LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND EXPENSIVE, HIGHLY RANKED PRIVATE COLLEGES:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE ROLE OF HABITUS ON COLLEGE CHOICE AND DEBT TOLERANCE

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to the Dean of the College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

2012
**Table of Contents**

1. Abstract ................................................................................................................. 6
2. Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... 8
3. Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................... 10
   a. Statement of the problem .................................................................................. 10
      i. What is unmet need? ...................................................................................... 11
      ii. What are low-income students doing to meet their financial needs? ....... 11
   b. Significance of the study .................................................................................. 15
   c. Intellectual and Practical Goals ....................................................................... 17
   d. Theoretical Framework .................................................................................... 18
      a. Research Question ....................................................................................... 21
4. Chapter 2: Literature Review .............................................................................. 22
   a. College Choice among Low-Income ................................................................. 22
7. Chapter 3: Research Design ................................................................................. 28
   a. Research Questions ........................................................................................ 28
   b. Methodology .................................................................................................. 29
      i. Site and participants ..................................................................................... 32
      ii. Sample ........................................................................................................ 34
      iii. Site access ................................................................................................. 34
      iv. Setting ......................................................................................................... 35
v. Data collection........................................................................36

vi. Data analysis procedures.........................................................38

b. Trustworthiness....................................................................40
   i. Role of the researcher.........................................................40
   ii. Internal validity.................................................................41
   iii. External validity..............................................................41
   iv. Protection of Human Subjects............................................42

8. Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings..................................43
   a. Description of the participants...........................................43
   b. Organizing and analyzing data............................................46
   c. Description of Emergent Themes.........................................47
      i. Theme 1. Best school, best life........................................47
      ii. Theme 2. Didn’t think much about financial aid and loan debt before enrolling..........................................................49
      iii. Theme 3. Would make the same decision again but..................51
      iv. Theme 4. You can’t always trust your resources..................53

9. Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings..........................56
   a. Major Findings....................................................................59
      i. Determination of career choice prior to incurring debt........59
      ii. Anticipation of benefits based on school choices...............61
      iii. Self-directed in motivation to attend schools of higher social classes..........63
iv. Perceptions of resource trustworthiness in light of upward mobility goals
.................................................................................................................................64

b. Reinforcement of Findings..................................................................................66

c. Recommendations for future study...................................................................69

d. Conclusion.........................................................................................................72

10. Appendices
a. Appendix A- Interview Questions.......................................................................75
b. Appendix B- Informed Consent............................................................................77
c. Appendix C- Letter to request site access.............................................................80
d. Appendix D- Recruitment email...........................................................................83

11. References.........................................................................................................86

List of Tables

12. Table 1: Participant demographics by school, graduation, ethnicity and loan
debt..............................................................................................................................44

13. Table 2: Emergent Themes................................................................................97
Low-Income Students and College Choice

Abstract

Tuition at some private institutions is more than $40,000 per year and the global economic crisis has made it more difficult for students to enroll without incurring significantly more loan debt than in years past (Pew, 2012). Despite the trend, low-income students who gain admission to highly-ranked private institutions are continuing to enroll at these institutions, regardless of cost and financial aid offered. In cases where they have unmet financial need, these students incur supplemental loan debt to attend these institutions, even if their out-of-pocket expenses would less at a less regarded institution. Using Pierre Bordieu’s work (1986) on the forms of capital as a theoretical framework, this study investigated the attitudinal factors that influenced low-income students to enroll in expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. Specifically, the role of habitus in the decision-making process was examined to understand the rationale for incurring debt to attend these schools. Bordieu posits that there are social, economic and cultural benefits that accompany membership in higher socioeconomic classes, and by acquiring degrees from schools typically associated with the upper class, the benefits are extended to the individuals who affiliate with these colleges by the social networks that possess these benefits. However, in light of the difficult economic climate and the high rate of unemployment among young professionals, students must give serious consideration to student loan repayment before they incur significant loan debt.

Data were collected from interviews of alumni who were low-income students who attended expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. Data were analyzed using a qualitative,
phenomenological approach and as a result, four major themes emerged demonstrating the highly significant role that habitus plays in the college decision-making process. The study’s findings support the literature on student loan debt and college choice, as participants recommended that high school seniors confirm their career choices prior to enrolling in expensive, highly-ranked private colleges.

The findings of this study can be used by college counselors and families to assist low-income students in choosing colleges best suited to their needs while also keeping loan repayment in mind. Future studies were recommended to explore the college decision-making process of low-income Caucasian students, as the participants of this study were primarily African American and Latino. In addition, future studies were recommended focusing on the career exploration process of low-income students in an effort to assist them in deliberately engaging in the process of choosing a career before incurring debt to attend a college that might not best for their intended career goals.

*Keywords:* low-income students, college choice, financial aid, financial need, habitus, debt tolerance
Acknowledgements

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required... (Luke 12:48, ESV)

I have so many people to thank for bringing me to this point. This study was inspired by my own experiences as a low-income, first generation student for whom college was mandatory in order to have a better life. I am so grateful to my parents for instilling this goal in me. Mommy and Daddy, thank you for every moment of inspiration, every pep talk, and every time you supported me even when you weren’t sure what to say. There are so many opportunities you missed out on because you were forced to change course. This degree and every degree I have is yours.

I am also grateful to my grandparents whose love, encouragement, and sacrifices have made me the woman I am today. To my brothers and sisters, extended family, dear friends and Alpha Kappa Alpha sorors, your love and support has sustained me through this process and I thank God for you. Even on those occasions I’ve missed and the extended periods of time that elapsed between phone calls and visits, you’ve always understood and for that, I will always love you.

To Dr. Leslie Hitch, you have been an amazing advisor and because of your encouragement, I have been able to approach this study with the depth and passion that this topic deserved. Thank you! Dr. Ron Brown, thank you for your rich feedback. You have been a wonderful complement to Dr. Hitch and I am grateful for your clarity of focus. Finally, Dr. Patty Louison, I am so grateful for you for so many reasons. Thank you for standing by me. I look forward to many more opportunities to stand by each other as “we strive and we do”.
To the Doctors: Kimberly, Danneal, Darrell, Joe, Debbie and Karen, thank you for being my brain trust. I’m grateful that your love and support extends beyond the boundaries of space, time, and circumstance. I pray we all have peace, closure and continued success as we conclude this chapter of our lives. Karen and Danneal, I look forward to cheering you on next as you cross the finish line.

To my children, my double heartbeat, Naja and Isaiah: Because I am your mommy, no one in this world will love you more than your father and I but you will need more than love in order to be successful. Your education is the most important tool you can acquire to create the life you want and to make your mark on the world. I hope you use me and your dad as examples of why you need to take your education so seriously. There have been so many times that I’ve wanted to quit- and once I actually did- but I pushed through and kept going because there’s no accomplishment or reward for quitting. No matter how long the race or how difficult, it’s fine to pause but never stop. We’ve been given so much and, in response, so much is required of us.

Finally, my dearest Orson, I could easily write 100 more pages to express my deep love and thanks for 20 years of support. Like iron sharpening iron, you have pushed me, loved me and nurtured me to become my best self. Your advice is always given with my best interests at heart and with deep concern about my feelings. I am so grateful for the dinners, loads of laundry, and activities you had to take on so I could focus on this process. I thank you and love you for being more than I deserved and everything I prayed for. I look forward to standing by your side as you accomplish your goals.
Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

As college costs increase and family incomes remain static (and in some cases, decrease), low income students at some schools assume greater debt in order to enroll at expensive, highly regarded private colleges (Kim, DesJardins, & McCall, 2009). With tuition and fees exceeding $40,000 per year at some private colleges, and reductions in financial aid packages, the direct costs of attendance can be prohibitive for low-income students if they have significant unmet need after financial aid has been awarded (Adams, 2011; Dezhbakhsh, H., & Karikari, J. A., 2010; Goreski, 2010; Rowley, 2010). Despite these difficulties, some low-income students make a conscious decision to enroll in expensive, highly regarded private colleges, even if they are admitted to less expensive colleges. Utilizing private loans and credit cards as resources, these students enroll based on attitudinal factors and perceived benefits of these schools without necessarily calculating the amount of debt they are willing to incur (Dezhbakhsh, H., & Karikari, J. A., 2010; O’Shaunessey, 2010; Rowley, 2010). These decisions are contributing to a growing national student loan debt average of almost $26,000, and low-income students are borrowing more than their wealthier counterparts to finance their educations (Project on Student Debt, 2010). This study examined the factors that contribute to low-income students’ decisions to incur significant debt to attend expensive, highly- ranked private schools, particularly if they were admitted to lower ranked schools that offered more aid.
**What is unmet need?** Unmet need is the difference between the total cost of attending an institution (tuition, fees, room, and board) and the amount of funding offered to students as part of a financial aid package, after the *expected family contribution* is determined (Heller, 2008). The Federal Government determines how much a family is expected to contribute toward the cost of college based on factors including family income, assets and the number of family members in college (FAFSA, 2010). This estimate, known as the expected family contribution, or EFC, is used to determine how much need-based financial aid to award a student. If the cost of the college exceeds the EFC, then the student is determined to have financial need (Heller, 2008). Students are awarded grants and Federal loans based on their financial need, and at some schools, merit aid is awarded based on academic ability. If those funds do not cover the full costs of their education (minus the expected family contribution), the gap is called unmet need.

Students who cannot fill this gap through private loans and employment may not enroll (Baum, 2007; Kim, et al., 2009). It is estimated that the unmet financial need among low-income students grew by 80% from 1990 to 2004 (Baum, 2007). At some schools, students are admitted and the college commits to meeting their full “demonstrated financial need” (Heller, 2008).

However, other colleges offer modest aid packages to students that do not fully meet their needs, leaving them with significant gaps between the total cost of attendance and the financial aid award package (Heller, 2008).

**What are low-income students doing to meet their financial needs?** As the country and the Federal Government call for less spending in higher education, Federal and institutional grants have been sharply reduced from 56% in 1990-91 to 45% in 2009-2010 (College Board, 2010) and replaced with higher federal loans, tax exemptions, and prepaid college plans, placing the
burden on the individual benefiting from the college degree (Rowley, 2010). A disturbing trend among low-income students trying to meet their expenses is their reliance on student credit cards (O’Shaunessey, 2010). Students used credit cards to cover meals, books, and other incidentals and they had to take on work-study or off-campus jobs to support their credit card use. In 2009, colleges shared the personal information of their students with credit card companies, resulting in 53,164 new credit cards being issued to students without co-signers or evidence of employment at the times those accounts were established (Hinson, 2010; O’Shaunessey, 2010). Though the Federal Government passed the Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act of 2009 (CARD Act), in part, to ban credit card companies from marketing to college students, a number of loopholes exist in the law enabling students to open as many credit card accounts as they would like as long as they have a co-signer over the age of 21 or if they can demonstrate their income is at or above a certain level (Hinson, 2010). In fact, in a 2008 House of Representative hearing regarding young consumers and credit, Kenneth J. Clayton of the American Bankers Association, along with several representatives argued that credit restriction on college students would impose greater hardships on those who rely on credit for both day-to-day and emergency expenses (p. 304).

Another source of funding used to supplement inadequate financial aid is the private student loan (Lederman, 2008; Rowley, 2010). Tuition costs outpaced the caps on federal loans over the last 20 years and more families turned to private loans, which carry higher interest rates and stricter repayment rules (Lederman, 2008). Baum (2009) found that institutional and federal grants have been substantially reduced and the emphasis has shifted to loans, placing a heavier burden on students and their families. Private loans make up a relatively small minority of all
student loans, supplying about $10 billion in loans, compared with $100 billion in Federal loans, (Rowley, 2010). However, according to the College Board (2011b), private loan usage dropped from 25% of all loans between 2006- 2008, to 11% in 2009 and 8% of all loans in 2010. The College Board (2011b) attributes the decrease in private loans to increased limits in Federal Subsidized Loans for undergraduate students demonstrating financial need and increases in aggregate Federal Loan limits for all undergraduates. Regardless of the number and types of loans that students use, according to the Project on Student Debt, Pell Grant recipients, students who are considered low-income because their family incomes were under $50,000, are much more likely to borrow, and they borrow more than their wealthier counterparts (2010). The most recent data available show that among low- income graduating seniors, 87% had student loans in 2008, as opposed to students who did not receive Pell but took out loans (67%) (Project on Student Debt, 2010). Those Pell Grant recipients had an average debt of $24,800- nearly $2,000 more than the average for all seniors graduating with loans that year (Project on Student Debt, 2010). After exhausting all sources of grant aid, the typical low-income student in 2010 needed to come up with more than $11,000 a year to attend a public or private nonprofit college, which is the equivalent of nearly three-quarters of their family income for just one child to attend a four-year college (Education Trust, 2011). By contrast, middle-class students only financed the equivalent of 27 percent of their family income to go to college, while high-income students only financed just 14 percent (Education Trust, 2011).

As costs continue to rise at private colleges by an average of 4.6% (Lewin, 2011) and low-income students continue to enroll in expensive, highly regarded private colleges, they will incur significant financial debt if their full financial needs are unmet via financial aid. Parents and the
college counseling community should remain informed about trends in rising costs and unmet financial need so that if their students choose to attend these schools, they do so knowing how much debt they will incur, prior to enrollment and how much they will need to repay after graduation. While The Project on Student Debt suggests that low-income students incur higher debt and borrow in greater numbers than their middle and high-income counterparts (2010), a study by William Trent, et al. on student perception of financial aid (2006) notes the critical need to better understand the motivations of low-income students with significant unmet need who attend private colleges by determining correlations between key attitudes and debt tolerance. The Trent study (2006) reviewed Dongbin Kim’s 2004 quantitative study examining the impact of different types of financial aid on college choice among students of color. The effect of financial aid on attendance at first-choice institutions varied across racial groups (p.43). The probability of attending a first-choice institution increased for white students if they received grants alone or grants with loans and for Asian American students if they received loans alone or grants with loans. However, for African American and Latino students in Kim’s (2004) study, no specific type of financial aid affected the probability of entrance at first-choice institutions. While the Kim study (2004) did not study socioeconomic status, the study did focus on students who had a strong desire to attend one specific school, exploring the reasons for wanting to attend these schools, and demonstrating the differences in choice patterns by race (pp. 43-70). Kim (2004) focused only on race and attitudinal factors to determine debt tolerance and its impact on students’ decisions to attend their first-choice college. This study utilized a similar methodology to the Kim (2004) study by identifying the attitudinal factors that influence low-income students to enroll at expensive, highly regarded private colleges despite having both unmet financial need
and options to attend less expensive institutions. In this study, however, socioeconomic status was the primary guiding demographic variable.

For the purpose of this study, expensive, highly ranked private colleges and universities are those listed among the top 100 National Universities that appear on the 2011 U.S. News and World Reports list of Best Colleges and Universities. With 4,481 U.S. colleges and universities (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009), these schools represent the top 2% of the most “highly regarded” schools in the country. Of these highly ranked schools, 65 of them are private and 40 of them cost at least $40,000 in tuition and fees. (U.S. News and World Report, 2011)

Significance of the study

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions that influence low-income students to assume significant loan debt to attend private colleges, instead of enrolling in less expensive public or private colleges. The results of the study are not generalizable to the total population of low-income students. A study by DeLa Rosa (2006) suggests that family income and financial aid plays such a significant role in the predisposition stage of college choice that some low-income students are dissuaded from applying to college altogether. However, Hu and Hossler (2000) found that family income did not have a significant impact on institutional choice at all. Given the global economic decline¹ and the age of the Hu- Hossler (2000) study, there is a need

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¹ Jay Light (2008) of Harvard Business School described the cause of the global financial crisis that began in late 2007 as “a collision between a collapsing housing bubble and a new but untested financial system”. This collision resulted from the substantial increase in subprime mortgages, a product introduced to improve access by poor people, with minimal or non-existent credit profiles, to the housing market. New methods for judging credit worthiness were developed and through the technique of securitization (which enabled mortgages to be bundled together and sold to other banks), the increase in sub-prime mortgages occurred simultaneously with the rapid increase in housing prices. When home prices declined, a significant number of mortgagees defaulted on their mortgages, causing sharp decreases in the values of millions of loans, threatening the bank’s financial viability. As a result, financial institutions tightened access to credit, including credit cards and educational loans. This
for new studies on the impact of family income and financial aid on the predisposition, search, and choice stages of the college selection process.

A brief overview of the literature and this researcher’s experience in college admission suggest that low-income students admitted to top tier colleges do not allow family income and financial aid to influence their choices, despite the economic decline. Studies by Berkner and Chavez (1997), Hearn (1988, 1991), Cabrera and La Nasa, (2000), and Adams (2011) support this suggestion, finding that socioeconomic status does not appear to be a major constraint for attending expensive, highly-ranked private institutions, as long as the low-income student meets the academic criteria for admission. In fact, according to Adams (2011), 18 private institutions experienced an increase in the number of students who enrolled with family incomes of less than $30,000 per year. (Overall, the number of low-income students enrolled at the country’s wealthiest private institutions remained static between 2004-2009 (Adams, 2011). Using data from the 1980 High School and Beyond Study for his 1988 and 1991 studies, Hearn (1991) found that the direct effect of family income on attending higher cost schools and selective institutions diminished once precollege academic variables were taken into account. Even though the data (Hearn, 1988) show that low-income students started attending expensive, highly selective institutions as financial aid programs grew at these schools in the 1970s, Hearn (1988) found that enrollment at high-cost and highly selective institutions was most influenced by educational expectations, high school grades, curricular rigor and academic ability. However, Hearn noted that socioeconomic status exerted small indirect influence in the selectivity of the
institutions that African Americans attended (1991), particularly among, “students with less educated or lower-income parents,” (p. 164). Although Hearn’s work is over 20 years old, it is still valid to the study because as the College Board study on student aid notes, Federal and institutional grants have significantly decreased (from 56% in 1990-91 to 45% in 2009-2010) forcing students to borrow more to attend expensive, highly regarded private schools (College Board, 2011b). If low-income students continue to choose these schools, despite having significant unmet financial need, they may incur educational debt that is difficult to repay.

Despite this finding, the literature on college choice demonstrates that the decisions to attend college result from a three-stage process that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) describe beginning as early as the seventh grade and ending with enrollment (Bergerson, 2009; Hearn, 1984, 1988, 1991; Hossler, Braxton, & Cooper, 1989; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Litten, 1982, 1983). There still exists, however, a gap in the research, as noted by Hu and Hossler (2000), regarding the attitudinal factors that influence low-income students’ college choices. This study provides information to students, parents, and the college counseling community in order to help students make a conscious effort to consider debt tolerance and loan repayment during the college choice process.

**Intellectual and Practical Goals**

The intellectual goal of this study is to expand the body of research on the college choice process among low-income students. The practical goal for this study is to provide data to families and the college counseling community so that low-income students can fully examine each admission offer in the context of the value of future degrees and their ability to secure
employment and repay loans. This section offers a theoretical framework for the study and a beginning literature review, as well as a discussion of the study’s research question, study design and proposed research methodology.

**Theoretical framework**

In order to understand the college choice patterns of low-income students who do not receive full financial aid to attend expensive, highly ranked private colleges, Bourdieu’s work on habitus (1986) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his theory on the forms of capital (1986), habitus describes an individual’s acquired, reflexive propensity to exercise subjective thoughts and actions in response to objective social systems. Bourdieu suggests that one must understand an individual’s habitus (their thoughts, attitudes, and actions) and how they use them as vehicles for engaging with the world (1986). These individual aspects of habitus are shaped by larger social structures based on differences such as race, gender, and ethnicity, and these structures of difference are characterized by the distribution of four main types of capital: social, economic, cultural, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986).

Academic credentials can serve as a form of cultural capital, through the individuals who accumulate them through time and personal investment, and as a form of economic capital, based on the external financial value and potential value that the credentials hold in the labor market (Bourdieu, 1986). However, the economic and cultural yield of educational qualifications largely depends on the social capital, which can be used to back up the credential (Bourdieu, 1986). The scarcity of cultural and economic resources creates competition, and the competition between
individuals and possessors of those resources generates even more scarcity and social value (Bordieu, 1986). According to Bordieu, the “material and symbolic profits which academic qualification guarantees also depends on its scarcity” (p.50) and the investments of time and effort may turn out to be less profitable than originally anticipated. However, the profits that accrue from membership in a specific group increases the social value- and the cultural and economic value- of the academic credentials (Bordieu, 1986). Of these four types, social capital is the combination of actual or potential resources available to individuals based on mutual relationships or memberships in a group, which is convertible, in certain situations to economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is never completely independent of economic and cultural capital because there is mutual acknowledgement that presupposes a minimum objective standard of homeogeneity, enabling social value to exert a multiplying effect on the capital individuals possess (Bordieu, 1986). In this study, the minimum standard of homogeneity is attendance at expensive highly regarded private colleges.

Social capital is a composite of social networks and the resources that are controlled within those networks (Bourdieu, 1986). The groups are characterized by certain cultural markers, which are driven by practices that are distinct and specific to the network. The network’s resources are open and beneficial to its members, while simultaneously being closed and prejudicial to non-members (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital mirrors cultural capital in its ability to convert to economic capital, however, social capital has economic value based on the social “connections” that entitle its members to economic capital in the form of “titles of nobility” (p. 247). In other words, certain social connections entitle individuals to a form of symbolic capital based on relationships with other people who possess much greater social
capital (or even cultural and economic capital), along with “a great name”, enabling all who have
circumstantial relationships to transform them into lasting connections (Bourdieu, p. 252). These
connections may be socially instituted, branded by a common, recognizable name, and
reinforced through various social, economic, and cultural exchanges (Bourdieu, 1986).
Examples of these connections include well-known individuals, families, schools, and
organizations. Collective membership in this type of group provides the individual members with
the “collectively owned capital that certifies that each member has the “credential” necessary for
validation and access to the all the benefits and opportunities of that social circle (Bourdieu,

While education at expensive, highly-ranked private schools is a minimum standard of
homogeneity for entry into certain social networks, the pursuit of a degree at this type of school,
without regard for the costs or the amount of debt they may incur, is an act of habitus among
low-income students because attendance at these kinds of schools is associated with the
dominant class (Bourdieu, 1986; John 2006, Perna, 2006). Habitus is central to the manner in
which individuals make decisions, influencing some low-income students to distance themselves
from the socioeconomic groups with which they are affiliated (Bourdieu, 1986; John 2006;
Perna, 2006). This type of logic may play a significant role in determining why some low-
icome students decide to attend expensive, highly ranked private colleges, despite the cost and
the availability of financial aid, in order to gain access to the social connections and resources
affiliated with the dominant class.
It is not clear whether low-income students considered the economic decline or thought of high loan debt as they made their college decisions but with habitus as the theoretical framework for this study, we can better understand the rationale these students used during their decision-making processes.

**Research question**

In order to accomplish the intellectual and practical goals of this study, the following is the research question:

To what extent does habitus inform low-income students’ decisions to attend expensive, highly ranked private schools that do not cover the students’ full financial needs?
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review reviewed existing studies to determine the process that low-income students use to decide to attend college and the factors that influence their choice of a specific college. Among these studies, the role of habitus was reviewed as a motivating factor among college bound, low-income students.

College Choice among Low-Income Students

Researchers have developed a number of studies over the last thirty years to evaluate the economic and social forces that influence college choice (Chapman, 1981; Hossler et al, 1989; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Hoxby, 2004; Jackson, 1982; Long and Riley, 2007). The models constructed in these studies suggested that the process unfolds in stages with specific factors impacting college choice at each stage (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Jackson 1982; Kotler and Fox 1985; Litten, 1982). Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) reviewed and synthesized the literature on college choice, presenting several models that not only focused on choice outcomes but on the actual decision making process, which can begin as early as seventh grade. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model builds upon earlier models of the college choice process (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982) but focuses primarily on the decision-making process that students use to determine where they apply and attend. The authors noted that college choice takes place in three stages:
• predisposition, where students as early as the seventh grade develop aspirations for college attendance;

• the search stage, or the point at which a student gains information that assists him or her in the evaluation of various characteristics of institutions for the purpose of identifying a good personal fit;

• and the choice stage, when a student gains a sufficient base of information on different colleges to help him or her eliminate alternatives from a choice set. A student who is able to maintain high aspirations for college attendance during the high school years will increase the likelihood of high educational attainment. (p. 207)

Within the three-step process of choosing a college, a student’s choice of college is affected by several factors during the predisposition stage including: socioeconomic status (SES), family background, academic achievement, and high school context source (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hu and Hossler, 1989; Perna, 2006). Factors influencing the search phase include SES, family background, academic achievement, perceptions and information about college affordability, and college counseling (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hu & Hossler, 1989; Perna, 2006). In the choice phase, factors such as SES, family background, race/ethnicity, academic preparation, college costs and financial aid, and institutional ranking influence students’ decisions to attend an institution of their choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Flint, 1993; Hu & Hossler, 2000; Hoxby, 2004; Jackson 1982; Kotler & Fox 1985; Litten, 1982; Long & Riley, 2007; McDonough, 1994, 1997).
Common factors influencing college choice at every stage of the process are family influence and socioeconomic status, perceptions about affordability, and financial aid source (Bergenson, 2009).

Hu and Hossler (2000) noted how the lack of documented attitudinal variables limited their research on students’ willingness to pay for private institutions, however, they did find that institutional preference is jointly influenced by familial, academic, and financial factors, with the mother’s educational background, particularly postgraduate education, having the strongest influence on institutional choice (p. 696). According to Hu and Hossler (2000), family income did not have a significant impact on institutional choice, and students of color had a stronger preference for private colleges, despite the perceived costs and availability of financial aid. Hu and Hossler (2000) recommended future studies on attitudinal variables impacting students, noting a significant gap in the literature on this aspect of the college choice process. Attitudinal data was particularly important in helping the college counseling community understand how to advise their students to make educated choices about college, based on their actual costs and their willingness to incur debt prior to their enrollment.

One study of 28 highly selective private colleges such as Amherst, Williams, Georgetown, Harvard, and Dartmouth showed that private institutions use a variety of aid policies to assist students with enrollment (Hill, Winston, & Boyd, 2005). Of the 28 colleges surveyed, only four colleges enabled low-income students to pay the smallest share of family income toward their educational costs. At seven of the colleges, low-income students paid a larger proportion of
family income than other income groups, and at the remaining colleges, low-income students paid the same proportion of income as other income groups (Hill, Winston, & Boyd, 2005).

**Perna’s Model of College Choice (2006)**

In understanding college choice, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model is the most widely cited theory used to examine factors that influence the college decision-making process, however, in Edward St. John’s (2006) study of financial inequity and college access, he suggested the inclusion of social critical theory because it was inappropriate to study the issue of socioeconomic status and college choice using a singular theoretical lens. By including Bourdieu’s (1986) work on habitus to determine how family income influences student motivation, preparation, and choice to attend college, Laura Perna (2006) extended the Hossler and Gallagher model (1987), which presented three stages of college choice decision-making that did not take socioeconomic status into consideration. As a result, Perna (2006) found that habitus played a central role in understanding college choice among low-income students.

Perna’s (2006) model of college choice is based on previous models of college choice (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982; Hossler- Gallagher, 1987) but is more recent and includes cultural and attitudinal influences on college choice. In his analysis of existing studies on college choice, Bergerson (2009) noted that the Hossler-Gallagher’s model (1987) is actually the most widely used and cited model on the topic (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hendrickson, 2002; Kern, 2000; Pitre, 2006; Tierney & Venega, 2009). However, Perna (2006) moved away from the linear, more general approach to college choice demonstrated in
the Hossler-Gallagher model (1987) and considered the complexities of background and culture and their influences on choice.

The Hossler-Gallagher model (1987), like Chapman’s (1981) and Litten’s (1982) models, is considered developmental in that each stage is associated with particular “cognitive and affective outcomes” (Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000, p. 5) ultimately leading to college enrollment. Also associated with the developmental nature of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model is the tendency of researchers to assign age ranges to each stage. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) suggested, for example, that students begin the process in seventh grade and complete it when they enroll in a higher education institution at the end of twelfth grade (p. 6).

In contrast, Perna’s conceptual model of college choice (2006), described the process as four layers of influence on students’ college choices:

- Individual habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) or the process by which students’ background characteristics influence decision-making. Habitus acts as an “unconscious lens through which individuals view their options and make decisions based on what feels comfortable for them” (Perna, p.142).

- School and community context (including school characteristics such as availability of counseling, size, and the overall knowledge of college entrance procedures). Perna (2006) noted that individual decisions must be viewed in light of this context because school and communities share ideas about education and this influences students’ aspirations and plans (Bergerson, 2009). Based on school and community culture, students choose schools of varying quality or opt out of higher education altogether (Perna, 2006).
• Higher education context, or the community’s philosophy towards both higher and K–12 education. Perna believed this philosophy shapes students’ aspirations, preparation, and decisions to enroll in higher education (p. 143). For example, if the community is comprised of mostly low-income families, for example, whose children typically go into fields that do not require college degrees, the community and schools may not necessarily invest in the resources that other communities might invest in to prepare their students for college (2006).

• Finally, Perna (2006) included social, economic, and policy contexts, which support or discourage college enrollment, such as labor market trends.

Perna’s model (2006) provided a more holistic lens for viewing this issue than the widely cited Hossler- Gallagher (1987) study by demonstrating how socioeconomic status influenced college aspiration, motivations and preparation among low-income students. It was the hope of this researcher that to learn more about why some low-income students opt to incur significant debt by attending expensive, highly ranked private schools that don’t meet their full financial need. Such research was necessary in order to assist parents, students and the college counseling community in making enrollment choices that are thoughtful regarding issues of debt tolerance and loan repayment.
Chapter 3

Research Design

Research Question

In order to understand the college decision-making processes of low-income students who enroll in expensive private colleges, the following research question guided this study:

- To what extent does habitus inform low-income students’ decisions to attend expensive, highly ranked private schools that do not cover the students’ full financial needs?

As demonstrated in the literature review, there are common factors such as family influence and socioeconomic status, perceptions of affordability and financial aid sources which influence college choice at every stage of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Perna’s (2006) models of college choice. However, Hu and Hossler (2000) noted that students’ attitudes about these variables and their influence on their willingness to pay for private schools have not been clearly documented in the literature. When one considers these decisions in the context of Bourdieu’s theory of developing social capital (1986), this findings of this study were helpful in determining if low-income students chose highly-regarded colleges because they represented certain cultural markers that are distinct and specific to the social classes they aspired to, or if they chose to attend these schools for other reasons. Having participants describe their attitudes about the colleges to which they were admitted and the demographic and socioeconomic factors that influenced their final choices increased our understanding about why students knowingly took on significant debt to enroll. This information was particularly relevant because in some cases,
other colleges offered equal or more grant based, financial aid but because habitus was a central factor in how the participants made decisions, it was important to document the extent to which this attitudinal factor played a role in the college choice process, despite the cost and the availability of financial aid.

**Methodology**

The research approach most appropriate for exploring the attitudes of low-income students at expensive, highly regarded institutions was qualitative research, particularly phenomenology. Phenomenology enables researchers to better understand a phenomenon through the lived experiences of study participants who describe these experiences and their meanings in their own voices (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of phenomenological research is to gain an understanding of meaningful experiences implicit in the description of the original experience, in the context of the particular situation. This style of inquiry requires researchers to go through a series of steps to try eliminate their own assumptions and biases, examine the phenomenon without presuppositions, and describe the structure of the phenomenon based on internal themes that are discovered (Moustakas, 1994). In response to Hossler’s call for additional attitudinal data regarding college choice (2000), phenomenological research was helpful in describing low-income students’ perceptions about the decision-making process, whether they believed that habitus played a role in influencing their choice of schools, and what factors influenced them to incur debt in order to enroll in the institutions they attended.

Moustakas (1994) identified three steps to phenomenological study- epoché, phenomenological reduction, and structural synthesis. “Epoché refers to the period of examination when a
researcher identifies bias and removes all traces of personal involvement in the phenomena being studied to achieve clarity of perception” (Moustakas, 1994). During the data collection process, the researcher identifies his or her own assumptions, biases, and beliefs about the phenomenon and then sets aside and invalidates that knowledge. The process of epoché challenges the researcher to view things with naïve eyes and an openness to whatever data emerge (Moustakas, 1994). Where the information conflicts with the pre-conceived notions of the researcher, those biases are to be eliminated.

After the epoché stage, begins the process of phenomenological reduction or “horizontalization” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). In phenomenological reduction, the researcher must describe what he sees in textural language, not only in terms of the external object, but the qualities of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) describes the process by saying, “one must reflect, first, on the meaning of the experience of oneself; then one must turn outward, to those being interviewed, and establish ‘intersubjective validity,’ testing out of this understanding with other persons through a back-and-forth social interaction” (p.59). Moustakas (1994) asks researchers to “look and describe, look again and describe, look again and describe, always with reference to textural qualities- rough and smooth,…fearful and courageous,…angry and calm- descriptions that present varying intensities; …time references, and colors all within an experiential context. (p.92)’ The goal of this process is to be more reflective and to more fully grasp the phenomenon by bracketing the meanings and themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Then by process of imaginative variation, the researcher attempts to understand the experience
by recognizing and listing all of the possible meanings and themes that underlie the phenomenon being studied, employing varying polarities and divergent perspectives. According to Moustakas, (1994), imaginative variation allows the researcher to develop structural themes from textural descriptions derived from phenomenological reduction, incorporating structures of space, time, materiality, causality, and relationship that precipitate feelings and thoughts related to the phenomenon. Finally, fundamental textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon are integrated into a unified statement of the essence, or the commonalities, of the experience being investigated (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological strategy enabled this researcher to understand the motivations behind the students’ choices of schools by learning about the context in which they made those decisions and to mitigate supposition based on this researcher’s prior experience. This approach not only addressed the research question about the factors and the role of habitus on decision-making but it also addressed Hu and Hossler’s (2000) call for additional research on the attitudinal factors that influence college decisions among low-income students. The job of the phenomenologist, according to Moustakas (1994) is to have the participant return to the experience in order to obtain a comprehensive description “that provides for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p.18). Through the use phenomenological methodology, the data revealed the feelings, experiences, and challenges of low-income students within their own contexts and from their own perspectives.

Site and participants. The processes of data collection and analysis for this study differed greatly from the “low risk, fixed unambiguous method” of quantitative research (Creswell,
Phenomenological research requires immersion into the everyday lives of the participants and the setting chosen for study to seek the informants’ perspectives and meanings about the phenomenon being studied. Aside from general considerations such as low-income status and attendance at an expensive, highly ranked college as defined earlier, there were no special criteria for locating and selecting research participants (Moustakas, 1994). The essential criteria for participation in this study included: a) participant experience of the phenomena; b) willingness to participate in a lengthy interview; and c) willingness to grant the researcher permission to tape-record the interview and publish the study (Moustakas, 1994).

The general criteria for participation in this study were:

1. Participants were alumni from colleges and universities defined as “expensive, highly ranked and private”, earlier in this study.
2. Participants were full-time matriculated undergraduates at the time they attended these schools;
3. Participants were considered low-income, which for the purpose of this study is someone who was determined by the Department of Education to be eligible for Pell grants (Pell eligible). The Higher Education Act of 1965 to provide grants to low-income undergraduates with the greatest demonstrated financial need created Pell grants. The 2011-2012 maximum award is $5,550 and the minimum award is $555 (NASFAA, 2011);
4. Participants were awarded financial aid packages that included federal and institutional grants and loans but still did not cover the total cost of attendance. As discussed in the
literature, students with unmet financial need tend to rely heavily on student credit cards and private loans to attend school (Hinson, 2010; O’Shaunessey, 2010; Rowley, 2010). However, at some expensive, highly-ranked private schools, financial aid packages are computed to meet students’ “full demonstrated financial needs”, meaning that the full cost of tuition and fees is subtracted from the expected family contribution (EFC) and the difference is covered by the school through a series of grants and federal loans. Other highly-ranked schools such as Harvard University, Amherst College, and Williams College, meet students full financial needs without loans of any kind, if their family income is below the minimum standard set by the institution (Hill, Winston, and Boyd, 2005). The participants in this study were alumni who enrolled despite having financial aid packages that did not assist them with the full cost of their education.

5. Participants must be alumni who graduated from expensive, highly-ranked private colleges and universities after 2007, the year Light (2008) describes as the as beginning of the global economic decline.

In this study, it was important to determine why participants would knowingly assume significant debt to attend the schools of their choice, when it was likely that if they were admitted to such highly ranked schools, they might have also been admitted to less expensive or lower ranked schools that offered more financial aid. For the purposes of this study, “less prestigious” or “lower ranked” universities were those that did not appear on the list of top 100 nationally ranked universities. This sample did not include or make reference to the ranking or quality of
institutions that were considered regional universities, liberal arts colleges, or colleges that opted out of the U.S. News and World Report Rankings.

**Sample.** Participant involvement in this study was kept confidential given the sensitive nature of the topic and to avoid the appearance of negatively implicating the financial aid policies of a particular school. C.O. Boyd (2001) suggested that data saturation, or the point at which relevant, non-redundant themes are not likely to emerge from continued interviews, could be achieved by interviewing two to ten participants. Though five participants were interviewed for the study, data saturation was actually achieved by the fourth interview.

**Site access.** Recruitment for participants began shortly after the study proposal was approved and interviews were scheduled within 7-10 days after they agreed to participate. The process of identifying participants began by securing permission to advertise the study on the Black Ivy Alumni listserve (see Appendix C). The Black Ivy Alumni League is a professional networking and advocacy group for more than 50,000 alumni of African descent who attended Ivy League schools as undergraduate or graduate students. Though the population of the listserv presents a limitation for the study because all of the alumni have self selected that they are of African descent, the listserv represents a diverse pool of participants who attended expensive, highly-ranked private schools as undergraduates, some of which are not Ivy League institutions. This researcher opted not to utilize a school based alumni listserve in order to ensure that the participants represented a diverse group of institutions within the designated institutional category.
A candidate screening process was conducted prior to data collection to ensure that participants met the criteria for participation. Alumni who expressed interest in the study were contacted by phone to describe the study and ensure they met the criteria and that they experienced the phenomenon being studied. Alumni were not excluded from participating if they appeared overly enthusiastic or particularly unhappy with their experience. The need to secure contextual attitudinal data about low-income students’ college decision making was the most important aspect of the study, as Hu and Hossler (2000) have identified a gap in the literature in this area.

Once participants were identified and provided verbal consent of their willingness to participate, they were sent an electronic copy of the purpose and description of the study, along with a copy of informed consent and a list of interview questions. The correspondence with participants also included personal information about the intellectual and professional goals for the study in order to increase comfort about participating. They were also reassured that if they chose to participate, their identities would remain confidential throughout the study.

Interview data were analyzed and coded before the next interview was scheduled. Each participant was granted access to the study’s results in exchange for their participation.

**Setting.** Data collection times varied based the scheduling needs and convenience of study participants. Typically, the interview is the method through which data is collected (Moustakas, 1994) and in this study, it was used to collect data from low-income students who attended one highly-ranked schools as defined earlier. The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process, utilizing open-ended questions and comments. Though some questions were developed in advance in order to evoke a comprehensive account of the participant’s experience
with the phenomenon, the questions were varied, altered or not used at all when the participant or “co-researcher shared the full story of his or her experience.” (Moustakas, 1994, p.114).

Interviews were conducted by phone at the convenience of the participant.

**Data collection.** In order to collect data about the factors that influenced low-income students to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, or co-researcher (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological studies, researchers and participants engage in an informal interactive process, utilizing open-ended questions and comments (Moustakas, 1994). The interview usually begins with a social conversation aimed at creating a relaxed atmosphere and before the primary researcher begins the interview, he or she engages in the process of epoche so that assumptions, “facts” and biases are set aside and do not taint the study’s results (Moustakas, 1994, p.116). However, in order to explore the process that students undergo when they decide on which college to attend, it was important for this researcher to develop some pre-determined questions, based on earlier studies as a starting point to describe the phenomenon. Bourdieu’s work on the types of social capital theory (1986) suggests that habitus influences attitude and decision-making so that individuals seeking affiliation with or benefits from a social network with “collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu, p.251) will distance themselves from their social class and engage in activities associated with the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1986; John 2006; Perna, 2006). In addition to this theory, Perna’s (2006) model of college choice suggests that college enrollment decisions are influenced by family, school and community environment, and these experiences shape students’ aspirations and preparation. As such, the majority of the questions were open-ended, flexibly
worded and asked in random order (Appendix A), to ensure that rich contextual details about the decision making process were included in the study.

Maxwell (2005) notes the importance of asking “real” questions based on the research questions and literature review (p.92). He states that this style of question creates a more symmetrical and collaborative relationship between the researcher and participant, allowing the interviewee to bring more of their personal knowledge of the phenomenon to the data collection process (2005, p.92). While the research question addressed what this researcher wants to understand, interview questions were primarily designed to assess what the participant understood about the phenomenon. The interviews began with open-ended questions about how their college aspirations developed and the attitudinal factors that influenced students to want to incur the financial burden. Additional open-ended questions were asked about whether their aspirations impacted their preparation and their ultimate choice of school. Finally, additional open-ended questions were asked to discuss their decisions to enroll in their chosen colleges and to determine whether they thought those decisions were right.

A limitation of using the semi-structured interview is that this method prevents deeper exploration of the phenomenon in the interest of using data collection time wisely (Creswell, 1994). To address this limitation, and collect as much information as possible during the course of the interview, I asked additional probing questions, and when necessary allowed participants to add or clarify data to be categorized for analysis. To assist in the process of collecting data, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. As a backup, I also took “observer’s notes” (Bogdan, 1982), in the unlikely event that recording equipment failed to work during the
interviews. Observers’ notes were also helpful in stimulating critical thinking about observations and augment the recording machine.

**Data analysis procedures.** Qualitative data analysis clearly differs from the quantitative approach in that there is no uniform procedure that requires data to be processed the same way among different studies (Creswell, 1998). The qualitative process requires researchers to become comfortable developing categories and making comparisons and contrasts, as well as to be open to the possibilities of contrary or alternative explanations for findings that emerge from the data (Creswell, 1998).

In order to manage and organize the volumes of information from each interview, data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection and interpretation using a modified version of the van Kaam method of analyzing phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). Procedures include:

- “horizontalizing” or categorizing every statement relevant to the topic as having equal value and from these statements, the meaning or meaning units are listed (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97);
- reduction and elimination, which determines whether statements contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding it and whether statements are abstract enough to label them. If they are, it is considered an invariant constituent and part of horizon of the experience. If statements are not abstract enough to be labeled, they are eliminated (Moustakas, 1994);
• Clustering and thematizing invariant constituents to develop descriptions of the experience (Moustakas, 1994);

• Conducting a final check of all identified themes against the complete transcribed record of the participant to see whether themes were explicitly stated. If not, they are not relevant and should be deleted (Moustakas, 1994);

• Using relevant, validated themes, develop for each co-researcher an “Individual Textural Description” of the experience, or an integration of the invariant textural constituents (themes), including verbatim examples from the transcribed interview. (Moustakas, 1994, p.121);

• Developing an “Individual Structural Description” of the experience, or a description of the qualities and meanings that construct the experience for each co-researcher based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation. (Moustakas, 1994, p.121);

• Developing for each participant a “Textural- Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating invariant constituents and themes. (Moustakas, 1994, p.121);

• From the individual textural- structural descriptions, developing a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).
Trustworthiness

According to Merriam (1998), guidelines for the ethical conduct of research have been established since the late 1940’s however, only recently has attention been paid to the ethical concerns of conducting qualitative research. Assessing trust in qualitative research involves examining the components of the research design and providing readers with enough detail to show that the researcher’s conclusions make sense and are therefore, trustworthy (Firestone, 1987). The research design for this study provided as much detailed information as possible to allow co-researchers to review the data collected and validate that the structure and essence of the phenomenon was described appropriately.

Role of the researcher. Clarifying researcher bias was the strategy used to ensure internal validity for this study. My experiences as an admission director at a private college, as well as my past experience as a low-income student, made me keenly aware of the issues and concerns of low- income students during their decision- making process. This background brought sensitivity and knowledge to my role as a researcher and also enabled me to identify certain biases that could shape how data was collected and interpreted for this study. Regardless of my experiences, this study was conducted in a manner that was as honest, accurate, and unbiased as possible. Diener and Crandall (1978) advised that “in planning, conducting, analyzing and reporting his work, the scientist should strive for accuracy and wherever possible, methodological controls should be built in (p. 162). Biases that could not be controlled were written down on this report. Where the data only partly supported the predictions, the report contains “enough data to let the readers draw their own conclusions.” (p.162). Every effort was
made to ensure that the voices of the study participants were heard by using internal validity to eliminate researcher assumption and bias, examine the phenomenon without presupposition, and describe the phenomenon based on internal themes that emerged from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.154).

**Internal validity.** Miles and Huberman (1984) discussed several procedures that lend internal validity to a study. It is important to establish whether research findings are congruent with reality and whether researchers are measuring what they think they are measuring. The process of data analysis suggested by Moustakas (1994) requires researchers to check intersubjective validity by submitting Individual Structural Descriptions and Individual Textural descriptions to each participant, or “co-researchers” as Moustakas describes them “for validation that the essence of the experience was captured correctly” (p.121). Each participant reviewed the descriptions and confirmed that themes and meanings identified were consistent with their experiences. Two participants made minor corrections that did not change the themes or their meanings.

**External validity.** While Miles and Huberman (1984) discussed the need for establishing internal validity in qualitative research, methods were also developed for establishing external validity in these studies. External validity is concerned with the extent to which the study’s finding can be applied to other situations (generalizability). This concept conflicts with the intent of qualitative research, which is to present a unique interpretation of events, not necessarily to generalize findings among populations (Merriam, 1988). Limited generalizability,
however, was applied to themes that emerged when the data were compared among participants in the study and similar experiences were found (Creswell, 1994, p.159)

Protection of Human Subjects

When collecting data from participants, researchers have an ethical duty to respect each individual participant’s autonomy. According to Merriam (1998): “Interviewing, whether it is highly structured with predetermined questions or semi-structured and open ended, carries both risks and benefits to the participants” (p.214). Interviews should be conducted in an ethical manner and one that accords with best research practice. Two important ethical issues to adhere to when conducting interviews were confidentiality and informed consent. In this study, participants received a letter assuring them of the confidential nature of this study. Audio recordings, observer notes, and analytical data were locked in a secure location in this researcher’s home. Participants could discontinue their involvement in the study at any time, without repercussion and were provided access to the study’s results in exchange for their participation.
Chapter Four

Report of the research findings

To determine the extent to which low-income students utilized habitus in their decisions to attend expensive, highly ranked private schools, data were collected from five participants. Although each participant was pre-screened to determine their eligibility, it became necessary to disqualify one participant after data collection because it was discovered that he graduated in 2000, making him ineligible to meet all of the criteria for participation.

Description of the participants

Prior to data collection, the researcher engaged in the epoché process by putting aside all preconceived notions of the decision-making process of low-income students that she developed over the years as a professional counselor in the field of college admissions. The names of the participants were changed to protect their identities.

Table 1 describes the study’s participants by ethnicity, school, and amount of loan debt incurred. Of the four participants in this study, three were female and one was a male.
### Table 1

**Participant demographics by school, graduation, ethnicity and loan debt**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Date of graduation</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Student loan debt incurred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catrina</td>
<td>New York University</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Syracuse University</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blair</td>
<td>Syracuse University</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>Case Western Reserve University</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>$56,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Catrina is a first generation college student from a family that she describes as a “pretty traditional Latino family” and going away to school was never an option for her. Her family emigrated to New York illegally and they served as a strong influence for Catrina to excel in school and seek admission at one of the highly ranked, expensive private colleges that were close to home. She chose New York University because it was “one of the best and it was local”. Catrina applied to the school using the Early Decision process, requiring her to enroll if she was admitted. Once admitted, she was required to withdraw all other applications and secure her place in the class regardless of the financial aid package she would receive. New York University offered financial aid covering half of the $40,000 tuition bill. She owes $80,000 in supplemental student loans.
Lisa is an African-American alumna of Syracuse University who attended high school in New Jersey. Like the other participants, she was one of the first in her family to attend college but she had an aunt who attended college and advised her during the decision-making process. Her family was very encouraging but limited in their knowledge of the college process. As a result, Lisa enrolled in a number of community based college preparation programs offering advice on college choice and the application process, test preparation, and supplemental coursework on the college level. She applied to a number of highly ranked state colleges in New Jersey but also applied to Syracuse University because of its prestigious School of Communication, Newhouse. Despite receiving a generous financial aid offer from Syracuse, and grants from her community based, college preparatory organization, she still needed to take out supplemental loans to cover the full cost of attendance at Syracuse. Lisa owes “a little less than $20,000” in loans and is completing a graduate degree in communications.

Blair is an African-American young man who graduated from 2011 Syracuse University as an accounting major and is currently in graduate school. He had parents who were supportive but lacked knowledge about the college process. He describes the college decision-making process as primarily his but they were “down with whatever I said I wanted to do as long as I was going to college - that was the requirement”. Syracuse’s initial financial aid package was not as desirable and Blair narrowed his choices down to two state universities in New York. “At the last minute”, Syracuse readjusted their offer, utilizing funds designated for diversity recruitment and Blair ultimately chose Syracuse. Blair owes about $25,000 in student loan debt.

Josie is a student of Latina and African American descent who graduated from Case Western Reserve University in 2007 and went on to complete law school in 2010. Josie’s mother attended
community college and received an associate’s degree when Josie was young and eventually
completed her bachelor’s degree while Josie completed high school. Josie received a half-tuition
scholarship in order to attend Case, and as a way of reducing the amount of student loan debt she
would incur, Josie enrolled in the maximum number of credits she could take every semester in
order to graduate in three years. She borrowed about $56,000 for undergraduate and law school.

**Organizing and analyzing data**

After conducting interviews and reviewing the transcripts, all statements whose meanings were
considered relevant and unique to the phenomenon of low-income students using habitus in their
college decisions were labeled. These meanings contained a “moment of the experience that is
necessary and sufficient” for understanding the phenomenon (or invariant constituents) were
clustered into themes (Moustakas, p.121). Statements that were redundant, overlapping or did not
meet this criteria were removed. After conducting a final check of all identified themes against
the verbatim transcripts, individual textural and structural descriptions were developed for each
participant. A structural description was created once this researcher engaged in imaginative
reduction, reflecting on the qualities and meanings of the themes that emerged in the textural
description. Once the textural and structural descriptions were developed, this researcher sent
them to each participant to check the validity of the data collected and to ensure that the “essence
of the experience was captured correctly” (Moustakas, p.121). Three of the four participants
returned the descriptions verifying that all information was captured correctly. One participant,
Josie, made a clarification to her statement about how she arrived at the decision to complete
Case Western in three years, however all other parts of the experience were described correctly.
After all of the descriptions were validated, a composite textural-structural description was developed for the group to describe “how the participants experienced what they experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, 142). This description can be found in chapter 5 labeled “Major Findings”. While it was not clear prior to the study whether low-income students considered the economic decline or thought of paying high loan debt as they made their college decisions, four distinct themes emerged from the data regarding the attitudes that influenced their college decision-making processes. The themes are as follows:

- Best school, best life
- Didn’t think too much about loan debt
- I would make the same decision again but…
- You can’t always trust your “resources”

**Description of Emergent Themes**

**Theme 1: Best school, best life.** The “best” schools are those offering the ability to secure jobs and professional and personal contacts commensurate with the institution’s reputation and perceived prestige (Bordieu, 1986). While this viewpoint can be shared among students of varying socioeconomic status, as an act of habitus, this mindset was the most important factor in participants knowingly taking on significant student loan debt in to attend expensive, highly ranked colleges. Because the participants sought upward mobility, they chose to pursue degrees at institutions where their academic credentials would provide them with the cultural, economic and social capital to secure unique opportunities that they did not believe they would have received from other schools. This viewpoint influenced their decisions more than other factors such as cost of attendance and potential loan debt.
Each participant was influenced by family, school and community resources, and their own sense of motivation to attend expensive, highly-ranked private universities. They framed their college aspirations in the context of their family members’ professional achievements, making a conscious effort to earn the best academic credentials they could in order to affiliate with the professional world and gain them access to a higher socioeconomic class.

Catrina made specific reference to attending her school as a way to “level the playing field” in terms of her ability to compete with wealthier students whom she perceived as having greater access to professional opportunities because of their parents’ achievements and relationships.

“I never had any contacts and this has become my contact in a way. Instead of, like, when I walk through the door and someone says, ‘oh yeah, there’s such-and-such’s daughter’ as part of the introduction, instead they say, ‘oh she went to this school, we should consider her…Going to NYU has taken the place of that. It’s my connection…it helps level me off and make me look better when I’m trying to get jobs.

Catrina felt that NYU was right for her because it would fulfill her needs and it also happened to be one of the best. The drive to pursue “the best” academic credentials, without much regard for the costs or the amount of debt they may incur is an essential underlying dynamic of habitus among low-income students because attendance at these kinds of schools is associated with the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1986; John 2006, Perna, 2006) and is perceived as a critical element to achieving the membership and benefits that are afforded to social classes to which they aspire. These students weighed the merits of all of the schools that admitted them, and in comparison cost and reputation, the students believed that the value of their school’s “brand” would provide a strong enough return on their investment to warrant their decisions to incur debt.
“So, when I made the additional cost comparison for what you’re getting. You’re kinda paying for the reputation. It sounds really bad but that’s what it is. If you went to Harvard, it’s the same thing. People say wow and you could have been an art major.”

(Blair)

**Theme 2: “Didn’t think much” about financial aid and loan debt before enrolling, despite cost of attendance.** Catrina and Blair stated that they enrolled at their colleges without thinking too much about the impact of loan debt on their lifestyles or their ability to repay because they possessed a strong sense of confidence in their ability to secure good jobs that would enable them to repay their loans. Similar to the rationale used in the previous theme, participants believed that the ability to attend the expensive highly-ranked private schools of their choice was more important than the cost of the institution and the financial aid offered to the extent that Catrina and Blair “didn’t think much about it.” Josie was more thoughtful about loan debt before enrolling and with family encouragement and a plan to register for the maximum number of courses that students could take per semester at Case Western, she reduced her student loan debt as an undergraduate. Lisa was a bit more hesitant about incurring loan debt because she was nervous about taking on “too much debt”. In fact, she discussed not having to think about how much debt was too much debt until she was faced with the choice of incurring additional supplemental loans or leaving Syracuse after her financial aid was reduced in junior year:

“I would have to take out loans and I was scared to be in that kind of debt. I didn’t really understand how much debt was too much debt and then I talked to my parents and
they put it in perspective. If I was spending $45,000 a year to go here and was coming out with less than 20,000 over all four years that I would be fine and that helped a lot.” (Lisa)

Participants accepted that supplemental loan debt was necessary for them gain access to this type of school and ultimately, the assumption of significant loan debt was acceptable as long as they understood the amount of debt they are taking on, particularly if they believed that the schools would enable them to become upwardly mobile. These findings are consistent with Hu and Hossler’s study (2000), which found that family income did not have a significant impact on institutional choice, particularly among students of color, who had a stronger preference for private colleges despite the perceived costs and availability of financial aid. Participants focused so much on school reputation, access to jobs and contacts and the prospects for the future, they didn’t necessarily have a strong understanding of how loan repayment would impact their finances after graduation. Even though Josie seemed to be the most thoughtful about the impact of loan debt, she felt that she was not thoughtful enough about the major she chose. She regretted not choosing a major that would make her more easily employable upon graduation and able to repay her loans. She regretted choosing political science as a major, given the job market for law school graduates, and was dissatisfied with her finances doing contract work as a recent graduate.

Setting aside concerns about cost and assuming supplementary loan debt in order to attend these highly-ranked expensive private colleges are acts of habitus among low-income students because the participants could have chosen to attend schools that were either lower ranked or less expensive state colleges. They believed that their affiliation with highly-ranked private schools
would enable them to secure better jobs, contacts and salaries necessary to repay these loans (Bordieu, 1986).

**Theme 3: Would make the same decision again but...** Despite the impact of student loan debt on their lives, all of the participants said they would have attended their schools again, if given the choice. However, each participant stressed the need for low-income high school seniors to prepare themselves financially and create plans in high school to minimize the amount of loan debt they might incur.

“...I just wish I was more prepared and less with the attitude of like “oh, it’ll get paid off...Those numbers mean nothing to you when you’re signing those papers and you’re a college freshman who got into the college of their dreams.” (Catrina)

Catrina enjoyed her experience at NYU and believes she has already benefitted from an affiliation with the school due to the contacts and employment opportunities she has been able to secure, however, she lamented her lack of focus on reducing the overall cost of attendance or loan debt while still in high school. She and Lisa regretted not spending more time actively engaged in the process of minimizing their debt through financial preparation, securing scholarships and other means of reducing loans.

Despite their satisfaction with their decisions to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges, one recommendation the participants made to help high school seniors prepare themselves for the impact of student loan debt on their lives was to consider potential career choices prior to choosing a college and balancing those choices with loan repayment in mind. Blair felt that seniors should not only have a sense of their career goals before incurring student
loan debt, but he also felt that low-income seniors should only incur debt if they know they will have the kind of careers that will enable them to make high enough salaries to repay their loans.

“It’s similar to how I advised my sister, what’s your final career goal? I feel like if you’re gonna be a lawyer or doctor, a big time professional, then you will probably eventually earn the money. My sister is in the arts... she didn’t need a top ten school. You will never make the money, it’s just not gonna work. You have to be realistic and think about what you’re gonna be doing long-term.”

He also felt that if students could not decide on a specific career before enrolling, they should at least have a general sense of the career field they aspire to work in and spend their undergraduate years refining their interests. Lisa supported Blair’s suggestion by noting that she never changed her major, she started out in public relations and graduated with a public relations degree. She asserted that the more students focused on career aspirations in high school, the less time and money they would waste on college.

Josie’s experiences as a high school student also supported Blair and Lisa’s recommendations. Of all the participants, Josie was the most focused about how to get into (and out of) Case Western in a timely cost-efficient way. Josie saw Case Western Reserve as a valuable yet expensive investment and she was extremely thoughtful and deliberate in her college decision-making. She considered Case Western’s total costs, resources, rankings, debt repayment, access to job opportunities, and future earnings prior to enrolling and developed a strategy to reduce her total cost over four years. In order to reduce the amount of loan debt she would need to repay, Josie enrolled in the maximum number of credits she could register for every semester and
graduated in three years. She was able to reduce her loan debt in such a way that she incurred only $57,000 for three years of undergraduate study and three years of law school.

Each participant expressed feelings of hope about their future earnings and pride in their decisions to attend their schools, however they also expressed sadness or regret about incurring loan debt. While each had accepted loan debt as necessary to their goal of attending expensive, highly-ranked colleges, Blair actually noted feeling “guilty about having so much debt” for undergraduate and now graduate school but he reminds himself often that it will all work out long-term.

The current literature supports this recommendation in that counselors and financial advisors now advocate that, in light of the high unemployment rate for young professionals, students take loan repayment into consideration while choosing colleges (Rose, 2012; Dell, 2011; Lieber, 2011). The Dell study (2011) even suggested maximum loan amounts that students should borrow based on their intended career choices. However, the author acknowledged that unless students chose certain careers in advance, like law and finance, this recommendation could be difficult for the average high school student to implement.

**Theme 4: You can’t always trust your resources.** Each participant had significant family support as they decided to enroll in expensive, highly-ranked private institutions however, Lisa and Blair discussed their experiences with teachers who discouraged them from applying and counselors who were not fully prepared to appropriately advise them on the decision-making process.
“I remember I had an English honors class, and you would think the English honors teacher would be more supportive, but people asked me where I was going to school and I would always say “Syracuse” and then he would always say, “but what if you don’t get in?” and I would say, “I know where I’m going and I’m going to get in” and he would always doubt me, “you’re not going to make it there, how are you going to be able to afford it?” and I would say, “you know I don’t know but it’s going to happen.” So high school teachers may not have your best interest at heart but I think the community has the best support systems for students because a lot of times, like you said, parents just don’t know and so they can tell you things that could be helpful and they can offer workshops.”

(Lisa)

The data provided by these participants were consistent with the findings in Perna’s study (2006) suggesting that college choice is influenced by school and community context, including characteristics such as availability of counseling and the staff’s overall knowledge of college entrance procedures. Perna also (2006) noted that students’ decisions should also be viewed in this context because school and communities share ideas about education, students’ aspirations and plans (Bergerson, 2009). Based on school and community culture, students choose schools of varying quality or opt out of higher education altogether (Perna, 2006) and in Lisa and Blair’s cases, the training and advisement they received in the community was likely the reason they attended expensive, highly ranked private colleges, in lieu of lower-tiered colleges. The participants in this study felt that unknowledgeable and unsupportive faculty were commonplace at their schools but these participants possessed a strong sense of habitus (and their support from other sources) that enabled them to keep moving forward on their decisions to attend expensive,
highly-ranked private colleges. This data presents an opportunity for future study to understand the experiences of other high-achieving, low-income students who did not attend expensive, highly-ranked private schools to determine if they felt that unknowledgeable and unsupportive faculty were commonplace at their schools and whether this played a role their decisions to enroll in the schools they chose to attend.

The themes that emerged during the data collection phase provided a comprehensive description of “how the participants experienced what they experienced” (Moustakas, 2004, P.121). As each theme is described in the Discussion of Major Findings in chapter 5, recommendations will be made to high school students, parents, and the college counseling community about the college choice process. Additional recommendations will be made for future studies about college choice and debt tolerance among low-income students who aspire to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges.
Chapter 5

Discussion of research findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions that influenced low-income students to assume significant loan debt to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges, instead of enrolling in less expensive public or private colleges. The recent economic downturn, along with the increase in unemployment to 9.1% in 2010 from 8.7 in 2009 created challenges for families with less to spend on college expenses (Project on Student Debt, 2010). In addition, endowment funds at some highly selective universities were negatively impacted influencing these schools to reduce their financial aid budgets and change their income guidelines to determine eligibility for need-based institutional aid (Brown, et al 2010). As a result, students interested in attending expensive, highly-ranked private colleges were faced with borrowing more in student loans than in previous years. (Brown, et al, 2010; Project on Student Debt, 2011), while other students enrolled in community colleges and state institutions (Fain, 2012) to avert considerable debt.²

Using Bordieu’s theory on habitus, this study sought to answer the following research question:

To what extent does habitus inform low-income students’ decisions to attend expensive, highly ranked private schools that do not cover the students’ full financial needs?

² The most recent data from the Project on Student Debt (2011) show that Pell Grant recipients, who generally have family incomes under $50,000, are much more likely to borrow and to borrow more than their wealthier counterparts. Among graduating seniors who ever received a Pell Grant, 87% had student loans in 2008, with an average of $24,800 — nearly $2,000 more than the average for all seniors graduating with loans that year (Project on Student Debt, 2011). The participants in this study exceeded this average, with the exception of one person, however, the participant with the highest loan debt (Catrina) also attended New York University, one of the top ten non-profit universities whose graduates have the highest student loan debt in the country (Project on Student Debt, 2011).
In answering this question, the study sought to describe the lived experiences of low-income students navigating the college decision-making process by using the participants’ own words to describe attitudinal factors that influenced them to choose expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. Hu and Hossler’s work (2000) on low-income students and college choice found that family income did not have a significant impact on institutional choice and they noted a gap in the literature on the attitudinal factors that influenced low-income students during the college decision making process. However, the increasing costs of tuition and fees and loss of endowment revenue beginning in 2008 resulted in more limited financial aid packages (Goreski, 2010), and more students entering college with greater unmet financial need, and more students incurring supplemental loan debt (Dezhbakhsh & Karikari, 2010; Lederman, 2008; O’Shaunessey, 2010; Rowley, 2010).

The research approach that was most appropriate for exploring the attitudes of low-income students who attended these colleges was the qualitative phenomenological research design. This approach enabled better understanding of experiences and the meanings these students assigned to those experiences through their own voices (Moutstakas, 1994). As a result, this data is not generalizable to the entire population of low-income students and the inability to generalize is a limitation of this study.

In response to Hossler’s call for additional attitudinal data regarding college choice (2000), phenomenological research was helpful in understanding low-income students’ perceptions about the decision-making process and whether habitus influenced their choice of schools and their decisions to incur debt in order to enroll in the institutions they attended. This study is
similar to Dongbin Kim’s 2004 quantitative study examining the impact of different types of financial aid on college choice among students of color. While the Kim study (2004) was quantitative and did not study socioeconomic status, the study did focus on students who had a strong desire to attend one specific school, exploring the reasons for wanting to attend these schools, and demonstrating the differences in choice patterns by race (pp. 43-70). Kim (2004) focused on race and attitudinal factors to determine debt tolerance and its impact on students’ decisions to attend their first-choice college. In contrast, this study focused on attitudinal factors using the voices of the participants to demonstrate how and why they were influenced to enroll at expensive, highly regarded private colleges. Socioeconomic status was the primary guiding demographic variable used for this study’s population given that habitus was the theoretical framework for this study.

The intellectual goal of this study was to expand the body of research on the college choice process among low-income students. The practical goal was to utilize the experiences of participants in this study to provide data to families and the college counseling community to assist low-income students as they fully examine each admission offer in the context of their ability to secure employment and repay loans. The participants of this study made several recommendations for high school seniors interested in attending expensive, highly-ranked colleges and the data uncovered a number of issues that are recommended for future study. The extent to which habitus drives these decisions is strong and clearly demonstrated based on the participants’ willingness to incur debt to order to gain access to the type of jobs, contacts, and economic benefits usually afforded graduates of highly-ranked colleges. Participants believed that affiliation with expensive, highly-ranked private schools placed them at an advantage
relative to students who attended cheaper or lower ranked schools and if given the opportunity to
choose again, they would have made the same choices for school.

Major findings

The four major findings of this study are the following:

1. Determination of career choice prior to incurring debt
2. Anticipate the benefits of school choices but minimize debt
3. Self-directed in motivation to attend schools of higher social classes
4. Perceptions of resource trustworthiness in light of upward mobility goals

Major finding 1: Determination of career choice prior to incurring debt. Despite their
positivity about the economic and social benefits of attending expensive, highly-ranked colleges,
and their beliefs about their ability to eventually repay their loans, the participants recommended
that high school seniors determine career goals and loan repayment prior to incurring debt. This
finding was surprising given the participants strong aspirations toward the social, cultural, and
economic benefits of higher social classes. However the recommendation from one participant
dissuading high school seniors from attending expensive, highly ranked private colleges if their
future career choices would not provide them the appropriate income to repay their student loans
is actually consistent with the most recent literature on college choice and loan repayment (Dell,
2011; Kingkade, 2012; Lieber, 2011). Although this recommendation was made with the benefit
of hindsight regarding the current economic climate, the participants did not foresee the impact
of today’s job market as they were choosing colleges and incurring debt to do it. Only one
participant, Josie, confirmed her career choice in high school, and mapped out a clear plan to
accelerate her studies and graduate early. Despite the participants’ decisions in high school, this finding is supported by the literature (Dell 2011; Lieber 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011) as the country debates the value of college degrees and wrestles with the country’s growing student loan debt and high unemployment rate for new college graduates. According to the Pew study (2011), most Americans are keenly aware of the increased earning potential of adults who earned college degrees compared to those who did not. However, of the participants who incurred loan debt about half (48%) say that paying back the loan has made it harder to make ends meet and 24% say it has had an impact on the kind of careers they pursued. In addition, participants felt that the majority of the burden for meeting educational expenses should be on the Federal and state governments while the college presidents polled felt that the majority of the financial burden should rest with families, even though they conceded that most families could not afford the average cost of college. In light of this opinion and the realities of the current labor market, this finding is particularly significant and would enable high school seniors to make more educated decisions about college enrollment and the impact that student loan debt could have on their lives. Overall, the participants’ advice to consider career goals was based on hindsight. Josie had clearly committed to her career choice as an attorney before enrolling in college and connected this aspiration to her decision to attend Case Western and graduate in three years. Even though Blair, and the literature (Fain, 2012) acknowledged that it might be difficult for a high school senior to settle on a career before choosing a school, there seemed to be a collective sense among the participants that low-income students should not make the investment in an expensive school without planning for their potential careers and salaries.
Major finding 2: Anticipate the benefits of school choices but minimize debt. Overall, the participants felt that their schools’ reputations and access to the best jobs and contacts were worth the debt they incurred to attend. Even though they were uncomfortable with student loan debt, they anticipated that the long-term financial, cultural, and social benefits of their educations would enable them to secure higher paying jobs that they might not have secured if they had gone to lower-ranked schools. The participants felt that the caliber of the schools they attended would enable them to secure the type of positions and salaries that would enable them to repay their debts in a reasonable timeframe. Given this, they felt that securing loan debt to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges was justified.

Despite their optimism about the benefits of attending expensive, highly-ranked private schools, the participants advised that high school students balance their desires for upward mobility and high paying careers by developing plans to minimize college costs and loan debt. This finding supports the literature warning high school seniors to avoid incurring significant student loan debt prior to choosing a college (Dell, 2011; Kingkade, 2012; Lieber, 2011).

However, as high school seniors, the participants in this study did not necessarily work to reduce the amount they would have to borrow in student loans. Latisha enrolled in college level courses at her state-based, college counseling program, however, those courses were not eligible to receive college credit because they were taken as noncredit courses primarily to make her more competitive in the admission process. One recommendation from this finding is to encourage low-income high school students who aspire to attend expensive, highly ranked colleges to enroll in “college level courses” with the specific intent of reducing college expenses. 1.8 million students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses in 2011 (College Board, 2011a) and
most of those credits will transfer to the colleges. Enrolling in high school Advanced Placement courses, or college sponsored, credit-bearing courses offered in high school, like those offered through Syracuse University’s Project Advance\(^3\), is effective in making applicants more competitive during the admission process while also reducing the number of credits these students will need to graduate from college.

Another option for minimizing college expenses and enabling low-income students to repay college loans is to enroll in community colleges courses while in high school. Among wealthier students, the trend of enrolling in community college classes is becoming more popular (Fain, 2012) and these students earn fully transferrable college credits, which are usually accepted for general education requirements. Community based organizations and high school guidance counselors can advise students to supplement their courses work with community college classes as an inexpensive method of reducing college costs while also making students more competitive in the admission process by enabling them to demonstrate their propensity to handle college-level work.

**Major finding 3: Self-directed in motivation to attend schools of higher social classes.** The third major finding of this study is that low-income students who aspire to attend expensive, highly-ranked colleges do so because they decide that they want the best for their lives and become self-directed in their motivations to affiliate with institutions that are typically attended

\(^3\) Syracuse University Project Advance (SUPA) is a cooperative partnership linking Syracuse University with secondary schools. Through this partnership, high schools can offer qualified seniors the opportunity to enroll in Syracuse University courses for college credit. Teachers who have qualified through SUPA as SU adjunct instructors teach enhanced concurrent enrollment university courses in high schools during the school day.
by students of higher social classes than the ones to which they belong. According to Bourdieu (1986), academic credentials can provide material and cultural benefits that are enhanced by the social and professional networks that accompany certain institutional brands. In the minds of the participants, affiliation with these schools ensured access to contacts and better jobs that would not have necessarily been available to them if they attended lower-ranked schools. In some cases, participants believed that the brand recognition of these schools erased the gap between themselves and students from wealthier backgrounds who already had access to the social, cultural and economic benefits of their socioeconomic classes. This thinking is consistent with the literature and its findings that by simply gaining entry into the desired social networks, members enjoy direct economic benefits due to the collective and individual rewards that are shared through the network (Martin, 2010; Zhang, 2011). At the time of their decisions, participants did not necessarily realize the impact of habitus on their mindsets, however, the emergent themes discussed in chapter four presents strong attitudinal data about why low-income students incur significant debt to affiliate with higher social classes through their attendance at expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. Even when participants struggled with the idea of incurring debt, with encouragement from family and other trusted advisors, they moved forward with their enrollment.

This finding conflicts with more recent literature about the need for students to consider loan repayment before choosing a school. With unemployment for young adults at a 60-year high (Kingkade, 2012), educators are encouraging students to consider the impact of student loan debt on their quality of life by attending colleges offering the best financial aid packages (Dell, 2011; Lieber, 2011). Despite the literature, participants in this study focused on the long-term benefits
of attending expensive, highly-ranked private colleges, maintaining the hope that affiliation with these schools would eventually pay off in the end. This focus on the anticipated benefits of attending these schools instead of debt repayment is an indication of the extent to which habitus motivated low-income students that aspired to affiliate with higher socioeconomic classes.

**Major Finding 4: Perceptions of resource trustworthiness in light of upward mobility goals.**

Given their aspirations of upward mobility, and their perceptions that affiliating with the “best” schools will grant them access to higher paying jobs and contacts, participants engaged in academic and extracurricular activities to increase their chances for admission to expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. At times, however, they openly questioned the validity of the advice they received from school staff who discouraged them or questioned their ability to gain admission to these schools, especially when parents and community organization leaders have been so encouraging. Based on the findings of this study, low-income students who have a strong sense of habitus and are highly motivated to affiliate with higher social classes are more likely to become distrustful of school personnel whose advice conflicts with their parents and community.

Lisa and Blair supplemented their knowledge about the college application process by participating in community-based college bound programs and finding school personnel who encouraged them to attend expensive, highly ranked colleges but both participants discussed these resources as part of a larger system that was not designed to support the aspirations of low-income students who aspired to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. While both deemed these “less knowledgeable” (Blair), untrustworthy (Lisa) resources as “typical” of the resources provided by their under-resourced urban high schools, these students had aspirations
and family support that outweighed the discouragement and lack of support they received from their high school resources.

This finding is highly significant because unless low-income students have strong goal orientation towards upward mobility and a strong system of support for attending this type of school, they can be easily dissuaded from attending, particularly if they have any concerns about loan debt and repayment. The issue of trust among low-income students, parents and school officials is well documented in the literature, establishing that relational trust is a complex dynamic that requires all parties to depend on each other and develop a shared vision of academic success for students (Beard & Brown, 2008; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2004) referred to the concept of benevolence as a sense of caring and the idea that a person’s well-being or something they care about will be protected and not harmed by the trusted party (Baier, 1985; Zand, 1997). When this “essential element of the trust” (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.19) is called into question by the low-income student whose goal is to attend an expensive, highly-ranked private college, the party is perceived as untrustworthy. While the intentions of “untrustworthy” resources could be perceived as benevolent if school personnel were counseling students based on the recommendations of the most recent literature advocating that students avoid significant loan debt (Dell, 2011; Kingkade, 2012; Lieber, 2011), the participants in this study did not perceive this advice as caring or protective of the shared vision of attending the “best” schools.

This finding clearly conflicts with the literature on college choice and loan debt repayment (Dell, 2011; Kingkade, 2012; Lieber, 2011) in the sense that the literature suggests that their recommendations should be applied to all college bound students. This finding suggests that the
issue of college choice and loan debt should be considered from multiple perspectives, including those of low-income students seeking upward mobility by attending expensive, highly-ranked private schools. As noted in the literature review, Edward St. John’s (2006) study of financial inequity and college access suggested that it was necessary to include multiple theoretical perspectives when studying the issue of socioeconomic status and college choice so that as school personnel advise students on enrolling in expensive private colleges, they can keep the interests of upwardly mobile, low-income students in mind while helping them to understand the importance of considering college choice along with career aspirations, potential earnings, and loan repayment.

**Reinforcement of findings**

During the course of the study, data was collected from a fifth participant, however this data was eliminated because he did not meet the criteria for the study requiring high school graduation after 2007, the start of the most recent global economic decline. The current economic climate and unemployment rate for young adults is significantly different than the climate that existed after this participant graduated from Brown University in 2000 (Light, 2008), however, the fifth participant provided data for the study that was consistent with the themes that emerged from the four other participants. It is in the interest of this study to compare and contrast this data with the overall findings.

Tito is a Hispanic male who attended Brown University and graduated in 2000. He discussed having parents who placed a high priority on education because of their backgrounds as migrant workers who emigrated to the United States to give their children better lives. As a result, Tito,
along with his two siblings, attended Ivy League colleges and received advanced degrees, including a sister currently pursuing a doctoral degree. This participant clearly utilized habitus to decide whether he should enroll at Brown- and borrowed the student loans to do so. However, he also acknowledged having fewer challenges in finding employment than students graduating after 2007. Similar to Blair, who said he chose his school based on the potential return on investment from the school’s reputation, Tito believed that if a senior was comparing multiple schools, and there was less than a $5000 difference between them, seniors should enroll in the most highly-ranked, private schools to which they were admitted. He also felt that today’s low-income seniors should continue to enroll in these schools, despite current economic trends and limited job prospects. In order for them to engage with the social and professional networks that accompany their choice of schools, he felt that today’s seniors needed the academic credentials necessary just to gain access to those networks, contacts, and jobs. Tito felt strongly that his personal sense of habitus and strong family support were the reasons he attended two of the most highly-ranked private schools on the U.S News and World report and why he is so successful in business today.

However, unlike the other study participants, Tito did not see the need for seniors to make a final decision on their careers before choosing an institution, conflicting on the emerging data on college choice and loan debt repayment which is in conflict with the current data (Dell, 2011; Lieber, 2011; and Pew 2012). In fact, he felt that by simply affiliating with the school and gaining exposure to the social and cultural networks within the school, he was able to finalize his career choice, graduate from undergraduate study and attend a world class business school. He believed that by focusing on his long-term access to contacts and potential job prospects, he
made the right decision to enroll in an expensive, highly-ranked private college. More importantly, in response to the current economic climate, Tito said that students looking to access similar networks should follow his example because the ones who attended schools like his would be the first considered for positions in this current economy and the ones who most likely remain employed or to be quickly rehired after unemployment. Tito, like the other study’s participants, believed that the benefits of attending expensive, highly-ranked colleges justified the loan debt that low-income students will incur to enroll.

The data that emerged from Tito’s interview was consistent with the literature (Koba, 2011) that found that job seekers with Ivy League degrees receive additional consideration for open positions and are often referred by other members of the social network. Tito’s data also supports the finding that the anticipated benefits of choosing certain schools are worth the debt that seniors will incur because by simply gaining entry into the desired social networks, members enjoy social and economic benefits due to the collective and individual rewards that are shared through the network (Martin, 2010; Zhang, 2011).

In one area, Tito’s findings were inconsistent with the literature demonstrating that highly-ranked state universities have become a favorite among hiring recruiters because of their large populations to choose from and the practical skills they teach their students, making them academically well rounded and professionally prepared (Evans, 2010). With companies being pressured to reduce their recruitment budgets (Evans, 2010), and the national debate about the value of degrees in the marketplace (Dell, 2011; Lieber 2011; Pew, 2012), highly-ranked state colleges serve a viable option in terms of securing well-paid positions and establishing contacts.
However, in order to enter higher social classes consistent with Bourdieu’s theories of social capital (1986), it remains unclear, whether highly-ranked state schools will provide low-income students the access they seek to these social networks.

The findings from this participant provide an important perspective that supports the data from the other participants and the literature.

**Recommendations for future study**

This study’s data support the Kim study (2004), finding that among African American and Latino students, no specific type of financial aid affected the probability of entrance at their first-choice institutions. In addition, data from this study also support findings from Hearn’s 1991 study on academic and nonacademic factors influencing college choice, which found that socioeconomic status exerted indirect influence on the selectivity of institutions that African Americans attended, particularly among, “students with less educated or lower-income parents,” (Hearn, 1991, p. 164). Kim (2004) and Hearn (1988) focused on race as the primary variable for study, however, socioeconomic status, the common demographic variable for this study, seems to have a stronger influence on the participants’ decisions, as Latino participants presented similar rationales for incurring debt to attend these schools.

The racial demographics of the participants presented a limitation for this study in that the site used to recruit study participants was targeted primarily to students of African descent. An additional look at this phenomenon from the perspective of low-income Caucasian students would greatly enrich the literature about attitudinal factors influencing college choice.
Future studies should also focus on where low-income students receive information to help them reduce overall costs at expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. Participants advocated for the need for reliable information from trusted resources in order to help low-income students financially prepare for college. In addition, they noted a lack of consistency in how low-income students were advised to financially prepare. This lack of consistency was evident in the data as one participant neglected research scholarship opportunities because she “had so much going on”, while another student was encouraged to take heavy course loads in college, enabling her to graduate from college in three years and save the cost of one year’s tuition. Future studies can serve as a resource for the counseling community to provide consistent up-to-date information to low-income students about reducing the overall cost of attending expensive, highly-ranked private colleges through transfer credit, scholarships, grant programs and work study opportunities. Similar to strategies utilized by wealthier counterparts (Fain, 2012), high school and community counselors can encourage low-income students to reduce college expenses by taking Advanced Placement exams to test out of undergraduate requirements (even if they did not enroll in the AP courses), or by enrolling at local community colleges during the summer to fulfill general education requirements. The purpose of this study would be to develop best practices for the counseling community to assist low-income students who want to attend expensive highly-ranked private colleges in order to become upwardly mobile. Considering the needs and interests of low-income students will enable students to view school staff as “trusted sources” who share in their vision of success.
A final recommendation for future study is to understand the motivations of high school
guidance counselors who dissuade low-income students from incurring student loan debt to
attend expensive, highly-ranked private universities. The issue of trust emerged in the data as
some of the participants felt they could not trust the advice of school personnel who tried to talk
them out of attending their desired schools. Low-income students must incur loan debt to attend
expensive, highly-ranked private colleges, unless they attend universities like Harvard, Yale,
Duke and Emory, which have eliminated loans from the financial aid packages of low-income
students (de Vise, 2011). Given the number and diversity of financial programs available for
low-income students, it is not reasonable to expect that high school students would have a strong
grasp of their options. Counselors must educate low-income students about these financial
opportunities or they may hinder them from having access to the cultural, social, and economic
opportunities that accompany schools of this caliber. Are guidance counselors advising low-
income students to avoid loans out of concern for their ability to repay, or are they steering low-
income students away from attending these schools because they do not believe that these
students belong at expensive, highly-ranked private colleges? The purpose for this proposed
study is to examine the advice and understand why guidance counselors would discourage
academically qualified, low-income students from attending the most highly regarded schools to
which they have been admitted. Guidance counselors must expand their knowledge about the
breadth of opportunity programs that will enable students to attend their desired schools instead
of dissuading them from taking advantage of important educational and socioeconomic
opportunities.
Conclusion

This study is highly significant because it identified four major findings that contribute to the body of literature on the attitudinal factors that influence college choice among low-income students. I successfully demonstrated the extent to which low-income students utilized habitus in making the decision to attend expensive, highly-ranked private colleges. Despite the literature dissuading students from incurring significant student loan debt (Dell, 2011; Kingkade, 2012; Lieber, 2011), Dell, 2011; Kingkade, 2012; Lieber, 2011), low-income students who gain admission to expensive, highly-ranked private colleges must secure supplemental loans in order to attend these schools. Low-income students who want access to the same social networks as their wealthier counterparts must make the time and financial investment to gain access to those networks. By deciding to invest in an education from an expensive, highly-ranked private college, they can elevate their socioeconomic standing and enjoy the social, cultural and financial benefits of their investment. With encouragement from family, and a strong sense of optimism about the ability to repay these loans, low-income students often move forward and enroll in these schools believing their investment in these schools are worth the debt they will incur. Once these students are admitted to the schools that they have always wanted to attend, their individual senses of habitus, along with family support, influence them to move beyond their concerns and enroll in the intended schools.

Concrete recommendations were made to high school seniors, families, and the college counseling community in order to assist low-income students who might be faced with similar conflicts. As they make final decisions about college, it is critical that parents and college guidance counselors help high school seniors understand the importance of taking on student
loan debt to improve their lives. Tito and Josie are examples of successful low-income students who transcended their socioeconomic status because of their decisions to incur significant loan debt to attend highly-ranked expensive private colleges. Even though the financial benefits of entering a new socioeconomic class may not be immediately realized, the findings of this study suggest that entry into new socioeconomic classes occurs in stages and young alumni who enter new social networks based on their educational affiliations will enjoy the benefits of those networks, sometimes even before the financial benefits are realized. Participants believed that their decisions to attend these schools would ultimately benefit them in the long run because of their future ability to utilize the personal and professional networks affiliated with their schools. Tito and Josie had the opportunity to experience the benefits of their new socioeconomic status and believed that opportunities they were afforded by attending this school were worth the debt they incurred.

In advising low-income students who are considering expensive, highly ranked private colleges, school personnel must understand the sacrifices these students are willing to make in order to improve their lives and assist them in developing their career plans and reducing their college costs while still in high school. Educators and counselors must broaden the advice they share about avoiding loan debt in order to address the diversity of goals that low-income students and their families bring to their attention. By incorporating the findings of this study, and encouraging low-income students to consider career options and loan debt before enrolling, low-income students can eventually enjoy all of the social, professional, and economic benefits that accompany a new, higher socioeconomic class, having full knowledge about the potential impact of loan repayment on their quality of their lives.
Appendix A: Interview questions

1. Tell me how your college aspirations developed. Why did you want to attend college? When did you make this decision?

2. Who influenced you to attend? What other factors influenced you to attend college?

3. What schools did you apply to and what or who influenced you to apply to those schools?

4. Why did you apply to these schools? How did you view these schools in term of your ability to gain contacts or get a job?

5. How were the schools you applied to different than the ones you chose not to apply to?

6. How did you think enrolling in these schools would affect your future?

7. To which colleges were you admitted? What was your reaction (or the reaction of your family or mentors) when you were admitted?

8. Did you attend the school that gave you the most financial aid? Why or why not? Would you make that decision again?

9. Why did you choose the school you attended?

10. Before enrolling, how did you view yourself in relation to the students who already attend that school?

11. Before enrolling in your college, did you think about student loans debt? What were your thoughts about that? How much did you think you would owe after graduation?

12. What was the process you used to make the decision? Did other schools court you?

13. Now that you’ve graduated, discuss your thoughts about the school you chose. Would you enroll again if given the opportunity? Why or why not?
14. How much debt did you incur?

15. Have you shared all that is significant about this experience?
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, School of Education

Karen A. Williams

Low Income Students and College Choice

**Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

We are inviting you to take part in a study.

The purpose of the study is to understand the college decision-making process among low-income students who attended highly regarded colleges but did not receive sufficient financial aid to cover the full cost of attendance. Given the recent economic downturn, and the trend among students to rely more heavily on private loans and credit cards for support, the goal of this study is to understand the attitudinal factors that influenced them to enroll despite the debt they incurred. You are being asked to participate because in a qualifying interview, you meet the criteria for the study.

The researcher will explain more about the study and you may ask any questions that you have. You do not have to participate but if you decide to, please sign this statement and the researcher will give you a copy to keep.

If you take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a one hour, face-to-face interview at a location of your convenience. If your schedule does not allow for an interview in person, we
can arrange for an interview using videoconference technology such as Skype©.

There are no reasonable foreseeable risks, harm, discomfort, or inconvenience from participating in this study. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, however, your answers may help us inform students and high school guidance counselors about the college decision making process by helping them consider college based on academics, reputation, and potential loan debt, prior to enrollment, not after the student has taken on the financial commitment of attendance.

**Your participation in this study will be handled in a confidential manner.** Only the researcher will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you as being of this project.

**The decision to participate in this research project is up to you.** You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

**You will receive access to the study’s findings during the data analysis phase of the study and you will be asked to validate the accuracy of your responses. You will also receive access to the findings at the conclusion of the study.**

**If you have any questions about this study**, please feel free to call me, Karen A. Williams at (914) 262-9335.

**If you have any questions about your rights in this research**, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.7570, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you
wish.
Appendix C- Letter to request site access

Dear Dr. Louison:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me regarding my study. Per our conversation, I am writing to request access to the Black Ivy Alumni League listserv so that I may advertise my study and recruit participants among your membership.

The purpose of the study is to understand the college decision-making process among low-income students who attended highly regarded colleges but did not receive sufficient financial aid to cover the full cost of attendance. Given the recent economic downturn, and the trend among students to rely more heavily on private loans and credit cards for support, the goal of this study is to understand the attitudinal factors that influenced them to enroll despite the debt they incurred. The results of this study will provide guidance counselors and prospective families with data that will encourage them to think critically about the college choice process prior to enrollment, not after, to better inform the student has taken on the financial commitment of attendance.

The selection criteria for this study requires that participants are:

1. Alumni from colleges and universities defined as highly regarded or highly ranked, according to this study’s criteria. For the purpose of this study, participants who attended schools that appear on the 2011 U.S. News and World Reports list of Best Colleges and Universities, under the section marked “top 100 National Universities”.
2. Full-time matriculated undergraduates at the time they attended these schools;

3. Low-income, which for the purpose of this study is someone who has been determined by the Department of Education to be eligible for Pell grants (Pell eligible).

4. Awarded financial aid packages that included federal and institutional grants and loans but still did not cover the total cost of attendance.

5. Alumni who graduated from highly regarded colleges and universities after 2007, the year Jay Light (2008), Dean of Harvard Business School, describes as the beginning of the global economic decline.

In this study, it is important to determine why participants would knowingly assume significant debt to attend the schools of their choice when it is likely that they were admitted to less prestigious or lower ranked schools that offered more financial aid. For the purposes of this study, “less prestigious” or “lower ranked” universities are those which do not appear on the list of 100 nationally ranked universities.

Interested alumni will be asked to participate if they meet the criteria for the study.

If they decide to take part in this study, I will conduct a one hour phone interview.

Thank you again, Dr. Louison for allowing me to advertise this study on the Black Ivy Alumni League listserve. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns at any time during this time.

My best,
Karen
Appendix D- Recruitment email

Why did you attend and would you attend again?

Hello:

My name is Karen Williams and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am conducting a study to understand the perceptions that influence low-income students to assume significant loan debt to attend private colleges, instead of enrolling in less expensive public or private colleges.

The purpose of the study is to understand the college decision-making process among low-income students who attended highly regarded colleges but did not receive sufficient financial aid to cover the full cost of attendance. Given the recent economic downturn, and the trend among students to rely more heavily on private loans and credit cards for support, the goal of this study is to understand the attitudinal factors that influenced them to enroll. The results of this study will provide guidance counselors and prospective families with data that will encourage them to think critically about the college choice process prior to enrollment- not after the student has taken on the financial commitment of attendance.

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If you are interested and believe you meet the criteria for the study, I’d love to speak with you. Please contact me at karenabigail@gmail.com or leave me a message with your contact information at 914-262-9335.

My best,

Karen
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Table 2
Emergent Themes and Meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statements</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Meanings</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I guess at the time, just thinking about good grades, …, we were thinking about people who had kids who had good grades, who would get good jobs, if they went to the school and that’s why I was going there….I have the academic background to go and I, therefore, deserve the prestige of being able to go.” (Catrina)</td>
<td>1. The best students go to the best schools</td>
<td>Catrina had a felt that she had attained the level of academic achievement that made her eligible to attend the “best school” and she deserved to go.</td>
<td>Strong sense of self-esteem and confidence Strong family support Willingness to incur debt given reputational benefits and access to jobs and contacts.</td>
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<td>&quot;Newhouse was one of the best schools of communication in the country… I just felt like it was what I needed and where I needed to be…” (Lisa)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Catrina felt that the institution was right for her because it would fulfill her needs and it also happened to be one of the best. Lisa, Blair, and Josie felt that even though the best was more expensive, they were willing to pay more to be affiliated with a school that has the best reputation. He felt it was worth paying for.</td>
<td>Among the participants, enrollment in their expensive, high-ranked private schools was an act of habitus because they were all admitted to less expensive colleges and received financial aid to attend but in order to affiliate with the “best” institutions for their goals.</td>
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<td>“I could either have an accounting degree from Hunter College or an accounting degree from Syracuse and just the fact that it says Syracuse, that has great name reputation. So, when I made the additional cost comparison for what you’re getting. You’re kinda paying for the reputation. It sounds</td>
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really bad but that’s what it is. If you went to Harvard, it’s the same thing. People say wow and you could have e been an art major.” (Blair)

“When I was deciding, I narrowed it down to Case and Denison because I didn’t get into Princeton. I did get into Denison but by then it slipped a little in the rating… I ended up choosing Case I felt it was a great choice but I mean, I applied to an Ivy League school so I was always interested in applying to schools with higher standards.” (Josie)
"Well, we kind of figured that we would get some money and we just expected that we would have to take out loans to cover everything else and that's, like, okay we just thought that, um, you know that I'd get a good job and that we would pay the loans off so we didn't put too much on financial aid.” (Catrina)

"Once I received that second offer, I realized that the cost...the additional cost I’d incur just going to the school, it has a higher and better reputation so I felt that the chances of getting better employment would increased.” (Blair)

"I was getting money from my grant and maintaining great grades but they took some of that money back and I would have to take out loans. I was scared to be in that kind of debt. I didn't really understand how much debt was too much debt and then I talked to my parents and they put it in perspective. If I was spending $45,000 a year to go here and was coming out with less than 20,000 over all four years that I would be fine and that

2. Didn’t think “too much” about loan debt before enrolling

Participants focused so much on school reputation, access to jobs and contacts and the prospects for the future, they didn’t spend much time thinking about how loan repayment would impact their finances after graduation.

Josie actively thought about the impact of loan debt on their lives and Catrina and Blair assumed that things would just “work out” in terms of their ability to repay. Lisa was more hesitant because she hadn’t really thought about how much debt was too much debt until she was forced to take out additional supplemental loans as a junior. All of the alums consulted their families

The desire to attain a degree from the right school seems to be the driving force for enrollment. College aspirations and school choice has been influenced so much by family, school, and community that the desire for upward mobility has surpassed the goal of simply attaining a college degree. The type of school these students choose is an act of habitus.
helped a lot.” (Lisa)

before incurring debt. The act of assuming supplementary loan debt in order to attend these highly-ranked expensive private colleges is an act of habitus among low-income students because all of the participants could have chosen to attend cheaper schools that were either less, highly regarded or less expensive state colleges.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Significant Statements</th>
<th>3. Would make the same enrollment choice again but would have wanted better preparation to minimize loan debt</th>
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<td>&quot;But if I had to do it over again, as of right now I would do it I just wish that I would've been more prepared…and less of an attitude of like &quot;oh it'll get paid off&quot; and just really look at the ways and I can start paying- while I'm in school, look for more options beforehand, instead of just going in into it so blindly thinking everything will work out when I get out.” (Catrina)</td>
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<td>&quot;My parents didn’t know much about college, they just knew it was expensive- and anything was expensive. And we just knew we didn’t have the funds period. I feel like that’s where the role of the high school counselor comes in. They’re supposed to be helping me prepare for what I don’t know. I need help finding colleges, selecting colleges, how much it costs…it falls mainly on them… I kinda feel like if colleges are going to lower income schools to recruit students, you have to prepare yourself to be very up front with (low-income students) in terms of the costs, and the things you’re offering and you need to</td>
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<td>Catrina and Lisa regretted not spending more time actively engaged in the process of minimizing their loan debt through financial preparation, pursuing scholarships and other means of reducing loans.</td>
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<td>Blair would have chosen his school again but placed responsibility on the guidance counseling community and the colleges who recruit low-income students to more closely tie costs with outcomes</td>
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<td>Josie and Lisa were active in reducing their loan debt because they were concerned about the impact of loan indebtedness on their ability to be upwardly mobile. Lisa specifically mentioned being fearful but it could be because the additional debt was unexpected and resulted from a reduction in her financial aid but had taken supplementary college courses while in high school. Josie also enrolled in supplementary college courses in high school but enrolled in as many courses as she could at every term she was enrolled at Case, since the cost of full-time enrollment covered 12-19 credits. Taking</td>
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be upfront with what students are getting.” (Blair)

“Well, I know that I would've probably applied for a few more scholarships. I just felt like at the time, I had so much going on because I was involved in a lot of different programs and classes and I really didn't have time to look to look for additional funds.” (Lisa)

“Yes but the only difference I might not have studied what I studied. I was political science and Spanish major, ethnic studies minor. Just based on what I see in terms of employment, I think I would have gone for something like communication, counseling, social work, education…you can’t get a job with just a political science degree” (Josie)

among law school graduates and she doesn’t believe her choice of political science as a major, or her contract position in the legal field, adequately prepared her to repay student loan debt.

Lisa, Josie and Blair suggested that today’s seniors balance their decisions to attend highly-ranked, expensive private colleges with their intended career choices.

Their advice to consider career goals was interesting because not all of the participants made those considerations themselves. While Blair was the only one to acknowledge that it might be difficult for a high senior to settle on a career before choosing a school, there seemed to be a collective sense that low-income students should not make the investment in an
expensive school without planning for their potential careers and salaries. It is also important to note that despite feeling hopeful about their future earnings, each participant expressed some sense of sadness or regret about incurring loan debt. Though their advice is based on hindsight reflection about their experiences, all four of the participants agreed that if they had to make the same decision again, they would all enroll in the schools they attended.
“I remember I had an English honors class, and you would think the English honors teacher would be more supportive, but people asked me where I was going to school and I would always say Syracuse and then he would always say, “but what if you don't get in?” and I would say, I know where I’m going and I'm going to get in- and he'd would always doubt me, “you’re not going to make it there, how are you going to be able to afford it?” and I would say, “you know I don’t know but it's going to happen.” So high school teachers may not have your best interest at heart.” (Lisa)

“Even before deciding to come to Syracuse, I applied to a wide range of colleges because my counselor was in her first year of counseling and you could sense that she didn’t know a lot. But she thought it was beneficial to apply to a lot of different schools and organize it to apply to schools you know you can get into, low-mid range, and the schools you might not get into but you want to apply anyway. Getting into the schools is when I guess my

4. Can’t always trust “resources”

Stories about teachers who discouraged participants from applying to expensive, highly-ranked colleges and counselors who weren’t prepared to appropriately advise students on the decision-making process are unique to low-income students attending underresourced schools.

Participants supplemented their knowledge of the college application process by participating in community-based college bound programs or finding school personnel who were supportive to them in their desire to attend expensive, highly-ranked colleges. The additional training and advisement they received from their resources (family and non-family) was likely the reason they attended expensive, highly ranked private colleges, in lieu of lower-tired colleges. There was a sense among Lisa and Blair that the “untrusted resources”, who were less knowledgeable or couldn’t be trusted, were part of a system that was not designed to support the upward mobility of some low-income students.

While the intentions of these resources could be perceived as “questionable”, there is clear that alums did not perceive this lack of knowledge or support
decision came into play.” (Blair)

colleges. among high school personnel as an impediment to their goals. It appears that habitus inspired them to seek support elsewhere, rather than accept that they can’t afford or don’t belong at a highly-ranked, expensive private college.