, speech, oratory, and debate skills. Stuff like that, you don't really need much of math, so that's why I really like something that hasn't much of math in it.

Academically, Annette was a good student and was enrolled in six Advanced Placement courses: biology, government, literature, psychology, calculus, and Spanish. Her hobbies are reading, searching the Internet, and looking at Japanese Anime. Annette said, "I like passive activities, I don't like to do sports." Regarding academics, as a result of her teachers' support, which has been a source of inspiration, Annette stated that she will complete her goal of attending college and be the first one in the family to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Jessica

Jessica was a 17-year old senior at Miami Edison Senior High School. She is a first generation student and comes from a large Haitian family in which she is the middle child and the only girl out of five children. Jessica was very involved in church activities and various high school clubs such as, RISE (science and engineering club). Jessica's parents were very concerned about her education and for many years motivated her to continue excelling at school with the idea that she would attend medical school. She mentioned, "My parents, since I was born, implanted in me the idea of becoming a doctor." As a result, she was raised with the idea of attending medical school at the University of Miami. She plans to become a general surgeon and want to specialize in treating liver diseases. Nevertheless, she mentioned that she loves sociology and perhaps would work on a minor in that subject in college.

She was in good academic standing and is enrolled in multiple Advanced Placement (AP) courses such as chemistry, biology, and calculus. She loves the Internet and used it frequently to do research regarding college opportunities. At the time of the study, Jessica had applied to the University of Miami, Florida Memorial University, and Barry University. However, the University of Miami was her number one choice. She knew all the admissions requirements for the University of Miami, visited the school on several occasions, and talked on a weekly basis with admissions counselors at the school. Jessica was concerned about her Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and said:

My test scores are ... a little bit, not so big scores. They are good for Barry University and Florida Memorial University, but for not for the University of Miami. I don't really have the test scores, I'm not even in the middle, I'm in like the lower half; but I'm taking the exam again in December.

Regarding other college preparation plans, she completed a Pre-FAFSA (Free Application for Federal [financial] Student Aid) and applied for various scholarships with the assistance of her high school advisor.

Robert

Robert was a 17-year old senior student at Miami Edison Senior High School where he was ranked in the top 20% of his class. He is a first generation student and comes from a large Haitian family. Robert is the youngest of four brothers and a sister. At school, he had been involved in leadership activities since ninth grade. A few of his extracurricular activities were: the Student Government Association, Honors Society, Track Team, Baseball Team, and Music Ensembles. Robert acknowledged that his parents always keep him on track by emphasizing education and responsibility in life. He said:

They instilled those values early and right now they don't really have to do tell me anything. I take the initiative to do the things myself; like I have to do my homework, and make sure I set my own curfew at 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. during the weekend.

In his family a brother and sister have obtained baccalaureate degrees from public institutions in the state of Florida. Now Robert felt he needs to achieve equal or better education than his older siblings. He stated, "I try to compete with them. Oh, you did this; I'm going to do better." Robert's plan was to attend the University of Florida and major in Business Administration or Business Entrepreneurship, and later on apply to law school.

As part of his college bound preparation, Robert had been taking Advanced Placement courses since 10th grade and maintaining a good grade point average. Among

the Advanced Placement courses he had taken are biology, chemistry, economics, English composition, human geography, literature, and world history. Furthermore, he was applying to the Gator Club Scholarship and had high hopes of obtaining this award that would assist with the payment of tuition. He was very excited about attending the University of Florida and cannot wait to see a football game there. He loves its football team and his favorite player is Tim Tebow.

Sheri

Sheri was a 17-year old senior student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was born in Jamaica and came to the United States at age 9 with her father and two sisters. Her mother was still in Jamaica with two other siblings. When Sheri came to the United States and began speaking American English she had some difficult times adjusting. She explained, “The language spoken in Jamaica (British English-Jamaican dialect) is different than here. It has its similarities, but for the most part is different.”

As are the other seniors, Sheri is also first generation student. At school Sheri maintained a high grade point average and enjoyed participating in extracurricular activities that she joined with the purpose of building her resume for college attendance purposes. She had taken AP courses, and honors classes such as American history, language and composition, chemistry, biology, algebra, and geography, among others. She definitely had plans to attend college and had applied for admission to the University of Florida, Florida State University, Edward-Waters College, Florida Memorial University, Miami Dade College and Washington University in St. Louis.

Sheri loves to cook and read books about sociology written by Caribbean authors. Two of her favorite authors are Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat. Kincaid’s

essays, stories, and novels are evocative portrayals of family relationships and issues associated with being raised in a foreign country; and Danticat, a Haitian author who moved to the United States at a young age for the most part writes on Diaspora themes. She declared “I like authors that focus on events that are close to me, such as sexuality, society norms, and various other elements that I have witnessed first hand in my native country”. Sheri would like to attend Florida State University and major in political science. Specifically, she wanted to focus on diplomatic affairs.

Almartha

Almartha was a 17-year old junior student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She is the youngest member of a large Haitian family of 11 children. Her parents are separated and offspring live in a number of separate households in Miami and Haiti. From an early age, Almartha showed leadership skills. In school she was a member of the school band, student government association, Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), and Health Occupation Students of America. She planned to attend college, preferably out of state, and then continue to medical school to become a cardiologist, neurologist, or pediatrician. She stated:

My plans for this, which is my short term goal, is to basically maintain my GPA this year and study for the SAT and ACT, then I think in the spring I'll be prepared hopefully at that time and take it and for senior year, basically just keep my grades up and do my work and fill out the applications for scholarships. After high school, I'll probably attend, no hopefully, most likely will attend college. I'm still trying to decide which universities I want to go to.

Additionally, at school, Almartha took some AP courses, such as human geography, chemistry, American history, language and composition. Almartha was an Upward Bound participant and through this program she had received extensive college preparation seminars, and visited several university campuses in and out of state. At high

school, with the assistance of her CAP advisor, she had started to compile grants and scholarship information. Almartha mentioned that due to her low income family status, financial planning was critical for her goal attainment. She said:

I don't really want to look at loans, because I found out that there is a limit of loans you can get, and I may need that loan for medical school, but loans are my last options. I remember in second grade, my Spanish teacher was telling me that she was still paying loans, and I don't want to end up in that situation, so my main goal is to get scholarships to pay for my education.

Her parents were very supportive of her college plans and Almartha recognized their efforts in putting some of her older sisters through college. As part of the Upward Bound college preparation, she had visited Florida International University, Florida Atlantic University, and the University of Florida in search of information about them and to experience their campuses.

Charlene

Charlene was a 16-year old junior student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She comes from a large Haitian family with five full siblings and seven additional step-siblings from a previous marriage on her father's side. She enjoys doing activities with her sisters and organizing family activities. At home, she was also responsible for seeing that the younger siblings complete their school assignments and several household chores. At school, she was a leader and at the time of the study holds executive positions in different organizations such as Student Government, Future Business Leaders of America and the Bowling Team. Charlene planned to attend college and major in Business Administration. She said:

Probably dual major in Business Administration and Psychology and a minor in Photography. I would like to own my own photography shop and probably a culinary restaurant. I want to own those. I'm really into entrepreneurship. I like putting out a product and seeing how far it goes and seeing the results.

Charlene saw education as an opportunity not only to improve herself and gain respect from others, but also as a venue to improve conditions in her Little Haiti Miami

community. At the time of the study, she spent hours weekly searching on the Internet for scholarships and other financial resources for college attendance and visited her CAP advisor frequently for additional information regarding financial opportunities for college. She had prepared an essay (written and video-voice recorded) that she utilizes as a template to apply for different scholarships. She was looking forward to an upcoming college tour and already visited Savannah State University, Morehouse, Spellman College, Mount Holyoke College, Howard University, and Tuskegee University through the Upward Bound Program. Charlene kept working on maintaining her academics in good shape and completing her AP courses (American History, pre-calculus, and language composition). She was going to take the ACT and SAT soon, and was working on test preparation at her Upward Bound sessions on Saturdays.

Jackie

Jackie was an 18-year old junior student at Miami Edison Senior High School. Her mother is from Haiti and her father is from the Dominican Republic. Her father does not appear to be involved in her life. Her passions are music, fashion, and school. Academics were a priority and she was a very active student at Edison, where she participated in organizations such as Future Business Leaders of America and Girls Merging into Successful Woman. She planned to attend college and major in nursing. She has an older sister who graduated from college with a nursing degree and has served as a source of inspiration to her.

Jackie was an Upward Bound participant, where she received information and preparation for college attendance, such as Pre-ACT and Preliminary-SAT (PSAT) coaching and practice. She had been taking honors courses since ninth grade and AP

courses since 10th grade. She had a special interest in math, sciences and social studies classes and planned to do very well in them. She says, “I love math, I always take honors math. Honors Algebra 1, Honors Geometry, Algebra II. Next year I’ll take pre-calculus.” At the time of the interview, through the Upward Bound Program, she had visited several colleges in the state of Florida (i.e., Florida International University, University of South Florida, the University of Miami, and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University). She likes to attend Florida International University because most of her college attending cousins were enrolled at this institution. During summer 2010 she plans to continue her college preparation. She stated:

During the summer I’m going to start writing my essays for scholarships and I must start taking SATs and I must start saving up money so that I can go to like prom and prom pictures, and class rings and all of that. I’m opening a bank account and start saving money. That’s about it. I will start applying to the colleges that I want to, and start planning my plan.

Thomasina

Thomasina was a 17-year old junior at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was in good academic standing, an active student leader, and very much enjoys listening to gospel music and texting on her phone. She says, “Gospel is one of the most spiritual kinds of uplifting music.” Thomasina comes from a large family. She has 10 brothers and sisters; some live with her mother and others, including herself, with her father. Some of her elder brothers have joined the armed forces, and she has been collecting information related to the military, in addition to web browsing for colleges and universities. When asked about her plans after high school, she replied:

My plans are attending college, I like to go to college, but at the same time I would like to go to the air force and take a different route, because not everyone goes to college. What are my benefits? So I’m very interested in that. Not that I

want to do aviation or anything, I just want to go and live life in the service. With school, college, basically I would be living a normal life, except I would be what I would call government property.

She later added, “Yes, I would go to college for 4 years, so I’m willing to make that commitment, either way I would be still going to school. That’s all I really care about!” Basically, Thomasina has been filling out college applications, taking the necessary tests, looking for scholarships, and searching online and with her brothers about the military options. She said, “So at the end I decide to change my mind, I’ll be ready for both paths.” As of now, she plans to study psychology or something related to the mind; she is very interested in finding out how the mind works.

As a participant of an Upward Bound Program, she visited many colleges including Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Louisiana State, Southern University and A&M College, Texas Southern University, Savannah State University, Morehouse, Spellman and Clark Atlanta University. In addition, for the past two summers she spent 6 weeks receiving college preparation.

Briana

Briana was a 16-year old sophomore student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was very focused on her academics and had very specific plans for college attendance at Florida International University 3 years from now. She said:

I have an attitude at home but I noticed that when I come to the school, I have to change my attitude and my act, because school is like life to me, and it is my future. I love school. Education is my future.

Briana’s spiritual beliefs are very strong. She commented, “You have choices to choose what you say, what you think, and what do, and that is because our creator allow us to do that, but he looks into that and we need to be very careful with our choices.”

Then when asked about future choices, she said, “My choices for the future are to, after I finish school, going to college and become a nurse.”

Briana is the youngest of three children and follows close advice from her middle sister, who was majoring in Nursing at Miami Dade College. She worked very hard in her classes and math is her favorite subject. At high school, she was taking Health Science I, where she was learning information about the human body, which she thinks is critical for nursing school.

Her college plans began in eighth grade. She wanted to accomplish this milestone since no one in the family has graduated from college yet. She had a 3.16 grade point average and was studying hard every day to improve her grades. She said, “3.16 is a good GPA, but not good enough for me.” She visited Florida International University a couple of times through school organized field trips, and loves the campus. Briana is a very focused student and she indicated that was eager to continue her high school class preparation to be followed by college attendance.

Christopher

Christopher was a 15-year old sophomore student at Miami Edison Senior High School. He was born in Haiti and is the youngest of eight children in the family. He felt pressured by his family to finish high school and go to college because he will be the first one in the family to accomplish this goal. In order to do this, Christopher was combining academics with sports. He was in good academic standing and plays football and basketball, trying to open additional opportunities for some type of academic or sport scholarship for college attendance. This was a great challenge and he commented on his routine:

I come from games at like 10:00 – 11:00 p.m., then getting home at around 11:00 p.m. -12:00 a.m., and then you got to do homework, which make you stay up until like 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. doing homework. This is really stressful, but I don't tell anybody because, it's not good when people feel sad for you and sorry, because it makes you look less of a success, so I tend to just do it.

When at college, Christopher planned to major in Business Administration. A year before the interview, he was a FBLA member, but at the time of the study he decided not to do it due to enormous pressures to pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Similarly, he delayed taking AP courses until he can pass the FCAT. He believed it is too much pressure at this time and could jeopardize his academics or chances to play sports in college. He remarked that he will enroll in AP courses during his junior or senior year at high school.

He was an Upward Bound participant and was learning about college requirements, and receiving ACT/SAT coaching. Christopher was also in the process of college exploration and searching for opportunities to play basketball or football in a Division I or II university.

Mary

Mary was a 16-year old sophomore student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was born in Haiti to a Bahamian mother and a Haitian father. At the time of the study, she live in North Miami with her grandparents and a brother, three sisters, and some cousins. Since she was in the eighth grade, she had been dreaming about becoming a film director.

At school, Mary was part of the Film Club and has prepared a couple of short videos and films. She had uploaded some of the videos into YouTube. She was working on a Michael Jackson short film. She loves to work with the camera and the camera

crew. She started to look for colleges that offer film degrees, and compiled some information about New York University, Columbia University, and the University of California-Los Angeles. She learned that she needs additional preparation in the areas of communication and creative writing. At school, she was taking her writing classes very seriously, and commented that some of her teachers believe she is doing very well. She said “My writing classes, they are trying to make me a level six, in writing, but now I’m a level four, so I’m trying to boost that up, so I can go to six.” Level six is the highest score level on the FCAT writing (Persuasive type) subject.

She acknowledged the need to begin looking for financial aid assistance for college because out of state film schools can be very expensive and due to her family’s financial situation, tuition might be a challenge. She heard that the University of Miami offers a film degree but she needs to find additional information. Mary will wait for university representatives to visit her high school again to look for more information. She received college information from a 17-year old uncle and one of her sisters who attends Miami Dade College. Also, she mentioned that she will start visiting Edison’s CAP advisor to gather college preparation information.

Shakira

Shakira was a 16-year old sophomore student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was a very good student and has a proficient grade point average in high school. She mentioned that other students at school consider her a “geek” or “nerd.” She loves studying and being at school. Shakira had complicated living arrangements, but at the time of the interview was living with her father in a relative’s house. She explained that her father is very controlling. This situation does not allow for her to participate in

high school extracurricular activities, making her concentrate only on her classes. She hopes that by doing extremely well at school she can go away to an out of state university and be away from her father.

When asked about future plans, Shakira replied, “I would like to be a neurosurgeon or an actress; but a neurosurgeon would be my big goal.” She saw acting as a secondary plan, if medical school does not work. She had been looking for college preparation information on the Internet since attending eighth grade. Shakira already opened a College Board account on the Internet, which she visits to learn more about college preparation. She had reviewed information regarding requirements at Princeton, Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, and Duke University. When asked what she discovered regarding college requirements, she mentioned that basically students need to have good grades, good behavior, and be active at high school. She said, “Because they [colleges and universities] want to have a mix, they want to have smart kids, energetic kids; but you have to have a good GPA, and good grades.” Also, she heard from teachers that to pay for tuition she might have to write essays in order to compete for scholarships. She says, “My teachers said that I am a good essay writer.” Shakira believed she have a good chance to compete for scholarships and will also work on looking for a job that helps her pay for college tuition.

Christina

Christina was a 15-year old freshman student at Miami Edison Senior High School. Her family came from Haiti via the Bahamas to the United States. Her family lived in the Bahamas for long time before coming to Miami. She was born in the United States and is the second youngest (out of eight children) in the family. She has a younger

brother who also attends the same high school. Unfortunately, her father passed away in September of 1999.

Christina enjoys nature, talking to friends, shopping, and being with her family. Her mother and older siblings encourage her to stay focused at school and complete her education since none of them were able to attend college. She mentioned, “Right now, my mom and my other sisters and brother they tell me to stay focused in school because they wish they had the opportunity to go to college.” In addition to her family values, Christina treasures religion. When thinking about the future, Christina mentioned that she would like to continue into higher education with the sole purpose of helping her mother. She said:

I told my mom, the first thing, if I have a good successful job, is that you don't have to do nothing, because you can sit in my house for free. I just do everything for you. If you want to go out shop for groceries, I'll take you, and I'll pay. So you really, basically, don't have to do anything.

When at college, she planned to major in Education. She would like to become an elementary school teacher. At the time of the study, she was doing community service at a day care center with the intent of gaining experience working with little children to improve her chances of being admitted to college to pursue an Elementary Education degree.

Claudette

Claudette is a 15-year old freshman student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was born in Miami, Florida and her family comes from Savannah, Georgia. She has one brother and one sister; and she is the oldest in the family. She enjoys music and taking apart electronic equipment. Her future plan includes college attendance and to

continue into medical school to become a brain surgeon. Claudette looks forward to being a member of the Health Club at school to gain more experience and knowledge in the health field. She would like to participate in that particular program because it offers hospital field trips, and she looks forward to those. In terms of college selection, she had completed some research into Savannah State University and Florida International University. She claimed that both schools have medical schools and that they target minority populations, specifically Blacks, which she likes. She values education a lot and said:

You need to go to college because, out here, in the world, you're not going to be able to do nothing. You'll need to have a degree or something, to tell them that you know something in the world. So you have to go to college, to be somebody.

One day, she contacted college admissions counselors and learned about the specific test scores needed for admissions requirements. Also, she learned about the importance of community services and was looking forward to those opportunities, too. Christina maintained a good academic grade point average and was taking several honors courses, such as Algebra, Biology, and English. When asked how honors courses contribute to her college preparation she said, "They teach you more and faster in those classes. So I think in college they are going to teach you really fast, so you have to learn, how to catch up." When asked about how she sees herself in college, she replied, "I think I'm going to do well, excellent in college. I probably won't join groups. I like being by myself, and more independent."

Justin

Justin was a 16-year old freshman student at Miami Edison Senior High School. When asked about future plans he replied, "My future plan is, when I finish high school, I

want to go to Tampa University. I will try to be a psychiatrist and try to get my doctorate, so I can have my own private office.” Nevertheless, the U.S. military forces is a secondary option, especially since Justin’s father was in the U.S. Army and his second oldest sister is about to join the U.S. Army very soon.

Justin and his second oldest sister recently traveled to Tampa to visit the university, since his sister was interested in Tampa University, and because of that trip, Justin likes the campus too. Justin comes from a large family in which he has three brothers and three sisters. He is the third oldest in the family. The older sister was in college studying nursing. Interestingly, Justin’s mother was also a student at Miami Dade College with plans to become a nurse. Education is highly valued in his family and they shared information with each other while everybody helps with the household chores. At school, Justin was taking some honors courses (i.e., Math, English) and was involved with track and field and dance. He was aware of the importance of maintaining a good grade point average for college applications and has a financial savings plan for college tuition. He said:

I am saving up my money from a summer job, plus I’m trying to be active in school so I could get a scholarship. But I’m trying not to depend on scholarships that much, so every penny that I get, I save it into my saving account.

In the meantime, Justin keeps working to obtain additional information for college attendance while also debating a military track.

Rianna

Rianna was a 14-year old freshman student at Miami Edison Senior High School. She was in the top 20% of her freshman class. Rianna and most of her immediate family came from Haiti to the United States when she was about 7 years old. Her mother still

lives in Haiti. Rianna had been worried about her mother since Haiti suffered a tragic earthquake in January 2010. She has visited Haiti two times in her life to see her mother and other family members. When asked about her visits to Haiti, she commented, “I don’t really fit in. I just been having fun talking to my friends, the family and stuff. When I’m there, I miss America.” Riana loves to read, act (theater), and dance, and she also loves animals.

At high school her grades were mainly As and Bs. She was in the honors courses and would like to graduate with a minimum of a 3.0 GPA. She strongly believed that good grades and excellent conduct will give her an advantage when applying to a university. She also mentioned that community services and some type of internship would increase her college opportunities.

Her future plans included attending college and becoming a doctor of medicine, specifically a pediatrician or gerontologist. Her older sisters are all nurses, and she wants to outperform them by becoming the first doctor in the family. She was working on an early plan that includes being part of the Health Academy at high school, taking honors courses, such as English, improving her grades for college admissions requirements, and working on her conduct. At the time of the interview, she was considering Florida International University, the University of Miami, the University of Florida, and the University of South Florida as some of her college choices. She remarked that, in the future, she is planning to visit those colleges and ask for additional information.

Themes

While interviewing the students and listening to their college aspirations and plans, information emerged that was related to their college plans. What guided their

aspirations? When did they start making their college plans? What information was available to them and what meaning did they make of what they know? Equally important was listening to the information gap between their plans and Talented Twenty, the educational program established to specifically assist these high ranking students at high priority schools. It was an interesting process, and I learned important information about this population of students. A priori themes (themes from the Hossler and Gallagher [1987] model based interview questions) and emergent themes (inductive) were identified from their narratives.

Initial themes came from the research questions, the interview guide and prior knowledge of the researcher. The a priori themes (a) development of student aspirations, (b) understanding of college opportunities through gathering of information, and (c) college choice, came directly from the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model on student college decision making. In addition, the Talented Twenty program was considered another a priori theme, which will be discussed separately at the end of the themes section since only one of 16 students mentioned it in the interviews.

After organizing the data, comparing interviews, and identifying segments, or units of meaning as described in Chapter 3, I developed the diagram below (Figure 4) to examine these initial as well as emergent themes. From the participants' responses to the interview questions, themes emerged that were organized according to the three stages of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. For example, themes such as family, leadership and extracurricular participation, and religion are associated with the development of students' aspirations. Similarly, themes such as honor courses, college visits, and pre-

collegiate programs are related to the students' gathering of information and their understanding of opportunities.

Utilizing the process of enumeration noted in Chapter 3 allowed me to quantify the number of times that participants discussed specific concepts and topics/codes. The frequency with which a code arose led to the identification of emergent themes. Emergent themes were spoken about by at least several students. Figure 4 also served as a visual guide in the analysis of data.

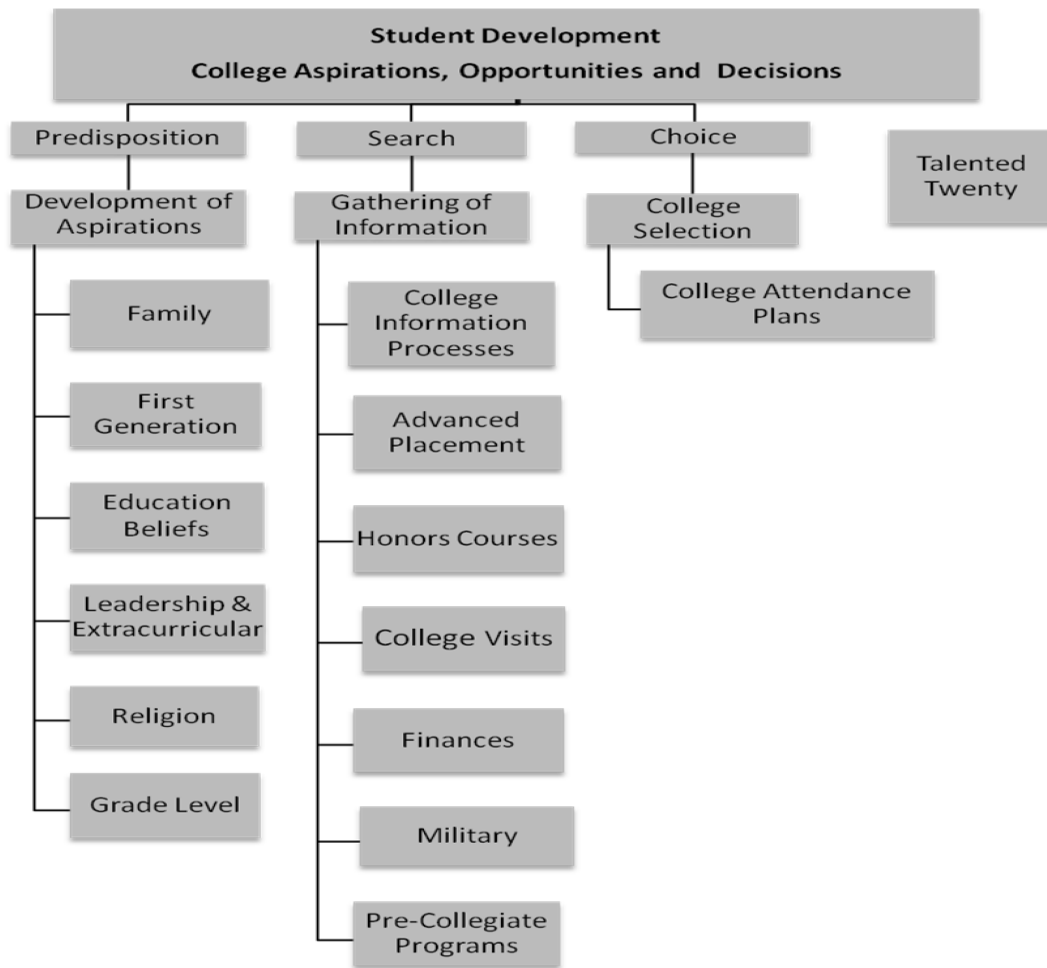


Figure 4. A priori and emergent themes concerning the development of college aspirations, opportunities, and college attainment decisions and their relationship with the Talented Twenty program. A priori themes are based on the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model.

Development of Student Aspirations

Close attention was given to the narratives describing how these high ranking students developed their college aspirations and the characteristics associated with these aspirations (the left column in Figure 4). Aspirations have long been considered an important psychological aspect of a student's propensity toward college attainment. The narratives reveal that the following topics were crucial in the development and outcomes related to their decision to pursue a college degree: (a) family support, (b) first generation status, (c) their education beliefs, (d) the development of leadership skills, (e) grade level when they were exposed to college.

Family. The theme of family emerged as students began to describe themselves and future plans. From the students' descriptions of their families and their compositions, it was important to note the influence parents and other family members had regarding their college plans. This supports previous research on the effect of student background characteristics that indicates that parental encouragement is the best predictor of postsecondary educational aspirations (Falsey & Haynes, 1984; Hearn 1984, Sewell & Shah, 1978; Tillery, 1973). Literature indicates that students who talk to their parents and other family members about their plans to attend college were more likely to plan on going to college and were also more likely to be certain about their plans (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). In the study, 12 of the 16 students interviewed discussed the role of family as motivators or inspiration for their college plans. Jessica, a senior, and Charlene, a junior, recalled:

Going to college was implanted in me from my parents. For years, the only thing I remember, I was like... okay, I'm definitely going to University of Miami, that was in 10th grade, but my dad was like every time I got to a certain grade, he was

very gracious, that, ok, ... would say, next year you're going to be in fourth grade, then you're going to be in high school, then you're going to college, so I was like...okay, college, yeah, I'm going to college. (Jessica)

I recalled wanting to go to college, ever since I was a little, it was a thing for me because my parents are from Haiti, and they grew up where you had to pay for your education. My mom would cry, and always stress the fact that our education was free and that every opportunity that comes our way, we should take it, because it's free. Whether we like it or not, because it's free it should be in your plan. So college you know, was always there. Things like do your homework every day, in third grade, come home, do your homework so you can go to college. In your mind as a child you are like, what is college? I don't know what that is, okay, but she wants me to go there, okay. So just thinking about it. Then into high school that's where it was more stressed out, and it's like... oh now this is why, okay, this is what it is. She [mother] would stress that to us, go and get your education. So, ever since around, it was always in my mind, okay, just get an education, whatever opportunities of an education are offered, take it. So ever since then it was like okay, education, education, education. (Charlene)

Sometimes the role modeling of family members and siblings carried significant weight. Students were observant of their family's positive viewpoint when talking about education and in some cases, when parents made an attempt to continue to study themselves it was inspirational to the student. Parental support has been important in the diffusion of the message to the students; in many cases was more than just encouragement- it was also taking students to visit colleges. Almartha, a junior, and Justin, a freshman, commented:

Fortunately for me, my parents are very supportive, if I'm willing to go out of state, they're willing to let me go. Like, I have a couple of friends, one in particular, like she tells her mom she's looking at out of state, her mom is a little sketchy about letting her go out of state because you know, her mom doesn't really want her to go out of state. But my parents are very supportive. They encourage education. I remember my dad, when he was taking my sister to the University of Florida, he was so proud of her, because you know she's like the first one of us to actually venture out and leave Miami to go to somewhere else, he's actually very proud of her. (Almartha)

I want to be just like both my parents, because my mom, she's gone back to school to be a nurse too. So she's going back to school in January, so my family

is making it. So I want to continue to, I want to continue the generation, to see that my parents make it, and I want my kids to see me make it too. So they could do the same thing, continue the generation. My brothers and sisters, we help out each other a lot too, because my mom has to do a lot of studying for nursing, and our father, because he works at the airport, he has to study too, so my sisters and, we help out each other a lot. (Justin)

The majority of students in this study are members of large (more than five siblings) families, or families that have multiple unions and include children from previous or subsequent marital arrangements. This background characteristic is important in the development of the students' aspirations due to the fact that in many instances they have older siblings who serve as role models or as examples not to follow. Also, many of them have younger brothers and sisters, and they intend to be an example for them.

Charlene, a junior, and Christopher, a sophomore, had the following comments regarding family size and composition:

In my family there are four girls and one boy. My father separately has seven other children. I have five half-brothers and two half-sisters. In the household, I'm the second oldest girl. And like my older sister, she kind of doesn't take on the role of being the older sibling, so right now, I'm kind of really the older sibling, you know, I help my sisters with their homework and I'm going through high school. My sister, she's a freshmen, she just entered high school and I'm telling her, you know do this, don't forget to do that, you know, this is a great thing you should be doing right now as a freshman. You know, get this ready, when it comes to this point in time, you're going to have to do this and that and just get ready for this and that. (Charlene)

On my mom's side, there's about eight kids. None of them graduated from college. So I really feel like, if I got the chance to graduate, I'm going to take my chances to you know, because I live here, and she's in Haiti so I might, you know, try to graduate. And if sports don't help me, I use my mentality, try to build something out of it, and try to help her out. I'm the youngest, so I'm really her last chance, it's either I do it or I don't, so I feel like I got to make her feel happy about something from the family because, sometimes, a lot of my brothers, I got two, two of them have kids already, and you know, if our parents are in Haiti, there's not much to do, they can't get much money, and we send them money so, I'm trying to help, trying to at least graduate and be somebody. (Christopher)

First generation. A significant number of participants of this study are first generation students. First generation (students whose parents never completed postsecondary education) are at-risk-students. Several students in the study mentioned that attending college is their goal since that will make them the first in the family with that distinction. This theme is important because it is closely related to the student's aspirations. The student wishes to attend college and part of the motivation for this is that he or she will be the first student in his or her generation or family to do so.

Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) reported in their study that first generation makes up only 6% of the students who apply for college. As parental education levels increase, children are more likely to plan for college attendance (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). For many students in this study, having parental encouragement, although very important and a key factor in their future plans will not be sufficient for attaining their college aspirations. First generation students need major assistance with their educational plans. The information provided to them and the timing of that information is critical to their future college plans. Briana, in 10th grade said, "when I was in eighth grade, I want to go because I noticed that in my family no one goes to college." Christopher, who had a challenging economic situation, is trying very hard to pursue a college degree and his account pointed out that life can be extremely challenging for a first generation student even though his family supported his educational dreams. Following his father will not bring him the "real money" that would improve his economic situation. He commented about pursuing a college degree:

They call it easy you know, it's just a little extra work than what you do in school, but when reality hits you is when you're in a certain age, things that happens to you, you don't really just say, oh, it happens to me and stuff, and that's why, but

.... [my motivation] it's family, because right now some of my family looks at me like, [and said] oh he's a bad kid. But my dad and my sister and my other brother, they encourage me, but mostly my sister and my dad, because she's always like, if I need some shoes, like right now, I can ask her and she'll try her best to send me money. So, I feel like, when reality hit as I get older, I realize that, if your parents came to the world, and you know they got a good job, make it or not, they can still support you, and you could follow what they do. But it doesn't really work like that for some people. I follow my dad, but it won't help me to the point where I would be able to support a good family and give my kids what I didn't really have. So college would offer that opportunity, a college education period, because it will give you the legal money. And when you don't have education to make good money, to make that real money where you can live in a house and don't be stressed, it's going to be some type of illegal [business], government won't allow you to do it. So, I feel like, it's either that [education] or nothing at all.

For Annette, a first generation senior student, the major source of support has come from teachers and school counselors. Lacking parental guidance for the college process, educators become the main source of information for first generation students. Annette declared "I would be the first one in my family to go to college, and hopefully the first one to complete it".

Jessica, who was encouraged by her parent since an early age to attain a college education, and with teachers' guidance, has completed several honors courses, and was enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. She needed to complete all the information without her parents' assistance, since they did not understand the financial aid process. She finished the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and applied for college admission at the University of Miami. Pointing out what she had accomplished, she said:

Like for UM I already had to submit a pre-FAFSA for an early decision, so I already did that on Saturday, and so then if I get accepted I'll know in December 17, so I'm waiting for that day, oh my God! Yeah! I've gotten accepted to Florida Institute of Technology and Barry University but they're kind of easy to get into,

it's not really much challenge and Barry is not really my forte, like I don't really like it. It's too close to home.

Education beliefs. This theme even though was not articulated by all participants, it was underlying all conversations because all students interviewed have plans to attend college and see education as a way to improve their lives. Getting a college education is commonly seen as a way out of poverty, and is a cornerstone of the American Dream (Swail, 2000). Families' belief in education as a way to improve their status and improve their future is common. Students like Charlene and Almartha, both juniors, received that message and related it to their future:

I'm a sensitive person, sometimes it makes me sad to see that you know a lot of people in my community are struggling, are impoverished, and we don't have as much as other communities. Something as simple things as going to school, and I know it's kind of hard, even for people with college degrees, to find a job nowadays, but just having that background [education] is like having something on your shoulders. When you have an education, people respect you. (Charlene)

College may not be necessary for everyone, if you have a trade that you can enhance or hone, to make you successful, you should do that, but college is important to me because, college basically assures you your position. If you are working as a doctor and you have your doctorate, you get paid more than someone that has their master's, or bachelor's or associate's, so college is basically, assures you your position. If you got a specialty or a degree in something, they won't likely fire you, or let you go, because you know the economy is bad, if you have this certification, they will keep you on, than a person that doesn't have a certain degree that you have. It's just insurance. (Almartha)

A younger student, Claudette, a freshman, also believes that to be someone in this world individuals need to be educated and pursue a college degree. She pointed out: "you need to go to college because, out here, in the world, you're not going to be able to do nothing. You need a degree to tell them that you know something in the world. So you have to go to college, to be somebody."

Leadership and extracurricular activities. Leadership emerged as a strong theme since most participants, especially the junior and seniors, hold leadership positions in their community and school. They are very proud of their leadership experiences and most think that it will be viewed positively when college administrators evaluate their admission application. Leadership seems to be valued highly at Miami Edison Senior High School. During my visits, I wrote in my journal that several of the teachers were organizing tours or field trips with small groups of students. For example, I saw how the teacher in charge of the Miami 5000 Role Model organized his activity and described to the principal the details of the field trip he had organized to a Miami area college. This program is a dropout prevention intervention program for racial/ethnic minority young boys “at-risk” of dropping out of school and/or choosing a life of crime. Students who enter the program, are guaranteed a chance to attend college or advance through a variety of post-secondary opportunities and programs geared toward the advancement of education. Community leaders and mentors from the program assist students in this process. Thousands of young men have been recipients of this award since its inception in 1993 (5000 Role Models, n.d.).

Some researchers associate student aspirations with leadership skills (McCullough, Ashbridge, & Pegg, 1994). Those authors investigated the relationship between self-esteem and leadership behavior in adolescents and found a moderate relationship. Students who perceived themselves to be leaders scored high on measures of self-esteem and had higher aspirations for prestigious careers in comparison to students who did not perceive themselves to be leaders. In the present study, extracurricular activities often provided leadership opportunities for participants.

Holland and Andre (1987) in a comprehensive literature review on extracurricular activities at secondary schools, described how participation in these activities was positively related to students' development of academic achievement, educational aspirations and attainments. In a classical study, Spady (1971) reported that participants in extracurricular activities, particularly service leadership activities, were likely to have college aspirations, whereas non-participants in any activities were less likely to have college aspirations.

Student involvement in extracurricular activities may be an indicator of overall levels of motivation and self-confidence and this can assist them with their college aspirations. Hossler and Stage (1992) indicated that students who are involved in more high school activities are more likely to have higher educational aspirations.

Most senior and junior participants of this study were very involved in school activities and organizations. Below are excerpts in which seniors and juniors discussed their leadership roles and participation in extracurricular activities. It is interesting to note the connections students in the study made about their leadership and extracurricular activities and future college plans. Charlene, a junior stated:

I love organizing things and managing things. I'm currently the class president and I'm the VP of Future Business Leaders of America [FBLA]. I participate in a lot of organizations, and I love getting them together and getting things together, and seeing the result of us working as a group. Also, bowling I was the captain this year for the girls. I enjoy it. Some people when they hear leadership they hear to boss people around. I like guiding people and showing them the way. I know with the bowling team this year we had kind of a struggle, because some of the girls didn't realize that it was a team effort, and they took my advice as me bossing them around, but really I was just teaching them how to be, how to hold the ball, or just the simplest things, how to go down the lane. And they weren't taking the advice the way it should have been taken. So they were kind of iffy about it. So I was like, okay, we're going to struggle this year. I mean, we did

struggle but we did make it to districts. We succeeded as a group and not as an individual.

I asked Charlene, “When it comes to applying all that information into what you’re doing now, and specifically, you know that this is a study about college aspiration, do you see any relationship there, between the skills that you’re developing and making choices about your future?” Referring to her extracurricular activities, Charlene replied:

Oh yeah, it’s definitely helping me grow up and getting things done. Because, as we get older you just don’t have as much leisure time, to just play around, and do this and that. So, you have to organize your time and organize, okay, this is time to do this, work hard, do this. You have to plan out your leisure time. Okay, you got to come from the top of your head with ideas, certain things, some things are sudden, some things are planned out, and you have to just kind of organize it all.

Speaking of his activities, Robert, a senior, said:

I am the class president and the homecoming king, just to name a few. I take part in lots of organizations and afterschool activities. Silver Knights, 5,000 Role Models, chorus session, honor society, track team, and I participate in baseball in the 10th grade. I also learned to play the baritone.

I asked Robert, “Is there are any relationship between all those positions you’re taking and your plans go to college?” Robert commented that those extracurricular activities assist in building his resume, which eventually will be reviewed by college admissions offices:

Yes. I started out thinking that I needed to build a resume basically, you know of extracurricular activities, but you know as I grew older, as I got into the 10th grade, I mean the 12th grade, you know I realized that sometimes you need to get involved in things like that. I need to be active to have the opportunities and basically live, like basically just live in senior year because you don’t get another chance to live another time your senior year; unless you flunk or do something like that, but yes, I just wanted to get very involved and you know, spend my last year with my classmates and do all the things I possibly can.

Sheri, another senior student mentioned:

I have heard that colleges will accept students with a lower GPA but has a plentitude of extracurricular activities on their application than a student with a high GPA but is not involved. I joined the soccer team, I guess more or less, to add to the resume for leadership positions. Let me see, during the summer of my ninth year, I started my community service at a day care, and I went there almost every day for the entire summer. Ten hours a day, I used to go early in the morning, and it closed at six, so I used to be there a lot, so I guess I got my community service requirement out of the way early, which is obligated by the school to graduate. So, I needed to do something else, because working at the day care, it's community service, but it's not considered like, up there, as some like, helping others who are in need. So, I decided they told me to do start something else, like a recycling project, I had joined a group over the summer. It's called Humanity for Our Future. It's a project started by one girl, and she does recruit people and know people. I guess join the club and do various errands in Miami Gardens and like some parts of Little Haiti, and Miami Shores. I guess we stop people in the street and inform them about the importance of being eco-friendly by recycling. We go to the recycling farm. It's like a factory and we got money for doing that. It's not a lot but the intention and the work that we are doing counts.

Jessica, a senior, commented:

I'm also into GEMS [Girls Educates and Motivates Success], and it helps us keep on track with our grades and stuff, but really my motivation honestly just came out of nowhere, just kind of hit me in the head and I was like okay, I'm going to do this. I researched it, because I also enjoy a lot of things to see if I would really fit to do them. I was in this program called RISE [Raising an Interest in Science Engineering] which got me interested in engineering. Also I'm interested in medicine, so I researched that together, so and I got biomedical engineering, and I researched it and I read about it, so I was like, oh, I could do that, so yeah!

Speaking about her extracurricular activities Almartha, another junior, commented: "I'm a very active student because I'm in the school band. I play saxophone. I'm on all these other clubs, Student Government Association, FBLA, and Health Occupation Student of America.

Finally, commenting on what she has learned through her participation in extracurricular activities, Jackie the oldest of the junior students mentioned:

Like now I have a club, FBLA. In FBLA we are doing something called pennies makes dollars, where we are raising money to send to Haiti because the kids in Haiti do not have schools, is like their schools are breaking down. So when you think about like every penny counts to make a dollar, so if we could raise like a thousand dollars that would be good for them to start to build their school, so if I have a chance to give a free education so they could have an easier chance to. You know maybe they do have to pay, but I could supply them with a school and books, and give them what I have for free that they don't have. I am part of GEMS which teaches us how to be proper, how to be polite and stuff. How to grow as women, and learn from your mistakes. And how to help others as a group, like you don't have to do nothing by yourself, you can be with somebody, do something and feel more comfortable.

Consistent with cited studies, I noticed that students spoke proudly of their activities and it appears that they relate their extracurricular participation with learning experiences that conceivably could enhancement of their college admission opportunities.

In general, participating in extracurricular activities is associated in the literature with both short and long term indicators of positive development including school achievement and educational attainment (Eccles et al., 2003).

Religion. For some participants in the study, a religious background played an important role in their lives and future plans. It was significant enough that some students decided about their college field of study based on what their understood was a match with their religion affiliation. For example, Christina plan to be a teacher because according to her, teachers will leave work at 3:00 pm, and that will give her time to take care of her future family and then attend church services on daily basis.

Several studies have shown that religious students do better on critical indicators of academic success (Mooney 2005). Typically, studies finding a positive impact of religious factors on school success measure "religiosity" with an indicator of religious participation. Religion can reinforce values conducive to educational achievement and

goal setting. Regnerus (2002) found that adolescents in low-income neighborhoods do not differ in their church attendance patterns from their peers in higher-income areas. However, their religious involvement is much more likely to contribute to their academic progress than it is among youth in higher-income neighborhoods. Briana, a sophomore, commented on the role of religion and future college plans:

I like to go to church. I basically stay home and go to church. I study the verses and the actions I have to look carefully into that because it is actually called the *Seed Principle*. It is like is your choice to choose what you say, to choose what you think and do, because that's what our creator wants and that's what he looks into. That's how, we choose to be, it is your choice, really.

When researching the *Seed Principle*, I found that core to the biblical verses is the message that "*What you sow, you will reap.*" Perhaps for Briana, to choose education is the outcome of her good behavior over the years. If she cultivates education it will have rewards. In addition, I asked Briana, "Have you thought of how you are going to pay for college?" She replied, continuing to speak about her faith, "Umm. Really I don't worry about the money wise of going to college, because I know that my parents and really God is going to make me succeed to that point." Christina selected her college major based on her religious affiliation:

I'm going into elementary education. The second one is social work. The third is pre-medicine. The reason why I picked them is because my religion, I want to be a Jehovah's Witness. So then, like, there's time you have to go to the Kingdom Hall, so I don't want to miss any of them [religious services], so that's why I want elementary. Because elementary education, we get off like, the same time as the students get off, you know. So, it would be good for me. I could go home, and study the bible and stuff. Pre-medicine, I'm just thinking about it, because I was going to be a police officer too, but the hours. It was like so big, so I just said, let me do elementary education. I like working with kids too right now.

Religion is a powerful force for many in shaping individual values, providing an overall sense of purpose, forming connections with others, and building a sense of

community. All these aspects might have an influence on student college plans, aspirations, and hopes.

Grade level at first thoughts about college. Information regarding educational initiatives related to college options needs to be offered to high school students on a timeline that parallels their decision making process. Educators need to know how and when students began making decisions about college attendance to have a strong influence and to provide information in an effective way. In particular, this information is critical to students at high priority schools and their parents.

Early college decisions carry significant outcomes, especially at high priority schools. Pitre (2006) suggests that in addition to strengthening systemic ties between high schools and colleges for the purpose of assisting students in the college choice process, it is important to begin developing college aspirations at an early stage (eighth - ninth grade level). In analyzing the data presented by participants of the study, I organized the information regarding their college process decisions by the grade level in which they declared the initial development of concrete ideas regarding college attendance. For the most part, the question participants responded to was the following: “Do you remember when was the very first time that you thought about college? Please, tell me about it.” In the discourse, students mentioned a variety of reasons related to their first thought of college attendance. Some talked about their parents’, family’s, or teachers’ inspiration or influence; while others understood that obtaining a college education was their only way to improve their social and economical situation, among other motives. All students make college attendance plans by 10th grade. The following is a compilation of the students’ response by grade level:

7th grade or earlier. Researchers have begun to speculate that college attendance decisions may be made as early as elementary school or middle school (Schmit, 1991; Sharp, Johnson, Kurotsuchi, & Waltman, 1996). More than half of the participants recalled beginning to make college attendance plans this early. For example, Riana, at the time of the study in 10th grade said:

The very first time that I thought going to college, it was like probably back in seventh grade. I like to think ahead for my future, because I don't want to be like people I see, that talk about they wish they could have done things different and stuff. So, I didn't want to be like them. I just wanted to be ahead and like, start my plans early. And that's how it started. I actually started in sixth grade.

Christina, in ninth grade said:

When was the first time...like you know when you're little, you want to do the same thing that your teacher does, because like, it's an easy job, [I thought] I got to teach. That's my dream, that was always my dream, but then you know... I grew bigger, so I knew other stuff, but teacher was always my first thing in life. So, now I made a decision to be an education teacher and work with kids and stuff. The grade was middle school. Like in seventh grade, yes. Something like that because I really like doing that. That's why [today] I like to help the teachers out. They tell me about the career they're in, but it's real good working with kids.

Claudette, in ninth grade said, "Sixth grade. Yes! Because I wanted to go to FIU and I want to go to Savannah State. FIU because I like it, I just like FIU; and Savannah State is like all Black school." Christopher, in 10th grade answered:

It's reality like, when you're a kid, middle school like, it's easy [to think], oh I'm going to college. You'll be like... your teacher would be like, who is going to college, and everybody would raise their hand, they would be like me.

Jackie, in 11th grade said:

Elementary. In elementary I decided that I was going to go to FIU South, because it's a big campus, it will look cool, everybody is there. At first I was going to go to UM, but UM is too pricey. Yes, very pricey and I do not like their rules for freshmen; you have to live on campus, you can't drive, and ...I do not know about all that. College is a big thing in my family. College is basic to me because

you have to go to college or you won't get a job. So, I already know what college I'm going to by now, so as soon as I finish high school; I will just go. I knew what college I was going to, before I knew what high school I was going to. When I was younger, I thought everybody [every institution] had nursing. I didn't even know about all that, but the thing is [that] I am the baby of the family, so I get information from everybody, and they would be like [talking] UM is a too pricey school, it's cool, but it is too pricey. Okay, I can't go to UM, I like UM but I can't go. ... or ... Oh FIU, I just got accepted, FIU they gave me full scholarship, oh I want to go there because I want to have a full scholarship.

Justin, in 11th grade said:

I came with the idea of college, probably in middle school, seventh and eighth grade because I like to help people out, so, because we go to church and our pastor is great. So, I'm always like, why is so, she could preach and speak about future and stuff, so I says, well, it's similar to psychiatrist, so I said OK, I like to do that so I'm going to be a psychiatrist.

Mary, in 10th grade stated:

I was in eighth grade. Yeah, and I heard, I don't know who I heard from, but I heard about Spike Lee, the famous movie director, and like, I heard about some of his movies, and I watched them, like there's one called, Jungle Fever. So, yes, he is really good, and he just inspired me to become a movie director and started my college plans.

Shakira, in 10th grade said:

Yeah, in the eighth grade, because our teacher assigned us like this project. Like she gave us a dice, if it landed on one, you didn't have any kids, if it landed on two, you got one kid, if you landed on three etcetera. Then, she told us to pick our job. So then, I picked neurosurgeon, for some reason. I don't know [why]. Maybe because I heard that they made a lot of money. Then, I just stuck with it, and ever since then I just got interested with it. Then like I had to look-up research on it, stuff like that so. I went into the College Board site [website] and I made an account. I think I wasn't supposed to do that but I looked up Harvard, but Harvard is really hard.

Almartha, in the 11th grade stated:

I think the first time I was exposed to hearing about college was in elementary, because the kids that used to come to our elementary school, it was a long time they came back to talk to us about. I was thinking about college, but I didn't really know what it was, when I went to middle school, that's when they really talked to me about colleges. I actually started making plans and my goals towards

college at the end of eighth grade. At the end of eighth grade, my older sisters told me that you start high school with a clean slate and you need to get your GPA to where you want it to be because it's going to determine which college you go to. So, that's when I started thinking about it and I started making plans, steps into how I'm going to go to the college. I want to go to college.

9th grade. Robert, in 12th grade reported:

I was in ninth grade. From the very beginning, when I met my counselor, Ms. Edmiston, like she called us up in the room; it was like two-three kids and she called us up and she talked to us about our plans[future plans], our goals, and things like that, the steps we have to taken to you know, to achieve that goal. She asked us about the colleges that we are looking at and of course I put USF because of my sister attended that school

10th grade. Jessica, in 12th grade said:

The only thing I remember, I was like, okay, I'm definitely going to UM, was in 10th grade, but my dad was like every time I got to a certain grade, he was very gracious, that okay would say, next year you're going to be in fourth grade, then you're going to be in high school, then you are going to college, so I was like okay, college, yeah, I'm going to college. Then they told me about AP classes, college credits, and when I heard the word college, definitely I think about college, I'm like, oh yeah college, I got to get on track, my parents want me to go to college. So, in the 10th grade I was like okay, I passed the FCAT, okay now what do I do? College, college.

Sheri, in 12th grade stated:

Tenth grade. I was with my AP Human Geography teacher. She tried to make us all apply to Harvard, and Brown, and all Ivy leagues, like Yale. I guess she was at Tufts at Mt. Holly. She tried to motivate us to go to you know, Yale, Harvard, yeah she was a great teacher, not only did she like Human Geography, but she really opened our eyes to the rest of the world [possibilities].

Annette, in 12th grade said:

I'm going to go... probably when I was, towards, kind of towards the end of my 10th grade year. It was my teacher, Miss Winters. Mainly Miss Winters, mainly, because Miss Winters opened my eyes. She opened our eyes, because I was confined to my little community. I went to other schools where you know, I wasn't exposed to that. Like we went to a geography bee meeting, and it was like kids from like super schools that I never even knew existed, Coral Reef, Killian,

this type of schools. So I'm like...these schools kids are like you. Yeah, and I'm like, this is who I'm competing against. So, reality hit me, these are the people I'm competing against, internationally. Some of them have five point GPA and I barely hanging to my little 4.2 weighted, and I'm like, you are serious, these are who I'm competing against, I have to step up my game up. That was in 10th grade. She [my teacher] was like my sister, she said ...nobody confines you to your community, there are people out there, people were waiting, wanting to get your position, had the opportunity to take your position, who are less than you, and doing some of the education, they will be like, don't take something for free take it for granted.

Thomasina, in 11th grade said:

At the end of the 10th grade, I've been looking at different colleges. Seeing what college I would like to go to. What I would like to do in college? Or would it be this year? It's basically what I want to do and how I would feel about it.

Gathering of Information and Search Process

The process by which students gather information and assess their opportunities is important in this study. Learning what the students know, and how they know, was an eye-opening experience. The second stage of the college choice and opportunity model is search. Search is the stage in which students gather and process information to assist in evaluating the various characteristics of different institutions and to identify a good personal fit. This process also moves a student in the direction of making a stronger commitment to college attendance (Hossler et al., 1989). How the information connects with students' potential plans and how they describe their opportunities based on that information is extremely important to educators.

Many students in this study looked for information using the Internet, or they relied on information gathered by their school counselor and pre-collegiate program staff. Some visited colleges with family or pre-collegiate programs and gathered information firsthand that helped shape their decision. While junior and senior students focused more

on details of the admission process, the sophomore and freshmen focal point was the field of study (college major). Seniors and juniors seemed to be aware of the requirements for their college preference.

They mentioned grade point average, aptitude test information, and in some cases the type of course needed for admissions evaluation. It is revealing to hear the connection students made regarding the information they gathered, the high school courses they decided to take, and their college attendance plans. I was fascinated by the complexity of the decision –making process and the variables (i.e., Internet searches, school visits, family and friends influence, school advisors, scholarship information, and pre-college and high school programs) that students considered when exploring college opportunities. Themes that emerged in this area were: (a) college information processes, (b) Advanced Placement as preparation for a college career, (c) honors courses and their role in higher education, (d) college visitation, (e) finance strategies, (f) military options, and (g) the role of pre-collegiate programs.

Students interviewed played an active role in their search. Schmit (1991) defined active search as when students actively seek discussions regarding educational options (e.g., advisors discussion, college fairs, CAP advisor activities, or family conversations). It is important to mention that these students are at the top of their classes and take their college attendance plans very seriously. Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) mentioned that students who seem to be more engaged in gathering information about college show more certainty about the college characteristics that are important to them. For the most part, in their conversation they were looking to attend 4-year institutions. In addition, I noted that at the search stage, students were less influenced by parents and more by the

school system and other external characteristics. When asked about how they gather college information and to explain their plans, these were some of their comments.

Jessica, a senior student searched online. She said:

I love the Internet. Also, I've visited UM, Florida Memorial, Barry and FIU. I look for biomedical engineering. FIU and UM have [it], FMU and Barry only have chemistry. So they are my plan "B." I have the requirements to actually get in there. Well, I have the grades and the GPA. I'm going to do this in four year with a minor in economics. I'm interested in the body and in medicine. All my life I've been, ever since I was small. Then, my boyfriend got me interested in business, and I'm like OK, economics; I'll minor in economics too.

Biomedical came along because I always when riding in a car pictured that the car is similar to the human body. The people that are driving are the brains, and we are the organs, I don't know, I just like to think about that, you know. So, I researched what nature major would allow me to see the body as a machine? Biomedical engineering will allow me to do that, and I'll study the body through technology. I like engineering because I was in this program called RISE, which got me interested in engineering. I'm also interested in medicine; so I researched that together and I got biomedical engineering. I researched it, and I read about it, so I was like, oh, I could do that, so yeah! I'm also into GEMS and it helps us keep in track with our grades and stuff, but really my motivation came out of nowhere and hit me in the head. I was like OK I'm going to do this. Then, I researched because I also enjoy a lot of things but I researched them to see if I was would really fit into do them.

Another student, Sheri, a senior said:

I tried to keep my GPA on point so that I could get into a good university. You have to have a high GPA to apply to schools in my junior year. I tried to make myself more applicable and more appealing for colleges to accept me. In addition, I joined more clubs. I have heard that colleges will accept students with a lower GPA but has a plentitude of extracurricular activities on their application than a student with a high GPA but is not involved. Also, I plan to apply for financial aid on January 1st. I have only applied at two scholarships so far, the Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship and the Ron Brown. I took the SAT and for the math part I have a 460, for the reading I had a 520, and for writing I had a 520. I could have done better and I'm going to retake the SAT.

Commenting on her college attendance plans, Almartha, a junior student commented:

My plan for this, which is my short term goal, is to basically maintain my GPA this year and study for the SAT and ACT. Then, I think in the spring I'll be

prepared hopefully at that time and take it [test] and for senior year, basically just keep my grades up and do my work. I also will fill out the applications for scholarships. After high school, I'll probably attend, no hopefully, most likely will attend college. I'm still trying to decide which universities I want to go to.

Shakira, a sophomore student said:

I want to be a neurosurgeon. That requires, oh my God, like 12 years of college and you got to go to medical school. I started looking on the internet, by 8th grade. They [neurosurgeons] make \$36,000, probably more, a month. Oh my God! That was in 2008 maybe it changed now in 2010. I went in the CollegeBoard website and I made an account. I think I wasn't supposed to but I looked up Harvard, but Harvard is really hard. I looked it up, and I went on their sites, they have like honors and like stuff like that. But just the way they were explaining it, seemed like their courses are hard. With my grades, I don't think that I'm good enough for Harvard. A's and B's can't make it to Harvard. You need at least all A's and one B. That's good enough, and you need to have referrals.

Mary, a sophomore student interested in filming stated:

I went online in my computer. Some, colleges require you to write your own movie, and that's about it. They want you to write a movie, know how to act, and just start the regular requirements of becoming a movie director. I don't know, if it's expensive, because I've never been to colleges, but I'm not a grown up, so I wouldn't know if that's price of tuition is really expensive or, it's just right.

Briana, a sophomore student said:

First I have the makeup plan. The next step would be research for the requirements I need to graduate in order to be in college. Then, I need to maintain my attendance and my grades in order to get into a good college. Here [at school] we get some information and research. Workers [admission representatives] come from college here, so students can go and view of how the colleges are.

Christina, a freshmen student said:

I gather information from my CAP advisor and then I researched online. Research and the people at the daycare, they told me if you want to be a teacher [education major], these are the stuff that you have to do. I'm trying to work with the kids, and see how they interact, so that's the community service I'm doing. So, I'm trying to take action right now.

Claudette, a freshmen student said:

I wanted to study the brain. I did a little bit of research, and a brain surgeon has to go to school for 12 years to get a degree. I want to work at the top hospital. I'm in ninth grade now; I'm taking a Health Science class. So, when I get into 10th grade, I take health science again. They [10th graders] start in the HOST [Health Occupation Student Track] program at that time. Then I do community service at the hospital, where my mom works. Then at 12th grade, well I keep my grades up to honor roll, like I'm doing now, and then prosper and go to college. I'm looking at Savannah State or FIU. I do that for 12 years. I'm going to look for a job, for to be a brain surgeon somewhere. I will get the job, and then I live my life.

Advanced Placement. The Advanced Placement (AP) Program provides a means whereby students can take college level work in secondary school, sit for standard end of the course examination, and, if successful, be placed forward with college credits. These courses are more difficult and involve more work than standard classes. Miami Edison Senior High School offers this opportunity to its student body and most participants in the study enrolled in the courses.

All seniors and junior participants of the study were enrolled in Advanced Placement Courses and they understood that this was a positive step taken toward college admittance. University officials are paying close attention to the number of AP courses that student have on their transcripts (Conley, 2005). Conley (2005) also mentioned that an outstanding student in the 1980s might have taken one or two AP courses, nowadays transcripts of similar students commonly contain five to six of such courses. Participants in this study had an average of four to six AP courses. They felt that these courses although difficult, would assist with their college plans and that their chance to be admitted to college would increase. Jessica, a senior student commented:

Because they told me that AP classes equals, college credits. So, when I heard the word college, definitely I think about college, and I'm like, oh yeah college! I got

to get on track; my parents want me to go to college. I'm in AP Chemistry, I took AP biology--love biology, I'm great in math, I have AP calculus, and AP Literature.

Robert, another senior student said:

My AP classes started in 10th grade when I had AP Human Geography and AP biology. Then at 11th grade, I had the next step which is AP World History and AP English and Composition. Now it's my senior year I have AP Chemistry, AP Literature and AP U.S. Government & Economics.

Almartha, a junior student replied:

I'm taking more AP classes because you know, if you pass the AP exam that's like a college credit. So far, I've taken one AP class that was AP Human Geography, and I passed that, so this year I'm taking AP Chemistry, AP American History, AP Language and Composition. I'm going to try to pass these AP classes. My goal is, every AP class that I take, I will pass it with a least of 3 or more, but if its science, hopefully I'll pass it with a 4 or more because I really like science.

Commenting about her AP courses, Claudette, a freshmen student indicated: "Yeah, they teach you more and they teach you faster. So, I think in college they are going to teach you really fast, so. You have to learn, you have to catch up.

Nevertheless, the following comment made by a top raking student in this study should be eye-opening to educators in the state of Florida. Keep in mind that this comment comes from a student who had high aspirations for college attendance and who is in good academic standing. Christopher, a sophomore student who is searching for an academic or sport scholarship to attend college said:

You feel like, since you have to do good in that [sports], and also good in your grades, that you know, the pressure is very high for you to maintain the level that you want either at sport or also with your grades. That's a lot of pressure there. To tell you the truth, I don't feel like taking AP right now, because, you know, this FCAT stuff, too much pressure. In AP you have to do a lot of work, a lot of research. You got like, papers, stacks of papers to read and do. I feel like, after this, if I do pass the FCAT, which I'm mostly struggling with reading, then I'm

going to take AP during my junior and senior years. That would be easier, less pressure on the FCAT and stuff.

Comments like the previous one worry me as an educator due to the fact that Christopher's academic credentials are in good standing (he has a 3.61 grade point average), but he perceives that he is struggling with reading and he is postponing taking AP courses, even though he knows this can be helpful for college admission consideration, because he does not want to jeopardize his grade point average. The student's financial situation calls for an academic or sport scholarship and at the time of the study he was playing two sports and struggling to find balance between his activities and maintaining a good GPA. He stated "It's about keeping that GPA up, trying to get a few scholarships in colleges"

Honors courses. Like AP courses the theme of Honors Courses emerges as students talked about steps taken in their college plans. Participants of this study are top ranked and their aspirations and accomplishments are high. They believed that because admission to college is becoming more competitive every day, it is imperative that they have an academic record that will stand out and that taking honors courses will help give a student that competitive edge.

For the most part, honors courses are developed locally by high school teachers to help meet the needs of accelerated students. Honors classes offer similar curricula to that of non-honor classes, but are more challenging. Honors courses are faster paced and cover topics more in-depth. However, these classes are not usually considered to be equivalent to college-level work, which is why they will not earn students college credit. Nevertheless, since study participants are high ability students, they understood that this

type of courses will assist them with their college plans and to practice “college course” content.

Sheri, a senior student commented:

All my core classes have been honors and AP’s. Except for the electives, which are regular classes. I’m taking pre-calculus, which is neither; it’s not specific AP or anything. But in nine, ten, and eleven grade I got honors, Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry. Tenth grade it’s AP Geography, and then I took AP biology and then ninth grade, I took honors for Space Science, honors for World History, honors English I, and what was another English course, let’s see... Honor’s Algebra. Yes, all that puts me in a very high rank.

Charlene, a junior student mentioned:

Oh, definitely with the AP and honors, you know more colleges will be looking at my application. Currently I have two; American History, and English Language Composition. Also, I was supposed to be taking two dual enrollment courses, but that hasn’t worked its way in yet. If I pass the classes I get 2 points, I mean 2 to 3 points on my high school credits, but in college, if I pass the test which is issued in May, I can receive those credits for the classes.

Jackie, a junior student, said:

I’ve been taking AP classes since 10th grade, 11th grade, and I will next year. Honors classes I’ve been taking since ninth grade, I take one AP, one honors. I don’t want to overload myself. I think I’m doing a good thing. I always make sure I have one AP and one honors and that’s it. I always do well at science as long as I listen and focus.

In general, many participants taking honors courses also took AP courses and seemed to be very concerned about their academic performance in those courses and maintaining their GPA. Honors courses are generally taught from similar lesson plan as regular classes but at a faster pace and in greater depth. Also, the honors class might delve deeper into a book’s historical underpinnings and yield more elaborate writing assignments. Nonetheless, research participants explained that taking those type of courses might increase their college admissions opportunity.

College visits. College visits help students to find out about the admissions policies, programs, and campus culture. College visits are one of the most important steps in the college search and selection process. They are the only way to get a true feel for a campus and find out whether it is the right fit for a student. Watts (2010) stated that college visits are important for the college attendance process because (a) they help to get students excited about going to college and, (b) also make it easier for students to make informed college decisions based on what they have personally observed. It is most important that students choose a school that is the right fit for them. It is not the name of the school, but the experience you have as an undergraduate that will contribute the most to a successful future. In the study, college visits served as eye opening experiences for the students. It answered or initiated questions regarding the school they were visiting. Miami Edison Senior High School organized a state-wide college tour that was of significance to the students. The financial situation of many did not allow for parents to take them out for college visits, but the college tour made it possible for some. In addition, participants of the Upward Bound Program had the opportunity to visit in-state and out-of-state colleges during their summer programs. Sheri, a senior student said:

We went on this statewide college tour to four schools with my CAP advisor. She was our chaperone. We had to pay \$140 dollars. We visited Florida State, University of Florida, University of South Florida and FAMU. So, I initially went there, I didn't like UF at all. I didn't like any of the schools. I wanted to go to USF badly. Then as I started to apply to USF, I had to submit my application at FACTS.org, but the application was not there. Then I guess started to take interest in UF. A lot of students over here are going to UF, so I'm like, even though it's going to be such a big campus, I may not see them.

Thomasina, a junior student said:

I went to LSU. I visited Southern A&M University Louisiana, and what other college did I visit.... ah, I visited Texas Southern University. When I got the feel

of college campus, I was like, I'm really enjoying this. So, I started looking at the majors and as I walked through the classrooms I looked at the settings. I can do this! Then I went on another tour, this summer, again. We went to Savannah State University, Morehouse, Spellman, and Clark Atlanta University. Savannah State University was my favorite!

Charlene, a junior student stated:

The college tour for the school is coming up soon so I would like to join them, that one, and recently over the summer I visited Savannah State University, Morehouse, Spellman and Tuskegee University through my Upward Bound program. We visited the college where you can receive information about them, their daily activity lives, and all the things that they have to offer. In terms of a decision, I'm kind of more on I don't know. The thing about going far, like the summer before I visited Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, it was far out. It was different from the city life so, from those that I've visited, you know, they're not my first choices, because it's different. Hopefully I can start opening up and saying ok.

My first choice were Howard University and UF, those kinds of things, but then, I learned with visiting Mt. Holyoke that you have to check the surrounding so even though those are my choices now, I still haven't checked out their campuses. I would like to check but the ones I had have visited, but I love Savannah State. It was quiet and calm but yet exciting. You think, in terms of fitting. Like, I'm from the city, and like this crazy, fast paced life, but sometimes it's nice to tone it down, but not too down, Savannah is just right, its calm, serene, but you can still have excitement going on. Others I've definitely checked and a few of them are too large of a school for me. That is the situation with Howard. Also, I've checked their program, but it doesn't seem to be as strong as the other one's that I was seeing but I can kind of research. I want to research more on them and see.

Almartha, a junior student stated:

I'm basically in this program, Upward Bound; it's with the Museum of Science. They expose us to different colleges. I've went on college tours with them and they basically sit down and talk to me and tell me what I need to do when I need to go, if I want to get into this certain college. I've visited UM, FIU, FAU, FAMU, and the University of Florida. I've so far visited most of the state colleges but this spring break they are taking us out of state to different colleges. So hopefully I'll see plenty more colleges to expose myself to. So far my favorites are: UF, FAU and UM. The people in the Upward Bound program, they really push us to go out of state because they tell us they want us to broaden our horizons. They want us to gain new experiences, get exposed to different cultures, and expose other people to our cultures. I'm looking at going out of

state, but if I would go out of state I would stay along the east coast and not go to the western coast, because I think the western coast is too far from my family and the weather changes would be like, total difference, like California experiences earthquakes, so I'm mainly looking at the eastern coast."

Jackie, a junior student said, "With the College Bound I had visited some colleges. USF, we went to New Orleans and stuff like that. Savannah, Georgia University and we went to Louisiana, Texas and Alabama, yeah."

Finances. An area of significant importance for participants of the study is the financial aspect of college attendance. All students expressed some type of concern when considering the cost of attendance. The majority seems to rely on federal government financial aid assistance (i.e., FAFSA) and scholarships. As early as 10th grade, students seemed to be concerned about the cost of college tuition. They put a strong emphasis on their grade point average as they were told by teachers and school administrators that "GPA is equal to money in college." Because the majority of these students are first generation, it does not seem parents were knowledgeable or involved regarding the financial aid process. In many cases it appeared that students were leading and providing their parents with financial information. Senior students were far more aware than their parents about costs, deadlines, and the documents needed from parents. For example, Jessica, a senior student said:

I applied for early decision to UM, so if I get accepted that's where I'm going regardless if I can pay or not. So like, that kind of terrifies me, that I'm poor. I depend on scholarships...scholarships. I'm praying to God I get scholarships. I wrote essays, a lot of essays, and a lot of writing. But I'm definitely applying to FAFSA. I'm definitely applying. As soon as my parents send their tax returns, I'm applying like that! Like for UM, I already had to submit a pre-FAFSA for an early decision, so I already did that on Saturday, and so then if I get accepted I'll know in December 17, so I'm waiting for that day, oh my God!

Robert, another senior student stated:

Then, my first step was to get my grades together. It [GPA] was high enough as it was, like a 3.2. but she told us that GPA is equivalent to money. So, the higher the GPA the more money, so that's what I placed in my mind. I believe she was talking about the scholarships, and you know, the more chances of you getting to college for free. Like a full ride.

Sheri, the third senior student was also aware. She said:

FSU is my first choice because in-state tuition is like \$15,000 vs. Washington State which is like \$37,000. Also, the location, Washington State is far away from home. I still wanted to stay within the bounds of Florida. Even though FSU is far away from home, I could still you know, like make a trip back home easily but, whereas Washington University, taking an airplane would be needed to go there and it would be costly. The economy is bad and is even worse for college students. Since I was small, I used to always save my money, but that's for my personal expense. As for scholarships, I plan to depend on scholarships. I plan to apply for financial aid on that's January 1st. I have only applied at two scholarships, the Bill Gates scholarship the Millennium, and the Ron Brown.

Annette, the fourth senior also indicated the importance of finances by noting:

I'm paying for school with Florida Bright Futures, FAFSA, financial aid, scholarships and grants. I started with Gates Millennium scholar, but haven't finished it. My CAP advisor is on me like crazy. Also, Kentucky Fried Chicken Scholarship, I got to get that one. So, my goal, before I graduate is to get a 3.5 weighted because, that's where the money's at. If I have a high enough GPA, like a 3.5, some colleges will overlook some faults, because GPA is everything. It's not just the test score because you never know what can happen. There are some smart people who are not good at test scale or what have you, there are so many distractions. So I feel as if, you know, GPA is everything, when I look at the requirements for all school scholarships, 3.5, I can do this, it's not hard getting that test score, it's that GPA. I want a 3.5 before I graduate. I want something that I can brag, I graduated with a 3.5!

Almartha, a junior student stated:

I'm paying for college with grants and scholarships. It's not going to be completely different for me; it's just that now it's going to count. I'm paying for it or the scholarship that I'm on is going to be paying for it and I have to maintain that GPA to keep that scholarship. I don't really want to look at loans, because I found out that there is a limit of loans you can get, and I may need that loan for medical school. Loans are my last options. Even for medical school, I really don't want to take loans because you have to pay it back. Most of my teachers, I

remember in second grade my Spanish teacher was telling me that she was still paying loans, and I don't want to end up in that situation. So, my main goal is to get scholarships to pay for my education. I need to look for scholarships and see if I meet the requirements. If I meet the requirements, I got to fill out like if they ask you to write an essay, I got to write essays, go to interviews and just basically talk to my CAP advisor because you know the CAP advisor is the one that's college oriented, and sometimes she has to recommend you for scholarships too. Also, my Upward Bound program gives us a lot of websites that they told us. FASTWEB is really a good idea and we could just Google scholarships, but we have to make sure it's valid, because there are a lot of people that will scam you, and there are scams that will scam you for scholarship money.

Christopher, a sophomore student said:

I calculate my chances of graduating and getting a free scholarship. I calculated it and my chance is like a 0.5 chance. This is based on, it's not only you, that's trying to graduate, in the state, the country, or the world. It's not only looking at kids in America. There's like so many kids out there looking at opportunities. This school, has about I would say 20 more kids the same as me. Better yet, imagine the whole world, and imagine how much high schools there are out there. There are more high schools than colleges. So if, there are more high schools than colleges, there already kids on college, and kids that are going to college the following year, and... what are your chances of make it? It's not good. But I think the next part actually gives me more chances, 5% to 2%, that is that I'm Haitian. I wasn't born in [the U.S.], you know, sometimes, being a foreign student raises your chances if you're doing better than a lot of other foreign kids, that it gives you a better chance.

For junior and sophomore students, the focal point is the search for scholarships.

This group also, seems not to be very aware of the differences in cost, for example in-state vs. out of state tuition. Nevertheless, all students had at least information regarding the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and believe that they have some knowledge regarding the process of applying and searching for scholarships. This information is critical when dealing with students from high priority schools, who are the targets of the Talented Twenty program. High priority schools have a high percentage of free lunch eligible students, acute teacher shortages, and large numbers of students served by Chapter I, the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act.

Military. When considering options after high school, the military is often a choice considered by low SES students and in this study was discussed by a couple of students. Although students in this study aspire to attend college, a few of them were considering having a military career first and then college. Students talked about military options and described what they understood was a military “way of living”. Thomasina talked about incentives for combining college education with military service and additional information that she obtained through conversations with her two brothers, who had joined the military. Justin considered the military options since his father retired from the military forces and a sister just joined the forces recently. Thomasina, a junior student, commented:

I have two brothers in the service. One is a marine and the other is an army soldier. They are both sergeants in their ranks. One is in Afghanistan now. They had told me about it [military], you know. The branches are similar, they just run differently. One is simpler than the other. Another is more like...what's the word I'm looking for? It's more brutal... more rigorous, it's like down to the point. I also read about it [military options] online. I actually go to a website and read brochures and when college fairs come to the area, I'll go and ask the Sergeant or the Major, questions and he will then explain it to me. People say they won't do it because they think about war but, you know, you don't always get deployed to another country. It's dependent on your rank, the line of work that you do, and the people in your squad. It's not like they're going to pick you... hey you, and then you're getting deployed! Now the truth is that if they send you, you have to go, or you will get a felony. They arrest you for 5 years and you will get a dishonorable discharge. It is a commitment of 4 years. Yes, I would go to college for 4 years, so I'm willing to make that commitment, either way. I would be still going to school. That's all I really care about. Four years on base [military] basically, I'll be living as if I was living here; except I'll be working for them. I'll be getting a stipend for like a \$1,000 and basically this will cover living expenses, food and all the little commodities and stuff that I would like to do. I can easily go out with my other cadets, or basically live like I was in college, except military style. You understand?

But the difference is, when you are in college, you have financial aid and that would be your stipend. So that's the difference I noted. It's basically, the same thing except, just different. For college, since I'm in the process now, I will take

the ACT, and SAT. I'm going to do all the steps. This is my plan. I'm going to do all the steps. Basically, I will sign college applications, research colleges, pick a major, take all the tests that I need, keep my grades up, graduate with honors, and all that will be leading up to college. Then I'm going to do all the things that, I would be proud of me and my efforts. So, if at the end I decide to change my mind, I'll be ready for both paths. All I have to do is decide. Say yes to one, or say yes to the other. Then, if any questions about college I'll ask my CAP advisor.

Justin said:

I wanted to go to Tampa University and if that doesn't really work out, then I want to go to the army, because my father was in the army. He's already out. He finished the army session. My sister, she going in January, so I want to do the same thing.

According to Merrow (2007) today the military has access to high school students because of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Schools receiving federal funds must give the military the same access that college and career counselors have or risk losing their federal money. Unless parents specifically request otherwise, schools must give the military personal contact information, addresses, and telephone numbers, for their students.

Pre-collegiate programs. Pre-collegiate programs, such as Upward Bound appear to be an important catalyst that promoted postsecondary access among participants of the study. Outreach efforts that increase students' aspirations, expose them to the rigors of college at an early age, and provide interventions to improve academic performance have been instrumental in revealing the barriers to equitable opportunity for higher education (Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997; Gandara, Larson, Rumberger, & Mehan, 1998; Perna, 2002). All Upward Bound participants in the study were very satisfied with its services. They each talked about exposure to college-level work on college campuses. This can give disadvantaged students a vision

of themselves undertaking and succeeding in postsecondary education. Along these lines, Thomasina, a junior student stated:

I'm in the Miami-Dade Upward Bound Program. They take us on college tours. It's a college outreach program, they eventually get us prepped for things we need for college and in terms of tests, SAT Prep. These past Saturdays I had prep classes and tutoring for SAT. So far I understand the basics of the test. I can take the PSAT and I'll have the feel of the test. I started with the College Bound Program in ninth grade. I was sitting in class, eighth period, and they [Upward Bound Staff] just came and handed me a field trip form. At that time, I was wondering how do these people locate me? Because I'm not a popular student. It was random selection. So then a guy friend of mine, we were like, how did you find me? So, we just went to the field trip thinking OK, we don't have to be in school. Then our teacher was talking about the program and at the time I was only thinking SAT prep and PSAT prep class for the summer. But the thing that caught my attention was when she said they pay you and you go on free college tours. At that point my ears went, tell me more. That's what I said, tell me more.

So when we went to the final acceptance program, we got accepted, but me, prior to entering the program, I didn't think it was going to be such a success. After that, every summer for six weeks, we go and we sit in class, they (Upward Bound Staff) teach us science, English, math, and life managing skills. They just keep us busy; but every day you participate they pay you, so at the end of the summer I ended up getting 190 dollars! Plus they take you on trips and taught us about the ecosystems. They gave us school supplies and we just recently got T-84 scientific calculators, which are like a hundred some dollars, each calculator. They gave us cameras to do experiments and later you get to keep. Eight megapixels large cameras! A program that loves you that much, why would you want to leave? This summer we have another college tour. When they take us on a trip, it's really fun. I'm so happy. Without this program I would never know about college."

Similarly, Almartha a junior student pointed out:

I'm basically in this program, Upward Bound with the Museum of Science. They expose us to different colleges. I've went on college tours with them and they basically sit down and talk to me and tell me what I need to do when I need to go, if I want to get into this certain college. I've visited UM, FIU, FAU, FAMU, and the University of Florida. I've so far visited most of the state colleges but this spring break there are taking us out of state to different colleges. So hopefully I'll see plenty more colleges to expose myself to. So far my favorites are: UF, FAU and UM. The people in the Upward Bound program, they really push us to go out of state because they tell us they want us to broaden our horizons. They want us to gain new experiences, get exposed to different cultures, and expose other

people to our cultures. I'm looking at going out of state, but if I would go out of state I would stay along the east coast and not go to the western coast, because I think the western coast is too far from my family and the weather changes would be like, total difference, like California experiences earthquakes, so I'm mainly looking at the eastern coast.

Another junior, Charlene, also commented on Upward Bound and college visits stating:

Through my Miami-Dade Upward Bound program I had visited Savannah State University, Morehouse, Spellman and Tuskegee University. The college tour for the school is coming up soon so I would like to join them too. You know I love Upward Bound even though this was my first summer, so I didn't get too much. I went to visit Mt. Holyoke College and with Upward Bound they offer us a lot. They take us out to new settings; take us out of state to visit colleges and restaurants, leisure time while we're at those colleges. We go hang out, they show us how to be responsible, be on your own, like more of what college is about. Just being on your own and just walk around campus and then going an hang out with friends and then eating, but still having your work done. It was fabulous.

Jackie, another junior student recounted:

I am at a program is called Upward Bound Trio. I got in it in ninth grade because my friendship told me and the group was recruiting. Every summer we go to college tours to some colleges, and one of the college tours we went to Savannah University. I had visited some other colleges like USF. We went to New Orleans and stuff like that. Savannah, Georgia University and we went to Louisiana, Texas and Alabama, yeah. I really liked it.

Christopher, who is a younger Upward Bound participant, declared:

I'm in a program called Upward Bound. They are like the mentors. Whenever I need something I call them; got their numbers. If I were to text them right now, I would be like oh, I got this problem in school; they'll come right now and check it out. Upward Bound teaches me a lot of things about science, business, all that preparation to go to college like the requirements, ACT test scores and things.

Myers and Schirm's (1999) research on aspirations also reveals that when compared to non-participating peers, Upward Bound students (a) earned additional coursework in areas of social studies and sciences, (b) were more likely to graduate from high school (65% vs. 52%), (c) were 12% more likely to attend a 4-year college, and (d)

earning about seven more credits in 4-year colleges. In general, the services provided by pre-collegiate outreach programs aim to counter negative school or community influences (e.g., lack of rigorous curriculum, poorly trained teachers, lack of role models) by providing the missing elements that help students aspire to prepare for and obtain college enrollment. In this way, programs attempt to provide students with the social capital necessary to achieve college enrollment (Perna, 2002).

As students research their preferred colleges and focus in their future, it seems that more questions and uncertainty arise. While seniors focused on the admission requirements of their preferred institution, I also heard a tone of uncertainty, especially as financial aspects got evaluated. In general, as these students became more accustomed to evaluating educational institutions, they became better at processing the information. They looked for program information, financial options, evaluated campus environments, and listened carefully to details of information provided.

College Choice and Attendance Plans

The third and final stage of college choice, the actual choice stage, is generally reached by a student who has gained a sufficient base of information on different colleges to help eliminate alternatives from the choice set. Having a base of knowledge allows the student to focus on one institution that will meet the student's individual needs (McDonough, 1997). It is important to note that a student may opt out of the college choice process at any stage (Hossler et al., 1989).

The focus of this section will be on the seniors in the study because their educational choices and decisions regarding college attendance are closer to realization than for students at lower grade levels in this study. The data supported the Hossler and

Gallagher (1987) model, which posits that students' decisions to attend college come early in their education track; usually by the ninth grade. In this study, however I compiled more descriptive information from seniors. Students in this grade level were able to describe the process in more detail and they had more anecdotes. From all the interviews, I was able to identify various student backgrounds and personal characteristics (i.e., family support, leadership and extracurricular participation, and coursework rigor) that are related to college attendance decisions, but to trace the development of the students' plans; the data provided by senior students can better illustrate the process.

In examining seniors' college attendance plans and choices, I found the following common characteristics among the group: (a) development of early aspiration toward college attendance (b) family encouragement, (c) development of college attendance plans by 10th grade, (d) advanced understanding of the college process, (e) use of good strategies to gather information regarding college, (f) enrollment in honors and Advanced Placement courses, (g) visits to preferred college(s), (h) in-state college attendance plans, (i) first generation students, (j) leadership skills, (k) financial concerns, and (l) no knowledge of the Talented Twenty program. I will describe this group in detail since when they were interviewed they were closer to completing the decision process and had concrete plans concerning college attendance. Seniors at this point were excited about their college plans and waiting for responses from admissions offices.

Jessica's educational choices and decisions began at an early stage, inspired by her family. She recalled "My parents, since I was born, implanted in me the idea of becoming a doctor." As a result, she was raised with the idea of attending medical school

at the University of Miami. At school she maintained excellent grades, took AP and honors coursework, developed strong leadership skills by participating in science and educational organizations such as RISE and GEMS . Jessica did extensive research online and through her participation in RISE developed an interested in the field of engineering and medicine. She commented, “RISE got me interested in engineering. I’m interested in medicine, so I researched that together, and I got biomedical engineering. I researched and read about it, so I was like, Oh, I could do that!”

Then she visited various colleges, all local (in South Florida), such as Barry University, Florida International University, Florida Memorial College, and the University of Miami. Jessica learned about admission requirements, experienced the environments, and compared the institutions to her academic record. For example, concerning UM she commented “I have the requirements to actually get in there. Well, I have the grades and the GPA, and I need an un-weighted of a 3.3 and my weighted is a 4.6.” She has maintained active contact with university officials at UM, and calls them on a monthly basis to review admissions concerns. Her financial situation was of concern; she applied for federal aid because she is dependent on grant aid to pay for college tuition. Jessica’s dream school was the University of Miami. When asked, “Why UM?” she replied:

It has the atmosphere. The atmosphere is amazing. I feel like I’m at home. The people are nice, they’re friendly. At least the people I talked to, my friend Steve, he got into UM on a full scholarship, and so if he could do it I can do it. Also, they have all the programs that I wanted. They have everything that I want and UM has just always been there; it’s just been there in the back of my head.

For Robert, college attendance plans and educational decisions began in ninth grade. Robert acknowledged that his parents have kept him on track by emphasizing

education and responsibility in life. Like Jessica, Robert was a leader at school. A few of his extracurricular activities were being part of the Student Government Association, the Honors Society, Track Team, Baseball Team, Music ensemble, Homecoming King, 5000 Role Models, and Silver Knights, among others clubs. Robert had been strongly influenced by family members and teachers to attend college.

At the beginning, his college plans revolved around the University of South Florida, mainly because his sister attended that institution and he was only exposed to information about USF. Later, after gathering additional information his opinion of his options changed. He remembers that his first step toward the college decision-making was to increase his grade point average. Then as he continued in high school, he always tried very hard to maintain his GPA in good standing. Academic preparation was a priority for him. He took all possible honors and AP courses at high school (i.e., human geology, world history, English composition, chemistry, literature, U.S. government, economics, and pre-calculus). Robert also acknowledged that a group of teachers had inspired and motivated him. Regarding academics, he commented:

I saw all the seniors and how they got their stuff together; and the ones that didn't get their stuff together ended up staying in the neighborhood, or didn't go to college. That was something that we really had to think about. Later, they're looking for a job. You know, some of them go to Miami Dade College and you know the other community colleges. It's all right but it could've been better .

Robert has done extensive online research and visited some in-state schools. His number one choice for college was the University of Florida. He was planning to graduate in 5 years with a degree in Business Administration and then attend law school. When asked, "Why UF"? he replied, "UF was the first choice ever since 10th grade and I guess I love the football team. Go Tim Tebow! Also, I like the diversity and the fact they

have a big population, which I kind of like.” He applied to UF and submitted all test scores, transcripts, and necessary documents. As a secondary plan, he also applied to Florida State University. Robert was planning to pay for college with federal financial aid and the Gator Club scholarship.

Sheri’s college plans and decisions began in 10th grade when her AP Human Geography teacher talked about college attendance, and encouraged students to research and apply to colleges. Sheri remembered the teacher and said, “She tried to motivate us to go to Yale and Harvard. She was a great teacher, not only did she taught Human Geography, but she really opened our eyes to the rest of the world.” Then Sheri started by working on her grades and taking all honors and AP courses available. She understood that grade point average was critical for college admission. Additionally, Sheri became more active at school and in searching for leadership opportunities within the school. The college visit organized by school was very helpful in exposing Sheri to different colleges and helping her narrow her potential options. It is important to mention the fact that Sheri stated sending admission application during summer of her junior year. She was planning to major in political sciences. Her first choice was Florida State University because of its location. She stated “FSU will offer you the opportunity to be far from home, but close because you’re still in the state.” Her second choice was the University of Florida. Regarding FSU, Sheri’s evaluation was that the tuition will be affordable for her. She mentioned, “\$15,000 is a relatively good price for education.” In considering her financial status, she was ready to apply for FAFSA as early as January 1st. Also, she researched and applied to the Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship and the Ron Brown Scholarship.

Sheri also researched a program at FSU that is specifically for first generation students called the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) program. This center provides preparation, orientation and academic support programming for students who are among the first in their family to attend college, and for those who otherwise may face unique challenges in college because of economic, cultural or educational circumstances. She seemed to be very interested in the program offerings.

Annette began her college attendance journey in 10th grade. She was inspired by the teachers at school who made it possible for her to consider herself a college bound student. Her goal was to graduate with a minimum of a 3.5 GPA. She knew that in achieving her goal and attending college she will be the first one in her family to attempt this endeavor. She understood that with good grades she can obtain the necessary financial assistance. Her focus was on grades. She stated:

GPA is everything, it's not people, not just test score because you never know what can happen with FCAT; there are some smart people who are not good at test scale or what have you, there are so many distractions, but GPA is what counts.

Annette has been taking AP courses and is making an effort to participate in extracurricular activities. At the time of the study, she has completed six AP courses: Biology, Government, Literature, Psychology, Calculus, and Spanish. She continued with her college attendance research and was looking for information regarding a variety of institutions such as, Clark University in Atlanta, Florida State University, the University of Florida, and Florida Agricultural Mechanical University (FAMU). She planned to attend Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia, but thinks that it is too expensive and her family cannot afford the cost. She mentioned, "I wanted to go to Spellman but

their out of state tuition is outrageous, so I'm not going to risk that, and I already know, you know, how the financial situation is, so I'm not going to risk that." Although she considered herself a procrastinator, her academic and college plans are a priority. She said:

Oh no, that's one thing I don't play about. Right now I'm finished with the college application process, I'm done, all I have to do is, I feel as if I have to take my ACT. I'm studying for that, I'm looking over my math very seriously, that's the part, because I need to improve math scores.

She has analyzed her ACT and SAT scores, and considered re-taking them if necessary. She has applied to four schools: Clark Atlanta University, Florida State University, the University of Florida and Florida Agricultural Mechanical University. When asked to rank them in order of preference and explain her preferences, she replied:

UF, FSU, FAMU, and Clark Atlanta. My favorite is Gator nation [UF], love it, I went to their college tour and fell I love with it. Plus UF is like the Harvard of Florida. So I felt that's a great school for me because its diversity. I want to learn, and I want to meet different people, different cultures. It's like a large campus and I feel like I can get contacts there and I can be myself, and it's a challenge because it's ranked 47th in the nation. So, that's a challenge for me, I need that challenge, I need that rush, that's all.

Annette is an achiever and has selected a school that, in her opinion, is selective and has prestige. She plans to study political sciences and mentioned that she would like to become a U.S. Ambassador in China. She explained her plans for taking Chinese language classes in the future and discussed how China is a powerful country in this world. One of her comments was, "We owed them a lot of money. One yen at a time, so why not learn the language?" She has this aspiration to study different cultures and although she would like to go out of state to study, she stated it will be too expensive. At the time of the study, she applied for Florida Bright Futures, federal financial aid, and

scholarships, such as the Gates Millennium. Interestingly, when I asked if she knew something about the Talented Twenty program, she was the only participant of the study who had a recollection regarding the program. She declared:

Yeah, I heard, it was, it's actually at FAMU. It's part of the application. They asked: "are you part of Talented Twenty of your school?" Then I didn't know what it was and they explained top 20% or 10% of your class, or whatever. So, I was like, yeah, I'll check that box, like, of course, yeah top five. Then, I don't know, that's pretty much it.

The Talented Twenty program

Aside from Annette's FAMU admissions application experience, there was no evidence presented by participants that demonstrated that they had ever received information about the Talented Twenty program. During the interview process all participants were asked directly: "Have you ever heard of the Talented Twenty program?" Three of the seniors responded negatively, saying: "No. No idea about Talented Twenty. Never heard of it" (Jessica), "No. What is that about? (Robert), and simply "No" (Sheri). Juniors, sophomores and freshmen offered similar responses. Checking to see if students received information but did not recognize the name of the program; I asked if they received any letter or brochure with information regarding the benefits of the program and received a unanimous negative response.

For these typically first generation, low income high achieving students, receiving information about the educational opportunities in the state of Florida would be an excellent way to support their college aspirations. Before the end of the interview process, taking in consideration my role as an educator, I found myself explaining the program to most participants of the study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of the study regarding understanding the relationship between the Talented Twenty program and college aspirations for high ranking students at a high priority school. This chapter also provides a summary of the study and underlines major findings and conclusions. Included is a section that briefly summarizes the purpose, methods, and themes examined in this study. The chapter ends with recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Study

In Florida, the Talented Twenty program, a percentage plan, emerged in 1999 as a voluntary, method of achieving diversity. The program's main purpose was to increase college attendance by students from high priority schools. Florida educational policymakers posited that with the development and implementation of the program, all eligible students can aspire to obtaining a college education because they are now guaranteed access to the postsecondary system. Since college attendance and graduation are related to the improvement of lives. Understanding how and when students make those types of decisions is critical in the development of sound educational policies, in addition to being important for students, parents, and advisors.

In this study, I listened to students' insights in an attempt to understand how these high ranking students at a high priority (low performance) school perceived their college opportunities. I undertook the study because my many years of experience as a Florida higher education administrator had left me with a number of questions: How do high

school students develop college aspirations? When do they develop plans to attend college? Also, what role the Talented Twenty program had in this process? The study was conducted with 16 high ranking students attending a high priority secondary school in Miami Dade County. This research examined students' perceptions via interviews to understand associations or connections between student development, as posited in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model and the Talented Twenty program.

By responding to interview questions each participant was able to talk about his or her experiences related to aspirations and college plans. A school counselor identified high ranking students from all different grades for the study and I conducted three informational sessions to recruit candidates for the research. Four students participated from each high school academic level: (i.e., freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors). Individual 45-minute interviews were conducted and transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded and analyzed to understand participants' aspirations and college attendance plans.

This analysis was organized around four a priori themes: (a) development of college attendance aspirations, (b) gathering of information about college, (c) college selection, and (d) Talented Twenty program. In addition, through the analysis of data, a number of themes emerged and were related to the a priori ones. The emergent themes were: family, first generation, educational beliefs, leadership and participation in extracurricular activities, religion, grade level, college information processes, Advanced Placement courses, honors courses, college visits, finances, military, pre-collegiate programs, college attendance plans.

I related the *development of aspirations* a priori theme to internal and external influences that students described regarding their aspiration to attend a postsecondary institution. These themes were: family, religion, first generation (based on parents' level of education), leadership and extracurricular activities, educational beliefs, and the grade level (timing) in which students realize their potential for college attendance. Having a better understanding of how and when students develop college aspirations is critical in the development of programs to assist college bound students, especially to assist high ranking students at high priority schools.

The second a priori theme of *gathering of information and the college search process* concerned how students in the study evaluated their opportunities and developed an approach to enhance their college admittance opportunities. This process also moves a student in the direction of making a stronger commitment to college attendance (Hossler et al., 1989). The emergent themes I related to this were: Advanced Placement and honors courses, college visits, finances, military, and pre-collegiate programs (e.g., Upward Bound).

The *college selection* a priori theme addressed how a student who has college aspirations, and who has gained knowledge concerning college attendance, is acting on it (e.g., taking Advanced Placement course, applying for college scholarships, applying for college entrance) and making specific college attendance plans. Seniors in this study were very descriptive concerning their college selection process. Having a base of knowledge allows a student to focus on one institution that will meet the student's individual needs (McDonough, 1997).

The Talented Twenty, although a program that is purported to motivate high ranking students at high priority schools in the state of Florida, was not mentioned by students in this study. Since participants had no knowledge of the Talented Twenty program, it had no part in their college decision making. Listening to their college attendance plans that were being made as part of a process rooted in their aspirations and perceived opportunities was instructive. How the students gained and acted on knowledge about college attendance and the impact they perceived of those actions on their future is crucial information for educators, parents, and policy makers.

Research Questions

Specifically, this research was undertaken to answer the following main and subsidiary questions: How do high ranking high school students attending a high priority school in a south Florida district perceive their college opportunities?

1. How do they describe their educational choices and decisions?
2. What do they know about the Talented Twenty program?
3. What relationship exists between that knowledge and their educational decisions?

In trying to best answer how students perceived their opportunities and described choices and opportunities, I developed the diagram below (Figure 5) to better understand students' descriptions. It was essential to describe the period of time in which students began exploring and acting on the idea of attending college. Concepts in the figure are positioned where they are core or essential; they are not exclusive of a stage/grade level. Describing the influences and experiences that they said had a significant effect on their

aspirations to attend college was of special interest. Moreover, the connections, associations, choices, and college attendance pathways are revealing.

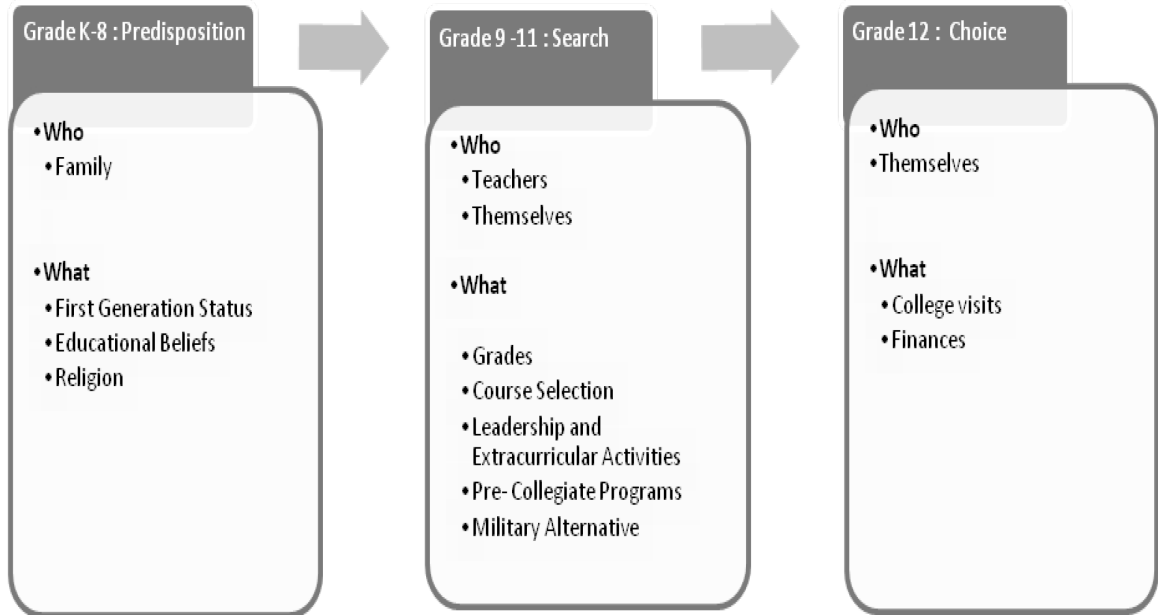


Figure 5. Timeline of students' college decision making.

One of the ways in which it was revealing was in how strongly it supported Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. For example, although the model was not developed based on low SES students such as the participants in the present study, parents were the strongest influence in the development of these students' college aspirations, as in Hossler & Gallagher (1987) model. Further, in the model academic achievement was strongly related to college attendance; in the study participants described how they perceived maintaining high GPAs and taking Advanced Placement and honors courses would assist them in getting into college.

That being said, there were also ways in which the model was not supported for the study's high achieving students from a high priority school. For example, differences were noted in the duration and level of parental involvement.

Description of Educational Choices and Decisions

Grade K-8 : Predisposition. Conforming to research in students' postsecondary educational choices and decisions (Hossler & Gallaher, 1987; Hossler & Stage, 1992), the study found that high school students formalize their educational plans between eighth and 10th grade. In the study, all participants formalized college attendance plans by 10th grade. Freshmen and sophomores recalled deliberating about their college plans by the eighth grade, while seniors in the study noted that their college attendance decisions plans were established by the 10th grade. This information was critical in the study and reflected common knowledge about students in general within the area of student development. In addition, to a large extent it supported Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model in a population of high ranking, Black students, mostly of Haitian descent, in a high priority school in south Florida.

Researchers have begun to speculate that college attendance decisions may be made as early as elementary school or middle school (Johnson, Sharp, Kurotsuchi, & Waltman, 1996; Schmit, 1991). A third of the participants in the study reaffirmed this premise by describing that by seventh grade or earlier they had thoughts and conversations with teachers on the topic of college attendance plans. By sixth grade Claudette recalled searching for information about becoming a "brain surgeon" and learning that she needed to obtain a college degree to pursue that career. Also, Christina

remembered talking to her teachers in seventh grade and asking about the specific path she needed to follow to become a teacher.

Students mentioned multiple reasons related to their first thought of college attendance. Most talked about parental and family member encouragement and others included their school teachers a source of inspiration. Previous research on the effect of student background characteristics has indicated that parental encouragement is the best predictor of postsecondary educational aspirations (Falsey & Haynes, 1984; Hearn 1984, Hossler and Stage, 1992; Sewell & Shah, 1978; Tillery, 1973). In the study, 12 out of 16 students described their family as a source of inspiration and motivation in the development of their college aspirations, especially in the early years of their lives. Jessica, a senior student, went as far as stating that her parents “implanted” the idea of her being a doctor when she was born. Therefore, for these students, childhood family conversations regarding future plans, hopes, and dreams, included the topic of college attendance plans. In this study, that initial seed that parents planted in their children’s minds was a key factor and had a strong relationship with the development of student college aspirations. This is not to say that parental support and encouragement alone were sufficient to determine these students’ college attendance plans, but that they were an important part of the development of participants’ development of college attendance aspirations.

Interestingly, the fact that most participants were first-generation students, appeared to serve as an early source of motivation for college attendance. In the study, many expressed an intense desire of wanting to be the first in the family to pursue and complete a college degree. They expressed a genuine commitment toward the

educational achievement of college attendance. Christopher, a first generation sophomore student, indicated:

On my mom's side, there's about eight kids. None of them graduated from college. So I really feel like, if I got the chance to graduate, I'm going to take my chances to you know, because I live here, and she's in Haiti so I might you know, try to graduate.

As parental education level increases, children are more likely to plan for college attendance (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Therefore, it is important to note that I found that for participants of the study, the particularity of being first generation was two-fold: a challenge and a source of motivation. Perhaps, they might not have had all the resources and guidance than non-first generation individuals might have, but they had high aspirations and a strong desire for their families to be proud of them and to bring satisfaction to themselves.

Other students recognized early that obtaining a college education or degree was their only way to improve their social and economic situation. Getting a college education is commonly seen as a way out of poverty, and is a cornerstone of the American Dream (Swail, 2000). To better understand the current environment of the participants, it should be noted that during my school visits, I sensed that education in general was highly valued at Miami Edison Senior High. This is based on conversations with school counselors, teachers, staff, and in particular with participants of the study. Participants noted a postsecondary degree as a way to acquire status in society. They posited that in order to be "somebody in the world" you need a college degree.

Finally, although Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model does not address it, a topic that requires further examination as one that seemed to have some influence in the

development of these students' aspiration is the role of religion. In some instances, students were planning to select college programs that they understood were in alignment with their religious activities. For example, a student perceived that becoming a school teacher would allow her to leave work at 3:00 p.m. and then proceed without any inconvenience to her church service early at night. In the study, when describing Christina's choices for potential majors in college, a religious activity (service attendance) was her sole determinant factor when exploring college majors. There are researchers who are exploring this motivating factor, especially since religion is known as an individual shaping force (Mooney, 2005; Regnerus, 2000). Moreover, Regnerus (2000) has suggested that religion plays a critical role in the academics of low SES students.

On the group level, religion offers resources and pathways for relational support, pro-social activity, community access and awareness (Matton & Wells, 1995), and social justice (Lebowitz, 1999). For these reasons, religion is a variable that might require further examination in higher education.

Grade 9 – 11: Search. When describing and explaining their college search strategies and how they gathered information, it became clear that at this stage parents were less involved in this process while school teachers had more influence. In addition, this was a more independent process in which students evaluated their alternatives and made active decisions. Several students described how some school teachers asked them the right questions: questions such as, “Which colleges are you looking into?” “What are your plans?” “What are your goals?” Others recalled how important the guidance and the “eye opening” lectures were that some of their teachers offered.

Today available technology helps students to conduct extensive searches regarding college requirements and assists them in comparing opportunities. All students described how they searched for information and talked about the importance of being up-to-date with their email correspondence and deadlines for college admission processes (e.g., applications, financial aid, scholarships). At this level students described two ways of gathering information and acting on what they learn: (a) passive searches where they read information and attended discussions and (b) active searches where they sought financial support opportunities, asked questions, and visited campuses. Acting on these searches, they submitted online scholarship applications and enrolled in Advanced Placement and honors courses.

Not surprisingly, participants of the study were in good academic standing and the maintenance of their GPA was very high in their list of priorities. They all understood and described the importance of maintaining a high GPA in high school and the relationship between good grades and college entrance opportunities. They were certain about this relationship and explained that as their GPA increased their chances to be admitted into college also increased. Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) stated that higher grade point averages were correlated with higher likelihood that they planned to go to college after high school; and that student academic achievement (measured by grades) was the best predictor of postsecondary aspirations. Not only did the present study participants associate good grades with college entrance, but they clearly understood that their academic achievement would assist in their pursuit of scholarships. Several of them explicitly stated that one of their teachers told them: “your GPA equals money”.

As indicated above, a pro-active strategy that most of these high ranking students practiced is enrollment in Advanced Placement and honors courses. Thirteen students out of 16 in the study explained that these types of courses give them an advantage when applying to college, because college admissions offices prefer to admit students who have taken those courses. The literature supports this. For example, Conley (2005) found that university officials pay close attention to the number of AP courses that students have on their transcripts for admission purposes. Participants in this study took advantage of the class offerings of the school and in general each student had on average a total of four to six AP courses. Nevertheless, for many other students who attend schools in low socio-economic areas the offering of these types of courses is non-existent or limited and this can prevent low SES students from accessing institutions of higher education (Pitre, 2006).

Students in the study viewed their active participation in leadership opportunities and extracurricular activities as tools that would increase the likelihood of their being admitted into college and help them develop attributes that will serve them well in their future. Especially by their junior year they actively looked for leadership offerings inside the school or in the community. In the study, students who were grade level student government presidents, vice presidents of various student organizations (e.g., HOSA, FBLA) indicated that they make a concerted effort to be active members. In addition, they also understood that these extracurricular activities assisted them in developing a well-built resume. Similarly, Holland and Andre (1987) in a comprehensive literature review on extracurricular activities at secondary schools described how these activities

assisted in the development of personal-social characteristics, academic achievement, and educational aspirations and attainments of students.

A major theme and an aspect that from the students' point of view had great relevance in increasing their college attendance opportunities was their participation in Pre-Collegiate Programs. Participants of the Upward Bound Program explained the benefits of involvement by talking about the opportunities the program had offered them. Each of them mentioned how program staff coached them in terms of college requirements, assisted them in ACT and SAT test preparation, took them on college tours, and provided them with research tools such as cameras and calculators. Research has shown that this type of program increased students' aspirations, exposed them to the rigors of college at an early age, and provided interventions improved academic performance. These types of efforts have been shown to be instrumental in removing the barriers to equitable opportunity for higher education among economically disadvantaged populations (Fenske, Geranios, Keller, & Moore, 1997; Gandara, Larson, Rumberger, & Mehan, 1998; Perna, 2002). Thomasina, a junior student described her experience with Upward Bound:

I'm in the Miami-Dade Upward Bound Program. They take us on college tours. It's a college outreach program, they eventually get us prepped for things we need for college and in terms of tests, SAT Prep. These past Saturdays I had prep classes and tutoring for SAT. So far I understand the basics of the test. I can take the PSAT and I'll have the feel of the test. I started with the College Bound Program in ninth grade.

Finally, while Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have not discussed the military as an alternative to post-secondary education, in the study two students brought this up as they described their decision making process. They talked about the influence family

members who are in the military had on them. A particular junior student, Thomasina, who is in good academic standing and has a good understanding of her college opportunities, was still evaluating her choices. She expressed:

My plans are attending college, I'd like to go to college, but at the same time I would like to go to the air force and take a different route, because not everyone goes to college.

Post-secondary educators should be aware that the military choice might be common in Florida and other Southern states since for decades there has been a military trend in the recruitment of soldiers. In the military new recruits are disproportionately likely to come from the South, which is in line with the history of Southern military tradition (Center for Data Analysis Report on National Security and Defense, 2008). In addition, due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools across the nation today receiving federal funding are required to provide contact information on all their students to the U.S. military (Merrow, 2007). As students make decisions about college attendance, the military option may be one that approaches them rather than one that they approach.

Grade 12: Choice. The study revealed that by the 12th grade, after gaining sufficient knowledge and information on the college process, students are ready to make final decisions on college attendance. The first shift in students' perceptions was from the formation of college aspirations to the stability of their aspirations and a more concrete decision-making focus. In this second stage, students enrolled in courses and participated in activities while maintaining a high GPA. In what Hossler and Gallagher (1987) called the Choice stage of college decision making, the final set of post-secondary decisions are made. They decide whether to go to college and make their applications to

the colleges they select. In this study, the family conversations at this stage are lead by the students leading and informing parents about the process.

Seniors at this stage visit and contact their preferred school and try to update their information regarding requirements. They talked to admissions counselors regarding the test score information and validation of AP courses. Then they began sending college applications and exploring the different alternatives to finance the cost of tuition. With the guidance of school counselors, they continued searching and now submitted scholarship applications and completed their federal financial aid (FAFSA) applications. The CAP advisor was extremely helpful to them in transferring information regarding institution application waivers and financial aid procedures. I perceived a feeling of excitement, while simultaneously a sensation of anxiety from the seniors. They described many months of narrowing down their choices based on location and affordability and expressed feelings of helplessness since admissions decisions depended on external factors. Jessica, a senior student, in describing her situation said:

For UM I already had to submit a pre-FAFSA for an early decision, so I already did that on Saturday, and so then if I get accepted I'll know in December 17, so I'm waiting for that day, oh my God! I applied for early decision to UM, so if I get accepted that's where I'm going regardless if I can pay or not. So like, that kind of terrifies me, that I'm poor. I depend on Scholarships... Scholarships. I'm praying to God I get scholarships. I wrote essays, a lot of essays, and a lot of writing. But I'm definitely applying to FAFSA. I'm definitely applying. As soon as my parents send their tax returns, I'm applying like that!

As reported by their CAP advisor after the data were all collected, the seniors in this study all received admission letters from 4-year institutions by the end of the academic year. Jessica was admitted to the University of Miami, Florida International University,

and Barry University. Robert, Sheri and Annette were all admitted to the University of Florida.

Knowledge about the Talented Twenty program and its Relationship with their Educational Decisions

The answer to the second subsidiary research question is brief. Students had no knowledge of the program and although being eligible for the Talented Twenty, they had received no information on the program; neither were they contacted by the Florida Department of Education. Therefore, in answer to the third subsidiary research question, from the narratives of all the participants in the study, I concluded that there was no relationship between participant's knowledge regarding the Talented Twenty program and their educational decisions. The one student who did know about the program had learned about it only while completing a university admissions application. She had no previous knowledge regarding the program and still understood only that the document requires student ranking information. Again, data from this study support the idea that students begin planning for college attendance by 10th grade, yet no information regarding the Talented Twenty program is generally made available to them to influence their aspirations or decisions in a significant way.

When examining the narratives of study participants relative to a predisposition stage and how they develop aspirations for college attendance, the Talented Twenty program was not mentioned. Rianna posited, "The very first time that I thought going to college, it was like probably back in seventh grade. I like to think ahead for my future, because I don't want to be like people I see, that talk about they wish they could have done things different and stuff." Four other participants also recalled thinking about

college attendance this early. The literature suggested that educational interventions intended to influence the educational aspirations of students are most likely to succeed if they take place by the eighth or ninth grade (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999).

Corresponding with the literature, this study reveals similar data. Hossler and Stage (1992) found that most high school students formalize their educational plans between eighth grade and 10th grade. All participants indicated that they began to think about and/or plan for their college attendance between middle school and 10th grade.

At the search stage, in which students gather information to assist in their evaluations of institutions and in making a stronger commitment to college attendance, information regarding the Talented Twenty program was nonexistent. Basically, when students were gathering information and analyzing elements that potentially could assist them in their decision, the Talented Twenty program had no influence. Although all students in the study were Talented Twenty eligible, and the program was developed to assist precisely this population, the students appeared to be unaware of the offerings and information. Their decisions to take honors and Advanced Placement courses, to participate in extracurricular and pre-collegiate activities had nothing to do with knowing they were Talented Twenty eligible.

Based on student development literature, Talented Twenty letters at the 11th grade (prospective eligibility) or 12th (eligibility) grade should not be expected to have any influence on students' aspirations to attend college since research (Hossler & Stage, 1992) had found students make this type of decision at an earlier school grade. Findings presented in this study support this. In February, when the eligibility letter were

supposed to go out, students in the study all the seniors were waiting for admissions decisions from their selected schools.

Implications for Practice

Findings suggest that, if those responsible for administering the Talented Twenty program seek for it to have an effect on student aspirations, it must be introduced to students, parents and educators at an earlier time in the student's career. Guidance counselors, beginning at the elementary school level should disseminate information about the program, especially to high achievers and their parents. Information regarding this program or any educational initiative related to college options needs to be offered to students on a timeline that parallels their decision making process.

Findings further suggest that interventions and programs intended to influence the educational aspirations of students are more likely to succeed if they take place by the eighth or ninth grade. Beginning at that time does not ensure that students will attend college, but for the information to be processed and considered as an option, it must be presented by that time. Students who might not have thought about it before will then have the opportunity to take honors, AP courses and search for their financial support possibilities at an early stage. The offering of AP courses in high priority schools is fundamental. When this curriculum is available, high ranking students understand the function of those courses and that they will get them an edge in the college admissions process.

While it is important that all students receive information about college preparation, it is vital for students who are low income first generation individuals and who attend high priority schools to participate in pre-collegiate types of programs. For

the participants in this study, the information and signals they received about college preparation made a positive difference in their lives and future college plans. In general, by the descriptions obtained in this study similar pre-collegiate programs would help in closing an educational gap for students with similar characteristics as the participants of this study.

Also, since this study revealed that the participants did not report receiving all the necessary information regarding college possibilities in a timely manner, it is important that higher education administrators (i.e., admissions counselors, pre-college personnel, TRIO administrators) assist in the dissemination of information. At high school visits, high school college visits, and in any intervention that higher education personnel may be involved, information that can assist and influence student aspirations and college attendance plans need to be effectively presented. There is an African proverb that says: “It takes a village to educate a student”. It is everyone’s responsibility, including K-16 educators, to inform all students about their possibilities and opportunities.

To help close this gap, findings also suggest that intervention efforts and programs for low SES high achieving students should also focus upon getting parents and students to talk early about the students’ futures. It may be helpful for parents who have not attended college to receive assistance in guiding their children through the college preparation process. In the study, these parents were good at articulating their educational expectations for their children but they lacked the necessary knowledge and skill to continue instructing their children about the details of how to meet those expectations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on fact that there were only three male students in this study, I recommend that further research be done to see if the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model might be useful for better understanding of high achieving low SES Black male students. Given that Black males have many barriers to academic success (Cuyjet, 2009); other studies do not have to focus on Black male students who are high achievers as this one did. These studies can further demonstrate the strengths and limitations of the model. It seems that current times call for this type of study, especially as Black men are increasingly under-represented in higher education. A gap has been widely noted between the number of Black women (65.1%) and Black men (34.9%) enrolling in higher education (U.S. Census, 2006). This is the highest college enrollment gender gap for any racial/ethnic group (Cuyjet, 2009, p. 68).

Since parents' encouragement was the most significant factor in the development of aspirations and initial formation of their college attendance plans a follow up study should focus on examining and meeting parents of low SES high achieving students' concerns and finding ways to add to their knowledge of the college attendance process. In the study, parents' guidance disappeared after a period of early encouragement. This is not surprising, given that none of the parents in the study had earned a college degree. They could not help their children the way middle class parents with college degrees could. We need to develop ways to educate these parents; to give them tools so they can navigate their sons and daughters' journey to college without ever having taken the trip themselves. Publications and written information need to be send home by schools and state agencies. In addition, workshops and informational sessions for parents at the

middle school level are necessary to assist families in understanding the college attendance process.

Since this study was about the college attendance process and culminated in student college selection of low SES high achievers, further study is called for into the selection decisions and college retention and graduation for this population. Access, which is getting into college, is important; but more important is graduation. There are many questions to be answered about these students. What happens with these students after they are admitted into post-secondary schools? Where do they attend? Two-year post-secondary institutions? Four-year institutions? Public? Private? Do they complete post-secondary education? What we find out from such studies might help higher education administrators develop more effective and efficient programs and practices to better serve these students.

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Appendix A
Notification Letter

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

T. WILLARD FAIR, *Chairman*

Members

DONNA G. CALLAWAY

DR. AKSHAY DESAI

ROBERTO MARTÍNEZ

PHOEBE RAULERSON

KATHLEEN SHANAHAN

LINDA K. TAYLOR

Dr. Eric J. Smith
Commissioner of Education



May 7, 2008

Dear Student:

First, let me commend you on your significant academic accomplishments. As a student ranked in the top 20% of your senior class, your achievements represent a level of college preparedness that is valued by our State University System. The State University System has committed, within space and fiscal limitations, to ensure enrollment in a state university for Florida's Talented 20 high school seniors. I would encourage you to continue to prepare yourself for admission to a state university as part of the Talented 20 program.

Florida's Talented 20 program cannot guarantee admission to the campus of your choice, but eligible students are guaranteed admission to one of the eleven state universities. To maintain your eligibility, you must meet the following criteria:

- Graduate with a standard diploma in 2008
- Take the ACT or SAT prior to enrollment in university (no minimum score is required)
- Complete all eighteen core course requirements for state university admission

Talented 20 students are in a position of priority for the award of funds from the Florida Student Assistance Grant, a needs-based grant. Please visit www.FloridaStudentFinancialAid.org for eligibility requirements and additional information on state financial aid and scholarship opportunities, including the Bright Futures Scholarship program.

High school counselors are prepared to assist you with the application process for state university admissions. You may wish to search www.FACTS.org for information concerning individual universities. Additional information and Frequently Asked Questions regarding the Talented 20 program are available online at www.fldoe.org/Talented20.

Sincerely,

Dr. Eric J. Smith
Commissioner

Appendix B
Potential Interview Questions

Potential Interview Questions

- What are your plans after high school?
- Where do you see yourself five years from now?
- Do you have any plans regarding attending college?
If so, ask for description of plans using follow up questions such as:
 - When do you start thinking about attending college?
 - What actions have you taken towards your plan to attend college?
 - What are your thoughts about attending college?If not, “Why not college in your future?” or something similar
- What information have you received or reviewed about the college application process or admittance? Where did you get that information?
- What, if anything, you have heard about the Talented Twenty program?
When? Where (or from whom?)
- What might the Talented Twenty program mean for you?
- (If they have heard about the program/after they are told about the program-) Have you changed your class schedule or have you done anything different after learning about the program? Describe.

Appendix C
Informed Consent Form



CONSENT/ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title: UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PROGRAM AND COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS FOR HIGH RANKING STUDENTS AT HIGH PRIORITY SCHOOLS

This form is to request your consent and your teen's assent to be in a research study concerning aspirations to attend college. The investigator of this study is Jeannette Cruz, an FIU graduate student. Your son or daughter was selected as a possible participant because your child is in high school (9th through 12th grade), and in the age range we are interested in studying. The study will require about one (2) hours your teen's time and this will be arrange in conjunction with administrators at the school.

The study purpose of the study is to describe and understand how high school students develop plans to attend college. How they perceived their opportunities to attend college and make meaning of their educational choices. Your son or daughter will also be given a form that explains the study and asks for his agreement to be in the study. If you grant permission, and your teen wants to be a part of the study he/she will be contacted by me and school administrators to arrange one or two interviews (1 hour each). There are no known risks related to the interviews as they concern with their experiences related to college plans or aspirations.

Your teen may not gain any direct benefit by being in the study. However, this research will give us information about how high school student made decisions regarding college attendance. I will have a general forum at the end of the study that will be open to all participants in which college preparation and guidance will be provided. There is no cost to your teen to be in the study.

The records of this study will be kept private. All data in this research is private and will not be shared with you, school officials or anyone not directly related to the study unless required by law. You or your teen may ask questions about the study at any time. You or your teen may request to be removed from the study at any time and no one will be upset with you.

If you would like to know more about this research you can contact me, Dr. Most, at 305-305-3053. If you feel that your teen was mistreated or you have questions regarding your rights as a volunteer in this research study you may contact Dr. Patricia Price, the Chairperson of the FIU Institutional Review Board at 305-348-2618 or 305-348-2494.

Student:

If you have had all of your questions answered to your liking and you would like to be in the study sign below.

Signature of Student

Date

Parent/Guardian:

If you have had all of your questions answered to your liking and you would like your teen, _____ to be in the study, sign below.
(Print Teen's name)

Signature of Parent

Date

I have explained the research procedure, subject rights and answered questions asked by the participant. I have offered him/her a copy of this informed consent form.

Signature of Witness

Date

Appendix D
Research Group Table

RESEARCH GROUP

Name	Ethnicity	Age	Grade	GPA	PSAT	ACT	SAT	Top 20%	College Acceptance	Code #	Pseudonyms
	B	17	12	4.683	125	20	1070	Y	U of Miami/FIU/Barry	01-11160904	Jessica
	B	17	12	4.601	135	21		Y	University of Florida	02-12010905	Robert
	B	17	12	5.059	133		980	Y	University of Florida	03-12030906	Sheri
	B	18	12	4.591	124	20	930	Y	University of Florida	04-12030907	Annette
	B	17	11	4.438	123	17		Y		05-11120901	Thomasina
	B	16	11	4.722	146	18		Y		06-11120902	Charlene
	B	17	11	4.799	147	18		Y		07-11160903	Almartha
	B	18	11	3.767	108	17		Y		08-12090908	Jackie
	B	15	10	3.615	123			Y		09-12090909	Christopher
	B	16	10	3.346	119			Y		10-12100910	Mary
	B	16	10	3.714	133			Y		11-02021012	Shakira
	B	16	10	3.167	99			Y		12-02021013	Briana
	B	16	9	2.500	84			Y		13-12171911	Justin
	B	14	9	3.500	96			Y		14-02191014	Rianna
	B	15	9	2.750	104			Y		15-02191015	Christina
	B	15	9	3.300	98			Y		16-03231016	Claudette

VITA

JEANNETTE CRUZ

February 24 Born, Santurce, Puerto Rico

1988 B.A. Psychology
Magna Cum Laude
Interamerican University of Puerto Rico,
San Juan, Puerto Rico.

1989 – 1991 Academic Advisor – Teaching Assistantship
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1989 – 1992 Guest Lecturer
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1991-1992 Admissions Counselor
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1992 M.S. Counselor Education
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1992 – 1997 Guest Lecturer & Instructor
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Whitewater, Wisconsin

Academic Counselor
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater
Whitewater, Wisconsin

1998 – 2006 Guest Lecturer & Instructor
Florida International University
Miami, Florida

1998 – 2010 Coordinator – Student Support Services
Assistant Director - Student Support Services
Associate Director - Student Support Services
Usability Manager – Enrollment Services
Director - Student Support Services

	Florida International University Miami, Florida
2001- 2002	NASPA Region III Innovative Program of the Year Award Florida International University Miami, Florida
2002	Student Affairs Distinguished Performance Award Team Player Florida International University Miami, Florida
2003-2004	Educational Leadership Enhancement Program Florida International University Miami, Florida
2009	Operational Excellence Award Florida International University Miami, Florida

PUBLICATIONS

- Cruz, J., & Littrell, J. M. (1998). Brief counseling with Hispanic American college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 26, 227-239.
- Cruz, J. (2001). *Retention Against the Odds: Student Support Services*. Submitted to ASHE for publication or poster presentation at conference, May, 2002

PRESENTATIONS

- Best Practices with TRIO at Florida Association Educational Opportunity Program Conference – November 8-10, 2000
- Collegiate Leadership Development Program at NASPA Drive Inn Conference. Lakeland, FL – October, 5, 2001
- FIU PantherChat Presentation at Alliance 2007 Conference. Las Vegas, Nevada – March 12, 2008
- FIU GradXpress Presentation at Darwin User Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana – June 24, 2009