UNDERSTANDING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF SELECTIVE AND EXPENSIVE PRIVATE
FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INTERPRETATIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Low-income students enroll at private, selective, and expensive four-year institutions of higher education at lower rates than students from families at the top end of the income distribution, hindering these students’ abilities to gain social, cultural, and economic capital needed for social mobility. As the University of Miami (UM) strives to achieve the many goals of its “Roadmap to Our New Century,” the enrollment management division turns its focus to one specific initiative set by President Julio Frenk: Access to Excellence. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand how low-income students perceive their experience with the college enrollment process and how private, selective, and expensive four-year institutions can utilize this knowledge to become more accessible to this type of student. The main question the researcher sought to answer was: How do low-income students who successfully enroll in a selective, private four-year institutions explain their experience with the college admission and enrollment process? Data was collected through interviews with eight low-income, first-time, first-year who shared stories about their college admission and enrollment process. Results indicated that successful low-income students at the UM explain that their college admission and enrollment process as a time-consuming, stressful, goal-oriented process, where they felt they lacked the necessary help to be as successful as they could have been. This research demonstrates the need for private, selective, and expensive, four-year institutions to ease the stress of the process for the student, help students understand how college will meet their goals, and encourage and educate students’ support systems.

Keywords: low-income, access, social reproduction theory, higher education, college admission, college enrollment, selective institutions
# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................. 3

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study.................................................................................. 11
  Statement of the Problem............................................................................................... 11
  Significance of the Research Question........................................................................... 13
  Research Problem and Research Question.................................................................... 15
    Definitions of Key Terminology.................................................................................... 15
  Theoretical Framework................................................................................................... 16
    Social Reproduction Theory......................................................................................... 17
    Critics of the Social Reproduction Theory................................................................. 19
    Rationale for the Use of Social Reproduction Theory............................................... 21
    Alignment of Theory with Problem of Practice......................................................... 23
  Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 24

Chapter Two: Literature Review............................................................................................ 25
  Barriers to Access Higher Education............................................................................... 26
    Macro-Level Barriers to Higher Education................................................................. 27
    Micro-Level Barriers to Higher Education................................................................. 29
      Costs and tuition........................................................................................................ 29
      Lack of resources available..................................................................................... 32
      Aspirations for college enrollment........................................................................ 33
      Family role in college attainment........................................................................ 36
    Summary....................................................................................................................... 38
  Enrollment Rates for Low-Income Students..................................................................... 39
Enrollment Predicted Before Higher Education..................................................40
Enrollment Blocked by Institutions of Higher Education...............................45
Summary............................................................................................................49
Lack of Social Mobility for Low-Income Students...........................................52
Systemic Causes of Social Immobility...............................................................53
Institutional Causes of Social Immobility.........................................................56
Summary............................................................................................................58
Conclusion..........................................................................................................58
Chapter Three: Research Design.......................................................................61
Qualitative Research Approach.......................................................................61
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).............................................63
Participants........................................................................................................66
Procedures.........................................................................................................68
Data Collection..................................................................................................69
Data Analysis.....................................................................................................72
Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research.........................................................74
Ethical Considerations.......................................................................................74
Credibility...........................................................................................................75
Transferability....................................................................................................76
Internal Audit Trail............................................................................................76
Self-reflexivity and Transparency.......................................................................77
Limitations..........................................................................................................78
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis...............................................................80
Goal-Oriented Process...................................................................................................81
Financially Motivated Goals..........................................................................................83
Culturally and Socially Motivated Goals......................................................................91
Summary.....................................................................................................................95
Shaped by Support System..........................................................................................96
Support from Family.....................................................................................................96
Support from Educators and Admission/Counseling Professionals..........................101
Support from Peers.......................................................................................................106
Summary.....................................................................................................................109
Stressful Process..........................................................................................................110
Time Consuming and Tedious......................................................................................112
Lacking the Necessary Help.........................................................................................116
Summary.....................................................................................................................120
Conclusion....................................................................................................................120
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications..................................................................124
Finding One: Goal Oriented Process..........................................................................125
Financially Motivated Goals.......................................................................................126
Culturally or Socially Motivated Goals......................................................................131
Summary.....................................................................................................................134
Finding Two: Process Shaped by Support Systems.....................................................135
Process Shaped by Family Members..........................................................................136
Process Shaped by Educators and Admission/Counseling Professionals...............140
Process Shaped by Peers.............................................................................................143
Summary......................................................................................................................146

Finding Three: Stressful Process..................................................................................147
  Time Consuming and Tedious....................................................................................147
  Lacking the Necessary Help to be Successful..........................................................150
  Summary..................................................................................................................152

Conclusion...................................................................................................................153

Recommendations for Practice.....................................................................................154
  Easing the Stress of the Process................................................................................155
  Help Students Understand How to Meet Goals.......................................................158
  Encouraging and Educating Students’ Support Systems........................................161
  Summary..................................................................................................................163

Recommendations for Future Research.......................................................................163

References...................................................................................................................164

Appendices
  A. Participant Recruitment Email (Initial).................................................................178
  B. Recruitment Email (Follow Up Message).............................................................179
  C. Participant Selection Email....................................................................................180
  D. Consent Form.........................................................................................................181
  E. Interview Protocol..................................................................................................184
  F. Member Check Email Template.............................................................................186
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to understand how low-income students perceive their experience with the college enrollment process at the University of Miami (UM). Accessibility for low-income students is generally defined as gaining admission to and enrolling at UM, a private, selective, and expensive four-year institution of higher education. Knowledge generated by this research was expected to inform enrollment managers at UM how these low-income students were successful in navigating the college enrollment process at UM.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to students from low-income backgrounds accessing higher education followed by the rationale and significance of the study, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. Social reproduction theory served as a lens for the research around which the problem statement, purpose statement, and research question are presented to focus and ground the study.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of practice under current review is the fact that low-income students enroll at private, selective, and expensive four-year institutions of higher education at lower rates than students from families at the top end of the income distribution, hindering these students’ ability to gain social, cultural, and economic capital needed for social mobility. As UM strives to achieve the many goals of its “Roadmap to Our New Century,” the enrollment management division turns its focus to one specific initiative set by President Julio Frenk: Access to Excellence. This initiative will move UM toward maximizing every student’s access to all the opportunities and programs offered by the institution regardless of their background. The
guiding principles for this initiative include recognizing the different needs of prospective students, current students, and alumni and eliminating financial obstacles for those constituencies (Access to Excellence, 2017).

With just over 22% of the University’s operating budget deriving from undergraduate enrollment, the enrollment management division must be cognizant of the net tuition revenue (NTR) and discount rate of its entering classes (personal communication, J. Haller, September 18, 2017). With NTR consistently hovering around $60 million and a discount rate in the mid-30% range, UM has the ability to incrementally make itself more financially accessible to students of low-income backgrounds and meet more demonstrated financial need at time of admission than they have in the past. The financial aid initiatives, however, are just one aspect of enrollment for this cohort. The recruitment strategies and review of applications must also take into consideration the context and backgrounds of low-income students in order succeed in becoming truly accessible. The enrollment managers at UM in departments like Undergraduate Admission and Financial Aid, will need to work hard and be creative in order to meet the goals in the Access to Excellence initiative and move UM toward increasing enrollment of the best and brightest students from low-income backgrounds.

There are many studies that suggest successful strategies and policies to narrow the access gap in higher education between the wealthiest and the poorest of students. Not one study, however, has focused specifically on the most selective, prestigious, and expensive institutions in the American system of higher education – like the University of Miami. Through this study, specific actions were identified for the enrollment management division at the University of Miami to take in order to make their campuses more accessible to low-income students.
Significance of the Research Question

The rationale for this study was the researcher’s interest in making higher education accessible to all students who want to pursue it. Working at multiple selective and expensive private four-year institutions, the researcher has witnessed barriers for low-income students that do not exist for wealthy students and that he believes should be alleviated. The justification for this research was the fact that higher education improves specific skillsets in students that help make them more attractive to employers after they graduate. These skillsets include creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. A more educated citizenry benefits our democracy at large by allowing people to recognize their role in society (Carver & Harrison, 2015). At the local level, the University of Miami has committed to becoming an exemplar of access in higher education.

In the 2014-2015 academic year, 16% of all undergraduate students at the University of Miami received Pell grants. This number dropped significantly for the 2015-2016 academic year when only 13% of all undergraduates and 12% of first-time, first-year students at UM received Pell grants (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Students who are eligible to receive Pell grants to help offset the cost of higher education must have an Estimated Family Contribution (EFC), as determined by the federal government, low enough where paying for tuition and other costs of attendance would be a major burden on the student and their family. These students are often on the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum. UM has also seen the median income of its enrolled first-time, first-year students climb over the past three years. The median income for domestic students from the state of Florida has grown by approximately $13,000 and by about $23,000 for domestic students from outside the state of Florida in this three-year period (personal communication, J. Haller, August 2, 2017). The average family
income levels at UM indicate that the university is in fact becoming less accessible to students at the lowest end of the income spectrum.

Part of UM’s mission is “to provide service to our community and beyond” (Mission Statement, 2017). The Division of Enrollment Management’s mission is “to recruit, enroll, and graduate a diverse student body who become engaged alumni and globally conscious leaders” (Enrollment Management, 2018). Therefore, the institution should be interested in helping educate the citizenry in its surrounding area, regardless of socioeconomic status. In 2012, 31.6%, or 265,760 of Miami-Dade County households, the county in which UM is located, had an annual income of under $24,999 and 57.2% or 480,510 households had an income of under $49,999 (Miami-Dade County, 2014). In fact, during President Frenk’s inaugural address in January 2016, he specifically mentioned his belief that education is an avenue to increase social equity and mobility. Frenk therefore set the institution on an initiative to meet 100% of demonstrated need for all students admitted to UM (Frenk, 2016). Frenk and UM are on a course to help increase the accessibility of a UM education, however the recent years’ data for median income and Pell eligibility of its students prove otherwise. This study will help UM set the course to make itself accessible to students from the lowest socioeconomic statuses (SESs).

While there are a number of studies that research how to increase access to higher education for low-income students, none focus specifically on expensive and selective four-year institutions, like UM. Much of the literature focuses on the barriers to higher education for low-income students and how policy can change both at the institutional and governmental level to alleviate these barriers. This study specifically focused on the students’ experiences with barriers that low-income students typically face while trying to gain admission to and enroll at UM. This information can help UM understand what is hindering low-income students from
enrolling at the institution and can likely be applied to its peer and competitor institutions, however more specific barriers may exist at institutions other than UM.

This study helped expand the current literature and the practice in order to increase access to a selective and expensive institutions of higher education by focusing on the University of Miami. UM has a 37% acceptance rate and a published cost of attendance of $66,274 for the 2017-2018 academic year. Administrators at UM and institutions like UM, school and college counselors at high schools and community-based organizations who serve low-income students, and students and families who are either part of lower socioeconomic classes and/or care about the socioeconomic diversity on-campus will significantly benefit from this study. At the end of this study, researcher makes recommendations for warranted actions selective and expensive four-year institutions, and specifically the University of Miami, should take in order to alleviate the access gap for low-income students to their colleges and universities.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand how low-income students perceive their experience with the college enrollment process and how private, selective, and expensive four-year institutions can utilize this knowledge to become more accessible to this type of student. The main question the researcher seeks to answer is:

*How do low-income students who successfully enroll in a selective, private four-year institutions explain their experience with the college admission and enrollment process?*

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Access** – the ability to successfully apply, gain admission, and enroll at the University of Miami
Admission and enrollment process – the process, from beginning to end, that a student takes to search for institutions to apply to, apply for admission to those institutions, apply for financial aid and scholarships in order to afford those institutions, and the decision to matriculate into an institution based on a number of different and unique personal criteria

Successfully enroll – a student who gained admission and enrolled at the University of Miami for their first semester of higher education

Low-income – the student has an Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) of $8,000 or less for that academic year as determined by UM’s institutional methodology in the financial aid process

The following section of this chapter includes a description and discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory which served as the theoretical lens for this study.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the accessibility gap between students of different socioeconomic statuses was researched through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory (1973, 1977, 1984). Bourdieu argues that the social and cultural positions of individuals are reproduced through the current education system. The social divisions experienced by the citizenry will continue from generation to generation because specific attributes are passed on from parents to their children. These attributes include personal characteristics like language, knowledge, and manners, but also include money, systemic advantage, and power. The three main tenets of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory are economic, social, and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, these forms of capital are embedded in the education system, and by leaning on Bourdieu’s three forms of capital, will reproduce social inequalities in wealth, power, and privilege (Rubin, 2011). Social reproduction theory helps frame the research on access to higher
education for low-income students as those with educated backgrounds are associated with higher socioeconomic statuses and, therefore, are more able to access and afford higher education.

In the following sections critics of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory will be examined. The researcher then outlines the reasons for using this theoretical framework in this study of access to higher education for low-income students. Finally, the researcher will apply social reproduction theory to the problem of practice focused on in this research study.

**Social Reproduction Theory**

Social reproduction theory aims to understand how institutions or social constructs, such as education, family, work, etc. perpetuate social divisions and inequalities. As mentioned above, Bourdieu believes that class structure is cyclical and is reproduced through the education system. Bourdieu defines class in a non-linear way and goes beyond simply “lower class,” “middle class,” and “upper class.” He defines class by grouping people together based on “distinctions” or features that make people similar or dissimilar (Bourdieu, 1984). This goes beyond economic capital, or the ability to purchase goods and services by an individual but includes social capital and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1973) defines social capital as the personal network accessible by the individual and cultural capital as the power privileges that come with social status (i.e. access to institutions or resources or the possession of objects). All three of these types of capital can be grown, cultivated, and converted from one type of capital to the next type (Bourdieu, 1973). Economic capital can be created by leaning on an individual’s social capital, for example, by learning of a lucrative financial decision through a resource in one’s network. Another example of this would be the creation of cultural capital through economic capital by purchasing tickets to fly to Paris to visit the Louvre. Though social class is rooted in
money or economic capital, it is embodied and transferred in multiple ways; knowledge, networks, resources, etc.

A final tenet in Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory is the idea of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Individuals all embody their class through their individual habitus. Habitus is an individual structural and ideological background of who a person is and how they make decisions. Habitus is created throughout an individual’s life by the person’s background, is a product of the individual’s history, and forms what makes that person who they are. That individuality influences our decisions and actions. The three forms of capital, economic, social, and cultural, all help form habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Everyone’s habitus is unique and will influence how they learn, how they live, and how they interact. This includes how students will interact with their institution of education and therefore helps define class and how different individuals react to and conceptualize experiences related to their class (Lareau, 2003).

Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory posits that social stratification is reproduced through institutions like work, family, community, education, and religion. Institutions of higher education, being a major source of class and culture, is at the forefront of social reproduction theory. Individuals who feel comfortable in higher education have higher competencies in cultural and social capital and understand the habitus of higher education. They feel a stronger sense of “belonging” in the classroom and on-campus and, therefore, perform better. Students with lower levels of cultural capital and a lesser understanding of the higher education habitus perform poorly and have a harder time acclimating to the campus culture. Practices within the institution will also keep reproducing the social structures. Anyon (1981) shows that teachers tend to “teach down” to students from lower socioeconomic classes, giving these students the sense that they cannot learn at the same level as their more affluent counterparts. In more
affluent classrooms, teachers “foster creativity, independent thought, and personal development” (Anyon, 1981, p. 122), while in classrooms with more working-class students they were taught “repetitive rote procedures and mechanical activity” (Anyon, 1981, p. 119 - 120). Students will sense this difference in teaching philosophy and it will create students who lack self-confidence in the lower-income classes. This lack of self-confidence is perpetual. If these students are learning in the classroom, at any level of education, that they are only capable of so much, and less than students from higher socioeconomic classes, then they will start to believe that and act accordingly.

The positionality of the individual student and the interaction between faculty and student play a role in social reproduction as well. Delpit (1988) discusses the power positions of these groups and the discourse low-income students feel with their teachers and the material, which is usually written by the white and the upper-class. This division continues beyond the classroom and into communities, states, and countries. If the powerful own and control the textbooks, admission criteria to institutions of higher education, and the classroom, it is no wonder that low-income students feel this different treatment and therefore resist or do not participate in their education (Beach et al., 2007). Finally, Bourdieu believes that because social class is comprised of capital beyond simply economic capital, funding alone will not solve the problem of inequalities between socioeconomic statuses. Therefore, class needs to be conceptualized beyond economic means and solutions beyond fiscal solutions need to be implemented.

Critics of the Social Reproduction Theory

While the social reproduction theory has been used and validated by a number of authors there are scholars who believe that higher education is a beacon of social mobility. Carver and Harrison (2015), mentioned above, believe that higher education is a perfectly viable tool for
students looking to improve their social status. They believe that higher education helps teach students very specific attributes like critical thinking and problem-solving skills that will help them become more employable. Brand and Xie (2010) and Papanicolaou and Psacharopoulos (1979) both show that students from lower-income backgrounds benefit more from higher education than students from higher-income backgrounds, as they have a larger ground to gain in socioeconomic terms. Blanden, Gregg, and Macmillan (2007) also conclude that students who come from families with a better educational background, i.e. parents with higher-level degrees, have a longer way to fall down the ladder when it comes to educational attainment and social mobility. While there are glimmers of hope for higher education and helping improve social mobility, the social reproduction theory introduced by Bourdieu, views higher education as a system that is worth restructuring – allowing faculty and administration to better serve students from underrepresented cohorts. The data show that a gap in accessibility of higher education persists among socioeconomic statuses and therefore warrants further research.

Giroux’s cultural reproduction model expands on Bourdieu’s model, given the gaps that Giroux believes exists in the social reproduction theory. According to Giroux, Bourdieu’s theory does not allow space for any human agency – everything is determined by structure, which Giroux disagrees with. “The pedagogical value of resistance lies, in part, in the connections it makes between structure and human agency on the one hand and culture and the process of self-formation on the other” (Giroux, 1983, p. 293). The social structure, in other words, influences many things from culture to curriculum, policy, economic conditions, etc., but there is a human element in culture and social circles too. The students have capital and habitus just like the faculty, staff, and other elements of structure in education.
Kezar (2013) offers her own post-structuralist point of view examining how “existing practices, policies, and structures embed certain normative and dominant values” (p. ix). She believes that there are both visible and invisible obstacles that keep low-income students from succeeding—that it is not the lack of prowess or desire by the student themselves. If a student does not have the capital or habitus to navigate the educational structure, then the educational system should change, rather than force the students to assimilate (Kezar, 2013). In practice, this significant change and cultural shift is difficult for administrators to implement.

The main limitation of the social reproduction theory is that it does not account for the number of students who break the trend and do increase their social, cultural, and economic capitals through higher education and increase their status. There a number of studies focusing on the fact that social mobility can be an effect of higher education, though the social reproduction theory does not account for those students. Future research should consider how social reproduction theory is not a blanket theory for all students. Some students will climb the social ladder, while others will fall down a status level or more. There are likely more variables here than simply the family and educational conditions where the student is raised.

Social reproduction theory also does not consider which of the three forms of capital is more heavily weighted when it comes to the accessibility of higher education. Can a student with larger amount of economic capital, but lesser amounts of social or cultural capital, easily access higher education? Is there a minimum amount of each type of capital that will help a student in the college admission process? These questions will not be answered by this research, though would contribute to theory, practice, and the literature on the subject.

**Rationale for the Use of Social Reproduction Theory**
Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory has helped form the research question above by grounding an understanding that the system of higher education has not been set up for the purpose of social mobility for low-income students. The research sought to understand why students want to obtain a bachelor’s degree from a selective, private, and expensive four-year institution, and what sorts of barriers that low-income students perceived hindered their ability to access an institution like UM.

The main tenets of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, the three forms of capital, played a significance role in this research. The research identified how low-income students understand the significance of their economic, social, and cultural capitals on their educational pursuits. The researcher assumed, without specifically using Bourdieu’s language of these three forms of capital, that low-income students pursue higher education in order to increase their wealth, power, privilege, and other attributes in order to create an avenue of social mobility for themselves and their families. Economic capital is easy enough to understand and most students of higher education believe that obtaining a postsecondary degree will allow them to find better employment and make more money in their careers post-graduation. Throughout the admission process, while marketing to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, admission professionals preach that the opportunity to work with students from different backgrounds from themselves will help the student down the line. This is an increase in cultural capital as the student will gain knowledge on the systems, cultures, languages, etc. of people whom they have not had the opportunity to work with in the high school setting. The social capital gained through higher education will allow students to better navigate the systems and bureaucracies in front of them by giving them tools to understand what resources are available to them. The researcher
believed that all three of these forms of capital would likely become trends in the interview data collected in this research study.

The three forms of capital influence the students’ habitus. Their habitus will influence the decisions and actions that the students took in order to access the University of Miami. The knowledge gained from this research, which is structured around Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, will allow educators, students, families, and other influencers to better understand the problem of practice: the low rate of enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds at a private, selective, and expensive four-year institutions of higher education.

Alignment of Theory with Problem of Practice

The social reproduction theory aligns well with this problem of practice and investigating the access gap in higher education between students from different socioeconomic statuses. If the system is designed to reward and value students who have larger amounts of economic, social, and cultural capital, then, according to Bourdieu, intergenerational inequality will continue. Institutions of higher education themselves, and the admissions offices and financial aid programs within the institutions, should be restructured to make their schools more accessible to low-income students. There are a number of ways that this might be possible, which will be discussed later in this paper, however the social reproduction theory itself will shed light on the low enrollment rates of low-income students to selective, expensive, private four-year institutions. If the policies and programs used by enrollment management divisions reproduce the inequalities and class divisions, then changes are necessary. This is especially true at the University of Miami where access is a major emphasis outlined in the “Roadmap to Our New Century” and in President Frenk’s inaugural address. This research, through the lens of the social reproduction theory, will help make UM and its educational resources more accessible to
students from low-income backgrounds, reversing course from recent years. This will help the student in the short term and future generations, in the long term, according to the theory.

Conclusion

The University of Miami, under President Frenk’s leadership and the “Roadmap to our New Century,” is committed to the institution’s accessibility to any student who seeks it. The Access to Excellence initiative focuses specifically on making the UM education accessible and affordable to all students regardless of socioeconomic background. Despite these goals and initiatives, the institution has had mixed success in becoming accessible and affordable for all students in recent years. Understanding the experiences of low-income students who successfully enrolled at UM will help enrollment managers understand the barriers these students must overcome and shed light on possible solutions in order to make the institution a viable option for these students and their families.

Using Pierre Bourdieu’s Social Reproduction Theory will help guide this interpretative phenomenological analysis. The experiences of successful students with the enrollment process at UM will create new knowledge on the accessibility and affordability of the institution. The researcher will seek to understand the backgrounds of these students and their personal experiences during the admission, financial aid, and enrollment process at the selective, private, and expensive four-year institution. Bourdieu believes that systems of education perpetuate inequalities by valuing economic, social, and cultural capital of students. The interview process will bring to the surface the forms of capital and habitus of each student interviewed in order to understand their experience with the enrollment process at UM.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Higher education improves specific skillsets in students that help make all students more attractive to employers after they graduate. These skillsets include creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. A more educated citizenry benefits our democracy at large by allowing people to recognize their role in society (Carver & Harrison, 2015). Due to the reproductive nature of our educational system, these skills are aspects of cultural and social capital that many low-income students lack. Enrolling more students of lower socioeconomic status is also in the best interests of the institution, as this will increase an institution’s reputation or prestige and ranking due to the weight students’ completion and graduation rates carry in third party rankings like *U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review*, etc. (Mangina, 2014). However, institutions of higher education are still enrolling fewer students from low-income backgrounds than wealthier students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Because fewer poor students are enrolled in universities, there is a lack of social mobility for low-income students who, in part, go to colleges and universities in order to increase their social status (Alon, 2009).

The problem of practice currently under review is the low rate of enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds at a private, selective, and expensive four-year institutions of higher education. This literature review will first examine scholarship demonstrating the barriers that reduce the access to higher education for students from low-income families, then works highlighting the low enrollment rates for students from low-income backgrounds, and conclude with research on the lack of social mobility that is caused by the inaccessibility of higher education for these students. Searching scholarly articles through ERIC, EBSCOhost, and Academic Search Premier has proven to be a successful method to study the current literature on
the access gap between socioeconomic classes that we face in the United States’ system of higher education.

**Barriers to Access Higher Education**

A number of barriers keep students from accessing higher education. These barriers can be systemic or institutional in nature. Selective institutions of higher education are often the most expensive institutions for students to attend. Low-income students are the most sensitive to the rising tuition costs and diminishing financial aid programs in higher education when compared to their more affluent peers (Declerq & Verboven, 2015). Other barriers to accessing higher education include the lack of resources available to low-income students including advanced-level courses at the high school they attend (Hemsely-Brown, 2015), standardized test biases (Carver & Harrison, 2015), and aspirations for college enrollment (Carver & Harrison, 2015; Gale & Parker, 2015). Standardized test scores, high school grade point average (GPA), and rigor of curriculum, all indicators of high performance and academic prowess, are admission factors that keep low-income students from accessing higher education as low-income students tend to have lower marks and board scores and less access to resources that will help increase these indicators of academic success.

Rising tuition and costs, a more profound lack of resources available to these students, the family that the student is a part of, and the relatively low aspirations for college attainment found among low-income students are micro-level barriers low-income students face when accessing higher education. There are also more macro-level of barriers, institutional and cultural levels of barriers, that students from lower socioeconomic statuses face while trying to achieve a higher education. Some believe that the access gap that the U.S. is experiencing is more of a social issue than it is an educational issue and has been increasing over time (Berliner, 2013).
Macro-Level Barriers to Higher Education

Policymakers and citizens of the United States maintain serious social barriers for low-income students to access institutions of higher education. While biases in admission practices, academic preparation, and achievement gaps will be discussed later in this literature review, the higher-level social issues are worth exploring. Berliner (2013) identifies ten effects on social inequality in education. Berliner argues that children from lower social statuses are not taken care of at home or in school which leads to a bump in high school dropout rates. He also argues that the inequality of mental health care and resources between the rich and poor lead to unequal education; with mental illness being four times as prevalent in lower income areas than it is in more affluent communities (Berliner, 2013). Similar to poor mental health, drug use and abuse is more common among students from lower socioeconomic classes, as are imprisonment rates (Berliner, 2013). It is easy to understand how students who face these types of obstacles and challenges have a hard time navigating the college admission and enrollment processes and completing secondary education when compared to peers who do not need to juggle those added stressors while in high school.

A study conducted in North Carolina examined the correlation between the local economy and standardized test scores of children in that community. By comparing data from the North Carolina School Administrative Records and the Business Closing Database administered by the North Carolina Employment Security Commission, Ananat, Gassman-Pines, and Gibson-Davis (2011) found that community-level job losses affect the achievement test scores of children, especially eighth grade test scores. The findings show, however, that not all childrens’ achievement is affected at the same levels. Students from families with higher incomes are less affected than students from low-income families (Ananat et al., 2011). As local
economies experience higher unemployment rates, we see that children in those communities are less prepared to enroll in higher education. As such, stabilizing the economy plays an important role in alleviating the access gap between socioeconomic classes.

The reproduction of social structure will be dissected later, however it is important to understand the social structures that help this cycle continue. Anyon (1981) explains this phenomenon and how teachers tend to “teach down” to students from lower socioeconomic classes, giving these students the sense that they cannot learn at the same level as their more affluent counterparts. This lack of self-confidence is perpetual. If low-income students are learning in the classroom, at any level of education, that they are only capable of so much, and less than students from higher socioeconomic classes, they will start to believe this as truth. In more affluent classrooms, teachers “foster creativity, independent thought, and personal development” (Anyon, 1981, p. 122). Where in classrooms with more working-class students they were taught “repetitive rote procedures and mechanical activity” (Anyon, 1981, p. 119). The former method, rather than the latter, will help create pride in the students when it comes to their academic work. The latter will crush self-esteem and their beliefs in their capabilities.

While we know that high school graduation rates differ between high- and low-income students, we see that the graduation gap has continued to expand. This is also true in access to college, college retention, and graduation or college success measurements. Using nearly 70 years’ worth of data from the U.S. census and the 1979 and 1997 National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, Bailey and Dynarski (2011) find that about half of income inequality in colleges are explained by the differences in high school graduation rates between socioeconomic statuses. The U.S. will need to use policy both at the primary and secondary education levels in order to narrow the access gap and ensure that more students graduate from high school. Bailey and
Dynarski go as far to say that policies at the post-secondary level will not be as effective as at the primary and secondary levels (2011).

While there are a number of macro-level factors that impact the access of higher education for low-income students, as discussed above, there are also many micro-level barriers, including the costs of higher education through rising tuition fees, the lack of resources available to low-income students through poorly funded secondary schools, the influence that the student’s family has on college attainment, and aspirations low-income students have for college education attainment. The literature above, focusing on macro-level barriers from the origin, processes, and policies of the education system, coupled with micro-level barriers, all contribute to the higher education access gap. The following literature focuses on micro-level barriers low-income students face when accessing higher education in the United States.

**Micro-Level Barriers to Higher Education**

The education system, as argued above, provides its own barriers for the socioeconomically disadvantaged when it comes to college attainment. Policies discussed above would certainly alleviate the gaps in access between socioeconomic classes, however could be very difficult to implement given their massive weight. The following strand of literature will focus on more micro-level barriers including rising tuition fees, educational resources available to students in low-income areas, the influence of the student’s family, and general aspirations on achieving a college education.

**Costs and tuition.** An obvious place to start is the continuously growing cost of attending college or university in the US. Between 1987-88 and 2017-18, published tuition and fees at public two-year colleges have yielded an average annual increase of 3.1% beyond
inflation, culminating in a 150% increase over 30 years. Published tuition and fees at private four-year institutions and public four-year institutions rose by 146% and 225% respectively, over the same 30-year period (The College Board, 2014). These published “sticker prices” matter a lot when it comes to enrollment in college for lower-income students, as they are much more sensitive to cost of an institution. In their quantitative research, Declercq and Verboven (2015) isolated the cost effect to show that if socioeconomically disadvantaged students in Flanders, Belgium had the same resources available to them as socioeconomically better-off students at time of high school graduation, they would enroll in higher education at a larger rate. They mention that “tuition fees are low” comparatively in Flanders (Declerq & Verboven, 2015, p. 533). It is reasonable to assume that where tuition fees are more expensive, like in the United States and at more prestigious institutions of higher education, these lower-income students will find it more difficult to access this type of education because they are even more averse to tuition costs.

At the University of California, tuition doubled from 2005-06 to 2011-12. From 2008-2010, the number of high school graduates who met admission standards and submitted applications grew, and yet enrollment rates decreased. The gap between number of eligible students and enrollment rates suggest a link between enrollment rates and the increase of the tuition fees in this time period. From 2008-2010, the number of students enrolling in the University of California system dropped from 27% of California’s qualified high school graduates to 22% (Nahai, 2014). Nahai’s (2014) findings suggest that if tuition fees were to stay flat or decrease, eligible Californian high school graduates would enroll in the University of California at higher rates.
As state budgets shift funds away from financial aid programs, the student and their families incur more of the costs of attending colleges. Financial aid programs play a significant role in whether low-income students attend a particular school. Institutions are still concerned with enrolling a socioeconomically diverse student body, though understand the amount of federal and state funds received are lower than they have been in previous decades. Thus, institutional funds are needed to make the cost of attending attractive to lower-income students. “Low-income prospective students in the USA, lacking the social and cultural capital of their high-income counterparts, are less likely to navigate the financial aid maze” (Nahai, 2014, p. 153). Because of the general concern over costs of college, “some low-income students who would qualify for aid may choose not to enroll in, apply to, or explore their options to attend the University of California” (Nahai, 2014, p. 153). The admissions and financial aid offices need to make this process easier for all students, especially students from lower-income backgrounds. The simpler and more transparent the process, the population of low-income students who enroll in more expensive institutions will increase.

While tuition costs continue to increase, students and parents, in general, tend to overestimate the cost of college, lack awareness of sources of financial aid, and significantly underestimate the amount of financial aid dollars available to them (Bell, Rowan, Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). Education and knowledge about financing higher education is necessary. In their study, Bell et al. (2009), show that 11th graders know more about college in general than 9th graders and could accurately predict sticker prices of colleges and universities. At the same time, however, they could not predict the amount of financial aid that would be offered. Bell, et al. (2009), also show that low-income students are more averse to taking out loans to pay for quality higher education than are higher-income students. This general misunderstanding and
cost-averse behavior makes the availability of resources and education pertinent to narrowing the access gap between socioeconomic classes in higher education.

**Lack of available resources.** It is known that the socioeconomic composition of the high school that a student attends is a predictive factor on that student’s college choice. Through survey data and statistical modeling, Palardy (2015) shows that students who attend low-income high schools will enroll at selective institutions at a much lower rate than those students who attend high-income schools. Part of this is due to the funding structures in place for these high schools. The best teachers cannot be hired and retained at low-income schools. Advanced level courses and standardized test (SAT and/or ACT) preparation courses are less likely to be found within the walls of low-income schools (Gamoran, 1987). Palardy (2015) also finds “that schools tend to match curricular and instructional rigor with their perceptions of student’s ability, backgrounds, and aspirations” (p. 344). Strictly because these students are from low-income families and attend low-income schools, the administration will teach less rigorous classes, setting these students behind students who attend high-income schools even more.

As teachers “teach down” to low-income students, they are less likely to offer advanced level and dual-credit courses, or college courses taught within the high school, to their students. There is evidence that taking dual-credit courses allow students to “warm up” to the academic rigor that they will face in college. This warming up effect, by taking dual-credit courses in a student’s junior or senior year of high school, increases that student’s aspirations for college. Enrollment in dual credit courses is directly correlated to low-income students and students of color enrolling in college at a higher rate and increases the retention rates compared to students who do not take dual-credit courses (Taylor, 2015).
Many institutions define college preparedness by the standardized test scores submitted by students with their application materials. Findings show that composite ACT scores and class, defined by the Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) to college tuition, have a linear correlation (Carver & Harrison, 2015). As colleges and universities seek to increase their average standardized test scores, fewer and fewer low-income students will be admitted due to this linear relationship. Later in this literature review, specific admissions strategies to mitigate the weight that traditional assessments of college preparedness, like the SAT or ACT scores and high school GPA, have on admissions decisions. The less admission offices use these types of qualitative statistics in their decisions, especially when they are proven to be correlated with socioeconomic status, the more socioeconomically diverse entering classes will become.

Finally, schools vary widely in the helpfulness of and accessibility to counselors who can help guide the college search and admission processes (Bell et al., 2009). These counselors help shape perception of colleges but also cost and affordability. They also teach students about other resources to use; for example, where to find other information on college admission, academic opportunities, and financial aid, software that helps students find their interests, scholarships, etc. The more knowledge students have, regardless of socioeconomic status, the more able they will be in navigating the college admission and enrollment process.

**Aspirations for college enrollment.** As mentioned above, students in low-income schools tend to have less ambitious aspirations for their college education due to the community that surrounds them and the lower-level courses that are offered at their high schools (Taylor, 2015). If low-income students do not have the same expectations for themselves in terms of college attainment, then they will continue to enroll in higher education at lower rates. Educators on both sides of the desk, high schools and universities, need to work to increase
aspirations of college attainment to low-income students. Educators must stop teaching down to these students and college admissions officer must believe that these students can do the work in the classrooms of colleges and universities.

Carver and Harrison’s study (2015) that shows ACT scores are linearly linked to enrollment and retention rates used data from the National Center for Education Statistics and research studies examining the Collegiate Learning Assessment to support the observations of the authors. Findings also show that low-income students are driven to vocational schools at a higher rate than their wealthier counterparts, forcing them to lack critical thinking skills that society needs and are attractive to employers (Carver & Harrison, 2015). As low-income students enroll at vocational schools at larger rates, they will be less employable than higher-income students and will make less money in their careers, keeping them and their future children, and future students, at the low-income level. If this cycle does not change, the gap in access to higher education for these students will continue for decades.

Low-income students are thought of by policy-makers and other citizens as students who are not qualified for higher education and do not have the qualities to be successful in higher education, therefore they do not aspire to get a higher education. Though these students understand the perceived realities, they still have the taste or desire to obtain a college degree. Students need to be educated on how to reach their goals and fill the gap between college attainment and the perception about the level of education they can and/or will get (Gale & Parker, 2015). If colleges, high schools, and other organizations were to educate low-income students on how to reach their goals earlier, perhaps more low-income students would enroll in higher education.

A study by Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman, and Williams (2015) found that the
self-efficacy of a student, or the perception of a student on their capacity to perform in the classroom, is predictive of attaining a graduate degree when surveying first-generation, low-income students. Tate, et. al. (2015) also argue that, to a degree, family influence was predictive of attaining a graduate degree. Though this study was specific to the attainment of graduate degrees, much of the research is applicable to undergraduate degrees as well. If low-income, first generation students believe that they can do the work required of them in college, enrollment would increase among this group. If families are educated on why a college degree is important to the students, students will likely enroll in college at a higher rate, as family influence does have a slight influence on attainment rates of low-income, first generation students.

By studying low-income females who are enrolled in community colleges with hopes to go on to attain their bachelor’s degree, Nielsen (2015) learned that their aspirations tend to “hold steady” while enrolled in a community college (p. 266). These women believe that they need education to meet their career goals and improve their self-worth (Nielsen, 2015). As these women progress through the pursuit of their associate degrees, they still hope to go on to obtain a bachelor’s. This shows that the gap in access to higher education is not attributable to a gap in drive or desire between socioeconomic classes. The general public believes that low-income students enroll in community colleges because they are “lazy” or “unprepared.” However, this study shows that these students aspire for a bachelor’s degree, though enroll at a community college first (Nielsen, 2015). This study does not go into what the reasons are for that decision, however it shows that students continue to aspire to higher levels of education while enrolled at a community college.

**Family role in college attainment.** There is an obvious relationship between family
socioeconomic characteristics and educational achievement of those families’ children over the past 50 years. Using data from 19 national studies, Reardon (2011) finds that the relationship between a family’s income and the children’s academic achievement has grown substantially. The gap in access between high- and low-income students is now wider than the gap experienced between black and white students. The gap in access not only widened between socioeconomic classes as a whole, but have even widened within racial groups, white, black, and Hispanic, as well (Reardon, 2011). There is so much focus on racial tensions and biases in our country, and much of the data in this study shows that there should be more emphasis on the income gaps in our country when it comes to educational persistence.

Family members are the most prevalent way students, especially 9th graders, learn about college and financial aid (Bell, et al., 2009). Unfortunately, at the same time, parents and students tend to have a lack of or misinformation about college and financial aid, overestimate the cost of college, and are unaware of sources of financial aid (Bell et al., 2009). Students with limited or wrong information on college admissions and financial aid tend to apply to college less, enroll in college at lesser rates, and are less expected to go to college by those around them. Family members are extremely influential when it comes to attainment of a postsecondary education.

Similar to the study of Ananat et al. (2011) above, Levine (2011) looked to understand the effect of unemployment at the familial/individual level of a child’s educational achievement. Using micro-data from the 2003-2007 American Time Use Survey and the 1979 National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, Levine (2011) compared how students fared on test scores when their parents lose their jobs. No cause and effect relationship was found at this level, interestingly, as there was a correlation found at the community level of unemployment in the
Ananat et al. (2011) article. This means that the socioeconomic area is more important to a student than is the particular unemployment period at the familial level.

Though there is no correlation between parental employment level and college access, a correlation was found when focusing on children in foster care. Using data from over 150 interviews with young people, social service managers, and nominated adults, the Young People from a Public Care Background – Pathways to Education in Europe (YiPPEE) ran a project in Hungary, Spain, United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden from 2008-2010 in order to determine their experience in the foster/residential care field and what that meant for barriers and facilitators for educational pathways. Johansson and Höjer (2012) found that a disproportionately high number of students in foster care come from working class backgrounds. In order to alleviate the educational barriers faced by these students, the authors suggest that welfare policies must clearly target injustices, discrimination, and poverty faced by these students. The social-democracies of this group, Denmark and Sweden, show that young people in care are much more likely to complete secondary education than low-income students who are not in supportive family or household settings. This article brings to light policies that work to increase the access among the working class in specific countries including welfare policies that clearly target injustices, discrimination, and poverty faced by these students (Johansson & Höjer, 2012).

Whether or not these welfare policies would work in the United States is something that is hard to study, as the U.S. is much different than the social welfare states in Scandinavia discussed above. Though we have seen evidence that the education gaps among students from different income levels is more of a social policy issue than it is an educational policy issue (Berliner, 2013). All of the studies above, show that aspirations for a college education is a
determining factor when it comes to access rates to higher education for low-income students. If educators, policy makers, and other influencers can make students believe that they can attain a college education, we will see access rates rise for low-income students.

**Summary**

The literature reviewed above suggests that there are many barriers to low-income students to obtaining higher education. There are many arguments that the system of education in the United States was not created for students from lower socioeconomic classes. Students are “tracked” into vocational or professional courses of study, which continues to keep the poor poor and the rich rich. However, significant overhaul of the education system seems like a lofty, costly, and lengthy solution. Educators and policy makers can start creating systemic change by focusing on the more micro-level barriers to higher education for low-income students.

The tuition costs that students face can be a major barrier, as low-income students are more cost averse than high-income students. This, coupled with increasing tuition fees across the country and more of the costs of higher education falling to the students as state and federal funding decrease, directly and negatively impacts low-income students’ decisions whether to enroll in higher education. There are also fewer resources allocated to education in specific areas and school districts than others. Unfortunately, oftentimes the schools that are less funded educate a larger number of low-income students than students from higher income backgrounds. This noticeable difference in the resources that are available to low-income students affects standardized test preparation and advanced level courses available in the high school curriculum. All these factors will negatively affect how institutions will judge “college readiness” for low-income students.
The monetary aspects are just one reason for the access gap that the United States faces regarding the enrollment of low-income students in higher education. It is known that aspiring to a college education also influences whether a low-income student enrolls in higher education. Studies suggest that vocational schools enroll higher numbers of low-income students than traditional institutions of higher education. Much of this has to do with the biases associated with standardized tests, but it is also the perceived realities among the students themselves and the educators teaching these students. Educating students earlier on how to attain a college degree could increase self-efficacy and how the student’s family positively influences them during the process. As aspirations and attitudes change in educators, low-income students, and families, more will enroll in higher education. Until then, however, there will still be an enrollment gap between those at different levels of socioeconomic status, especially at the upper and lower extremes, with low-income students enrolling at much lower rates than students who come from more affluent backgrounds.

**Enrollment Rates for Low-Income Students**

In 2015, 69.2% of all high school graduates in the United States who were low-income students enrolled in a two-year or four-year college. In the same year, 83.2% of high-income high school graduates enrolled in higher education. This gap between socioeconomic classes is apparent in the data from 1975 through 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). There are many reasons why narrowing the access gap would prove beneficial to institutions of higher education, the higher education system in the United States, and society at large. Critical thinking skills that students gain while enrolled in college allow them to solve problems more effectively and efficiently. These critical thinking skills are what employers are generally looking for while recruiting talent from institutions of higher education (Suvedi, Ghimire, & Millenbah,
A more educated citizenry benefits our democracy by allowing people to recognize their roles in society (Carver & Harrison, 2015). This allows people to understand how to vote for their representatives, understand policy that helps them and their peers, and consider how best to make our country more accepting and a better place to live. Mangina (2014) argues that enrolling more lower-class students will increase an institution’s reputation and prestige through different ranking systems like *U.S. News & World Report, Forbes, Princeton Review*, etc., due to the fact that these students complete their education at a greater rate and graduation rates are weighted in third party rankings. While recognizing that there is a gap in college attainment between socioeconomic classes and why narrowing this gap is beneficial is a beginning to finding a solution, we must first start by researching what the barriers are that keep low-income students from enrolling in college at the same rates as their upper-class counterparts, as we did above. In this section, the difference in enrollment rates between socioeconomic classes will be researched. Of course, enrollment is blocked by policies of and by institutions of higher education themselves. Though enrollment, in many cases, can be predicted before a student decides to pursue a higher education too.

**Enrollment Predicted Before Higher Education**

While we know that high school graduation rates differ between high- and low-income students, this gap has continued to expand in recent years. This gap between socioeconomic classes exists not only in accessibility of higher education, but also when studying college retention, graduation, and other college success measurements. Using nearly 70 years’ worth of data from the U.S. census and the 1979 and 1997 National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, Bailey and Dynarski (2011) find that about half of income inequality in colleges are explained by the differences in high school graduation rates between socioeconomic statuses. Policy is needed, both at the primary and secondary education levels, in order to alleviate the gap and
ensure that more students graduate from high school. Bailey and Dynarski (2011) believe that policies focusing on higher education will not be effective enough to help solve the problem. They go on to say that policy focusing on the primary and secondary educational levels will be more impactful on increasing college readiness and, therefore, accessibility (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011).

It has also been found that students with less knowledge or social capital regarding college, especially about the cost of higher education and financial aid, are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education. This social capital is less prevalent today and mostly so with parents of minorities, low-income households, and those who did not go to college themselves. As mentioned above, parents and students tend to have a lack of or misinformation about college admissions and financial aid, overestimate the cost of college, and are unaware of sources of financial aid (Bell et al., 2009). Students with limited or wrong information on college and financial aid tend to apply to college less, enroll in college at lesser rates, and are less expected to go to college by those around them. Low-income students tend to rely on their school to provide them with knowledge about college and financial aid, though these students are often attending schools with the least amount of resources. It is also true that college guidance tends to vary based on ability with high-achieving students at high-achieving high schools receiving the best guidance on the process (Bell et al., 2009). In their case study research, Bell et al. (2009), studied three different schools in five different states: California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The three schools in each state come from the same district or metro area and come from different levels of student achievement based on average SAT score, college enrollment, state high school math and reading exams, and different socioeconomic statuses based on number of students participating in free and reduced lunch programs; one comes from
the average level in the state, one from above average, one from below average. Bell et al. (2009), then looked at ninth and eleventh graders in each school and asked what students from each grade level knew about college, how they knew it, and what the variance was between states and socioeconomic classes. They found that eleventh grade students knew more about college than ninth graders; they could accurately predict sticker prices, but not financial aid packages, as mentioned above. The students’ primary source of information and education about college were their parents and family members, followed by the internet, and finally, resources they can find in their high schools. The students’ context in terms of SES and social policy determines the amount of college related information a student has access to; furthermore, state policy makes a major difference. In Georgia and Florida where there are transparent funds available for public education, knowledge about college and enrollment rates for students are better than states where the funds are less transparent. Programs in Georgia and Florida pave a clear path to making their public higher education programs affordable to students (Bell et al., 2009). This study shows that presenting students clear and simple ways to secure financial aid dollars will allow them to work towards a goal and enroll in higher education at greater rates.

Florida and Georgia both accomplish this through their financial aid programs that are partly merit-based and not strictly need-based. Students in these states know that working hard will allow them to reap financial benefits from their efforts. State-level financial aid programs differ between merit-based and need-based programs. Each of these programs has helped increase access to higher education, though in different ways, whether by influencing performance in the classroom or increasing access to funds and information on financial aid. In Florida and Georgia, through the Bright Futures and HOPE programs respectively, merit-based funds are offered to their students. In California and Pennsylvania, on the other hand, need-
based programs are used. Maryland, sitting in the middle, uses a hybrid approach linking both merit and demonstrated need shown by the student and their family (Perna & Steele, 2011). Some states increase access to students who are not even citizens by allowing undocumented immigrants to access state funds, like California’s Dream Act enacted in 2012 (Lopez, 2013).

The Bell et al. (2009) study shows how important family and peers are when it comes to enrollment. Mentioned as a barrier previously, family dynamics are immensely influential in predicting college enrollment. Unfortunately, family members are often not professionals when it comes to college guidance and enrollment processes. Students need other more accurate and trusted sources of information on the college admission and enrollment process. The study conducted by Bell et al. (2009) demonstrates that resources, especially college guidance counselors, should be prevalent in all high schools, regardless of funding, location, or demographic makeup, as these professional resources allow students to better understand the college admission, financial aid, and enrollment processes. Students with no or limited resources will enroll at lesser rates than students with ample resources. Often, accessibility to these resources are determined by SES (Bell et al., 2009).

Research above shows that low-income students, like their wealthier counterparts, are still aspiring to attain a four-year degree. However, low-income students are much more likely to start at a community college on their path towards a bachelor’s degree. At that stage, regardless of aspirations, students who first enroll at a two-year institution attain four-year degrees at much lesser rates than students who start immediately at a four-year school (Cox, 2016). Cox (2016) found that strategies directed toward low-income students to help prepare them academically or improve social capital (knowledge of the college choice process) does not ensure college enrollment. Even those students who take advantage of these capital-growing
educational opportunities and are admitted to a four-year institution, 70% of them either will never enroll in college or will enroll in less selective colleges than their high school academic performance would allow of them, called undermatching. Cox (2016) found that college choice by low-income students is more of a situational, in the moment type, of decision than it is a long-term plan, regardless of desire of attainment. She points to three factors making college choice more situational for low-income students: 1) the stress of residential mobility, 2) complicated family dynamics, and 3) financial constraints. Each of these factors impact low-income students in greater capacities than students from more affluent backgrounds and force low-income students to enroll in community colleges, regional institutions, or colleges that are less prestigious or challenging for them, impacting the enrollment rates overall (Cox, 2016).

Lastly, in order to enroll in a four-year institution, college admission officers and the admission professionals reviewing applications must be able to understand the context from which students from low-income backgrounds come. According to Bastedo (2017), this context is not understood and low-income students, therefore, are admitted at lower rates. Normal measures of academic preparedness, like standardized tests, will not make students from lower socioeconomic classes attractive in the admissions process. Students in the top income quartile score above a 1200 on the SAT at a rate that is six times greater than students from the bottom income quartile (Bastedo, 2017). The lack of data or evidence on the school context and the student’s performance within the school context will skew the admission decisions towards higher preforming schools or schools that admission officers are more comfortable with and knowledgeable about; usually high preforming, well-funded public schools and expensive private or preparatory schools. Admission officers have shown that they will benefit students from low-income backgrounds if they have the context of the student and their environment, but
too often this is missing when reviewing applications; this effect is consistent across institution regardless of institutional selectivity, admission process or practice, and background of the admission officer (Bastedo, 2017). High schools then, need to help their students by providing that context to admission officers and application readers. A robust and clear high school profile should be provided with each student’s application which explains the demographics represented within the high school setting. Admission officers will then better understand the students’ achievements if they know some simple information including, but not limited to: average standardized test scores, curriculum offered at the high school, racial makeup of the student body, percent of students on a free or reduced lunch program, etc.

These are some of the reasons that the enrollment gap can be attributed to the general state of high school level of education in our country. Though, this is not an issue simply alleviated at the secondary level. Colleges and universities can also help alleviate issues that lead to the differences of enrollment rates between students from low- and high-income backgrounds.

**Enrollment Blocked by Institutions of Higher Education**

Overall, low-income students are underrepresented within the elite institutions of the United States. Hillman (2013) gathered research that shows that within the United States most selective private four-year institutions, only 10% of students enrolled there come from the bottom 40% of the income distribution. It was found that elite institutions could enroll 10-13% more low-income students without reducing their average SAT or ACT scores for the entering class. Other studies show that 3% of the poorest American students enroll in “top tier” institutions, even though a higher percentage performs well on standardized tests and would likely be admitted to more selective institutions if they had applied. As mentioned, there is
disconnect between academic performance, college aspirations, and perceptions of affordability to where students “match” or enroll (Hillman, 2013). Remember, low-income students are overrepresented at community colleges or regional public institutions, while being underrepresented at “elite” private institutions and public flagships. It has been shown that low-income students decide which college to attend based on ability to pay rather than on academic ability and therefore undermatch to less selective or reputable schools (Hillman, 2013). These are issues that, while stemming from the students’ high school environments, can be alleviated by institutions of higher education.

Hillman (2013) went on to study 69 public and private institutions who have instituted a no-loan policy, where no loans will be included with students’ financial aid packages. The idea is that if loans were substituted by grant money that does not need to be paid back by the student or their family, the number of students from low-income backgrounds will enroll at higher rates at these institutions. These 69 schools are some of the wealthiest and most elite in the American system of higher education and, therefore, competition for seats in these classes are becoming more and more competitive as the number of applications received are increasing, but the number of seats in the freshman classes are static. Some of these schools, most notably the Ivy League institutions, have argued that there are a small number of students in applicant pools who are high-achieving and low-income. In other words, these institutions believe that the demand for seats in their classes is undersupplied by low-income students. In order to make themselves more attractive to low-income students, no-loan policies have been introduced, usually with eligibility requirements based on family income. Many of these schools claim that this financial aid policy helps increase the number of low-income students on campus, however Hillman (2013) posits that there were other factors at play and not just the elimination of loans in aid
packages. Using data from institutions, IPEDS, and the Department of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education from 2002-2003 – 2009-2010, through a regression design he finds that while no-loan aid policy may be effective in increasing affordability and access to the institution, it most likely needs to be a part of an overall and multipronged enrollment management strategy to be most effective (Hillman, 2013). Simply eliminating loans will not increase the number of low-income students enrolling in these elite institutions.

The no-loan financial aid policies studied above are a good attempt to increase socioeconomic diversity as financial aid is a major factor on the enrollment of these students. Low-income students are disproportionately coming from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, tend to be older, are less likely to receive financial support from their parents, and tend to have multiple obligations outside of college (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Location and cost are two of the most influential factors when low-income students are deciding to apply to colleges and which colleges they enroll in. This, coupled with the fact that Pell grants alone will not meet the financial need of low-income students, make the idea of a no-loan policy one that would theoretically help expensive institutions enroll low-income students. However, the research above showed that no-loan policies alone do not alleviate this issue and that the enrollment gap among socioeconomic classes is much more complicated than a single policy solution (Holliefield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Holliefield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) suggest that planning and decision-making in higher education consistently fail to consider and meet the unique needs of low-income students. Through their interview protocol they found that though financial constraints create significant issues prohibiting enrollment in higher education, lack of employment counseling and preparation also attributes to the enrollment gap (Holliefield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Colleges and universities need to cater this type of programming to low-
income students, rather than more affluent students. Students interviewed by Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) also suggest that faculty members need to better understand their students, especially those from low-income backgrounds. These students felt like their teachers could not relate to them, did not understand their situations, were not understanding when other obstacles appeared, and were negatively stereotyped within the academic setting (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). How can we expect low-income students to enroll in colleges if they speak to their peers and hear that this is the general feeling of low-income students who did enroll in higher education?

While the above issues in enrolling low-income students are based on perceptions of either institutions or students themselves, there are also financial incentives for some institutions to shy away from diversifying classes in a socioeconomic sense. Selective public institutions enroll low-income students at lower rates than wealthy students, regardless of the smaller sticker prices associated with public institutions. Of all high school students graduating in 2004, students from the bottom half of the national income distribution represented only 23% of students enrolled at selective public institutions (Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt, 2016). Due to declining public funding, public research universities are becoming more reliant on tuition dollars and therefore are incentivized to enroll more students who are not residents in their state and pay higher tuition fees than state residents do. Because of this, nonresident students tend to be students who are more affluent and are not underrepresented low-income students. From the 2002-2003 academic year to 2012-2013, nonresident enrollment increased from 20.7% of enrollment at public research universities to 24.7%. During the same time period, the number of low-income students enrolled went down as well, this negative correlation was stronger at the most prestigious public research universities and within states with high poverty rates (Jaquette
et al., 2016). As institutions become more attentive of their operating budgets and where their funding comes from, attracting high paying students will continue to increase the gap between socioeconomic classes enrolling in higher education.

Finally, even if institutions do get a critical mass of low-income students to apply and these institutions admit and enroll low-income students, this does not always show up in enrollment numbers in the census data for the institution. Students from low-income backgrounds tend to “melt,” or renege on their enrollment, at higher rates than other students. This “summer melt” is due to a number of influential resources suddenly becoming inaccessible after their high school careers end and they are faced with the expectation to navigate the final stages of the enrollment process on their own (Castleman & Page, 2013). College counselors, teachers, even some peer interaction are less available to low-income students in the summer months. This means that without these resources, colleges can only nudge students to continue the enrollment process. While colleges will attempt to support students to ensure enrollment, they simultaneously build “summer melt” into projections and models. If a student melts at the end of the process, if done correctly in an enrollment strategy, it will not impact the institution significantly.

Summary

While the first strand of literature speaks about many of the barriers that keep low-income students from accessing higher education, this strand provides concrete evidence that there is a gap in enrollment to higher education between socioeconomic classes. This gap is caused by many of the barriers discussed earlier, though there are a number of reasons why society would like to narrow this gap. Of course, completion of higher education cannot be done without initially enrolling, and higher education leads to the betterment of society in a number of
ways. It allows employees, regardless of socioeconomic background, to be more employable by teaching skillsets that are difficult to obtain elsewhere. Higher education allows citizens to make better decisions at the voting polls, impacting the country as a whole. And, there is evidence to show that a socioeconomically diverse student body benefits the institution of higher education itself by providing a better education to the whole student population and generates a better reputation and greater prestige for the institution in the greater landscape. While the barriers originally discussed cause the enrollment gap, its genesis lies well before a student ever thinks about higher education.

It has been shown that social capital and the knowledge to obtain a higher education partly stems from a student’s background and demography. This social capital is invaluable when obtaining a higher education, though students from low-income backgrounds, among other underrepresented areas, start off at a significant disadvantage compared with affluent students. Much of this social capital can be found in the way of resources provided both at home and at school. Resources like family members are influential, though professional college guidance counselors, educators, and other resources need to be accessible to students at each stage of the admission and enrollment process in order to work.

Policy at the state level can also play a role. If a state’s financial aid policy is clear, it helps educate students about what it takes to be successful in higher education, and provides financial aid funds to that state’s public institutions if those attributes are shown by the student, then the student is much more likely to know about costs, learn about financial aid sources, and are more likely to enroll in higher education. States which consider merit in financial aid policy, like Florida’s Bright Futures program or Georgia’s HOPE program, will help increase students’
levels of social and economic capital and provide a pathway to college. Resources coupled with policy will dramatically increase access to higher education for low-income students.

High schools also need to help their students when it comes to the application review process by providing context about the student and the student’s high school and community to the admission office reviewing applications. Reading applications within the context of the student’s background and situation can help admission officers understand some of the hardships and barriers low-income students need to overcome in order to be educationally successful. Without this context, the admission officer evaluating a student’s candidacy for admission will not be able to accurately understand the academic prowess and personal resilience students possess and how this can benefit the rest of the student body and the institution at large.

While enrollment can be predicted before students consider higher education, there are ways that colleges and universities can improve in order to increase the accessibility of their services to low-income students. Institutions can focus on their published tuition costs and the make-up of their financial aid packages. Students from lower socioeconomic classes are much more cost averse, with good reason, than their wealthier counterparts. Fewer loans present in financial aid packages would help but would not solely solve the accessibility issues. While cost is a major factor when it comes to enrollment, overall fit and a sense of support at the institutions themselves is something that low-income students look for while searching for colleges and going through the enrollment process. These students need to know that they will have the resources to succeed and faculty members who will understand their unique situations. Colleges and universities need to do better to make low-income students feel like they are valued among the rest of the student body.
Lastly, institutions need to find the right balance of socioeconomic diversity within their student body and the ability to generate revenue for the overall operating budget. Recruiting the right mix of students is necessary. The continued increase in presence of nonresident students for public institutions, international students for many private institutions, and the focus on other full-paying students is a setback to socioeconomic diversity. However, even if a school does focus on recruiting a socioeconomically diverse student body, gets the right amount of quality applications, and admits and enrolls low-income students, the institution needs to continue to help those students throughout the summer months in order to fully engage and enroll these students. The job of diversification does not stop after admission letters are sent to students’ houses.

Enrollment rates of low-income students is an issue, at all levels of the American educational landscape. Secondary institutions, postsecondary institutions, and policymakers all play a role in alleviating the enrollment gap. The citizenry, society, and the institutions will all benefit from low-income students attaining a college degree at higher rates that are more in line with students from more affluent socioeconomic statuses.

**Lack of Social Mobility for Low-Income Students**

Higher education, not only as a tool to help society, citizens, and institutions, is sought out by families and students because it theoretically provides the promise of upward mobility regardless of background. At the very least, it is a way of protecting oneself against falling down the social ladder or maintaining their status quo (Marginson, 2016). The demand for higher education is not only present among lower social classes, but also from the growing middle class and the upper social classes. As higher education in the United States grows and a larger number of students participate, not all participation in higher education is of equal value. There have
been exponential increases in participation rates in the two-year sector while only slight 
increases in the four-year public sector and flat in the four-year private sector (Alon, 2009). This 
creates a stratification of opportunity among type and prestige of institution. While more 
students participate in higher education in general and more graduates enter the work force each 
year, the opportunities for high-value outcomes stay stagnant (Marginson, 2016). This makes the 
outcomes just as stratified as the higher education opportunities themselves and makes social 
 mobility harder and harder to achieve, especially in highly unequal societies like the United 
States. Higher education is both part of the solution and part of the problem of social mobility. 
The issues of higher education that contribute to the lack of social mobility are both systemic in 
nature and occur at the institutional level.

**Systemic Causes of Social Immobility**

Many low-income students are seeking higher education in order to better their lives and 
the lives of their future children. Higher education plays a significant role in the idea of the 
“American Dream.” Bowles (1972) makes the argument that the system of education in the 
United States was developed for a very specific reason: to increase wages and productivity when 
capitalism was introduced to our country and laborers were no longer the sole body responsible 
for production in an agrarian society. Educational institutions were created by and for citizens 
who would be able to economically contribute to our new country. Oftentimes these citizens 
were from higher socioeconomic classes. A track system was in place in the United States where 
vocational schools would become “skill builders” for students from lower-class families, 
whereas “book learning” in the college setting would be reserved for those students who would 
have the opportunity for “white-collar employment” (Bowles, 1972, p. 304). Thus, schooling is 
responsible for the stratification of our social classes and has continued to widen the social gap.
As “children of managers and professionals are taught self-reliance within a broad set of constraints; the children of production-line workers are taught conformity and obedience” due to the tracking of students early in the educational pursuits (Bowles, 1972, p. 308). The conclusion Bowles comes up with is that as long as specific jobs, professions, and employers have more power than other jobs, professions, and employers, educational inequality will always be present in our country and class structures will continue to be unequal (Bowles, 1972).

Around the same time that Bowles was drawing his conclusions, Romania shifted their educational policies and postponed the tracking of students into either academic or vocational schools to later in the students’ educational careers. As Romania made this shift, more students were eligible to apply to university, increasing access to higher education. However, the more economically disadvantaged students also became significantly less likely to complete university studies after the postponement of tracking. Though the number of students who became eligible to apply to university, the policy Romania changed in 1973 proves that the universities must make a larger number of slots available to disadvantaged students on top of the more macro-level policy of postponing tracking (Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2011).

The articles above show how more advanced schooling is necessary for employment in an advanced industrial society like the United States. Collins (1971) studies this phenomenon through two theories: the technical function theory of education and the conflict theory of education. In the technical-function theory, it is believed that skill requirements have increased because of the continued advancement of technology in the workplace. Education, then, provides training to be more adaptable to changing technologies and, because more training is needed to be more adaptable, our citizens need more and more education in order to be employable. Conflict theory, the more conclusive of the two, is based on the fact that there are
distinctions among cultures, including social classes, in modern society that different status groups will occupy different occupational positions in our economy and that these occupants struggle for power within the organization. Collins (1971) concludes that there is a cultural precedence embedded in our economy that will continue to stratify American workers. Connecting this study with the Bowles (1972) article, it can be assumed that because of the conflict theory, students, like workers, will continue separate into different social classes.

Anyon (1981), discussed earlier in this paper, explains how teachers contribute to the stratification of classes and continue the social reproduction of inequality. If teachers “teach down” to students from lower socioeconomic classes, they will perpetuate the idea that these students are not able to learn at the same level as students from higher SESs. It will generate a lack of self-confidence within low-income students who believe that they are destined to be the working class because they were taught “repetitive rote procedures and mechanical activity” (Anyon, 1981, p. 119). What would the results be if low-income students were taught to “foster creativity, independent thought, and personal development” like students in more affluent classrooms are (Anyon, 1981, p. 122)? Perhaps the cycle and reproduction of social and economic inequalities would be interrupted.

All of the research mentioned above came after the work that Lyndon B. Johnson envisioned to help the poor come out of poverty in the 1960s. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was intended to ensure access to a quality education for low-income and minority children by focusing on improving quality of schools in areas with large populations of students in low socioeconomic classes. Schools with a population of 40% or more under the Federal Poverty Line were eligible for grants and assistance to mitigate the achievement gap, improve libraries and remedial programs, perform research on educational quality and training,
and programs for gifted students, foreign languages, and the arts. The Higher Education Act in 1965 looked to do the same things for postsecondary education; opening doors regardless of race, creed, income level, disability, etc. However, these pieces of legislation did not, in fact, alleviate the problem, as students today are leaving higher education with more debt than students in any other era have in the past (Kilty, 2015). Increased debt levels for low-income students will only continue to perpetuate the cycle of keeping low-income people in lower socioeconomic classes. While low-income students aspire to attain college degrees in order to improve their social status, many students will start their pursuit for a college degree at a two-year institution or community college as a way to cut cost. This increased representation of low-income students in community colleges results in less degree attainment, as students are 13% less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree if they go to a two-year school before enrolling in a four-year school (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011).

Hoffman (2016) continues to add to the literature surrounding the social reproduction outcomes of higher education due to the levels of social capital gained while enrolled in college. The greater amount of social capital, the more likely a student will move beyond the family and community bonds and over perform in the labor market. Though a college degree does not guarantee employment (in 2013, 53% of four-year degree holders were underemployed or unemployed altogether), children from well-off families are disproportionately more likely to stay well-off as they start with more social, cultural, and economic capital. Children in the highest income quintile are five times more likely to end up in the highest quintile than they are the lowest quintile. Conversely, children from the lowest quintile are more than ten times more likely to stay in the lowest quintile than end up in the highest (Hoffman, 2016). Hoffman’s
research shows how social mobility is significantly limited due socioeconomic backgrounds of students and the capital gained while enrolled in higher education.

**Institutional Causes of Social Immobility**

While academic preparation has increased over time for all students regardless of SES and, partly due to this, low-income students match at institutions that fit their academic preparation at higher levels. However, low-income students are still underrepresented at the most selective institutions. This is because that although academic preparation has increased, it has not increased enough to close the access gap between SESs as the number of selective institutions and seats in their undergraduate classes have remained relatively flat (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). If low-income students are less likely to even attain a four-year degree, they are that much less likely to graduate from a prestigious or selective institution. This will isolate the students who come from the elite classes from the less well-off and, in the long run, will contribute to the income inequalities that exist in the United States, jeopardizing economic growth and social mobility (Dalton & Crosby, 2015).

The most prestigious of institutions of higher education are reputable, in part, due to the selectivity of their admission process. Educational attainment, income, and job status of college graduates are all correlated to the selectivity of the institution that they graduate from (Marina & Holmes, 2009). Prestigious and well-endowed universities are more concerned with admitting students who are likely to become higher paid professionals; as a result, low-income students are kept out and thus not given the chance of changing their economic status (Marina & Holmes, 2009). This selectivity is causing social reproduction and keeping low-income students from contributing to the future of our society. Poor students who are living above the poverty line, *near poor or missing class*, do not qualify for public assistance, including Pell grants and other
financial aid programs, keeping them out of the expensive, selective, and prestigious institutions (Marina & Holmes, 2009). According to economists there are major economic benefits to graduating from a prestigious institution compared to nonselective institutions and those benefits have become more significant over time. Prestigious employers and prestigious graduate programs select students from the most selective undergraduate programs creating a disproportionate number of F500 CEOs coming from the most selective institutions (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011).

**Summary**

Both the higher education system and the institutions themselves are to blame for the lack of social mobility they produce for low-income students. The higher education system was created without these students in mind and is biased against these students in terms of both access and success of low-income students. While many policies have been introduced throughout history to provide access and alleviate the educational and income inequalities that the system of education in the United States perpetuates, results have not been seen. Students from low-income backgrounds continue to stay in the lowest socioeconomic classes. The institutions of higher education are just as much to blame as the system itself. Admission practices seek out the highest achieving students and the students most likely to contribute economically to both the institution as a tuition payer, as an alumnus, and to society at large. Financial aid policies are not robust enough to allow low-income students to pay for a prestigious degree, which would help break the social cycle and allow students to achieve the “American Dream.” The lack of social mobility for low-income students is impacted by the barriers to and the low enrollment rates within higher education.

**Conclusion**
The literature reviewed above explains the issues higher education faces when it comes to the accessibility to low-income students. Students from low-income backgrounds face a significant number of barriers to gain admission to and pay for a college degree. Barriers can exist at the macro-level and the micro-level. Macro-level barriers include the economic stability of the community the student lives in, high school graduation rates, and classroom dynamics within school districts. Micro-level barriers include costs associated with higher education, resources available to the student, family dynamics the student experiences, and personal aspirations for a college education. These barriers lead to low enrollment rates for students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds. Policies at all levels of government, levels of capital possessed by students and influencers, and a simple way to explain environmental context can all attribute to low enrollment rates by areas outside of higher education. Of course, institutions of higher education and the system itself can also be contributed to low-income students enrolling at lower rates than wealthier students too. Admission practices and financial aid policies again play their role, but so do financial incentives of the institutions themselves. Finally, the low enrollment rates cause a significant lack of social mobility. While higher education is often thought of as a mechanism for the betterment of lifestyle, it often perpetuates the social inequalities that are faced in the United States today. Again, both the higher education system and the institutions themselves claim some of the blame for inhibiting social mobility.

The study that follows hopes to allow a specific expensive, selective, and prestigious private four-year institution to become more accessible to low-income students. This would allow these students to improve specific skillsets and gain social, cultural, and economic capital that will allow them to become more attractive to the workforce after they graduate and allow these students to integrate with and assimilate with their peers from higher socioeconomic
statuses. Access to higher education will contribute to increased levels of capital, allow students to promote the common good, and contribute to society at greater levels.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Every day higher education is made less accessible to students of low-income backgrounds our society, democracy, and educational values will be tested. Whether or not the admission practices, financial aid programs, or enrollment processes are inherently biased against students from the lowest socio-economic classes, the college admission and enrollment process does inhibit these students from gaining social, cultural, and economic capital needed for social mobility. Therefore, this qualitative study is intended to better understand the lived experiences of low-income students with the admission and enrollment process at a selective, expensive, private four-year institution – the University of Miami. The following research question served as the focus of the study:

*How do low-income students who successfully enroll in a selective, private four-year institution explain their experience with the college admission and enrollment process?*

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to understand how low-income students perceive their experience with the college enrollment process, and how selective and expensive private four-year institutions can utilize this knowledge to become more accessible to this type of student. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the qualitative research approach, paradigm, and methodology the researcher used to answer the research question above. The participants, data collection and analysis process, and the strategies that the researcher used to ensure high quality research will be discussed.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

A qualitative research design allowed the researcher to understand a phenomenon through a person’s experience or perception of that phenomenon. Qualitative research approaches are used
when the variables are unknown when looking at a problem or phenomenon. These variables were sought through a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2013). Words and experiences from the participants, rather than numbers and quantifiable datasets, were collected, analyzed, and processed by the researcher during the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana 2014). During the data collection process, the researcher made observations, then brought meaning to those observations through interpretation and the double hermeneutic process (Creswell, 2013). While making meaning of the observations, the researcher sought to understand his personal biases while performing qualitative research. These biases otherwise could have impacted the analyzation and understanding of the participant’s perception of the phenomenon being observed (Creswell, 2013).

There are different paradigms, or interrelated assumptions about the world that organize society into frameworks, that researchers can use depending on the question that the researcher wants to answer (Ponterotto, 2005). The paradigm used in this research study was the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm as it allowed the researcher to be closely connected to the participants during the data collection process. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm holds that there is no singular truth, because every individual in the world views the truth from his or her specific position. Therefore, the researcher can only find the perspective of the individual being investigated and not the one certain truth (Butin, 2010). As H.A. Alexander states, “we can say nothing at all with certainty about life beyond our own thoughts and experiences” (2006, p. 211). Only the construction of the human mind can be studied in this paradigm, versus a specific object and there is the belief that continuous change occurs in the environment, making it impossible to study the one specific reality (Merriam, 1991). Because there are many different and equally acceptable realities, deep reflection and interaction between the researcher and the subjects is necessary. Both sides work together to form dialogue and interpretation of the truth being studied.
Goals of the constructivist-interpretivist are idiographic and emic, meaning behaviors and viewpoints are unique to the individual, cannot be generalized, and seeks to understand the individual. Constructivist-interpretivists try to understand a particular occurrence through the eyes of the observer, or research participants. The many different and equally correct viewpoints of a specific occurrence create a subjective style of research which varies based on how the participant experiences and perceives the social environment. Dynamic and deep interaction between the researcher and participants is central to understanding the experiences of the participants, and the researcher will clearly articulate their biases, opinions, and experiences. The constructivist-interpretivist will position themselves in the middle of the participant’s environment for a long period of time, and therefore will be presented in the first-person and will be personal in nature (Ponterotto, 2005). Overall, the constructivist-interpretivist will focus on the process, rather than the outcomes (Merriam, 1991).

Using the constructive-interpretive paradigm allowed the researcher to connect with his participants and find truth in the phenomenon which is dependent on the perception of the participants and researcher. Through in-depth interviews with participants over a longer period of time, the researcher came to a deeper understanding of the participants’ beliefs, values, and perceptions of the college admission and enrollment process. This interpersonal relationship between the researcher and the participants allowed the researcher to work with the participants to make meaning of their experiences in the college admission and enrollment processes (Ponterotto, 2005).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Researchers who use the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology seek to understand how people perceive, experience, and grasp specific phenomena –
relationships, events, or processes – in their own reality (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Stemming from more general phenomenological methodologies, researchers using IPA are trying to understand the essence of the central occurrences and then describe what their participants experienced and how they experienced it. The IPA methodology is popular in social and health sciences; particularly in sociology, psychology, nursing, and education (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

There are three significant theoretical aspects to IPA; phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic-interactionism. Phenomenology, the construction of a philosophical mindfulness, is usually credited to Edmund Husserl, whose version of phenomenology will be described below (Larkin et al., 2011). Hermeneutics is the way in which people interpret experiences. Finally, symbolic-interactionism or ideography, which focuses on the experiences and the interpretation of those experiences by both the participant and the researcher. The experiences are learned, and the interpretation of the experience is analyzed through social interaction and interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA, a branch of phenomenological inquiry, is a relatively new methodology introduced by John Smith, a professor in the Psychology Department at Birbank, University of London in 1996 (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Smith expanded on the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, two central figures in phenomenology (Shosha, 2012; Fade, 2014). Husserl founded the process of descriptive inquiry which focused on the observation of the experience or phenomenon as it occurred. Husserl did not believe that researchers had to rely on empirical data and analysis in order to understand the world. Rather, he leaned on intentionality, the idea that each thought is related to something, and the perception of that something has meaning as the main focus for understanding experiences. Husserl’s version of phenomenology made the
experience central to the person’s knowledge. Understanding the experience as it appeared would eliminate biases found in other research methodologies, according to Husserl (Dowling, 2007). “Therefore, Husserl’s phenomenological view requires that descriptions of experiences be gleaned before it has been reflected on” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). This was a major stepping stone towards social-scientific inquiry used by many researchers today and is the foundation of descriptive inquiry (Shosha, 2012; Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

A student of Husserl’s, Martin Heidegger, expanded on the Husserlian phenomenology by focusing more narrowly on the individual experience. Heidegger concentrated more so on personal existence itself and the personal experience with their existence and the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). In Heidegger’s phenomenology, there is a greater emphasis on the individual’s understanding or perception of the phenomenon, rather than Husserl’s focus on the description of the experience itself (Dowling, 2007). Both Husserl and Heidegger believed that there was a shared experience between individuals. However, Husserl wanted to understand lived interaction between experience and person, while Heidegger wanted to understand the personal experience and perception of the sheer existence of the phenomenon and how that individual tackled it (Dowling, 2007). In other words, Heidegger went past the experience itself and introduced the personal interpretation of the experience, or hermeneutic process, to the phenomenology. Heidegger’s version of phenomenology introduced interpretative inquiry to the scholarly world.

The addition of hermeneutics to the inquiry, or phenomenology, is very specific to IPA methodology. The combined works of Husserl and Heidegger, with additions from scholars like Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer, allowed Smith to create IPA with specific ways of collecting and analyzing data. The interpretive experience of research is central to IPA and includes a double
hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2009). The conscious experience of the individual must be explained, as must the individual’s interpretation of the experience. However, in IPA research, the interpretation of the researcher will also be included in order to find traits and assumptions of the circumstance being explored – the double hermeneutic process (Moustakas, 1994).

IPA research takes place through specific, semi-structured interviews and with a small dataset due to the length and depth involved with the interviews (Smith et al., 2009). All participants will have experienced the same phenomenon and the researcher will seek to make sense of their collective experience. IPA is an appropriate choice for the study on accessibility of higher education as it allowed the researcher to make sense of the phenomenon through multiple perspectives of different students at the University of Miami.

In this IPA study on accessibility to higher education for low-income students, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon of navigating the college admission and enrollment process through the experiences of low-income students in the context of their socioeconomic status, environmental background, and personal experiences. Through interviews and analyses of the transcriptions, the researcher tried to understand how the participant lived or made sense of their relationship to the world, in their specific context. The inquiry was divided into the descriptive and the interpretive. This allowed the researcher to focus on the first-person perspective through the lens of the participant and the third-person perspective, through the lens of the researcher (Larkin & Thompson, 2011).

**Participants**

In order to be a participant in this study, the subject must be a successful, low-income, first-time, first-year student at the University of Miami. Successful is defined as the student
having at least a 3.0/4.0 GPA and has completed their first academic semester. This allowed the researcher to study students who both successfully navigated the college admission and enrollment process and the academic culture at UM. UM’s definition of low-income is that the student has an Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) of $7,500 or less for that academic year as determined by UM’s institutional methodology in the financial aid process. This data was available to the researcher through UM’s Office of Financial Assistance and Student Employment and the ’Canes Success Center (the retention department of the Enrollment Management division). There were no specific criteria for gender, ethnicity, or geographic origin, though the researcher ensured that there is such diversity represented in the sample.

Sampling occurred through contacting the students to gauge interest via email. After finding eight students who met the above criteria and volunteered to be interviewed, the data collection process began (Smith et al., 2009). The sample size for IPA studies must be small to obtain extensive, interview-based data but large enough to understand and interpret a trend of the phenomenon being studied (Shaw, 2010). The location of the interviews was chosen by the participant and were public spaces or the researcher’s office on the Coral Gables campus of the University of Miami.

While the bulk of the data was obtained through extensive and semi-structured interviews with the participants, other forms of data were also used. As mentioned above, the researcher also obtained raw financial data for the student and their family. With access to their admission application to UM, the researcher also assessed the quality of the high school that they attended, academic rigor of the courses taken at the high school level, the family’s educational background, and general academic success by measures such as high school GPA and standardized test scores (SAT and/or ACT). This extensive dataset allowed the researcher to
analyze and assess both the description of that student’s lived experience with the college enrollment process as well as their perception of their experience, specifically how their socioeconomic, environmental, and interpersonal experiences impacted their college admission and enrollment process.

**Procedures**

After the Internal Review Board (IRB) protocol and approval process through both the University of Miami and Northeastern University, the researcher selected a small and pointed set of participants to interview and act as participants in the dataset. The researcher recruited participants in two phases: an email directed to students who met the criteria of selection discussed below served as a recruitment tool (Appendix A) and a follow up email was sent in phase two if the first letter did not yield the appropriate amount of responses to those students who didn’t respond to the initial email (Appendix B). Participants who were interested were asked to respond to the researcher’s Northeastern University email account within ten days of receipt of the invitation to participate in the study.

Participant selection for this voluntary study was determined with the intention of having an ethnically diverse sample as well as having at least three first-generation college students whose parents did not receive a baccalaureate degree. The researcher used eight participants of various ethnic and educational background in order to represent the student body at the University of Miami. All participants were first-year students who were early in the undergraduate career at UM. At the conclusion of ten days, the researcher selected participants based on the criteria noted above and notified them of their acceptance (Appendix C). Participants received an informed consent (Appendix D) form to sign at the beginning of the interview protocol (Appendix E).
Data Collection

IPA allows for the interpretive process to begin with the collection of data. Data can include observatory notes by the researcher of the participants, interviews with the participants, and other raw data points on the participants which will be explained in more detail below (Crist & Tanner, 2003). Observations and interviews are typically repeated a number of times so that the researcher can understand the participant’s life experience, find details on the specific issues being explored, and ask follow-up questions to encourage the participant to reflect more deeply on the phenomenon (Seidman, 1991). During the interview process, the researcher took notes in order to collect more data about nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, vocal tone, and gestures by the participant. These notes became significant data during the interpretive process in the analysis phase (Cirst & Tanner, 2003).

Participants were called to be briefed on the interview process and were asked to sign consent forms before the recordings and interview protocol started. Participants had the ability to schedule both a time and location of the interview that is convenient and comfortable for themselves. The interviews lasted sixty to ninety minutes and participants were notified that interviews would be recorded before the interview started and reminded at the conclusion of the interview. Two devices recorded the interviews in case of technical difficulties. Interviews were transcribed for analysis using gotranscript.com. Transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. Transcripts were then sent to the participants (Appendix F) to verify that the transcription accurately reflected their intentions and allowed them the opportunity to make corrections, ask questions, and add to the transcription if necessary. Notes were taken by the researcher during the interview to capture nonverbal cues of the participant and are included with the data. The interview schedule was flexible which allowed the researcher to ask probing and
encouraging questions (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher engaged with, listened to, and learned about the participant to help ensure a quality interview.

The data collected through the interviews were the student’s personal experience with the college admission and enrollment process. Their perception of the roles that their socioeconomic class, cultural background, and environment played in that process was elicited through specific questioning. As mentioned above, the researcher also obtained raw financial data for the student and their family. Data found on the student’s application for admission to UM allowed the researcher to understand the educational opportunities and resources that the student had access to while in high school and their academic performance prior to UM. The combination of the diverse datasets helped the researcher grasp how the student perceives their college admission and enrollment process and how their individual socioeconomic, environmental, and interpersonal experiences impacted that experience.

Participant identity remains confidential and each participant is assigned a pseudonym and a number. Table 1 below provides more details of each participant.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P#</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Geographic Origin</th>
<th>EFC ($)</th>
<th>Family Background</th>
<th>HS GPA</th>
<th>SAT/ACT</th>
<th>UM GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>7195</td>
<td>FGEN &quot;in spirit&quot; (Father has degree but is not involved in participant's life)</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>2550</td>
<td>Mother with degree, Father unknown</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>4443</td>
<td>FGEN</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1190 SAT</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>2876</td>
<td>Legacy of UM (deceased mother)</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>6679</td>
<td>Mother with BA only</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>1480 SAT</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ontario, Canada</td>
<td>3575</td>
<td>Both parents have BA and sister is current student at U Vermont</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>FGEN; older brother goes to law school at UM and two older sisters at FIU</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Not Specified</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>6718</td>
<td>Both parents have advanced degrees (MA and JD); Brother is UM Class of '18</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

An analytic procedure that allows the researcher to identify critical features of, experiences of, and perceptions of the participant is necessary in IPA studies. The first step of analysis is obtaining a verbatim transcript of the questions and answers from the interview process. By reading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings of the interviews, taking notes and writing memos throughout the process, and combining these with the notes taken during the interviews, the researcher analyzed both the lived experience by the participant, the interpretation of that experience, as well as began to form his own interpretation of the participants lived experience with the phenomenon being studied (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher focused on one participant’s case before moving on to the next participant allowing him to make comparisons across participants’ experiences (Shaw, 2010).

Part of the data analysis included coding the interview transcripts. After reading and rereading the transcripts, and after the member-checking process, the researcher contributed his own initial interpretation (Shaw, 2010). In the right margin of the transcript, the researcher added his interpretations (Shaw, 2010) and in the left margin the researcher added codes that pointed to descriptive themes (Smith et al., 2009). Coding is the process of grouping aspects, words or phrases of various sizes, of the data into categories that allow the researcher to easily find symbolic meaning in the larger dataset (Miles et al., 2014). Coding can be done in a variety of ways, such as descriptive coding, value coding, open-coding, causation coding, attribute coding, etc. (Miles et al., 2014). Many IPA studies will also use bracketing in the analysis. Bracketing is the act of “the researcher examining their prejudices in order to allow them include the views of the respondents” (Dowling, 2007, p. 136). While there is some debate where
bracketing should occur during a phenomenological study, during analysis it can prove to be a good strategy. The use of bracketing allowed the interview itself to be true and impartial.

In the analysis phase of the IPA study on accessibility of higher education for low-income students, the researcher transcribed recorded interviews verbatim through gotranscript.com. Through an open-coding method while analyzing interview transcripts, the researcher identified key themes that point to obstacles and issues faced by this group of low-income students (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis includes “in-depth interpretations of excerpts, central concern summaries, and interpretive summaries” of the interviews, transcripts, and notes taken by the researcher (Crist & Tanner, 2003, p. 204). Both descriptive and interpretative phenomenology are included, explaining both the experience itself of the participant with the college admission and enrollment process as well as their interpretation of their lived experience with the admission and enrollment process. The researcher included his interpretation of the participants’ experiences with the process and, specifically, how the participant’s socioeconomic class impacted that process. This analysis helped inform the researcher of different strategies for UM to increase its accessibility to students from low-income backgrounds.

Admission applications and financial data were also analyzed. Table 1 above includes a summary of the overall demographics of the participant group which will include racial/ethnic and gender breakdowns. The participant’s EVC, HS GPA, SAT/ACT, and college GPA at the time of the interview is included. Each participant was interviewed following a three-tier interview structure. The first part of the interview allowed the researcher to establish rapport with participants and begin understanding the participant’s background and experience (Smith et al., 2009). The second part of the interview is an in-depth, semi-structured interview, and includes the probing of the students for their own self-reflection on their college admission and enrollment
process. The third and final part of the interview allowed the participants to member-check their interviews, giving them the opportunity to read the transcripts of the first two parts of the interview and allow the students to elaborate or clarify if necessary (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the research studies of the highest quality are also high in integrity. This section will describe the ethical considerations, credibility, transferability, self-reflexivity, transparency, and the internal audit trail of the researcher and the research method and process. Finally, the limitations of the study will be highlighted.

**Ethical Considerations**

Studies that include human subjects must keep participants and data protected. Creswell (2013) identifies a number of actions a researcher should consider in order to make the study as ethical as possible. The researcher obtained appropriate approvals from the IRBs at Northeastern University and the research site—the University of Miami. All policies from both IRBs regarding research with human subjects have been followed by the researcher. Participants were recruited with the understanding of both the purpose of the study and the option to opt-out at any time. Consent forms were distributed by the researcher and were signed by participants before interacting with the researcher in any capacity related to the research study. The study was voluntary and was presented as such to the participants and they understood that they could have left the research at any time. As the participants are students at the University of Miami, the informed consent form will indicate that their participation does not impact any aspect of their enrollment at the University.
The semi-structured interviews included fair and unbiased questions so as not to skew the dataset. The analysis kept the participants anonymous through a pseudonym and a number. Only the researcher knows the identity of the participants. The data was evaluated thoroughly and any piece of data that relates to the research question was reported on. Only the researcher, transcription service, the researcher’s advisor, and second reader have access to the raw data. Interviews were recorded and saved on the researcher’s personal computer and personal tablet, both password protected, in case of technical failures. Paper copies of the transcripts and the researcher’s notes pertaining to data analysis have been stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home. Interview recordings collected will be destroyed upon publication of the study.

Credibility

The research study is credible as the documentation and procedures are clearly defined, transparent, and included in the appendices when appropriate (Shaw, 2010). The researcher also made himself credible with participants by following a three-tier interview structure. Firstly, the researcher established rapport with the subjects and ensured that he understood their background and experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The second part of the interview consisted of a more in-depth, semi-structured interview probing for the students’ reflections on their college admission and enrollment processes. Thirdly, and most importantly to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member-checking will take place. Transcripts of the interviews were made available to the participants giving them the opportunity to elaborate on, clarify, or correct any of their answers.

Finally, the multiple datasets have been through a triangulation process so that the researcher can verify all data points. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for verification. The participants have verified the data pertaining to their interview to confirm validity through the member-checking process.
Transferability

To address the issue of transferability of this research by other scholars, the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of process, analysis, and results including quotations when illustrating the participants’ perception of the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Detailed descriptions and interpretations of the interview transcripts have been provided. Information on the research site is explained in context so the reader can make a transfer if necessary. Finally, the phenomenon of a lack of accessibility to higher education is discussed thoroughly. This rich and thick description is at the cornerstone of external validity for a research study (Creswell, 2013).

Because the methodology used in this research study is IPA, the study is idiographic in nature rather than nomothetic. Analysis, therefore, is made at the case level for each participant and the researcher. Through rich and thick description, specific claims about each individual case have been presented (Shaw, 2010). The researcher was transparent on how specific data points allowed him to draw certain conclusions. Thick descriptions and the idiographic nature of the study allows the readers to determine the transferability of the study.

Internal Audit Trail

An internal audit trail can be followed to ensure that the researcher’s conclusions were drawn directly from the data. This was established and maintained during the data collection and the data analysis phases of the research study. The audit trail for this study includes: “initial notes on the research questions, the research proposal, an interview schedule, audio [recordings], annotated transcripts, tables of themes and other devices, draft reports, and the final report” (Shaw, 2010, p. 183).
Self-reflexivity and Transparency

The researcher believes that the access gap in higher education between socioeconomic classes within the United States is a serious problem. If education continues with the status quo, this gap will only grow wider as the population in our country diversifies and becomes more polarized socioeconomically. By studying this issue in depth, the researcher hoped to help selective and expensive institutions change and improve access to, and ultimately to enroll students from lower socioeconomic classes and diverse backgrounds and encourage our institutions and country to become a better and more accepting place. The researcher believes that this benefits colleges as much as it would benefit the students and society as a whole.

As a higher education professional, the researcher may be biased in his thoughts about the positive impact that higher education has on students and their families. Not identifying as a member of a lower socioeconomic class, the researcher is aware that group members may have acted differently than he believed they would. The risks that students from lower socioeconomic classes experience are much different than the risks and decisions that the researcher had to make coming from a wealthier family (Bloom, 2007). The researcher was prepared for college thanks to attending a high school with resources and supportive adults in his community. The researcher did not worry about taking out a loan, as his family had the economic capital to pay it back if the researcher did not make the means after gaining employment after graduation. These levels of privilege in the researcher’s life has allowed him the ability to see the difference and diversity in the students he has worked with in the professional setting as a college admissions officer (Bloom, 2007). Because the researcher comes from a different position than the students whom he is trying to empower, it required effort on his part to become part of the solution to the access gap. He needed to interact with and engage students to understand their positions, and
how his personal biases have influenced his experiences and his choices. The researcher was careful of observer bias during his research given his passion for the subject and belief in the strength of education. He could have also been prone to confirmation bias for the same reasons (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). The researcher paid attention to his findings and his research methods to eliminate these biases.

The researcher was also cognizant of deficit and difference thinking (Carlton Parsons, 2008). He wanted to be sure that he does not essentialize any major group of people, like a socioeconomic class, as acting the same, having the same ideals, and sharing the same attributes, as they are a group of individuals. He did not believe that this group of people is starting off in a worse place than any other group of people.

The researcher believes that he was able to provide an inclusive report without positioning any group of people as “the others” based on their sociodemographic position. Positionality theory states that power is socially constructed (Kezar, 2000; Kezar, 2002). It is key to understand that expectations can influence personal interactions with regards to power, especially as the researchers engaged with students who come from lower socioeconomic classes than himself (Baldwin, Kiviniemi, & Snyder 2009). The researcher wanted to be able to provide an “equitable and diverse representation” on the gap in access to higher education between socioeconomic groups (Briscoe, 2005, p. 39).

Limitations

This study focused on one university and a small sample of low-income students at that university. While the researcher believes this will create knowledge for the University of Miami on how to make itself more accessible to low-income students, the participants are a small
representation of the entire group. It is also possible that respondents to the recruitment letters
are removed enough from the college admission and enrollment process that their memories
might be clouded from that period of their lives. This could jeopardize the generalizability of the
study.

The main medium of data collection in an IPA study is the semi-structured interview,
which could prove to be a limitation. While the follow up questions will allow the researcher to
ask probing and though provoking questions, it could take the researcher down an unintended
path. Semi-structured interviews could cause the researcher to lose control of the study overall.
This could impact the transferability of the research.

The researcher interpreted the individual experiences of each student as well as the
collective whole experience of the group of students. The idiographic nature of an IPA allows
the researcher to understand an individual’s experiences and perception of a phenomenon with
significant depth as well as the group of individuals’ shared experience. This, coupled with the
semi-structured interview discussed above, will make it hard for another researcher to transfer
this study and find students that have similar sets of demographic and behavioral variables to the
study. This IPA is intended to reflect some of the experiences of the eight participants who
experienced the phenomenon under study.

Despite the limitations highlighted, the researcher produced a viable, credible, and
trustworthy research study that examines how low-income students understand their experience
of accessing higher education at a selective, expensive, private four-year institution.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to understand how low-income students perceive their experience with the college admission and enrollment process, and how selective and expensive private four-year institutions can utilize this knowledge to become more accessible to this type of student. Eight participants with similar socioeconomic statuses and who successfully navigated the admission and enrollment process at UM shared their experiences of their college admission and enrollment process through semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the data yielded three superordinate themes with nested subthemes. Superordinate and subthemes were identified as those recurring in at least five of the eight participants’ interview data. These themes were:

1) Goal-oriented Process
   a. Financially Motivated Goals
   b. Socially and Culturally Motivated Goals

2) Shaped by Support System
   a. Support of Family
   b. Support from Educators and Admission/Counseling Professionals
   c. Support from Peers

3) Stressful Process
   a. Time Consuming and Tedious
   b. Lacking the Help Needed

Influenced by social reproduction theory, interview questions were intended to answer the central research question for the study: How do low-income students who successfully enroll in a selective, private four-year institution explain their experience with the college admission and
enrollment process? Table 2 provides a listing of the superordinate and nested subthemes that emerged from the analysis, as well as the recurrence of each theme across all participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES/SUB THEMES</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Goal Oriented Process</strong></td>
<td>Alexandra, Kerry, Shannon, Victoria, Henry, Tammy, Betty, Bella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Financially Motivated Goals</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Culturally and Socially Motivated Goals</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Shaped by Support System</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Support of Family</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Support from Educators &amp; Admission/Counseling Professionals</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Support from Peers</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressful Process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. Lacking the Help Needed</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. Time Consuming &amp; Tedious</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Goal-Oriented Process**

Students from low-income backgrounds who have been successful in navigating the admission and enrollment process at the University of Miami all explained their process as one with a goal in mind, or as being goal-oriented. In this theme, the participant’s explanation of why they believed being successful in the college admission and enrollment process would help them achieve their goals later in their lives. All students knew that being successful in this process would help them achieve one goal: obtaining a college education. The college education was never a terminal goal in itself but was always tied to some larger future goals. Each did seem to consider college for what it would do for them in the future, however, each student had
different ideas of what a college education could bring them. Some students believed that
college would develop them as a person, academically or professionally. Each wanted to
become better versions of themselves, improve their socioeconomic statuses, or increase social
and cultural capital.

Many students believed that a college education would allow them to “pay the rent,” as
Bella says, or gain financial means in the future by becoming more employable. Other students
focused on their goals of expanding their networks, increasing their knowledge bases, or helping
others in their lives and careers. Alexandra mentioned that she considered academic programs,
specifically Psychology, when looking at institutions to apply to and attend because she “could
learn just in terms of learning as far as…furthering [herself] as a person.” The decision to enroll
at the University of Miami was in part due to the “good amount of resources that can help you
make connections and network if you’re really willing.” She believed that choosing the right
school and the right academic program would allow her to better herself by knowing more about
the people around her. It would also allow her to have more opportunities at her disposal. The
social capital gained by the increased network of a university’s faculty, student, staff, and alumni
bodies bring with college enrollment helps students understand how personal and professional
goals of theirs could be met in the future.

Doing well in high school and getting into college was believed by some participants to
help set up their path of success and leave behind difficult childhood situations. Kerry mentions
that the admission and enrollment process was necessary, a “life changing process,” and was a
pivotal moment in her life. “If I didn’t do this, then I wouldn’t have been successful the rest of
my life,” Kerry states. Many other participants eluded to the same feelings that Kerry touched
on here. By reverse-engineering her goals, she explains that goals of employment and personal
success in the future relies on getting a college degree by a reputable institution. In order to meet those goals, she first has to successfully navigate the college admission and enrollment process. The goal of being successful in the college admission and enrollment process is pivotal for the rest of her goals in the future and escaping a difficult upbringing. The participants place a lot of weight on the college admission and enrollment process.

Like many goal-oriented processes, the participants explained that the admission and enrollment process was not always easy. Shannon specifically mentioned the feeling that “this is all going to pay off.” She knew that her hard work would be rewarded down the line. These students were goal-oriented when navigating the admission and enrollment process, whether it was bettering themselves as a person-at-large, helping their socioeconomic statuses, or increasing social and cultural capitals. Of course, when it comes to increasing financial capital, most of the students specifically mention the idea that attending college was with the goal of gaining employment after graduation in mind. Most of the participants also mention that positively impacting their families played into the decision to take the admission and enrollment process seriously. Thus, the goal-oriented processes among the students interviewed revealed two nested themes: Financially Motivated Goals and Culturally and Socially Motivated Goals.

**Financially Motivated Goals**

Each of the eight participants, when talking about their admission and enrollment process and their goals, all mentioned the fact that succeeding in this process and enrolling in college would help them gain employment after college leading to financial success in the future. Some students mentioned this in more details than others. Alexandra talks about how the resources and opportunities in college will help students “further yourself and your career.” Bella believed that college was her best path to “help pay the rent.” Other students mention specific careers goals,
like Victoria who wants to “become an FBI agent… A little bit more realistically, I would want to be a prosecutor…” Victoria mentioned unique opportunities available to her at the University of Miami to help her achieve the goal she set for herself:

> There are so many events, not just social events but also professional events.
> Toppel [Career Center] has interviews. They have practice interviews with different places and so I was even able to do a practice interview with some FBI agents here from the Miami division. That’s great. I feel like I wouldn’t have gotten that any other place.

Betty, a music major like Tammy and Shannon, knew that she needed to do research on her career path as a classical vocal performance major. Many people told her that she was “stupid” for wanting to be a music major. However, before enrolling at the University of Miami’s Frost School of Music, she made sure that the major she was interested in and passionate about had multiple career paths for graduates from that program. She says,

> With a vocal performance degree, not only can I sing, but I can teach. I would have to take maybe one or two extra classes, but I could teach. I could do a lot of stuff. I could go into production, stuff like that. So, there’s more than one thing I could do with that…

The experiences and explanations from the participants above show that financially motivated goals were driven by the employability that a college education brings with it. The participants believe that the careers and professional futures that they desire will bring financial stability with them. They each have goals of increasing their economic capital and socioeconomic statuses. To do so, the participants first had to meet their financially motivated goal of successfully navigating the college admission and
enrollment process. Now, they want to obtain a college degree in order to pursue lucrative professional paths.

Henry focused specifically on the economic capital that he would gain by being employable thanks to a higher education. He mentions that he knows that “people who go to college make, on average, a million dollars more than [people who do not go to college].” He goes as far as to say that he was comfortable taking loans out in order to pay for the University of Miami because he believes that because of this education he’ll “make a lot of money…. I’ll just start a company or something, and then I’ll pay [the debt] off.”

Regardless of how it would happen, all of the participants believed that completing their degree would impact their ability to gain employment. Being successful in the admission and enrollment process is the first step toward meeting these financially motivated goals for their futures. Some thought about this connection more explicitly than others and each thought about it in a different context. Each interviewee did incorporate some degree of financial motivation in order to obtain their college degree. Though the success of the admission and enrollment process would not immediately bring economic capital, it was the first step in their journey to increased socioeconomic status. Social mobility was something considered by each participant. All of the participants were also considering the financial motivation on the front end of the process, specifically when it came to financial aid and scholarships.

Almost all of the participants said that the financial aid and scholarship process was just as important to them as the admission process. Kerry’s family, riddled with medical issues and abusive relationships, provided Kerry with the motivation to go to college and better her situation.
My mom spent a lot of time backing that idea too; to do well in school because that would be my way out of what the situation we were in and stuff like that.…

‘You’re going to be a doctor’ I guess that was my mom telling me that too.

Kerry’s family was the impetus to pursue a college education. She says, “…I grew up on food stamps and with Medicaid and stuff like that because my dad had bipolar disorder… We never had money and I was always good at school. The goal for my entire childhood was just to get into college…” In order to afford a college education to help her economic capital in the future, Kerry focused on financial aid and scholarship programs. Her college search process was driven towards private universities because they “were going to give [her] money and public schools were not.” Kerry is on a competitive and generous scholarship at the University of Miami for students who overcome significant adversity. Kerry said that she “knew about that scholarship two years before [applying to UM].” Kerry emphasized the importance of financial aid and scholarships to ensure that she could afford a private higher education and gain economic capital in the future—a very financially motivated way of thinking. Kerry believed that mitigating the amount of debt and the overall cost of a college education was going to help her family and their financial situation in the short-term. Kerry was cost averse when it came to look for colleges, deciding to focus on private institutions because she believed that these schools would be able to discount her cost of attendance at a higher rate than their public counterparts. A financial motivation was integrated into Kerry’s admission and enrollment process from the early stages.

Victoria was awarded the same competitive scholarship as Kerry. She says that scholarships and financial aid “played a really big role” in where she was going to apply to college. She believed that she was a strong enough student to gain scholarships, it was just a
matter of how much. Like many of her peers, her decision to enroll at the University of Miami was swayed by the financial package that she received. She said that she did consider enrolling elsewhere because of financial aid packages and scholarships awarded by other institutions, though chose to attend UM due to the generous scholarship she received. She also said that if things were to change at UM with her current package, she would have to consider transferring to another institution. Cost of attendance was a major factor in Victoria’s process, from searching for schools and deciding where to enroll. The scholarship offered to her from the University of Miami made the decision for her. By obtaining a full cost of attendance scholarship plus book and computer stipends, she alleviated an already strained financial situation for her and her family. Victoria was very cost-averse when it came to the admission and enrollment process. This attitude was the most important factor in her process. She would have enrolled in other institutions with less perceived prestige or reputation if they were going to cost her and her family less. The phenomenon known as “under-matching” is something that Victoria would have been exposed to if she was not awarded with her current scholarship. A cost-averse mentality like this could have impacted Victoria’s economic capital in a different way than she intended. Victoria would have attended a school that may not have helped her gain the economic capital that the University of Miami can through resources and opportunities that it lends its students.

Betty’s process was impacted by her family’s health situation, like Kerry’s. According to Betty, her family is a “whole ball of sick” which helped shape her decision to stay close to home and commute to campus with her older sister, an employee of the University. She also noted that the application for admission did not take into consideration her unique and nontraditional family
structure with two adopted siblings – one on legal record and the other not. Her family’s financial situation also impacted her process. She says,

[Financial aid and scholarships were] pretty important because if I didn’t get the amount of scholarships that I did, I wouldn’t be able to go to UM. There’s no way. My parents are like, ‘Yes, we will make it happen.’ Me, thinking realistically, there’s no way it’s going to happen. I can’t do that to my family.

Like Victoria, the passage above shows that Betty was cost averse when it came to the admission and enrollment process. The family dynamic with adopted children and health issues caused Betty’s family’s finances to be strained. While her parents seemingly would have done whatever it took in order to send Betty to the school that she wanted to go, regardless of cost, Betty took it upon herself to be fiscally conservative in her admission and enrollment process. The financially motivated goal here was to not impact her family’s short-term financial situation in a negative way. Students with situations like Betty’s need to be aware of how money is being spent in the short-term. Attending a feasibly affordable institution for college was important to Betty. It was important for her to allow her family to continue to live comfortably while still helping set herself up for financial success in the future.

Shannon believed that her choices on which colleges to apply to were limited because of her family’s financial situation. Her choices, in her perception, were limited to within driving distance in the state of Florida, where she grew up. She knew that she would not be able to afford to fly to and from school for breaks, for example. Even when Shannon decided to apply to the University of Miami, she said that friends and classmates would say “Do you know how expensive it is?” or would talk about her behind her back saying, “Did you guys hear about that black girl that applied to UM?” Reacting to those questions, Shannon says, “Isn’t that scary? Do
people really think about UM like that? That it’s this unattainable thing?” Shannon went against the grain and did not perceive a selective and expensive private institution like UM to be unattainable for a low-income, underrepresented minority like herself. This shows that many other students like Shannon do perceive the University of Miami to be on an unreachable pedestal, especially within the state of Florida. This perception and reputation of the University of Miami by low-income students within the state only exaggerates the institution’s lack of accessibility. Low-income students believe the University of Miami to be unattainable. Low-income students, according to Shannon’s perception, may find any selective and expensive institution outside of driving distance financially unfeasible to attend. Finally, Shannon said that scholarships were vital for her to attend the University of Miami. Loans were not an option for her. She explains, “I know you should invest in your education but it's easy for someone to say ‘invest in your education’ when they have the money. When you don't have the money to invest, how are you going to invest?” The cost averse mentality is exposed here again. College admission and financial aid officers at the University of Miami believe that the investment in the education UM provides is financially worth it. However, students who do not have the funds to invest may end up investing in lesser academic services and products by attending institutions that will not be able to help improve the financial capital of these low-income students to the same degree. The University needs to be able to explain what the financial investment is worth and how the investment will help students pursue and obtain their short- and long-term financial goals.

Alexandra and Bella, both low-income students who attended expensive and private preparatory high schools on financial aid, said that they wish that financial aid and scholarships played a larger role in their process. They believed that because their peers in their high school
settings, affluent classmates, did not necessarily consider the cost of college, it was not emphasized in their processes. Alexandra explained,

“I think because of the school that I was coming from, it was just a private school in LA, in the middle of Brentwood. There were a lot of really wealthy families there. Among my peers, I didn’t see a huge effort towards focusing on how much a school costs before you go, so I wasn’t focused on that either, even though I wasn’t in the same situation.

Alexandra is even considering transferring from the University of Miami for financial reasons as she did not emphasize the financial aspect during her admission and enrollment process enough. This shows that the other students who did consider financial aid, scholarships, and total cost of attendance were fiscally responsible when it came to their admission and enrollment processes. Transparency of what the financial commitment is, over four years, is needed and that responsibility falls to the institution. Admission and financial aid offices and professionals need to educate these students on why an expensive institution like the University of Miami is worth the financial commitment. It is also up to the students to consider how the education received at an institution like UM compares with the net cost – the total cost of attendance minus any discount received in the form of financial aid and scholarship.

All of the participants discussed the financial aid and scholarship process and the impact it had on the admission and enrollment process. This and the motivation to increase economic capital was a consistent theme among the participants, proving that financial motivation was part of the goal-oriented process these students took on when deciding on their educational futures.
Culturally and Socially Motivated Goals

While all of the students had goals that were financially motivated, they all also had goals that were culturally or socially motivated as well. The social motivations to be successful in the admission and enrollment process encompassed growing their networks and meeting people who can help these students obtain their goals in the future. The perceived reputation of faculty members and how those faculty members could help students become successful during college and after graduation came through in a number of the interviews. The participants believed that in order to meet the goals they have for themselves in the future, they would need help from specific people in order to obtain those and introduce them to other people who would hire them or benefit them in other ways. The social capital gains that these students would receive from faculty at institutions of higher education made the college admission and enrollment process important. If these students were successful in navigating the admission and enrollment process, they would have access to faculty members and those faculty members’ networks in order to gain employment or learn of other opportunities for their futures. The cultural capital gained by having access to the resources and knowledge of how to set themselves up for success would also come from their years spent in higher education. This knowledge would provide them access to things like career services, research, and study abroad opportunities. The cultural capital will also provide these students with strategic thinking and problem-solving skills that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to hone. In order to improve these skills and access these resources being successful in the college admission and enrollment process was imperative, making the goal-oriented admission and enrollment process culturally and socially motivated.
Although Alexandra attended a small, private, and elite preparatory high school, she came from a very different background from many of her peers there. She was clearly in the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic minority at her school and lived in a single-mother household in a much less affluent neighborhood than her peers. Many of the peers in her neighborhood did not aspire to go to college. Regardless of their influence, Alexandra knew a goal of hers was to attend college and did not let peers with opposing goals dissuade her. She was eager to learn and use resources that would be available to her in college – “resources that can help you make connections and network if you’re really willing.” Alexandra understood how the resources and the knowledge that she had access to in a college setting would impact her future. Despite influences around her that could have caused her to give up her goals of attending college and being successful in the admission and enrollment process, the cultural and social motivation was enough for her to block those out. She wanted to go to a school where she could meet people that would help her, push her, and force her out of her comfort zone, like the people around her in her high school setting did. Alexandra also wanted to take advantage of “resources” that would positively influence her future. This cultural capital is important at the college setting and why career services, internships, and other opportunities are marketed by admission offices across the country. The networks created and the access to resources at an institution of higher education make the goal of being successful in the admission and enrollment process culturally and socially motivated.

Shannon partially chose to enroll at the University of Miami’s Frost School of Music due to the opportunities presented to its students. She mentions that,

You make connections…. You can’t just stay dormant and they put you in these settings where you perform, and you learn, and you meet other musicians that are
outside of your [specialty]…. I feel like they really prepare you for things that you wouldn’t have at other institutions.

Shannon was energized by these opportunities. Being pushed and challenged excited her and she appreciated the opportunities, resources, and networks she was gaining while attending UM’s Frost School of Music. In her perception, these social and cultural capitals will help her in the future. In order to have the opportunity to increase these capitals, she needed to be successful in the admission and enrollment process. By successfully navigating the admission and enrollment process, Shannon was going to be able to increase her status by increasing her cultural and social capitals. Taking advantage of the opportunities and resources that UM and Frost provide for her will help her in the future and made the admission and enrollment process goal-oriented.

While cultural and social capital did not necessarily climb to the top of the list for Bella when she was navigating the application and enrollment process, she does believe that the University of Miami will help her with these things in the long term. She knew that she wanted to attend a small school, in order to have accessibility to professors and other resources. Bella has taken advantage of the faculty network and resources during her first semester and a half on campus. She believes that the social and cultural capitals that she has gained thus far will help her get to where she wants at a faster pace than had she chosen to enroll at some of the larger schools she was considering as their networks and resources would be less accessible than UM’s resources. She took all of this into consideration during her admission and enrollment process, making it motivated by the cultural and social capitals that she would gain in college.

Finally, Tammy focused almost primarily on cultural capital when choosing to enroll at any university. She explained:
As I said, I was debating not going to music school at all or any school. From coming to Frost [School of Music] I learned things that I didn’t even know I needed to learn. Just these new things I was like ‘Duh! I need that!’ but on my own I wouldn’t have figured it out. In that sense I’m really glad I came because if I was just doing it alone maybe I would have figured it out eventually but not at this pace…. There is like very acclaimed faculty members. Who are like the world’s best flutists, Sir James Galloway, and stuff like that. It’s just cool to be in an environment where you can just go up and talk to them. Be like ‘What can I do in this situation?’ or like the music business program is very, I don’t know, acclaimed, you know? So, I’m taking classes with people that were in the business, vice presidents and presidents of these companies and stuff. It’s like they can tell you little hints of how to get into the business that I want to get into. Or what works at an intern at these places. How to get the internship, what should be on your resume. How to promote yourself without coming off as like super pushy to executives. Because they were the executives getting promoted too.

These forms of social and cultural capital were, according to Tammy, what she needed in order to accomplish her goals of becoming a singer/songwriter in the future. Tammy believes that UM pushes students to be their best, make connections that could help them in the future, and exposes students to situations and people that will increase their status over time. The social and cultural capitals gained from attending the University of Miami was just as important as the economic capital that could come with a UM degree for the participants in this study.
Summary

Whether these students had goals of increasing economic, social, or cultural capital, each student navigated their admission and enrollment process with goals in mind. Some students had their eye on improving the financial situation that their families had been in, some had ideas of increasing the scope of their networks, and some had the idea that they had intangible skills to learn and college was the place to learn them. All considered the financial cost that their families and they would take on in order to obtain a college degree and weighed that with the economic opportunities that would come with being college graduates. This combined with the economic capital that these students would gain would increase their socioeconomic statuses. However, to achieve the economic opportunities that come with a higher education, these students understood that their first step would be to succeed in the admission and enrollment process. If they were successful in this process, then they would be able to study, learn, and succeed professionally in the future. Their goal to succeed in the admission and enrollment process was financially motivated. These students also perceived that a college education would bring stronger and more expansive networks. To access these networks, they needed to be successful in the admission and enrollment process, thus creating a social motivation to be successful in their goals of gaining admission and enrolling in college. Finally, these students perceived that they would learn skills and have access to resources that would help them achieve goals that they had for themselves post college graduation. To increase this cultural capital, such as problem-solving skills, creative thinking skills, and resources housed in institutions of higher education, being successful in the admission and enrollment process was necessary – a cultural motivation. The increased levels of economic, social, and cultural capitals that come with higher education
and how those capitals would influence their futures caused the admission and enrollment process to be a goal-oriented process for all of the participants in this study.

**Shaped by Support System**

Another common theme was that each of the eight participants explained that their college admission and enrollment process was shaped by the support they received from their networks. Alexandra believed that the advice that she received from others was helpful and helped her gain admission to various colleges and universities. Betty explicitly states, “I would attribute my success to having a good support system.” While this theme was prevalent in each of the eight participants, the type of support system did differ among the participants. Some participants credited their family – parents, grandparents, siblings, and other extended family members – for shaping their process. Others decided to credit experts in the college admission process or other educators. These people included teachers, college guidance counselors, and admission or financial aid officers from the colleges and universities themselves. Finally, many also explained that their processes were impacted by their peers. Friends would help the majority of the participants when it came to a variety of different aspects of the admission and enrollment process. While not each participant was assisted by each kind of support system, they each attributed help in general to the successful completion of their process in general.

**Support from Family**

The majority of the participants did receive some support from their family when it came to successfully navigating the admission and enrollment process. Support from their family came in many different forms. Some students had help when it came to search for the right list of colleges to apply to and where they believed that they would be successful. Families helped students when it came to the application and aid process. Some students’ families influenced the
idea that a higher education in general was the right next step for the student to achieve goals that he/she had for themselves. For example, while Shannon never explicitly stated that her mother helped shape her college admission or enrollment process, she did talk with pride about her mother’s recent educational pursuits. Her mother, a Haitian immigrant who came to the United States when she was 16 years old, graduated from high school, went to a community college, and as recently as 2015, received a certificate as a licensed nurse practitioner. It was evident in the interview with Shannon that her mother’s value of education did help shape Shannon’s desire to be successful and obtain a higher education. In Shannon’s case, her family’s value of education made Shannon believe that an education was a significant and worthwhile pursuit.

Tammy told a similar story of her father’s nontraditional educational path and the influence that had on her and her sister. She says,

My dad had a weird educational route, where he went to Colgate for a football scholarship, partied too much, got kicked out, got asked back, got kicked out again, and then went to film school at UCLA, finished his degree when I was six or seven, so all his kids were at his graduation. So that was cool because he did that to show us that we shouldn’t use him messing up as an excuse to not attend college and stuff like that. He did that to steer us in the right direction…

This type of educational influence that a family has on students like Shannon and Tammy is real, even if it is not necessarily tangible support. If others within a family value education, the student will value education and understand the importance of education and the impact education will have on their futures. The value that the families of Shannon and Tammy place on education is a form of support and helped shape their admission and enrollment process. It is
conceivable that, had Shannon and Tammy grown up with families who place less value on education, their admission and enrollment processes would have taken a different path.

In Kerry’s and Betty’s cases, their families helped shape their processes by more actively encouraging a higher education. Kerry mentions that at a young age her mother noticed that she “[does not] think like everybody else” and that she was “going to be a doctor.” Kerry’s mother knew that a higher education was very possible for her and seemingly tried to encourage goals that would require a college degree in Kerry’s future. Betty’s family, a large and nontraditional family, also values education. Although Betty is a first-generation college student, her older siblings have all attained college degrees, with one currently in law school. Betty mentions, “they absolutely value education. They think it’s really important that we be able to provide for ourselves, but they also think it’s important that we do something we enjoy.” Kerry and Betty, while receiving a different type of support than Shannon from their families, still had that idea that a higher education was not only attainable, but necessary for their futures, instilled in them by their family members around them. The support Kerry and Betty received from their families shaped and influenced their college admission and enrollment process. While at times feeling marginalized during the process because of their socioeconomic backgrounds, they believed that a college education was their way to improving their lives. Their family helped inject that mentality into their educational pursuits, including the admission and enrollment process.

Betty’s family also helped in more tangible ways. Betty, a student who appears to notice small details going on around her, used advice from her parents and her siblings when it came to the search for the right schools to apply to, help when physically filling out admission and financial aid applications, and enrolling at the University of Miami. She took notice of her older brother’s search and application process, her parents took her on college tours in order to find the
school that was right for her, family members would look over her application materials before she submitted, and she wanted to stay close to home to continue to be near and help out her “very close family.” Betty also mentioned that her family was willing to “figure it out” financially for her higher education, but Betty took it upon herself to not burden her family in that capacity. The family helped shape, in many ways, Betty’s admission and enrollment process. They gave her moral support through encouragement but also helped her access resources that she needed to be successful in the admission and enrollment process. They encouraged following academic programs that Betty enjoyed. They helped Betty learn about and get to the campuses that Betty was interested in. This allowed her to learn what made each school unique and her “fit” at that institution, ultimately helping her succeed in the admission and enrollment process.

Bella had a unique experience. Similar to Betty, she had a lot of tangible help from her mother in particular when it came to the admission and enrollment process. Unique to Bella, however, was that her mother was studying to become an independent college counselor during Bella’s search and application process. Bella leaned on her mother for questions to ask various parties in order to find the right “fit” when it came to schools to apply to or attend and “how to better narrow down” her search. Bella’s mother tapped into her network and resources available to independent college counselors to get very specific questions answered as well as very pointed and sound advice on the admission and financial aid applications and processes. Bella’s mother also significantly helped with the financial aid and scholarship process. Bella’s mother “knew a lot [about financial aid and scholarships] because she’s been doing it with [her] brother for three or four years.” Bella’s mother was such a force in her process that she “100%” credits her mother for her success in navigating the process. It is very possible, though never explicitly mentioned, that this process was partly influenced by her brother as well, as he is a current senior at the
University of Miami. Bella does mention that having her older brother on campus has been helpful, presumably as somewhat of a social safety net in her early years at UM. Bella’s family had higher levels of social and cultural capital regarding the admission and enrollment process than other participants in this study did. This higher level of social and cultural helped shape Bella’s process by giving her the access to opportunities necessary to be successful in her process. She knew the right questions to ask, she knew the right people to ask them of, and she knew how to get the information she needed to gain admission and enroll in a selective and expensive institution and afford that institution’s cost of attendance.

Victoria, like Bella, also had family connections with the University of Miami that seemed to shape her process. Victoria’s late mother is a University of Miami alumna, as are many other family members. With family connected to UM, the university was constantly embedded in the admission and enrollment processes of Victoria and Bella. Each of these students, as well as Alexandra and Tammy, also received help from their family when it came to the financial aid process. Both Bella and Victoria’s families helped in similar ways to Alexandra’s mother when it came to financial aid and scholarships – less definite help and more of an effort to “keep it in mind” during the process. Nudges to start researching scholarship programs were necessary when it came to the cost of attendance and how financial aid and scholarships could offset that cost. When family members encourage and remind students to take action throughout the admission and enrollment process they are shaping the process for the student.

While Tammy’s parents nudged her to start considering the financial implications of higher education and the assistance needed to pay for a degree, she also had significant help from her grandparents. In fact, her grandparents were the people who introduced Tammy to the
University of Miami and its Frost School of Music while she was visiting them in South Florida. While she was hesitant at first, after touring the school she realized that it could be something that would help her in the long term. According to Tammy, “…My grandparents have a good financial situation… They wanted me to go towards the school path, so they were saying, like hinting at like, ‘Oh, we'll help you out if you need it, if you go to school.’” The economic capital available to Tammy from her grandparents shaped Tammy’s admission and enrollment process. Without this financial support, Tammy would not have otherwise considered the University of Miami. Without the motivation that Tammy’s grandparents provided, Tammy may have never looked at the University of Miami and may have never gone to college at all.

Seven out of the eight participants explained that their admission and enrollment processes were shaped by family in one way or another. Some of the support that they received was financial, some was moral support and encouragement to attend higher education, and some was tangible help with searching for or applying to different colleges and universities. Regardless, the success that these seven low-income students have had with the admission and enrollment process was attributed, in part, to support received from their family members.

**Support from Educators and Admission/Counseling Professionals**

During the interview process, the support from various educators or experts in the admission process came through in seven of the eight conversations. Support came from their college guidance counselors at school in most cases. This support shaped the admission and enrollment processes from seven of the eight participants. Educators and experts offered their advice, encouraged the students to apply to schools or scholarships that the students did not believe that they could obtain, and introduced them to aspects of institutions that were important
to them. Without the support received from these educators and experts on the admission and enrollment process, the process would have been much different for these students.

Alexandra’s and Bella’s counselors, at small, independent, preparatory schools, were focused specifically on the admission process and could dedicate a lot of time and resources to their small caseloads of students to assist. Bella “got some advice from [her] college counselor at school, just like the list of schools and guiding forces.” Even though Bella’s mother was knowledgeable about the process, she made sure that Bella utilized her college counselor at school as well. Bella probably leaned on her college counselor less than other students because of her mother’s knowledge and education on the subject. Alexandra met with her college counselor on a more frequent basis, as there was less of this type of cultural capital within the family to lean on. Alexandra was introduced to her counselor relatively early in her high school career and met with her counselor in a one on one setting in the middle of her junior year. Her counselor shared resources that were available to Alexandra like the College Board and other online resources. Alexandra says that her counselor “definitely” made her search process easier and her applications to various colleges stronger. The counselor helped with the search process and narrowing down a list of possible colleges to a list of schools that Alexandra was excited about, was a good fit for, and could afford after the financial aid and scholarship process had taken its course. During the interview, it was obvious how appreciative Alexandra was for her college counselor for all the help she received during the search and application process. Alexandra partly credits her counselor with the success she experienced in the admission and enrollment process. Alexandra may have not considered the University of Miami from her high school in Northern California if it were not for her counselor.
The school that Alexandra attended also made sure that a financial aid expert was available to Alexandra and her mother. Because Alexandra was on financial aid at the preparatory school that she attended, she was approached and encouraged to sit down with this financial aid expert. This person helped Alexandra and her mother fill out both the FAFSA and the CSS PROFILE. Alexandra says that this specific type of support “wasn’t necessary…but it was definitely helpful to have someone that really understood the form and how to fill it out and what should be included, where, and how.” Alexandra may not have had the right skills to maximize her financial aid package if it were not for the support she received at her high school. All of this support shaped Alexandra’s process.

While Alexandra’s financial aid help was much more specific and nuanced than most participants, college counselors did help with the financial aid process with other participants too. Henry, who was not very impressed with the support that he received from his college counselor at school, did mention that they “pushed the FAFSA so much” as well as Bright Futures, a series of scholarships that are available to Florida residents, attending Florida high schools, to offset the cost at Florida institutions of higher education. Henry also mentions that teachers would remind and tweet about the FAFSA and Bright Futures program, making sure that the students were aware of these throughout the admission and enrollment process. Henry’s school also encouraged the QuestBridge program to a certain subset of students. QuestBridge is a non-profit program that links students with educational and scholarship opportunities at institutions of higher education that pay to participate in the organization and fully fund these students. While QuestBridge is a very competitive program, Henry was named a finalist for full scholarships at a number of top tier institutions. Because of the competitiveness of QuestBridge, it was surprising to hear how much the school encouraged students to apply to this program.
However, someone at Henry’s school must have recognized Henry’s ability and chances to be named a finalist for this prestigious scholarship program. This support shaped Henry’s admission and enrollment process. The belief in Henry’s abilities and encouragement to apply to QuestBridge impacted his process in a positive way.

Encouragement to competitive scholarship programs was not unique to Henry, however. Kerry and Victoria were also encouraged by their counselor to apply for the University of Miami’s George W. Jenkins Scholarship. This program is a scholarship for the full cost of attendance that includes tuition, fees, room, board, University health insurance, a laptop allowance, and stipends for books, transportation, and other personal expenses. Students who are eligible must come from states located in the Southeastern U.S. and have a history of overcoming significant adversity. Both Kerry and Victoria’s college counselor nominated them for the Jenkins Scholarship, as they knew these students’ personal stories and their ability to overcome hardships faced over the course of their lives. Both Kerry and Victoria sing praises for the encouragement that they received from their counselors throughout the whole process, but specifically for the ability to apply for and take advantage of significant financial help that they each now receive through the Jenkins Scholarship. Both students believe that if it were not for the Jenkins Scholarship, they would not be at UM. They both also believe that if it were not for the support that they received from their counselors, they would not be able to afford UM or any institution like it – shaping their admission and enrollment process significantly.

While most of the participants mention support they receive from their college counselors, Bella also mentioned that she received help from admission officers from various colleges and universities too. Although this help was more limited in scope, she says “meeting them was a big deal and then sending that follow up email…” Bella felt like having a name of
someone to ask specific questions to and having your name known by the admission officer was a form of support that shaped her admission and enrollment process. Shannon’s support also extended beyond college guidance counselors, as she mentions specific teachers who helped her. Shannon utilized her teachers, their connections, and their knowledge of various higher education music programs. While she found her college counselor helpful for larger, big picture strategy and philosophical questions, the pointed knowledge that her music teachers had was the most helpful. Teachers pointed her towards specific music programs that would have her specialty and a faculty body that they knew, trusted, and whom had significant industry experience. All of this was important to Shannon. Her teachers knew “how would you grow in this setting, how does this setting benefit you, what does this institution focus on, like this program focus on, also would I feel comfortable as a black student in this setting especially the repertoire and how the program is built.” Shannon’s teachers knew what was important to her in a college and helped her find colleges with those important things. This shaped Shannon’s admission and enrollment process by making the University of Miami her ultimate goal.

The majority of participants leaned on support from college counselors, financial aid experts, admission officers, and teachers in order to be successful in their admission and enrollment processes. Many of these students believe that a great deal of their success is due to these people. While the support that the participants in this study receive from educators and experts is universal, many times these experts are the only way that low-income students can access the types of social and cultural capital needed to succeed in this process. Support from educators and experts on the admission and enrollment process substantially shapes the process for low-income students.
Support from Peers

While almost all the participants explained that their admission and enrollment processes were shaped by the support that they received by family members and educators or experts on the admission process, the majority also explained that they received support from their peers. Alexandra explains that her friends were the people who told her to keep in mind the location of the school “rather than the actual school.” She also mentioned that because many of her friends went to the same independent preparatory school, they were not as worried about cost as she should have been. Because there was a lack of emphasis on cost in her friends’ processes, it was not weighted as heavily as it should have been in Alexandra’s process. When a low-income student’s process is being shaped by peers, it can be both a positive and negative influence on the admission and enrollment process. In Alexandra’s case, her process was shaped in a way that made selective, expensive private institutions less accessible and affordable to her than they otherwise should have been. Cost was not a major factor for Alexandra because it was not for her peers. This made her choose UM, an institution that she is having a hard time affording and may transfer out of due to financial reasons.

Victoria’s list of schools that she applied to was also partly guided by her friends. Her friends were very encouraging and enlightening. “My friends, they told me I could get into any school, but they also told me to look at the atmosphere of the school – whether or not I would be comfortable being in a school like that.” Victoria’s friends knew that she worked hard in high school and that that work would pay off. But they were concerned, as friends are, that Victoria needed a space where she would feel comfortable. In the interview, it was obvious that Victoria was a little shy and guarded, making her friends’ advice ever more important on the
comfortability of the school’s environment. Victoria also found that sharing this experience with her friends lightened the weight or importance of the process, relieving stress. She says, 

sharing the experience with my friends, because as stressed as I was, they were stressed also. Most of us would make jokes about applying to certain schools that we would make jokes about the different prompts, the writing prompts, that they would ask. It was just fun having some friends come in and say ‘Oh my God. I think I sent my University of Florida essay…to USF….’ Or ‘I’ve been using the same essay multiple times.’

This lightheartedness and encouragement helped Victoria throughout the process and shaped her process into a successful one and allowing Victoria to shed stress. Without her peers, Victoria’s process may have turned out differently.

Like Victoria, Bella also leaned on her peers for support throughout the admission process. Bella said that she would talk to her friends “about essay ideas or where we’re applying, why we’re applying…. Not so much advice was given there, but it was also an outlet from the whole process…” Henry also talked about how stressful the process was, specifically the essay portion. Henry sought advice from his friend his college application essay. When asked if Henry needed help on the application itself he says,

Yes, I did, actually. I feel like I needed help a lot. One of my friends, he went to – We were really good friends in middle school. Actually, we’re still really good friends. He went to… one of the best private schools…. I’d always ask him, I’m like, ‘Can you just read this essay really quickly and see if it’s good?’

Henry believed that because his friend had resources available to him through a private school, that his friend knew more about the process, specifically what admission officers were looking
for in the college essay, than Henry himself did. Naturally, Henry sought support from a friend who he thought to have a higher degree of cultural capital than he did. This friend’s willingness to read over essays and support Henry throughout the admission and enrollment process shaped the process for Henry.

Henry was also influenced by a friend during the search process. Henry participated in a summer program through the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. He said a friend was applying and spending a few weeks over the summer at Stanford University. Henry says, “If he’s going to something over the summer, I should probably do something. I wanted it, the competitive nature in me…” Henry took action to increase his stature, or so he believed, on his college applications because his friend participated in a summer program. Attending the summer program is something Henry would not have thought about unless he was influenced by his peer. That peer shaped Henry’s process. Shaping the admission process on a friend’s action was not isolated to Henry. Tammy also carved her path after seeing a friend do something. While Henry learned that he should take an action that his friend took, Tammy decided that, after seeing a friend go into a program that she was not passionate about, Tammy would take the opposite approach. Tammy says,

My best friend is at a school for nursing at the University of Pittsburgh and she doesn’t want to be a nurse and I’m like, ‘Why? Do something else.’ But she’s struggling with that and it’s – I don’t know. Don’t do something you don’t want to do, that’s my philosophy.

Tammy decided to follow her own passion – music – after she saw a friend commit to something and struggle with that decision. Tammy learned from a friend’s experience and gravitated toward music and songwriting. Her process was shaped by a peer’s influence. Although
different, Henry and Tammy’s approach still shaped their admission process after a peer’s experience.

Peers had a lot of influence on the admission and enrollment processes of seven of the eight participants. Friends would help relieve the stress of the process or shape the process during both the search and application phases. Peer groups significantly shape the admission and enrollment processes of low-income students. These students compared themselves to one another, challenged each other to do their best, and generally supported each other, shaping their admission and enrollment processes.

**Summary**

All of the participants in this study explained that their admission and enrollment process was shaped by their support systems. In most cases, their support systems consisted of their family, educators and experts in the college admission process (i.e. teachers, counselors, admission officers, etc.), and their peers. Students leaned on support systems to help navigate the college admission and enrollment process. In some cases, the processes of the participants changed because of the influence that support systems had. These changes could have been positive or negative, or because of explicit and tangible influences or observations by the participants throughout the process. Regardless, these support systems all impacted the participants processes when it came to the admission process in general and enrolling at the University of Miami. Support systems are an important part of successfully navigating the process for low-income students and will be necessary to understand when providing increased access to these students at UM.
Stressful Process

Participants in this study explained that their admission and enrollment process was a goal-oriented process and a process that was shaped significantly by their support systems. On top of this, a third theme presented itself throughout the interviews conducted; each participant explained that they believed this process was a stressful one. Students were dealt with the pressure and anxiety that comes with the competitiveness, the tedious nature, and the sheer weight or importance that they assert on to the admission and enrollment process. The first subordinate theme, the goal-oriented admission and enrollment process, mentioned that many of the participants believed that to be successful for the rest of their lives, and in almost all aspects of their lives, they needed to be successful in this process first. Students placed a lot of pressure on their own shoulders, and therefore explained that the admission and enrollment process was a stressful process.

Alexandra was stressed out by the competitive nature that the process had, calling the environment at her high school “disgusting” as her peers were “fighting for” admission at some of the most selective institutions across the country. She says, “Since everyone goes to college from your school, you feel like it’s not about if you get in, it’s where you go.” Alexandra recalls, “People are fighting and crying all the time.” She described that the atmosphere during the latter part of her junior year and the majority of her senior year as toxic. The perception of the college admission process at her school was different for her, as her peers came from a much different background than her. The standards she was held to by her teachers and her peers were so high that it was not an atmosphere where people cared about the “fit” that each student found with an institution, but rather the brand name associated with that institution. When asked what the best part of the admission and enrollment process was for her, she replied, “…having it be over and
done.” Alexandra did not possess the cultural or social capitals that her peers held, leaving her to a disadvantage when it came to adding stress to this process. The peers around Alexandra all came from much higher socioeconomic statuses and could attain and afford the most selective and most expensive private institutions in the country. Alexandra had to both try to save face with the peers around her, but also be realistic when it came to funding her college education. Navigating these two opposite cultures lead Alexandra to believe that her admission and enrollment process was a stressful one.

Many students underscored the weight of the process. As mentioned above, Kerry believed that the process was pivotal, explaining, “If I didn’t do this, then I wouldn’t have been successful the rest of my life.” Shannon talks about the admission and enrollment process as “your future, it’s your life.” Both Kerry and Shannon agreed with Alexandra saying that their peers around them helped increase the tension on the process, as the competition for admission offers was palpable. Victoria calls the process “intimidating” and “intrusive.” Bella says that it’s a “stressful process and it takes a toll.” As these students are on the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum, they are lacking all three types of capital when compared to their peers. In theory, these students have much more to gain from a college education and therefore they feel the stress of the process at a much higher level. They feel, more than other students, the pressure to be successful in order to improve their lives and the lives of their family members. The weight and purpose they place on their success in the admission and enrollment process creates stress in these participants’ points of view.

While the process was obviously overwhelming for these eight low-income students, there were specific reasons that seemed to make the process a stressful one. The participants talked about how time consuming the process was, especially when they had to consider other
priorities that life brings with it: family, school, work, etc. The “life cycle” of the admission and enrollment process can certainly be burdensome on students and cause students to worry about the process over a long period of time. Stress comes with long and tedious processes. All the students believed that they were lacking the help necessary to succeed. Each seemed to rely on their own resilience and skills to navigate the process and secure funding that they thought was needed in order to enroll at the University of Miami. Trying to succeed when so much of the research and knowledge of the admission and enrollment process isn’t possessed by these low-income students causes them to feel an inordinate amount of pressure.

**Time Consuming and Tediumous**

Part of what played into the stress of the admission and enrollment process for these low-income students was the sheer amount of time that it takes to apply to various schools. Bella sums it up nicely, “…it’s a process. It’s the longest process ever.” The admission process typically starts in the student’s junior year with the application due in the early to middle part of their senior year. The enrollment process will run from the second half of senior year through the summer until classes start in the Fall. The lifecycle of the admission and enrollment process is almost a full two years. Two years is a long time to be stressed out, especially as low-income students face pressure in other aspects of their lives. Add to the process the fact that these students had to navigate various deadlines, multiple essays, multiple application platforms, and a variety of different financial aid and scholarship processes when applying to a number of different institutions.

Victoria said that the process was “confusing because I had to go between one website to another website, but then another school, you can apply just directly and not through the Common App or through the main screen ways to apply.” Many of the participants mention how
they needed to learn how to prioritize their many applications at various institutions by deadlines. Alexandra said that she,

completed all of my applications for just that earliest date so that I could send them in all at once and not have to worry about it for weeks on end like everyone else was. I just spent maybe a few months probably, just really solidifying and editing my essays and the activities page and all the other information.

Both of these students could feel that they were at a disadvantage due to the lack of cultural capital during the admission and enrollment process. Applying to multiple schools brings stress to the process with more and more pieces to keep organized.

Kerry talked about how she was forced to start the process early through assignments in her English class in junior year that had her working on essay prompts well before the due dates of applications. That momentum continued for her during the summer between her junior and senior years, knowing that many students would be waiting until the months or weeks before application deadlines to start their processes. Shannon said that she started early “just in case something unexpected happens.” It seems as though she had missed deadlines in the past and did not want to miss such an important deadline that would impact her future; organization was key for her. Victoria had a system that kept her motivated and organized during, what she called a “tedious process,”

I had [the deadlines] written down on a calendar next to my bed at home. Every time I would leave out the door, my calendar was there. I would see it and I had it in these big bold letters to remember that I had that to do.

Bella had a process of her own,
I basically [worked on my applications] all day Sunday from August to November or something…. I’d do it all day long, so I got it all done pretty quickly. I never missed the deadline because I’d set all the calendars and my mom was also on – not on top of me…but she was just like, ‘Your deadline is this date. Don’t forget that.’ That was definitely helpful, to just have that reminder. She’d also tell me, she’d just go like, ‘You have to do it but just remember that if it’s not done now, I don’t know when I’m available to help you next.’ I was like, ‘Okay. I need your help, so I have to work with your schedule too.’

These students had to keep organized and find a way that would keep them working towards their goal of gaining admission to college. Further, they had to maintain this organization under the pressure of a lengthy and complex process, and with regard to the impact various degrees of perceived success would have on their professional and personal futures. And, all of this is extended over a long, two-year period.

Kerry went as far as prioritizing this process over some of her high school classes, explaining:

It’s so difficult and confusing, it was like an extracurricular activity that I had to participate in everyday…. I used to skip one of my classes…. and go to my soccer coach’s classroom and I would literally be on the phone with [UM’s Office of Financial Aid] every single day for three weeks. Just trying to be like ‘What is going on with this process?’ It is insane, absolutely insane.

In Kerry’s case, not only was the process tedious, but it also forced her to devote a lot of hours to it. She had to continue to pursue successful avenues for this process. She had to pick between classes and working on college applications and submitting the required financial aid documents.
It is a stressful process when you need to prioritize it over things that you have been conditioned to believe are among the most important parts of your life – your education.

While all of these students talked about the time-consuming nature of the process, each used their own organization and time management strategies to spread the process out and be successful. However, much of time management strategies were used only on the admission process. The financial aid process and the final aspects of the enrollment process were still to come. Like the admission process, these processes require certain amounts of economic, social, and cultural capitals. Kerry said that just when she thought that the hard part was over, she had to start to fill out the financial aid requirements, the FAFSA and the CSS PROFILE for the University of Miami. “…That was the only time I felt like I was at a disadvantage,” Kerry says. Henry could not even remember the difference between the financial aid application process and the admission application process. This was surprising given that he is not far removed from the process and would need to start the financial aid process over again only a few weeks after the interview was conducted in order to get the funding he needs for his sophomore year at the University of Miami. The combination of the admission and financial aid applications was a lot for these students to fit into their already busy extracurricular schedules, rigorous curricula, and other priorities such as work, family, and friends. Time management skills are hard for even the most senior professionals. These low-income students, because of the tedious and time-consuming nature of this process believed it to be stressful.

Alexandra, Kerry, Henry, Victoria, and Bella all mention that time management was necessary in order to succeed in this process. Many of the participants worked on their applications gradually over time. Alexandra even attributed much of her success to learning how to manage her time while in high school saying, “…as far as time management, my high school
experience really molded me and prepared me.” Students like Tammy left this process until they are forced to think about it. Tammy wishes she had done it differently, “I wasn't even looking the summer going into my senior year. I just thought about it like in the fall. I think that's too late I would have liked someone to be like ‘start thinking about this now.’” Time management skills and tendencies to procrastinate made the admission and enrollment process stressful for these students. Though, as Bella, Victoria, and others mentioned above, the length of the process causes students to fatigue. The best example of this from the interviews was Henry who says,

… I feel like I was a little burnt out towards the end, especially because you have to balance school work and the application process. I think senior year was my most difficult year because I was in IB so we had all of our IB exams. We had our IB’s, the internal assessments, and all the papers to write. It became pretty ridiculous when I have to write a paper for this class and also write college essays.

Burning out is a common feeling among students who start thinking about the college admission and enrollment process as early as their junior year of high school and let it consume their final years of secondary education.

**Lacking the Necessary Help**

In every interview conducted, each participant either outright mentioned or eluded to the fact that they felt that they were lacking the help needed to succeed in the college admission and enrollment process. Many of the students had to manage conflicting priorities, whether family, school, work, or otherwise. Every student felt that they had to rely on their personal skills or traits to research institutions of higher education, complete admission applications, successfully file financial aid applications, or apply for scholarships that allowed them to fund their educations. No matter the reason, all students required more assistance to navigate this very
personal process for them. They all relied on their own resourcefulness to find information necessary to apply for admission and financial aid. They all perceived a lack of cultural capital or knowledge related to this convoluted process. This lack of knowledge caused the admission and enrollment process to be stressful.

As these students started to fill out various applications for the different institutions, many did not have help with prioritization or organization. Various people within their support systems helped them curate a list of colleges to apply to, but then they were on their own. Help may have come in the form of editing essays, writing letters of recommendation, or prioritizing extracurricular activities, but only two students mentioned help physically filling out the applications for admission and arranging which schools should be focused on first. Alexandra mentions that, at her small, private, independent school, that her college counselor sat with her one-on-one to help her fill out the Common Application. Bella, who also attended a small, private, independent school, mentions that her mother, who was on her way to becoming a certified independent college counselor, helped her fill out the Common Application. But the other six participants, all from public institutions, had almost no help. Navigating a new process with the significance that the admission and enrollment process has for these students, with little or no help is stressful.

Shannon says things like “I kind of did this whole thing on my own [chuckles],” or “It was more so like me doing everything on my own” throughout her interview. At various times throughout the interview, Shannon seemed like she was lonely throughout the process. As a music major who had to audition as part of her admission process, she felt like she could not turn to many people for advice. She had to personally find faculty members and musicians who would teach her the musical “chops” she needed to audition properly, she relied on internet
research to find schools that were right for her and had faculty that she wanted to learn from, and she asked her teachers about faculty members at different music schools to see what the programs would be like. She credits her work ethic and independence on successfully enrolling at a school with the prestige and quality like UM. Shannon believed she didn’t have the proper amount of help. Without help in this process, it would be a stressful one.

Kerry also credits her resourcefulness in her success. According to Kerry, her self-reliance and resourcefulness was necessary because her family had little to no knowledge about the college admission and enrollment process. Because she moved so many times during her high school career, she did not have the social capital to ask for the help she needed from her guidance counselors and teachers. Of course, she relied on a few professionals in her support system for help, however much of it fell on her shoulders. When asked how she knew what to do and when to do tasks necessary to complete applications she said, “A lot of research, no one really helped me.” She took it upon herself to do internet research for resources, college websites, and financial aid websites to learn what needed to happen. If she had questions, she picked up the phone and talked to admission officers or financial aid officers at institutions to get her questions answered.

Kerry was not the only participant who relied on her own internet research to learn what steps were needed in the application and financial aid process to become successful. Victoria mentions that she would “look on the school’s website” to assemble a list of colleges to apply to. When it came to financial aid policies and procedures she said, “I kind of had to do that research on my own.” Henry goes as far as saying, “I didn’t actually get any help from anyone. I had to rely off of my intuition and research skills because the high school I went to, it was like a big deal if you graduated from high school. I’m like ‘I’m trying to get a PhD’ or something.” These
students had to research a tedious and time-consuming process on their own, without help or resources that significantly increase success in the admission and enrollment process, bringing stress into their lives.

When asked about the help received when it came to the financial aid process, the students were very frustrated. Victoria said that her college guidance counselor would “[remind] us to do the FAFSA” or that it was “either going to her and getting the information or doing it yourself.” According to Shannon, the financial aid process was just as important to her as the application process, but she had to find websites with financial aid statistics herself; no one pointed her towards those and towards schools that she and her family may have been able to afford. Henry’s experience with the financial aid process is explained above, though he does add “I actually didn’t apply to any scholarships at any school. I probably should [have].” Though he does say that teachers and counselors at his high school did advertise the FAFSA and other state-wide financial aid programs. Tammy said that she found the resources she needed to apply for financial aid and scholarships through her parents, as they had done it for her older sister, and by calling institutions herself. She says, “I basically just called, and I was like ‘what is everything I need to turn in to get the best outcome….’ I had a ton of pressure coming from [my parents] to find out about this stuff.” Many of the participants felt that, especially with the financial aid part of the admission and enrollment process, they were left on their own to navigate the resources for help and the requirements for securing proper funding. Finances bring anxiety to everyone, let alone these students navigating a college admission and enrollment process from the lowest levels of the socioeconomic spectrum with the least amount of economic capital.

The lack of help in the general admission and financial aid process for low-income students, with the lowest amounts of financial, social, and cultural capital were barriers for these
eight participants in being successful. All relied on their own skills, intuition, and resourcefulness to find what they needed to gain admission and enroll at the University of Miami. While some participants would credit luck, fate, or faith, or were simply too humble to credit themselves with strong work ethics, all overcame an obvious lack of necessary help when it comes to the college admission and enrollment process.

Summary

The eight low-income students who participated in this research study all explained the college admission and enrollment process as a stressful process. It was stressful in two main ways: the time-consuming and tedious nature of the process and a clear lack of necessary help to succeed in the process. Students had to cope with various platforms, deadlines, or conflicting priorities while keeping clear, and sometimes quick, deadlines in mind. They did this while still being full-time high school students, participating in extracurricular activities such as performing arts groups, athletics, or part-time jobs, and full-time family members and friends. Not only did they have to absorb this stress and navigate a long and time-consuming process, but they had to do so while navigating this important and weighted process with limited help and resources. The fact that these eight participants were successful in enrolling in a selective institution like the University of Miami is no small feat.

Conclusion

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to understand how low-income students perceive their experience with the college admission and enrollment process, and how selective and expensive private four-year institutions can utilize this knowledge to become more accessible to this type of student. A close analysis of the interview data with the eight participants yielded much insight into how low-income students explain their college
admission and enrollment process. Each of these participants perceived that they took on this process with goals for their future in mind, that the process was shaped by the support systems around them, and that it was a stressful process in general.

The participants all navigated the college admission and enrollment process with a goal-oriented mindset. Those goals were both financially motivated and culturally or socially motivated. They wanted to be sure that the process and the outcome of the process, enrolling and graduating from college, was going to be worth it financially. This means that the employment outcomes for the institution that they were interested in enrolling in was part of the process and considered in their decision-making process. The front-end financial aid and cost of attending an expensive, private, selective four-year institution also had to be researched and considered throughout the process, however. There must be a balance between the net cost of attendance, after financial aid and scholarships are considered, and the possibilities of employment or other fiscally related goals after graduating with their bachelor’s degree.

Improving levels of economic capital was a goal when it came to the admission and enrollment process. Extending beyond the financial aspect, each student considered how the outcomes of this process would impact themselves and their families in a cultural and social sense. The connections and networking opportunities were considered during the admission and enrollment process by a majority of the participants. Improving social capital at college was a goal of theirs and, to meet this goal, success in the admission and enrollment process was the first step. This relates directly to the employable skills and knowledge obtained by a college education and increasing cultural capital overall. Some students were considering all of these goals while facing difficult situations, both financially and socially, at home.
All participants explained that the college admission and enrollment process was shaped by their support systems. Family members played a role in the process and, in many cases, influenced how students ended up at the University of Miami. In some cases, family members emphasized the financial aid process, in other cases they accentuated specific institutions of higher education (i.e. the mother of the student attended one institution and hoped that their child followed in her footsteps). Sometimes, the lack of knowledge by the family significantly shaped the process for the student. Educators and experts in the college admission process also helped many of these participants. Counselors, teachers, and admission and financial aid officers helped these students navigate and shape a process that was not necessarily set up with low-income students in mind. Friends and peers of these students also shaped the process. Whether it was advice and help on the actual applications, searching for colleges, or sheer moral support, peers helped shape these students’ processes. All of these influencers need to be a part of the recruitment and yield strategies for an institution’s admission and financial aid offices as these experts shape the admission and enrollment processes of low-income students.

Finally, in every case, the admission and enrollment process was a stressful one. These students had to navigate a time-consuming and tedious process lacking the help that they thought was necessary to succeed. The stress that these students sustained was mainly due to the confusing process and conflicting priorities that each student faced over the months they spent understanding how to gain admission and how to afford an institution like the University of Miami. To alleviate the stress, admission and aid practices and policies need to be simplified. Proactive engagement with low-income students will help these students feel like they have the assistance they need in order to gain admission and enroll at a school like the University of Miami. With all of the factors addressed above lined up against them, the eight low-income
participants successfully navigated these processes thanks to their own resilience, resourcefulness, and determination.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

This interpretative phenomenological analysis sought to explore how low-income students explain and perceive their college admission and enrollment processes. With this knowledge, private and expensive four-year institutions like the University of Miami, can become more accessible to this type of student. Through interviewing eight participants, a deep and extensive understanding of these students’ experiences and their perception of their individual processes were uncovered. This research study contributes to the literature where there was a lack of qualitative research on the accessibility of expensive and selective private four-year institutions for low-income students by asking the research question: How do low-income students who successfully enroll in a selective, private four-year institution explain their experience with the college admission and enrollment process? The analysis of the data rendered three superordinate themes and seven subordinate themes which included:

1. Goal-oriented Process
   a. Financially Motivated Goals
   b. Socially/Culturally Motivated Goals

2. Shaped by Support Systems
   a. Support of Family
   b. Support of Educators or Experts
   c. Support of Peers

3. Stressful Process
   a. Time Consuming and Tedious
   b. Lacking the Necessary Help
This chapter will examine all of these themes as they relate to the existing literature and within the context of this study’s theoretical framework – social reproduction theory. Finally, this chapter will conclude with recommendations that institutions like the University of Miami can implement to increase accessibility to this type of student. Additionally, implications for future research on the accessibility of selective and expensive private four-year institutions for low-income students will be explored.

The following sections will link each superordinate theme and each subordinate theme to the literature. Then each theme will be discussed in the context of implications for practice. Finally, implications for future research will be offered. The section immediately following will link the first finding, that the process was goal-oriented for low-income students, to the current literature.

**Finding One: Goal Oriented Process**

The first finding of the admission and enrollment process being a goal-oriented process shows that the participants in this study explain their experience as one that would help them in the future in some way. Each student believed that succeeding in the college admission and enrollment process would improve their futures and increase their status. This finding is supported by the current literature. This link to the research will foreshadow implications for practice found later in this paper.

The participants in this study all navigated this process with various goals in mind for their futures, though two themes that resonated with many of the participants were being financially motivated and/or culturally and socially motivated. Participants compared financial aid and scholarship packages across institutions that they were admitted to. Economic capital greatly influenced these students’ admission and enrollment processes. These participants also
tried to assess how an institution can help them achieve desired outcomes in terms of employment opportunities and being financially stable after graduating from a four-year institution. Increasing economic capital, according to the participants, would allow them to increase status in their futures. However, not all the goals were financially motivated. All of the participants also understood that succeeding in the admission and enrollment process would help them achieve their goals through social and cultural effects. Some students believed that a college education would help them expand their networks and connections (social capital) while others believed that the material and knowledge that they learned in college (cultural capital) would be invaluable when pursuing their goals beyond college. Like economic capital, the acquisition of social capital and cultural capital will help a student increase their socioeconomic status. Regardless of the motivation, these students navigated the admission and enrollment process with individual and specific goals in mind for their futures: grow their levels of economic, social, and cultural capital in order to escalate their status.

The following sections will explore the first finding of the admission and enrollment process as a goal-oriented process in terms of the current literature and within the context of the theoretical framework of this study – Bourdieu’s social reproductive theory. Implications for practice will be explained in a later section of this chapter.

**Financially Motivated Goals**

Much of the literature on access to higher education for low-income students focuses on the cost of a college education and the impact that financial aid has on the enrollment behaviors of this cohort. Declerq and Verboven (2015) found in their study that isolating the cost of higher education for socioeconomically disadvantaged students in Flanders, Belgium explains enrollment gaps between students from different socioeconomic statuses (SES). In Nahai’s
(2014) study, it was found that if tuition fees within the state of California were to stay flat or decrease, qualified high school graduates from the state would enroll in the University of California system at higher rates than when tuition fees increase. Nahai states that “some low-income students who would qualify for aid may choose not to enroll in, apply to, or explore their options to attend the University of California” (2014, p. 153) if published tuition fees are too high. The data collected through the interviews with UM students in this study supported this research finding cost-averse mindsets of low-income students through some of the participants. Some students applied to the University of Miami and other expensive private four-year institutions with the belief that tuition discounts are higher among private schools than they are with public institutions. These students’ beliefs are supported by Jaquette, Curs, and Posselt (2016) through their research that showed private institutions discount their tuition at higher rates than public schools. Each participant was very concerned about their financial aid and scholarship packages both in the short- and long-term. They knew financial aid and scholarships were imperative for them to access a school like the University of Miami. However, most of their effort went towards applying to scholarship programs. Many of the participants’ decisions on where to enroll was due to the total financial aid package received, with an emphasis on the scholarships. The University of Miami offered the most attractive total financial aid package, and therefore the students decided to enroll there. While only two of the participants, Shannon and Kerry, explicitly stated that they could not take out loans, it was perceived that the other participants were wary about taking loans out to pay for college and growing their personal debts or the debts of their family members. This feeling by Shannon and Kerry is supported by the literature where low-income students are less willing than students from higher SESs to go into debt in order to pay for a quality higher education (Bell et al., 2009). Kerry said that her mother
did not have the credit level necessary to take out loans. Shannon said that she knew she should invest in her education but did not have the money to invest. Loans were not specifically mentioned throughout the interviews other than these two cases, but the emphasis on grants and scholarships by these low-income students was telling.

Although financial aid and scholarships were an important part of the admission and enrollment process and the students’ abilities to access a selective and expensive private four-year institution, they did not know a lot about the financial aid process before they began. Many did not know a lot about the financial aid process even after they had started filling out applications for admission to various institutions. This lack of knowledge about financial aid programs is in line with the literature on the topic. Students and parents will typically overestimate the total cost of college, are generally unaware of the different financial aid sources, and will underestimate the amount of financial aid available to them (Bell et al., 2009). Several of the participants in this study seemed surprised by the package that the University of Miami offered them. In many of the participants’ cases, the University of Miami met 100% of their demonstrated need. In some cases, full tuition or full cost of attendance scholarships were awarded. In only one of the eight cases did the financial aid and scholarship package seem insufficient to retain the student at UM. Alexandra alluded to the possibility of transferring institutions for her sophomore year because of her inability to afford UM. In most cases, if the financial aid package were to change year over year, the participant said that they would have to weigh whether the change was significant enough to stay or to transfer. This data is supported by the literature showing that low-income students do not have the knowledge about or the ability to predict financial aid packages is in line with the findings of this study.
The Cox (2016) study shows that attending college is a situational or in-the-moment type of decision for low-income students rather than a long-term plan, even when the student has a strong desire to attain a college education. In most cases, this literature did not align with this study. Only one participant, Tammy, held off until the final second to decide whether or not she would attend any college. Tammy, however, was not totally sure if she wanted to attain a college degree until a few weeks prior to the start of classes for the fall of her freshman year. In the other seven cases, all of the students knew that they wanted to attain a college degree and worked very hard over the course of their educational careers, especially the latter half of their high school years, to make sure a goal of attaining a college degree was in reach. Where the Cox (2016) research aligns with this study is that financial constraints were among the most prevalent of factors that could have inhibited these students from attaining a college degree. As mentioned, the competitive financial aid package, or lack thereof, did force some last-minute decision on where to enroll for these eight participants.

Hoffman (2016) connects the literature on the topic and the theoretical framework used in this study. It is generally believed that to become employed in today’s workforce, a college degree is necessary. Hoffman (2016) shows that children from higher SESs who start off with higher degrees of social, cultural, and economic capital will continue to stay in higher SESs at a disproportionate rate when compared to lower-income students. Students from the highest income quintile are five times more likely to stay in the highest income quintile than drop to the lowest quintile. On the other hand, students from the lowest quintile are ten times more likely to stay there than they are to move into the highest quintile (Hoffman, 2016). This directly aligns with Bourdieu’s (1973) social reproduction theory as social status is cyclical in nature and reproduced through the education system. The study at UM focuses on low-income students,
and the financial motivation of their goal of attaining a higher education is in order to increase their economic capital. Whether or not these students “break the cycle,” as Shannon put it, has yet to be determined. The literature shows increasing status will be difficult, but the participants are trying to increase capital in order to increase status, aligning their actions with the social reproduction theory.

Finally, Hillman (2013) found that no-loan financial aid policies help increase the proportion of low-income students on campus, but only when other factors and policies are contributing through a multi-pronged strategy. The study conducted is in line with this research, as the University of Miami does include loans in its financial aid packages. Though, these students from the lowest socioeconomic classes chose to enroll at UM, often due to the financial aid package offered. While UM is moving towards meeting 100% of demonstrated financial need for all admitted students, loans are still included in packages, and low-income students are still enrolling at UM. This shows that other factors are contributing to the University of Miami being an accessible and affordable institution for students from low-income backgrounds.

This study is aligned with much of the research on the financial motivations for students to be successful in the college admission and enrollment process. Low-income students were generally more cost-averse than students from more affluent backgrounds (Declerq & Verboven, 2015; Nahai, 2014). In this study, the participants considered cost in every aspect of their admission and enrollment processes. At the same time, they were less willing to take out loans in order to pay for their college educations and, throughout the process, they knew very little about financial aid. These aspects of the participants’ admission and enrollment processes is supported by research from Jaquette, Curs, and Posselt (2016) and Bell et al. (2009). Cox (2016) proved that the decision to enroll in a college was a less thoughtful decision for low-income
students than it is for more affluent students. Only one participant’s experience in this study aligned with this research, as Tammy was not sure she was going to attend college until after she graduated from high school. While being sensitive to cost, in some cases the participants chose the University of Miami when weighing price and quality of education. Because loans are a part of UM’s financial aid packages, this supports research by Hillman (2013) that more is at play than no-loan policies for institutions as they try to increase the number of low-income students enrolling. Lastly, the finding in this study of financially motivated goals is connected to the social reproduction theory used, as Hoffman (2016) finds that it is more difficult for students from low-income backgrounds to increase their socioeconomic status than it is for students from higher-income backgrounds. Regardless of the goals and motivations these eight participants had throughout the admission and enrollment process, research indicates that it will be significantly more difficult for them to increase their economic capital than peers of theirs at the University of Miami. Implications for practice at the University of Miami will be discussed later.

**Culturally or Socially Motivated Goals**

While the eight students who participated in this study were financially motivated to meet their goal of being successful in the admission and enrollment process, they were almost equally motivated by social and cultural motivations. This fact aligns with both the research surrounding the topic of access to higher education for low-income students and Bourdieu’s (1973) social reproduction theory. Nielsen’s (2015) study focused on low-income women who were enrolled in community colleges and their aspirations to attain their bachelor’s degrees. Neilson found that these women believed that they needed an education for “moral self-improvement” (2015, p. 266). Many of the participants in this study knew that they wanted a college education in order
to simply gain knowledge, access resources, or expand their networks in ways that otherwise would have been difficult. Throughout the interviews, many of the participants could not necessarily explain why they decided that college was the best next step for them after they graduated from high school. It was engrained in many of their perceptions that college is what you are supposed to do to be viewed as someone worthwhile in the workforce, in their families, and in society at large. This perception of the participants is very much a “moral self-improvement” mentality (Nielson, 2015, p. 266).

In a case study at Clear Horizons Early College High School in Houston, Texas, the administration put students through goal-setting exercises. The school serves “mainly first-generation college goers, English language learners, and at-risk students” (Morrow & Torrez, 2012, p. 74). These students are simultaneously working towards their high school diploma and a two-year associate degree in order to attain their bachelor’s degree and attend a four-year institution. In the goal setting exercises, students will often set “complex goals such as earning an outstanding student award, finding an internship with a particular agency, or becoming leader of the robotics club” (Morrow & Torrez, 2012, p. 75). These goals are not financial or economic in nature but are sought by the students in order to increase their status in the future through growing their levels of cultural and social capital. They believe that these things will increase their chances at admission into a four-year institution. Activities and pursuits like the ones explained by the students at Clear Horizons and the reason behind them is parallel with the goals set by the participants of this study at UM. Alexandra was very involved in her high school as a student leader. Kerry was an active student athlete. Henry participated in academic clubs and organizations and attended an academic oriented summer program at the Naval Academy. All of these actions were in pursuit of cultural and social goals in order to increase
access to knowledge, access to resources, and access to networks that will help them be successful in the admission and enrollment process and increase their status in the future.

The cultural and social motivation to be successful in the admission and enrollment process is directly linked with the theoretical framework used in this study. The participants all wanted to increase their levels of social and cultural capital in college, making the goal of being successful in their admission and enrollment process a culturally and socially motivated goal. Hoffman (2016) finds that the amount of social capital gained by a student while in college will help that student in the long-term. Students with increased social capital due to a college experience will over-perform in the labor market when compared to other students from the same socioeconomic class. These students with degrees are also more likely to expand networks beyond and achieve a higher status than what the community and family surrounding that student has (Hoffman, 2016). Many of the students in this study specifically mentioned that they wanted a college education in order to expand beyond what they knew, saw, and grew up with in their family and community settings. To name just a few examples from the interviews: Henry had higher educational aspirations than many of his peers in high school, Shannon wanted to “break the cycle” her family is in, and Kerry viewed college as her “way out of” a difficult family situation. These students wanted to increase their status by increasing levels of social and cultural capital. All the participants were motivated by social and cultural factors to be successful in their admission and enrollment process and to attain a college degree.

Finally, some of the participants’ experiences are supported by the research of Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons (2015) where they felt like faculty members did not understand them or their backgrounds. While Hollifield-Hoyle and Hammons’s (2015) research focuses specifically on college faculty, the experience of these low-income participants believed that high school
teachers and counselors did not understand their situations or the obstacles that they faced within the admission and enrollment process. Some participants believed that their counselors did not understand how important cost was to their process, especially Alexandra and Bella, low-income students in a high school setting filled with students from more affluent backgrounds. The students who are currently music majors at UM, Shannon, Tammy, and Betty, all believed that at some point their counselors did not understand what was required of their admission and enrollment processes or faced obstacles in the form of influencers trying to dissuade them from pursuing music as a major and future career. With these types of influences, it was more difficult than it should have been for students to achieve success in the admission and enrollment process. Their social and cultural capitals, in these cases, were working against them when it came to raising their statuses, supporting both the literature and social reproduction theory.

Summary

The finding from this study that the admission and enrollment process is a goal-oriented process, and specifically goals that are social or cultural in nature, is supported by the literature on this topic. Students set goals for themselves that go beyond salaries that they may attain post-graduation but include goals of increasing their status through “moral self-improvement” (Neilson, 2015, p. 266). These goals directly tie this study to the social reproduction theory as students are attempting to expand their networks and gain access to the knowledge and resources that will help them be successful in the admission and enrollment process and graduate from college with higher status levels than when they entered. Implications for practice based on the finding that the admission and enrollment process is goal-oriented will be discussed below.

The next section explores the second finding of this study, a “process shaped by support systems,” and its connection to the current literature and the theoretical framework.
Finding Two: Process Shaped by Support Systems

Throughout the interviews, it was obvious that all these students leaned on their support systems for assistance. They felt that in order to succeed in the admission and enrollment process, guidance and advice was needed. These low-income students turned to their support system who shaped the admission and enrollment process in a number of ways. When these low-income students needed help, they turned to people whom they trusted, believed were knowledgeable, or believed to have higher degrees of capital than they did. These support systems effected the admission and enrollment processes of these eight students.

The systems of support were categorized in three different ways. In most of the cases, family members were supportive throughout the process. These family members often helped by providing economic capital. Others helped by bringing their students to campuses for tours or filling out the admission or financial aid applications; a form of cultural capital. Family members also provided positive encouragement during a stressful admission and enrollment process. The second system of support that these data shows shaped the process for these students was a group of experts on the admission and enrollment process. These experts were educators in the positions of the students’ college guidance counselors, teachers in their high school, or admission or financial aid officers from institutions of higher education. These people provided assistance by using their social and cultural capitals in order to help seven out of the eight participants. The last group comprising of a support system that helped shaped the processes of the participants came in the form of their peers. Students sought out other students who they thought could help with the process, who were applying to the same institutions, or were sharing the same experience at the same time. Students provided relief throughout the process for other students, making light of situations with great weight and giving advice when
these participants thought that a peer of theirs might have higher degrees of capital than they have themselves.

Regardless the type of support system, it was obvious that the support received by these eight participants shaped their admission and enrollment processes. The following sections will explore the second finding of a process shaped by support systems and how the finding relates to the current literature and the social reproduction theory. This link to the literature and theoretical framework precedes linking the second finding to practice in a later section.

**Process Shaped by Family Members**

Throughout the admission and enrollment process, seven out of the eight participants received support from their family members. The current research on low-income students and how their family supports them shows that a strong family network will increase the chances of success that that student experiences. Berliner (2013) finds that if a child is not taken care of at home, that student’s probability of dropping out of high school or not being successful increases. The Tate et al. (2015) study shows that a student’s self-efficacy, or self-confidence on their ability in the classroom, and relationship with their family correlates with the probability of that student attaining a graduate degree among first-generation, low-income students. This study aligns with Tate et al.’s (2015) research showing that students who have a support system within the family will more often than not succeed in the admission and enrollment process. The data in seven out of the eight interviews showed that family support was a factor of success in the participants’ experiences. Students, like Betty, who have parents who cherish an education and believe that their children are intelligent and capable students, are more likely to succeed than students without this support at home. Bella’s and Shannon’s mothers both continued their education recently so that their daughters could witness what characteristics a successful student
has. All of this contributes to the success these low-income participants achieved in the enrollment and admission process. While not a direct alignment between the current literature and the research done in this study, the similarities are apparent.

The current literature on access to higher education for low-income students shows that family members are predominately the way students learn about college and financial aid (Bell et al., 2009). The Bell et al. (2009) study also shows that parents and students, regardless of socioeconomic status, are generally unaware of sources of financial aid, are misinformed on the admission and financial aid processes, and overestimate the cost of college. These data all confirm the data collected for this research study at UM. In many of the participants’ experiences, they believed that they did not know enough about the financial aid process and believed incorrect information on the cost of college in general. These students turned to the support systems within their families for help and ran into obstacles, as their families also did not know a lot about the cost of higher education or sources to fund a college degree. Alexandra said that her mother made sure that financial aid was incorporated into her enrollment and admission process. Alexandra’s mother, however, did not know a lot about the process and appreciated the help received from Alexandra’s school when filing the necessary financial aid documents to get complete, accurate, and maximum packages for funding Alexandra’s education. Henry and Kerry both share that they had to keep asking their parents for the right information and forms to complete their financial aid applications. Even though the family knows how important financial aid is, they are still under-informed on the process, directly aligning with the Bell et al. (2009) research.

In a recent study conducted at the University of Wisconsin, Roska and Kinsley (2018) found that first year students on financial aid who received emotional support from their family
were much more successful than students without that same support when it came to the student’s GPA, accumulation of credits, and first to second year retention rates. According to the study, financial support had no correlation on the same three outcomes. This literature proves that emotional support from family members is critical when it comes to the success of low-income students. While the literature does not discuss the accessibility of higher education, the academic success and retention findings are similar to the findings found in this research. Most of the students interviewed for this study explained that they had emotional support from their families during the admission and enrollment process. Tammy, who was not sure that college was the right path for her, received the support from her family to make her own decision on her educational future. Her mother even helped Tammy record her audition video, hours before the application deadline, encouraging her throughout the process. Thanks to the emotional support that she received, and some financial support from her grandparents, she was successful in the admission and enrollment process. Kerry’s mother supported her emotionally throughout her childhood. Kerry’s mother made Kerry feel unique, special, and smart, all while protecting her from the unpredictability of her father’s actions and emotions. Kerry credited her mother with her success in the admission and enrollment process. Bella mentions that she speaks with her mother every day via phone and this communication has helped her be successful throughout her life. If it were not for the emotional support received by family members, some of the participants in this study do not believe that they would have been as successful as they were in the admission and enrollment process.

This study’s findings show that family members who support students in attaining their goals increase the chances of success that students have in the admission and enrollment process. This is supported by the research in Kim and Schneider’s (2005) study where they found that a
parent with goals aligned with the student’s will help that student succeed in gaining admission to college. They also find that the more aligned a student and parent’s educational goals are for the students, the more likely that parent will engage with the admission and enrollment process, increasing the student’s social capital and expanding networks, becoming more likely to gain admission to selective institutions. As a parent actively seeks to assist in increasing the status of their child, social capital is a tenant of the social reproduction theory that matters the most in terms of family engagement. This study also found that parents who have completed post-secondary education and has increased levels of social capital will be able to help more and increase their child’s chances of admission to selective institutions more than parents with little or no higher education.

The current literature on accessibility to low-income students support the findings of this study. A student’s life at home will impact their self-confidence, both factors that will have an effect on the chances of that student becoming successful in the admission and enrollment process. The knowledge gap pertaining to the financial aid sources and cost of college that is present among the family members of this study’s participants created an extra barrier to higher education for them. While these students were successful in the admission and enrollment process, many of them explained that with an increased understanding of the financial aid process by family members, their processes would have been much easier. Some family members knew a little about the financial aid process, some family members were willing to take financial risks to help their students, and all were willing to try to learn in order to help. This support was very beneficial to these participants in order to gain admission and enroll at the University of Miami. The studies on the emotional support and the aligned goals of parents and their student connect the literature and this study to the theoretical framework used. Both are
examples of social capital which, according to the social reproduction theory, increased levels of will help students increase their status. At the same time, the literature proves that the more emotional support received from the parent and the closer the goals align between the parent and student, the more likely a student is to be successful in the college admission and enrollment process.

While family members were very influential in these participant’s admission and enrollment processes, this is not the only group that shaped the student’s path. Other groups, including educators and other experts in the admission and counseling fields all contributed to the success these low-income students experienced. The following section will explore how this unique support system shaped the process for the participants in this study.

**Process Shaped by Educators and Admission/Counseling Professionals**

Like the support received from family, the interview data in seven out of eight of the participants’ interviews show that their admission and enrollment process was shaped by education and experts in the college admission and financial aid process. Literature on low-income student success proves how important support from educators and experts are for this cohort. Paladry (2015) shows that undermatching is something that happens because of the educational environment a student is exposed to. Students who attend low-income high schools enroll at selective institutions of higher education at much smaller rates that students from more affluent school districts (Paladry, 2015). This is partly due to the lack of advanced-level courses housed in these schools (Gamoran, 1987). Oftentimes this lack of accessibility to advanced course work is due to the perceptions that the faculty and administration has of the student body noting “that schools tend to match the curricular and instructional rigor with their perceptions of student’s ability, backgrounds, and aspirations” (Paladry, 2015, p. 344). Anyon’s (1981) article
also cites the effect of teaching down to students from low-income backgrounds. The students interviewed in this study overcame these obstacles. Henry mentioned how it is a “big deal” if people graduate from his high school. Without overtly stating that he felt taught down to he did mention that he knew that he had bigger plans and larger goals than many of his peers in high school. However, someone in his school noticed Henry’s capabilities and supported him in pursuing the most elite of institutions and the competitive QuestBridge scholarship program. Without the support received from his teachers and other experts, he may have never thought about competitive and selective scholarship opportunities for himself.

Bell et al.’s (2009) research continues to be applicable to this study on the accessibility of higher education for low-income students. They found that the helpfulness of and accessibility to college guidance counselors differ from school to school. The students who had helpful and accessible counselors who were knowledgeable about the admission and enrollment process were more successful in navigating the process and enrolled in higher education at higher rates. The accessibility to competent college counselors is largely determined by socioeconomic status (Bell et al., 2009). This finding was supported by this research with low-income students at UM. Students like Alexandra and Bella who attended private preparatory schools with an affluent student body mentioned how helpful, accessible, and knowledgeable their college guidance counselors were. Betty, who attended a magnet dual-enrollment program, also mentions the capabilities of her college guidance counselor. Though not always associated with more affluent students, the dual enrollment program is associated with the highest achieving of students in the Miami-Dade area. Perception of abilities, as mentioned above in the Paladry (2015) article, did correlate with a more impactful college counselor resource for Betty. Henry also believed that his friend who attended a private high school nearby and whom he leaned on for support during
the admission and enrollment process had a better college counseling staff to go to for assistance than Henry did. Regardless, seven out of the eight participants believed that they had experts that helped shape their processes.

The literature above supporting this study also connects the admission and enrollment process of low-income students being shaped by educators and experts to the theoretical framework used. The accessibility of resources that these successful students had is a form of cultural capital, a main tenet in Bourdieu’s (1973) social reproduction theory. These students were more likely to be able to successfully navigate the enrollment and admission process, in part, due to an increased cultural capital. By enrolling in college, these students have a better chance to increase status. Many of these students’ socioeconomic peers may have not had the same level of cultural capital and access to resources, like competent college counselors, in order to increase their status in the future. The personal and professional networks these counselors bring to the students’ enrollment and admission processes also increases their social capital. Both of these forms of capital are key aspects of the social reproduction theory and increase the probability of these low-income students increasing their SES in their future.

As alluded to above, with college counselors and other experts in the process comes their personal and professional networks. The relationships that college counselors have with admission officers allows the admission officer to have a better understanding of context within the student’s educational experience. This understanding and knowledge of context helps students gain admission to more selective institutions because these admission officers will understand the obstacles and adversities faced by low-income students and will allow the admission officer to focus on aspects of the application beyond the raw standardized test score or grade point average. This form of social capital will help a student succeed in the admission and
enrollment process and is directly supported by Bastedo (2017). Context will make admission officers’ decisions more beneficial to low-income students when reviewing their application irrespective of institutional selectivity, internal admission process/practice of the college, and background of the admission officer (Bastedo, 2017).

The evidence in the current literature supports the finding of this study that experts and educators shape the admission and enrollment process of a student. Studies show that the educational environment in general will affect a student’s aspirations (Paladry, 2015), how they are being taught (Anyon, 1981), and the rigor of the curriculum a student is exposed to (Gamoran, 1987). The research also shows that students with accessibility to resources like college counselors and the knowledge and networks these educators have regarding the admission and enrollment process will make college more available (Bell et al., 2009). These resources and networks directly align with the social reproduction theory, as these are sources of cultural and social capital, and needed to raise students’ status. The admission and enrollment process for low-income students is shaped by educators and experts in the field.

The following section will seek to connect the current literature and the social reproduction theory to how the admission and enrollment process is shaped by peers of low-income students.

**Process Shaped by Peers**

While the current literature supports this research study on how the admission and enrollment process for low-income students was shaped by family support systems and educators/expert support systems, it also supports the fact that a peer support system shapes the process. In the data analysis, it was mentioned that peers of low-income students will shape a student’s admission and enrollment process through encouragement, moral support, and the
ability to discuss ideas and strategies on various parts of the application. Henry leaned on his friend for help editing his essay. Victoria asked friends for advice on the application process and they helped bring levity to the very stressful process. Most of the students interviewed mention the type of support that they received, coming from students who were in the same situation, with similar backgrounds, and similar aspirations for success in the admission and enrollment process. According Taylor’s (2015) study, ambition for a college education is partly attributed to the community around the student. They find, for example, that students in low-income schools will not have as lofty goals when it comes to higher education as students from higher-income backgrounds. However, the students in this study seemed to have align themselves with students with greater objectives within their communities, and thus, had greater ambitions for their own higher education.

Bell et al. (2009) show that family and peers are the primary source of knowledge of college information. This supports the findings in this research, as peers shaped seven out of the eight participants’ college admission and enrollment process. Henry, as mentioned above, asked a friend for support with his essay, as he believed his friend learned how to write better given the prestige of the high school his friend attended. Shannon mentioned how friends tried to dissuade her from applying to the University of Miami because of the published cost, thinking that they knew how expensive and how few financial aid monies would be awarded to her. Victoria mentions asking friends about deadlines and essay topics. All these students gained knowledge from their peers whether or not the information was accurate. Many of the participants were more successful in the admission and enrollment process because of their peers.

On the other hand, Pope’s (2012) list of myths about the college admissions process does bring up the influence a friend may have on a student’s process. He believes that a student
should not necessarily take advice on the process or assume that a friend’s knowledge about a specific institution is accurate. This could negatively impact the admission and enrollment process according to Pope (2012). While a different perspective on the impact peers have on the process, it does support the findings of this study as peers do shape the admission and enrollment process. Pope believes that students can rely too heavily on advice from peers in terms of where they should apply and where they should enroll. Imagine if Shannon had listened to her peers who were telling her that she could not afford the University of Miami. Shannon would have never been successful in gaining admission to and enrolling at UM simply because of the price associated with attendance. Shannon followed Pope’s advice and was wary that UM wasn’t affordable, applied for admission and, with her offer, came a very generous financial aid and scholarship package. She was able to avoid a negative impact on her process by her peers, aligning with Pope’s (2015) article.

Jagešić (2015) studies the link between peers and their effect on a student’s educational aspirations. While the results are mixed, there were many cases that peers do influence attainment. Students who have peers with loftier goals for their educational careers will tend to raise their own goals at the high school level. Students will see their friends and peers going to more prestigious and selective institutions and will instill the drive within that student to do the same (Jagešić, 2015). This directly supports the finding in this study, as the participants were all eager to gain admission and enroll in the best school that they could. Henry mentions a competitive drive when he sees his friend go to an academic summer program, making him do the same and therefore impacting his admission and enrollment process. Alexandra talks about the competition at her high school and the sometimes-uninspiring drive that students had to go to the best or most widely-recognized institution that they could get into. Victoria mentions that
her peers supported her to get into the best school that she could because they knew how ready she was for that educational challenge. All of these are examples of goals that peers had surrounding the participants in their high school setting and those aspirations impacting the admission and enrollment process of the low-income students who participated in this study.

In many ways, the support a low-income student receives from their peers during the college admission and enrollment process will impact the social and cultural capital possessed by the student. The reliance on peers for information and knowledge about the process and specific institutions is a form of cultural capital (Bell et al., 2009). At times, however, this transfer of information from one student to the other can be detrimental to the admission and enrollment process, as students are not experts in the process or may be misinformed on specific institutional processes or policies (Pope, 2015). The social capital that a student owns will also impact the outcome of the admission and enrollment process. The peers and community members surrounding a student will influence a student’s educational aspirations (Taylor, 2015; Jagešic, 2015). This social capital makes other forms of capital available and accessible to the student, increasing his chance of success in the admission and enrollment process and increasing the possibility of positively impacting the student’s status. The support system of peers surrounding a student will affect a student’s admission and enrollment process, directly in line with Bourdieu’s (1973) social reproduction theory.

Summary

The participants in this study all explained that their admission and enrollment processes were shaped by support systems. The support systems that impacted the process for the low-income students at the University of Miami came in the form of their families, educators and experts on the process, and their peers. The current literature supports this finding and links it to
the theoretical framework used in this study. Later, implications for practice in line with this finding will be discussed.

The follow section will explore the third and final finding, the admission and enrollment process as a *stressful process*, and its connection to the current literature and theoretical framework.

**Finding Three: Stressful Process**

The third and final finding of this study was that these low-income students explained their admission and enrollment experience as an overwhelming and *stressful process*. Each of the participants interviewed for this research recalled feelings of stress, anxiety, and unknown when it came to their admission and enrollment process. In all eight cases, the low-income participants explained that they believed the process to be taxing and demanding. Two factors contributed the most to this feeling of stress: the time-consuming essence of the admission and enrollment process and the fact that these students believed that they did not receive the proper amount of help to be successful.

The following sections will explore the third and final finding of the *stressful process* that low-income students believe the admission and enrollment process is. The finding will be outlined in terms of the current literature and within the context of the theoretical framework of this study. Afterward, all three findings will be discussed and how they can be implemented in practice.

**Time Consuming and Tediumous**

Many of the students interviewed for this study mentioned the fact that the admission and enrollment process is a long, tedious, and time-consuming process. This will contribute to some sort of “burn out,” as Henry stated during his interview process. This time-consuming process is
explained by E. Whitney Soule, currently the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Bowdoin College, and her admission and enrollment process for her graduate degree. She writes about the stressful and long process, as someone with significant economic, cultural, and social capital, not to mention extensive experience within the admission and enrollment process. She had to relearn information from prior educational pursuits, she had to overcome the competition to gain admission to a top graduate program, and she had to navigate the actual application (Soule, 2007). It is an easy connection to see that if someone with Soule’s levels of status and capital finds the process long and time consuming, then a low-income student is at a much greater disadvantage in the admission and enrollment process. Soule is intimately familiar with what it takes to apply to, gain admission to, and enroll in a selective program. Low-income students need to learn how to apply to, gain admission to, and enroll in college while navigating the process simultaneously.

Though not connected directly to access to higher education for low-income students, a study on the effects of fatigue on students in Taiwan by Chen, Chou, Tzeng, Chang, Kuo, Pan, Yi-Wei, Chin-Bin, and Mao (2015) shows how students who face issues with fatigue, sleep problems, and depression have higher grades than students who suffer less from these issues. They go on to find that students who had completed the college application process are less tired, happier, and sleep better than students who are either still applying or have not started to apply to colleges. Academic stress, according to research by Chen et al. (2015), is the largest cause of depression and fatigue among high school students in Taiwan. Other research studies support this, where students with higher amounts of academic achievement have higher rates of “student burnout” (Yang, 2004). Fatigue can be connected to the time-consuming process of the admission and enrollment process within the participants of this study. They are balancing
multiple priorities from school, family, friends, part-time employment opportunities, athletics, clubs and organization, etc., on top of the admission and enrollment process. Students with fatigue would have a more difficult time succeeding in this time-consuming process. Henry mentioned all the work he had to put into the admission and enrollment process while his exams and school work did not let up his senior year. Alexandra mentioned how critical time management was to her success in the admission and enrollment process. Bella talks about the stress and pressure that she felt because the admission and enrollment process was the “longest process ever.” These students clearly are impacted by fatigue due to the length of the process that college admission and financial aid offices put them through.

Lastly, in Redding’s (2017) case study on three students and their journey through the admission process, she finds that a student had a stressful process partly due to conflicting priorities with each requiring time set aside for them. The student was a low-achieving student from a broken home and “was tasked with getting a job and caring for a younger sibling, all while trying to keep up with her homework” (Redding, 2017, p.19). The time that she had to spend elsewhere changed her path that was leading to a much more selective institution of higher education (Redding, 2017). This case study supports this research where some participants mentioned that time had to go towards the college admission and enrollment process when other academic or cocurricular priorities fell in weight. It was a struggle for Henry and Kerry to find the time that they needed to be successful in all aspects of their lives. This time-consuming process impacted the levels of success experienced.

The current literature supports the research outlined here. This finding, however, presents many opportunities for future research, which will be discussed later in this paper. In
the next and final finding, the current literature will be shown to support how students lack the
necessary help to be as successful as possible in the admission and enrollment process.

**Lacking the Necessary Help to be Successful**

All eight participants in this study felt as though they did not have the proper amount of
assistance to be as successful as they could have been in the admission and enrollment process.
This directly aligns with the current research on the topic of accessibility to higher education for
low-income students, as these students have significantly less help than more affluent students.
Research shows that as early as 9th grade, students do not have the wherewithal to predict the
type of or amount of financial aid that they will be eligible for. This persists through 11th grade
in the Bell et al. (2009) study. Low-income students will overestimate the cost of college, are
unaware of different sources of financial aid funding, and miscalculate the amount of financial
aid dollars available to them (Bell et al., 2009). This knowledge about financial aid is pertinent
for most low-income students at multiple points during their college admission and enrollment
process. The students in this study all felt that they did not have the required knowledge about
financial aid during the admission and enrollment process. It became very clear that they did not
know enough about the financial aid process when it came time to apply for funding and, finally,
at least three of the students who participated in this study needed to contact the Office of
Financial Aid at the University of Miami multiple times after receiving their offer of admission
in order to ensure that their aid package was accurate and as robust as possible. In all three of
these cases, increases in the financial aid package occurred, either due to errors made by UM or
by the student and their family.

This lack of help continues after the student graduates from high school. Research shows
that low-income students “melt,” or intend to enroll, but do not end up enrolled in classes at the
start of the academic term, at higher rates than their counterparts. According Castleman and Page (2013), this increased melt rate is due to the resources offered at high schools becoming inaccessible to them after graduating and during the summer months when schools are not in session. The advice and increased levels of cultural and social capital that influencers like college guidance counselors, teachers, and peers bring with them are not available to the student. As this research shows, these types of interactions and support systems are prevalent reasons why these low-income students were successful in their admission and enrollment processes. Without these systems of support and the knowledge, resources, and networks that they bring with them, it is much more difficult for these students to enroll in their first terms as college students. Tammy mentioned in her interview that she did not actually make the decision to attend the University of Miami until about a week prior to move-in day. It was not until that point that she believed that the education she would receive at UM would be worth the money that it would cost, the knowledge she would gain, and the expanded social capital from the networks she would gain access to while at UM. She was supported by family and friends and ultimately enrolled at UM, but the support she received from her high school disappeared and made it more difficult for her to enroll, supporting the research by Castleman and Page (2013).

The heightened summer melt rates for low-income students is continued to be supported through Arnold, Chewning, Castleman, and Page’s (2015) research and connects the lack of assistance to the theoretical framework used in this study. They mention that students “don’t know what to do” and that parents did not understand that bills and other information was electronically sent during the summer months (Arnold et al., 2015, p. 13). The authors believe that colleges moving into the online space do not necessarily account for students with smaller amounts of cultural capital regarding the enrollment process, regardless of socioeconomic status.
The combination of lower amounts of capital, earlier timelines, and complexity of processes will drive these students to focus on other priorities, making them less successful in the enrollment process (Arnold et al., 2015). This part of the enrollment process is biased against students from lower-income backgrounds with lesser amounts of cultural capital than students from more affluent background. As low-income students do not have the cultural capital required to navigate this part of the process, in line with the social reproduction theory, they would be less likely to increase status.

**Summary**

Access to resources and knowledge, in the form of cultural capital, and access to networks of individuals with expertise in the admission and enrollment process, in the form of social capital, is required for low-income students to find success. The literature outlined above shows that the finding of students lacking the necessary help to succeed is in line with current research. The social reproductive theory used in this study says that access to the ability to increase economic, cultural, and social capitals will also help students succeed in the admission and enrollment process. These forms of capital could manifest themselves through financial aid, knowledge and resources to help them through the process, or the networks to help navigate unique aspects to the admission and enrollment process. Without these capitals, misinformation will present itself to this cohort, steps will be missed, and summer melt will increase, all leading to a student’s inability to increase their future status. Implications for practice for all three findings will be discussed following the conclusion of linking all three findings to the current literature and theoretical framework.
Conclusion

The central question guiding this study is: *How do low-income students who successfully enroll in a selective, private four-year institution explain their experience with the college admission and enrollment process?* The study answered the question finding that successful low-income students at the University of Miami explain that their college admission and enrollment process as a time-consuming, stressful, goal-oriented process, where they felt like they lacked the necessary help to be as successful as they could have been. The process was shaped by support systems comprised of family, influencers, and peers. This conclusion is supported by the participants’ rich descriptions of their college admission and enrollment processes through the lens of their economic, cultural, and social capital. These forms of capital create a student’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and influences how a student interact with their institution of education (Lareau, 2003). Students explained their admission and enrollment process from the time they started to think about applying to college and detailed each step including admissions, financial aid, and matriculation at the University of Miami. They described the goals that they had as they took this process on and who helped shape their process, influencing steps throughout. Finally, the participants explained that they felt like they did not have all the help they needed during the admission and enrollment process and the stress that caused, along with the time-consuming nature of the process.

This study’s findings are supported by the literature surrounding access to higher education and the social reproduction theory. The theme of the goal-oriented process is supported with research on student educational aspirations. This theme and the finding of the process being shaped by support systems aligns with the literature on disadvantaged student access and the admission process in general. The literature is scarcer for the third and final
finding of a stressful process pertaining to the tediousness and feeling a lack of help. By nature of the design of this research study, these students break the mold of the traditional low-income student as they were successful in navigating the admission and enrollment process at the University of Miami. The design of this study also allows it to contribute to the literature on student success and access to selective and expensive, private four-year institutions. In the pages below, this will be explored this with other implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

UM’s direction and Road Map states that the institution recognizes the different needs of prospective students, current students, and alumni and eliminating financial obstacles for those constituencies (Access to Excellence, 2017). The following section will propose recommendations for practice at the University of Miami and the Division of Enrollment Management to become a more accessible institution for low-income students and moving toward their mission statements.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study will help administrators, admission professionals, financial aid, and enrollment professionals at all selective and expensive, private four-year institutions of higher education, especially the University of Miami. By easing the stress of the admission and enrollment process, addressing low-income students’ goals, and supporting and informing the influencers that support low-income students, institutions like UM will increase their accessibility to low-income students, will be able to better serve low-income students, and better prepare them for successful futures. The researcher will help UM achieve this level of accessibility by recommending that UM review and revise their policies, strategies, and marketing efforts when it comes to financial aid, admission, and recruitment and yield efforts.
The following section outlines recommended actions that UM can take in order to ease the stress of the admission and enrollment process for low-income students.

**Easing the Stress of the Process**

The participants in this study lacked help in the financial aid portion of the admission and enrollment process. They leaned on support systems, who were informed at varying degrees, regarding financial aid. The enrollment management divisions at selective and expensive, four-year private institutions need to do what they can to make this portion of the process simpler, clearer, and easy to consume for students and families with the least amounts of economic, cultural, and social capitals. UM can quickly implement a handful of changes that are relatively simple that would ease the stress of the admission and enrollment process for low-income students.

The letter students receive with their aid packages and awards need to be clear and transparent. Loans, grants, scholarships, and fees should all be clearly labelled using verbiage that all students can comprehend. It would be beneficial to include the average return on investment of successful students and UM graduates from similar backgrounds and comparable academic majors. If the return on investment data is strong, then students would understand the financial and economic risks and rewards that they are facing when choosing to enroll at UM. This could also hold UM accountable, both at the administrative and faculty levels, to provide quality education at the most economically feasible cost. Over the next few months, the researcher will be working with the Vice President of Enrollment Management, Executive Director of Financial Aid, and Director of Marketing to ensure a simpler, clearer, and helpful financial aid award letter will be included with the offers of admission to admitted students.
It is also recommended that the University defines students who are deemed as low-income using a different methodology. Currently, the definition is based on a dollar figure for EFC. In order to make the process more transparent, UM should use aggregate gross income levels as the metric for defining low-income students. A number of institutions currently do this and set the level at different rates; $60,000 annually, $100,000, $120,000, etc. This would allow students and families to have conversations about the cost of a UM degree and their possible financial aid packages in a more consumable way and earlier in the process. Low-income students and families would no longer have to calculate their EFC and compare that with the cost of attendance at the University, but rather have a transparent conversation within the confines of their private spaces and understand how financial aid policies at the University of Miami would affect their packages.

During the recruitment phase, the Office of Undergraduate Admission and the Office of Financial Assistance need to work hand in hand to make sure low-income students clearly understand the admission, aid, and enrollment policies of the university. The websites of both offices should include a simple and transparent Net Price Calculator that would allow all students to accurately assess the cost of attendance, the amount of grants and scholarship that they may be eligible for, the amount of loans or self-help that they will be offered, and the remaining need or financial gap that they will be expected to pay. This more generally informs the students and allows open and honest conversations between the students, parents, counselors, and other people financially and emotionally supporting a student through the admission and enrollment process. With the help of colleagues in the Enrollment Management Systems and Analytics department and the Office of Financial Assistance, the researcher will be assessing the accuracy
of UM’s Net Price Calculator to ensure that it gives our prospective students an honest reflection of the aid they are eligible for and their cost of attending UM.

UM should also drop the requirement that students must resubmit the CSS PROFILE during their sophomore, junior, and senior years on campus. The CSS PROFILE would be submitted along with the FAFSA during the student’s first year in order to create an accurate financial aid award. However, the minutiae in the CSS PROFILE does not change drastically from year to year, so a FAFSA alone would suffice in a student’s upperclassman years. This will ease the process and cut down on the amount of time it would take for a student to submit a complete financial aid application. This helps the University become more efficient and cuts down on the length of the enrollment process for a student each year.

The University of Miami should also research the possibility of creating an institutional application fee waiver, easing the finances and minds of low-income students incurring costs throughout the admission and enrollment process. There are many ways to do this, however it is recommended to add the following questions to the admission application:

1. Do you receive free or reduced lunch in school?
2. Do you participate in a TRIO program?
3. Do you qualify for fee waivers from the ACT, College Board, and/or NACAC?
4. Are you currently serving or have you previously served in the U.S. Armed Forces?

If the answer to any one of these questions is “yes,” then the student would be awarded an institutional application fee waiver. The researcher will work to implement this fee waiver for the next application cycle, working with his counterparts in Undergraduate Admission and Enrollment Management Systems and Analytics.
UM can also institute scholarships for sophomore-level students who are successful during their first year on campus. This would incentivize students to be successful during their freshman years and increase retention rates. The availability and requirements for these sophomore level scholarships should be marketed during the recruitment process and throughout a student’s first year on campus. These financial incentives will level the competition among students with different degrees of economic capital and help low-income students find success in the admission and enrollment process.

Finally, it is encouraged that UM drop its admission requirement of the submission of standardized test scores. The literature on standardized tests proves that these tests are biased against students from low-income backgrounds and the fee associated with sending official test scores to the institutions that students apply to is burdensome to low-income families. Another recommendation that would help students feel less stress throughout the admission process is to require any piece of “unique work” in the form of an essay, video, art, research paper, or other assignment in lieu of the traditional essay. This will make students feel like they have more control over the admission process and are able to produce their best work.

By implementing the recommendations above, the admission and enrollment process at the University of Miami will be much less stressful for low-income students. The following section will include warranted actions to help students understand how being enrolling at UM would meet their goals.

Help Students Understand How to Meet Goals

Being successful in the admission and enrollment process was important to low-income students because of their goals of increasing their statuses. The following recommendations will
help enrollment professionals explain to low-income students how UM can help them attain their goals whether they are financially motivated or culturally and socially motivated.

Firstly, over time the University should continue to reduce the amount of loans included in the financial aid packages it offers its students. A no-loan policy is not being suggested as a possible action, as this policy would require large amounts of capital. The current literature and this research have shown that low-income students are averse to taking loans out for their education, so limiting the amount will be beneficial for the University’s enrollment and the students at large. While difficult, at the same time, the University of Miami should also continue to incrementally increase the amount of demonstrated need met while filling financial gaps between the students need and the financial aid package awarded. This will allow UM to meet 100% of demonstrated need for all incoming students while easing the financial burden that low-income families face when funding an expensive private education.

The Office of Undergraduate Admission should ensure that Career Services is more involved during the recruitment and yield efforts. This will help low-income students understand the value of a UM education and how UM can assist them in obtaining their financial, cultural, and social goals. The Topple Center for Career Services should be present at all recruitment events, a mainstay of daily campus visits, and invited to yield events on- and off-campus. The researcher will work with Admission and Careers Services to facilitate this for the University.

A much more lofty and long-term project would be to work with other institutions who share applicants with the University of Miami in order to provide a common and more streamlined financial aid application. Many of the participants said that they had a hard time understanding what had to be submitted, how it had to be submitted, and where it had to be submitted. This can start with other private Florida schools whom have cross over applicants
with UM like Nova Southeastern University, St. Thomas University, or Stetson University, for example. If each institution accepted the same application, used the same financial aid methodology, and utilized the same system, this would significantly streamline the process for low-income students. It would allow them to clearly understand the net cost of attendance at each school. It would allow counselors, teachers, and parents to better support their students. It would allow students to feel less stress throughout the admission and enrollment process. All of this would allow the students to understand how their financially motivated goals will be met on the front end in terms of financial aid and cost of attendance and on the back end in terms of return on their investment.

The last recommendation would be for the Division of Enrollment Management to work with other divisions and departments at the University of Miami to create a bridge program for economically, culturally, and socially disadvantaged students. This would require a student cohort to be conditionally admitted to UM after the completion of two for-credit courses, one in math and one in English, during the summer before their freshman year. While on-campus during the summer, administrators and faculty can ensure that these students know what types of resources the University offers students to help them achieve their goals including the Topple Center for Career Services, Office of Academic Enhancement, tutoring services, and mental health services. This will allow the students with less cultural and social capital to build these resources before the rest of their class matriculates in the fall semester. The increased transparency on how UM will increase capital will help low-income students more clearly understand how UM will help them increase their status and meet their goals for their futures.

The recommendations above help students comprehend how enrolling at the University of Miami will meet their future goals. It would help them visualize how both their financially
motivated goals and their socially and culturally motivated goals will be met. The following section will provide recommendations for UM to implement to encourage and educate influencers of low-income students.

**Encouraging and Educating Students’ Support Systems**

In order to become more accessible to low-income students, UM must help the people who influence and support the students. The findings of this study showed that the admission and enrollment process is shaped by support systems consisting of family members, educators and other experts on the process, and peers. UM can implement the following actions to help support the support systems of low-income students, helping them gain success in the process and set themselves up to increase their status in the future.

The recruitment process of UM’s enrollment management division should take low-income students into more account throughout the recruitment lifecycle. The offices of Admission and Student Financial Assistance need to ensure that all counselors are trained on and able to work with students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Partnerships, programming, and memorandums of understanding with organizations that serve low-income youth and families would help remove barriers to a selective and expensive institution like UM. These partnerships would allow UM to provide cultural and social capital to the low-income students and families. These programs could include an “Application Work Week” with select public high schools in the Greater Miami area whose populations are heavily low-income students. These workshops would include areas of instruction and education surrounding the admission application, application essays, activities section of the application, FAFSA, CSS PROFILE, and other resources to find scholarship opportunities. Students who attend these workshops would be automatically awarded the institutional application fee waiver
recommended above. The counselors and teachers would be able to attend workshops on writing letters of recommendation and the admission and enrollment process overall. All workshops during “Application Work Week” would be instructed and moderated by admission and financial aid professionals at the University of Miami during the fall semester.

During the spring semester, a week should be dedicated to working on community service projects in the same communities. With admission and financial aid employees giving back to the local community in the form of service, the reputation of the University as being accessible and aware of low-income communities will create positive branding efforts for the institution. After a number of successful “Application Work Weeks” and service weeks, these programs could expand into secondary and tertiary markets if deemed feasible by the admission and financial aid departments. The researcher will work with admission and aid officers to ensure that the “Application Work Week” and spring service projects are executed during the current recruitment cycle.

In order to make all of the above happen, all admission and financial aid officers at the University of Miami must be trained and educated on how to work with low-income students. These staff members should continue to attend national and regional conferences with professional development in mind to better understand the market’s complexities and niches. While attending these conferences, staff members should be encouraged to sit in on workshops with college access or low-income students as the subject. The knowledge that they gain while taking advantage of professional development opportunities and while in the field in their markets should stay with them during the application review phase of the admission and enrollment process. The readers on the admission and financial aid side should take this context into consideration while making decisions, understanding the gaps in levels of capital and
assisting low-income students in accessing the University of Miami. They should also share their insights and findings with their colleagues in meaningful and dedicated ways at staff meetings.

Becoming more educated on working with low-income students and becoming more of a visible presence within those communities will help encourage and educate the families, experts and educators, and peers of low-income students. This care from UM will help these support systems help low-income students in more significant, ethical, and positive ways.

**Summary**

The clarity and transparency that comes with the warranted actions and recommendations for practice above will allow the student to feel less stress, help students understand how UM can help them attain their goals, and help the students’ support systems help the students themselves. Policy adjustments, strategic recruitment and yield efforts, specific programming, and a knowledgeable staff will allow the University to become more accessible to low-income students. In the following section, recommendation for future research surrounding the accessibility of higher education for low-income students is articulated.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s findings are consistent with the current literature on the accessibility to higher education and student access. There have been a number of recent articles on student success and loan indebtedness of students who attend institutions of higher education. Much of the research is surrounding students of color and other underrepresented groups and their access to higher education. There is a gap, however in terms of research on diverse datasets of low-income students, regardless of race, ethnicity, and educational backgrounds (i.e. first-generation students). This study begins to fill that gap in the literature as the participant group of this study
was diverse in a number of different ways ranging from regional location, academic majors, race and ethnicity, and educational background including family attainment and type of high school attended.

Throughout the literature, access to selective institutions is mentioned, however is rarely the sole focus of the research. Studies like this specifically help institutions who are selective and who carry a large published price tag become more accessible to low-income students. Case studies and more broad research would help administrators implement strategies that would attract low-income students to their institutions, would help influencers assist low-income students, and relieve stress of the students as they navigate the admission and enrollment process. More quantitative approaches can be taken as well, in order to better understand the equilibrium between financial aid packages, expectations of cost sharing by both the institution and the student, and cost of attendance would help in this regard.

Finally, the weight of the process and how it effects low-income students in their latter years of high school, throughout the admission and enrollment process, and during the early parts of their college careers should be focused on more by researchers. Qualitative and quantitative studies on the stress that low-income students sustain during the process could produce meaningful results that could help the system of education at large and institutions of higher education be more accessible to this type of student.

The expansion of literature surrounding access to higher education is critical in today’s climate. Tuition fees and costs of attendance are rising year over year, the socioeconomic strata are becoming more and more polarized over time, and students are becoming more cost adverse as the media questions the value of a higher education and loan indebtedness among American students. The research should also continue to focus on successful low-income students who
were able to navigate the admission and enrollment process and meet their educational goals.

This type of research will continue to expand the research on access to higher education as it focuses on successful low-income students enrolled at selective and expensive, private four-year institutions like the University of Miami.
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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email (Initial)

Subject Line: Student Research Participation

Dear [Student Name],

My name is Jay Jacobs, and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, and also a Senior Associate Director of Undergraduate Admission here at the University of Miami. I am conducting a study with my Principal Investigator, Dr. Kimberly Nolan, entitled *Understanding the Accessibility of Selective and Expensive Private Four-Year Institutions of Higher Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.*

I am currently seeking 12 students who meet the following criteria to participate in my study:

a) Currently a full-time first year student at the University of Miami
b) Completed at least one full academic semester
c) Obtained a cumulative GPA of a 3.0 or higher
d) Has an Estimated Family Contribution of $7000 or less for this current academic year as determined by the Office of Student Financial Assistance

In this study, participants will be interviewed and asked questions about their admissions and enrollment process at the University of Miami. Specifically, students will be asked about their perception of the admission and enrollment process and how their socioeconomic status, cultural background, and interpersonal experiences impacted their college admission and enrollment process. Participants will participate in a 90-minute interview that will be conducted at a location at or near the university that is deemed safe and appropriate by the participant. These locations will also be appropriate and comfortable spaces in which to conduct a recorded interview that will allow the interviewee to talk freely. Interviews will be recorded. Participants will be asked to review a copy of the transcription of the interview to confirm accuracy. The total time for participating in this study is less than two hours.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. I would greatly appreciate your willingness and interest in participating in this study. I would be happy to answer any questions that you have about participation or the research under investigation at any time. If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions, please contact me at jacobs.ja@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jay Jacobs, EdD Candidate
Northeastern University
jacobs.ja@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B: Recruitment Email (Follow Up Message)

Subject Line: Student Research Participation

Dear Students,

This is a follow up email concerning the message you were sent about a research study I am conducting for my doctoral thesis.

This is a reminder to email me at Jacobs.ja@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions.

Thank you again for considering participation in the study.

All the best,

Jay Jacobs, EdD Candidate
Northeastern University
jacobs.ja@husky.neu.edu

*Note: This is a follow up email sent to students not responding within ten days of the initial email request. In addition to this follow up email, the initial email will be forwarded so individuals can view the information included and respond appropriately.
Appendix C: Participant Selection Email

Subject Line: Student Research Participation

Dear [Student Name],

This letter is to notify you that you have been selected to participate in my study Understanding the Accessibility of Selective and Expensive Private Four-Year Institutions of Higher Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Thank you for agreeing to participate and for taking valuable time to assist me. I would like to remind you that your participation in this study will help me make the University of Miami and institutions like it more accessible to low-income students. Your participation in this study will allow you to share your experiences in the college admissions and college enrollment processes. Furthermore, it will allow you to reflect on how socioeconomic backgrounds impacted your experience.

Before we schedule the 60-90 minute interview, I would like to speak with you on the phone for 10-15 minutes to ensure that you understand the study, my role, and answer any questions that you have. Please provide two times and a contact number for me to reach you.

During our call, I would like to schedule a time and place for our interview. Since I am working with 12 participants, would you please be prepared with at least two 90 minute periods where you are available to be interviewed? Also, consider a place for the interview that is on or near campus.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,

Jay Jacobs, EdD Candidate
Northeastern University
jacobs.ja@husky.neu.edu
Appendix D – Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Principal Investigator, and Jay Jacobs, Student Researcher

Title of Project: Understanding the Accessibility of Selective and Expensive Private Four-Year Institutions of Higher Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have expressed an interest in participating in this study after reading the recruitment letter. To participate in this study, you must be a full time, first year student at the University of Miami; have a cumulative GPA of a 3.0 or higher; and have an Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) of $7000 or less as determined by the Office of Student Financial Assistance at the University of Miami.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this research is to gain understanding of how low-income students explain and describe their experience with the college enrollment process and how selective and expensive private four-year institutions can utilize this knowledge to become more accessible to this type of student. This study will help expand the literature and the practice in order to increase access to a selective and expensive institutions of higher education by focusing on the University of Miami. Administrators at UM and institutions like UM, school and college counselors at high schools and community based organizations who serve low-income students, and students and families who are either part of lower socioeconomic classes and/or care about the socioeconomic diversity on-campus will significantly benefit from this study.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to participate in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview that will last between one and two hours. The interview will include questions about your experiences with the college admission and enrollment process; your understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic status and college enrollment; and how you would describe, define, and distinguish your experience with the college admission and enrollment process. If you choose to participate, you may still terminate the interview and your participation in the study at any point without negative repercussions.

Where will this take place, and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and place that are convenient and comfortable for you. The...
interview will take between one and two hours. If you chose to participate in this study, you will be asked to create a pseudonym under which your interview will be stored.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**
There will be no foreseeable risks, harms, or discomforts associated with participating in this study. If at any time, you will uncomfortable or feel that your participation in the study poses any risk, you may terminate the interview.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
No direct benefits will be received by the participants or researchers. However, potential benefits include the opportunity to allow UM to become more accessible to students like them as well as a direct contact in the Office of Enrollment Management for assistance they will need or people they know will need in the future.

**Who will see information about me?**
No identifiable information related to the participants will be used in any of the publically available forms of the study. Identifiable information will be available to only the primary investigator and the investigator’s dissertation advisor. Identifiable information will be destroyed at the completion of the study. All identifiable information will be secured on a password protected, personally owned computer.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
If at any time, you will uncomfortable or feel that your participation in the study poses any risk, you may terminate the interview.

**What happens if I suffer any harm from this research?**
There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. You will be free to only answer those questions that are comfortable for you to answer.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student, employee, etc.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
All questions and concerns can be directed to investigator, Jay Jacobs, cell phone (412) 926.7443 Email: jacob.sja@husky.neu.edu or Principal Investigator, Dr. Kim Nolan, k.nolan@northeastern.edu

**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: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
There are no financial incentives for participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There are no costs associated with participation in this study.

______________________________  ______________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part        Date

______________________________  ______________________
Printed name of person above        Date

______________________________  ______________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent        Date
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Topic: Understanding the Accessibility of Selective and Expensive Private Four-Year Institutions of Higher Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Time of Interview:
Date of Interview:
Place of Interview:
Interviewer: Jay Jacobs
Interviewee #:

Ask permission to begin recording (Turn on recorder)

Introduction/Description of Project:
- Interviewer/Interviewee Introductions
- Provide an approximation of how long the interview will take
- Explain the purpose of the study
- Explain of the sources of data being collected
- Explain what will be done with the data to protect the confidentiality of the participant

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
   a. Where do you come from?
   b. What is your family like?
   c. What are you majoring in?
   d. How are you involved outside of the classroom at UM?
2. When considering applying to colleges, how did you find the colleges that you wanted to apply to? What advice did you get, who did you get it from and how did you use it?
3. How much did tuition and cost play into where you were applying and what did you know about financial aid and scholarships?
4. Before you actually applied, were you always considering going to college? Did you consider other paths? How did you decide that college was the right next step for you?
5. When applying to different schools, what proactive steps did you take? How did you seek help? What did you not know that you wish you knew?
6. When applying to college, what advice did you get, who did you get it from, and how did you use that advice?
7. When applying to college, when did you consider applying for financial aid and other scholarships? How did you find the resources you need to apply for financial aid and scholarships? Was this process just as important to you as the college admission application process when it came to going to college?
8. When choosing to enroll in the University of Miami, how important was the financial aid package and merit scholarship that you received? If it were lower, would you have still enrolled? Did you consider enrolling elsewhere because of the cost, financial aid package, or merit scholarship?
9. Tell me how UM and the education and connections you make here will help you in the future? Did you consider this when you decided to enroll at UM?
10. What do you attribute to your success in applying to, enrolling in, and navigating the academic and social cultures at the University of Miami?
11. What was the best part of the college admission and enrollment process?
12. What would you change about the college admission and enrollment process to make it easier for students like you?

Other appropriate prompts:
- Would you elaborate on that?
- Can you provide more detail?
- What did you mean by “xxxx?”
- Tell me more.
- Can you provide any documentation that I can take with me?

Closing:
Thank the individual for his or her cooperation and participation in this interview. Assure him or her of the confidentiality of his or her responses and inform the participant the interviewer will send an email to schedule the third and final interview.
Appendix F: Member Check Email Template

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences with me on February 22, 2018. I truly enjoyed learning about your college admission and enrollment process. As we discussed, I am sending you this follow-up email so you can review the transcription of the interview for accuracy (please see attached). Please feel free edit the transcription as necessary, as well as to offer any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you may have had since our interview.

When you are finished, please send it back to me. If you have nothing to change or report, please send me a quick email to let me know. All revisions are due on Sunday, March 18, 2018. Again, thank you for your valuable time!

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,

Jay Jacobs, EdD Candidate
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