Title I High School Counselors’ Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

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Title I High School Counselors’ Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

Abstract
The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the high school counselor’s perception of their ability to influence low socioeconomic students’ postsecondary enrollment decisions in nine Title I high schools in northern New Jersey. The research questions explored how high school counselors are able to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at institutions of higher education. This study also examined how elements at the district and school level influence the high school counselor’s ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Data, which consisted of individual interviews and archival materials was collected from 12 participants who worked in a district in northern New Jersey and thematically analyzed. Results from the data revealed that positive relationships between the counselor and student, which are fostered by pushing and encouraging students that college can be their reality has a positive influence on college aspirations, preparation, application, and enrollment choice. This study further found that high school counselors were instrumental in helping low socioeconomic students understand, search, identify, and select colleges by walking them through each step of the college admission process.

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Title I High School Counselors’ Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

By

Stephanie Nicole Baker

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Janice Kelly

Committee Member

Dr. LaTasha Hamlett-Carver

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

August, 2021
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my ancestors, both known and unknown who without their guidance and selfless sacrifice, I would not exist. I will continue to work to make you proud. I am forever grateful to my husband, Anthony L. Baker who inspires, teaches, and motivates me daily... He is the wind beneath my wings and the air I breath daily... you are appreciated and my love for you deepens daily.

I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Janice Kelly and committee member, Dr. Latasha Hamlett-Carver for the guidance, support, and direction they provided me throughout this process. I appreciate your patience and your ability to push me to assure that I stayed the course despite obstacles. My time spent with you was a wealth of intellectual exchanges which I will forever value.

To my friends and family, who cheered me on during this time, I appreciate you. Thanks for allowing me the time I needed to finish this project, but also for getting me out the house for a good time because balance is important! Cohort 11, it has been an honor to be in this program with you and to complete the program during a national pandemic. I will never forget the laughs, tears, or how we persevered through to the end together. Special shout out to my “Deputy Mayor’’ Dr. Janette McKoy-McKay whose words and wisdom, humor, perseverance, and grit truly inspired me through this journey! Thank you for your exchange of intellectual ideas and your friendship.
Biographical Sketch

Stephanie Nicole Baker currently serves the Academic Advisement Office at Berkeley College as an Advisor. Mrs. Baker attended Essex County College and graduated with an Associate in Science Degree. She attended Montclair State University and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2009 and Master of Arts degree in 2012. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2019 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Baker pursued her research in Title 1 High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students under the direction of Dr. Janice Kelly and Dr. LaTasha Hamlett-Carver and received the Ed.D. degree in 2021.
Abstract

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the high school counselor’s perception of their ability to influence low socioeconomic students’ postsecondary enrollment decisions in nine Title I high schools in northern New Jersey. The research questions explored how high school counselors are able to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at institutions of higher education. This study also examined how elements at the district and school level influence the high school counselor’s ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Data, which consisted of individual interviews and archival materials was collected from 12 participants who worked in a district in northern New Jersey and thematically analyzed. Results from the data revealed that positive relationships between the counselor and student, which are fostered by pushing and encouraging students that college can be their reality has a positive influence on college aspirations, preparation, application, and enrollment choice. This study further found that high school counselors were instrumental in helping low socioeconomic students understand, search, identify, and select colleges by walking them through each step of the college admission process.

Keywords: High school counselor, postsecondary counseling, school counselor, college enrollment
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Pursuing a college education is significant for many reasons. Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) indicated that college and post-baccalaureate graduates have lower unemployment rates of 4.4%, compared to high school graduates with 8.5%. In addition, Ng et al. (2014) argued that college graduates could improve their future earning potential, grow personally and intellectually, enhance future employment opportunities, experience better quality of life, and extend satisfaction to children and communities. Despite the many advantages associated with earning a college degree, many students delay enrolling, completing, or pursuing a postsecondary degree (Cox, 2016; Deterding, 2015).

In the United States, many educational policy makers are calling for an increase in the number of students receiving postsecondary education and earning college degrees (Matthews, 2010; Obama, 2009). More jobs today than in the past require education beyond a high school equivalency diploma and prior projections suggested that if changes were not made, the United States in 2020 would have more available jobs requiring a college degree than qualified people to fill them (Carnevale et al., 2010). As the need for college-educated workers grows, the connection between higher education and high wages remains strong (Aud et al., 2010). These current economic concerns put the wage gap and need for highly educated workers in stark relief. (Clienedinst & Hawkins, 2011). Recent graduates out of high school between the ages of 18 and 21 do not lack desire to go to college (Chen, et al., 2018). Most high school students seek postsecondary
education; 92% of U.S. high school seniors in 2013 planned to continue their education after completing high school (Chen et al., 2018). However, in 2017, only 31% of the individuals ages 25 to 29 had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher (Chen et al., 2018).

Whether students from low socioeconomic backgrounds aspire and choose to attend college or not depends on a variety of factors. Ng et al. (2014) theorized that personal aspirations at a young age, prior achievements, educational experiences, and life circumstances help to determine whether students attend college or not. However, Brown et al. (2016) argued that disparities in college access (informational resources) exist among low- and high-income students, which support or prohibit college aspirations and enrollment. For example, Klugman (2012) suggested that high socioeconomic families can afford paying for college and can also access college-related information by activating their social capital, defined as support and knowledge that students gain through relationships with others (Savitz-Romer, 2012). More importantly, these families have resources to financially and educationally invest in their student’s educational endeavors, unlike low socioeconomic families (Klugman, 2012).

The challenges faced by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds differ from their high socioeconomic counterparts. For example, Martin et al., (2014) and Brown et al. (2016) highlighted that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have limited social capital in their families, requiring that they seek information on postsecondary opportunities from non-familial sources. Students low in social capital typically do not possess the knowledge regarding college selection criteria and entrance requirements (Woods & Domina, 2014). Along those same lines, Zhang et al. (2016) and Alger and Luke (2015) indicated that affordability, insufficient college-related
preparation, and limited access to college information hinder these students from transitioning to college. Without college-related knowledge and support, these students may forgo applying to college or miss important college-related deadlines (Castleman & Goodman, 2015). Consequently, the widening gap in college enrollment and attainment rates between low- and high-income students have placed high school counselors at the forefront of conversations on postsecondary enrollment by educators, researchers, and policy makers (Bryan et al., 2015).

Finding ways to support traditionally underrepresented students in their pursuit and preparation of their future goals is needed (Bowen et al., 2009). This includes first generation college bound students, Black, Latino/a, those with American Indian backgrounds, and low-income students. The research suggests that these groups are likely to not receive a college degree, so the issue is particularly pressing for them as the U.S. student population is increasing in racial and ethnic diversity each year (Aud et al., 2010). High school counselors are overlooked on their ability to help with the transition from high school to college and assist in admission and perseverance of this marginalized group (Bowen et al., 2009).

High school counselors are the primary source and facilitators of college information for many minority, first-generation, and low-income students; yet little is known about their influence on low socioeconomic students’ postsecondary enrollment. Researchers first investigated the influence of the high school counselor on the college going plans of students in the 1960s (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). College enrollment rates throughout the United States increased with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which made going to college more accessible to
all students, including racial/ethnic minority groups (Kinzie et al., 2004). During that
time high school counselors became important to the college recruitment and enrollment
efforts of universities and subsequently increased their influence on college enrollment
(Kinzie et al., 2004).

The Rosenbaum et al. (1996) study on high school counseling practices of
students during the 1960s revealed that high school counselors frequently identified
students believed to have college potential and dissuaded those without the maturity,
personal characteristics, and emotional stability to attend. This practice was known as
*gatekeeping* (McKillip et al., 2013; Roderick et al., 2011; Rosenbaum, et. al., 1996).
Researchers observed that high school counselors aggressively discouraged low–income
students and those from racial/ethnic groups from applying to college as well as restricted
access to college recruitment officers in order to not jeopardize their relationships with
colleges and universities (Roderick et al., 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 1996). However, by
1983, high school counselor influence started to decline within public schools due to
large student caseloads and changes in job duties, which left little time to inform and
support students on college choice and enrollment (Kinzie et al., 2004). Nevertheless,
more recent studies reveal a shift in the effect of high school counselor influence on
college trajectories.

High school counselors can contribute to college admission and perseverance.
High school counselors work with students to deliver culturally relevant programing and
placement to support all students via *individual planning* (ASCA, 2012). High school
counselors’ positions also allow them to handle inequalities and advocate for students
who do not successfully transition through high school into college (Holcomb-McCoy,
High school counselors’ positions also allow them to address the inequalities that hinder certain students from going to college. Several scholars have highlighted that when high school counselors are available to provide intensive college counseling and their caseloads are manageable, they positively influence students’ college choice and aspirations and ultimately persistence (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2015; Holland, 2015; Perna et al., 2008; Woods & Domina, 2014). For example, Bryan et al. (2015) argued that high school counselors play an integral role influencing college attainment by building a culture where college is expected for all students. Likewise, Woods and Domina (2014) noted that high school counselors are positioned to influence students’ college predispositions, support students college types, provide information on financial aid, increase students’ social capital, and broaden college access. Although various studies have documented the positive impact of high school counselors, other researchers have highlighted their negative impact.

**Problem Statement**

Given the United States’ current economic concerns, wage gap, and the need for highly educated workers (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2011) postsecondary education has become a requirement for many jobs/careers (Matthews, 2010; Obama, 2009). Unfortunately, many high school students in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are not moving successfully from college aspirations, to access, to persistence in college, and finally, to a degree (Aud et al., 2010). Since it is not known how high school counselors are able to influence low socioeconomic students’ college enrollment, the research suggests it is necessary to find ways to support traditionally underrepresented students in their pursuit of postsecondary degrees using high school
counselors (Bowen et al., 2009). The research further suggests that a student with a college degree will be able to compete in a global economy (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2011).

**Theoretical Rationale**

Bourdieu (1986), an early researcher of social capital theory, explains the family dynamic and says that high school counselors can be agents to help build social capital to assist in college admission. Researchers suggest that parents and guardians who have successfully navigated the college process are crucial for students’ success (Roderick et al., 2011). Roderick (2011) further explains that mentors outside of the home are equally important as a resource for students. The structure of social capital is found in relation to family members, community residents, and religious affiliates. When students have access to more educational resources, they gain access to higher education opportunities and social networks, thus leading to a change in social capital (Lin, 2000).

Social capital theory is relevant as students unknowingly depend on social capital and social networks for access to resources. One’s social capital determines one’s current environment and access to resources. Social capital is the collective value of all social networks and the power they possess (Castleman & Goodman, 2015). This definition has been used in several different contexts, but for the purposes of this study, it pertains to student access to postsecondary resources. While Bourdieu (1986) was an early trailblazer on social capital, Lin’s (2000) study on inequality in social capital expanded the theory and complements Freire’s (1970) emancipation theory ideal that education should be used to emancipate the oppressed from their current environments. While social capital is the main theory used for this study the contrast and relevance of Freire’s
theory seemed to enhance the study and draw parallels. According to Lin’s work, social capital is conceptualized as access to resources and the access social networks provide (Lin, 2000). Resources can be defined in the educational context as anything from highly qualified teachers and high school counselors to information about colleges and universities. Social networks are defined as groups to which people belong, which can be based on many factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, race, or class. Membership in these groups dictates the number of resources to which one is exposed, which directly influences a person’s social capital and therefore this theory appears relevant to the research (Lin, 2000).

Lin’s work adds to the body of research by asserting that there is an inequality in social capital due to the social networks in which people are members. This inequality in social capital directly correlates to the availability of resources one’s social group may control (Lin, 2000). Lin also asserted that the inequality of social capital is greater when it pertains to children because they depend on the social networks of their parents. Social capital and access to resources of parents directly affect those of their children. Preschool education is a direct predictor of the access their children will have (Lin, 2000). Lin (2000) explained the cycle of social capital and the categorization of disadvantaged pointing out how disadvantaged parents want to provide their children with access to different social networks but are mostly limited by their own lack of access. In most cases, this lack of access is due to a lack of educational opportunities and the inability to interact well with non-disadvantaged social groups. The parents’ lack of access is passed on to their children, which is then normally passed on to the offspring of their children, which continues the cycle of disadvantaged groups (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). The
cycle of disadvantaged groups impacts the total livelihood of persons who reside within this group by impacting their ability to access career opportunities, thus keeping them restricted to low socioeconomic status.

Stanton-Salazar (2010) took a slightly different approach with his study on social capital. His study shared Lin’s (2000) ideals of social capital and access, but created a framework based on social capital and institutional support. Stanton-Salazar expanded the role of social networks by referring to them as gateways to improved human development, school achievement, and social mobility. Social capital, like the emancipation theory, cannot stand on its own or change by itself. Stanton-Salazar’s framework demonstrates that institutions can have a positive or negative effect on social capital. Stanton-Salazar viewed institutions with the same regard that Lin (2000) viewed resources.

In his study, Stanton-Salazar (2010) looked at the devastating effects that a gap in institutional support can have on a child who is a member of a disadvantaged social network. The findings of his study showed that it is more difficult for students to improve their social capital if there is a gap in the institutional support they are receiving. Students will most likely remain in the category of disadvantaged, continuing the cycle of disadvantaged groups (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006), if students are not receiving support within their schools such as from high school counselors, tutoring, or rigorous coursework that makes the student a competitive applicant for college admissions. Stanton-Salazar study concluded that often students remain in the disadvantaged social group, they will most likely remain in that social group for the remainder of their life and will continue the cycle, with their children being born into the same social group.
The study conducted by Pham and Keenan (2011) combined the works of Lin (2000), Stanton-Salazar (1997), and Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) in examining the impact of institutional support for improving college admission for first-generation college students. Their study made the connection that first-generation college students are mostly socioeconomically disadvantaged because of their parents’ lack of access to postsecondary education. The study focused on the institutional support needed for socioeconomically disadvantaged students to change their social capital. It found that guidance high school counselors play a large role in accessing resources for the disadvantaged group. Pham and Keenan (2011) concluded that first-generation college students need more time with their guidance high school counselors to gain enough support, which leads to the correct selection of postsecondary educational opportunities that fit the students’ needs.

The works of Lin (2000) and Stanton-Salazar (1997) confirmed Freire’s (1970) work on emancipation theory with respect to using education as a change agent in the realm of social capital. Both researchers understood the importance of social capital and how students can be oppressed by their inability to gain access to available resources. Education can end the cycle of disadvantage by providing students with the resources they are lacking. This may be done by exposing students to rigorous frameworks that will either help them function within the social system that has oppressed them, or give them enough resources to circumvent their oppressive social systems (Hinton and Adams, 2006).

Freire’s (1970) emancipation theory posits that education is a means of emancipating an oppressed group of people. Social capital theory says that when students
have access to more educational resources, they gain access to higher educational opportunities and social networks, thus leading to a change in social capital. Both theories support the researcher’s dissertation topic by speaking to how education can help an oppressed group and how they can benefit from the relationships made through education, using high school counselors as a conduit. Benefits may be material, as money, or non-material, as power, prestige, and social approval. Either way, your social capital can increase based on your educational pursuits and the network you build. High school counselors can be useful in finding ways to support traditionally underrepresented students in their pursuit of postsecondary degrees (Bowen et al., 2009). Gaining social capital of underrepresented students could give access to resources needed including material resources, such as literature and admission requirements for schools, and information that high school counselors could share with students about the process (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2012).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how the role of high school counselors can improve college admission and perseverance. The study focused on academic and non-academic support services that are provided by high school counselors.

**Research Questions**

Based on the reviewed literature, this study focused on the following research questions:

**RQ1:** To what extent are high school counselors able to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at institutions of higher education?
RQ2: How do high school counselors feel they influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll in higher education institutions?

RQ3: How do fiscal and structural elements at the school and state level influence the high school counselor’s ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because in the United States there are economic concerns, wage gaps, and a need for highly educated workers (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2009). Given that a requirement for many jobs/careers is postsecondary education, it is a need to assure that high school students in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are allowed the same opportunity to compete in this global marketplace. For example, the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic impacted high school students entering college, and likely precipitated a further *widening gap* between low- and high-income students. The results of students being out of school will not be known for some time. School closures have separated students from peers, teachers, high school counselors, and other staff members who can support them during important developmental transitions. Low-income students are less likely to have someone who can help them navigate college decisions, decipher complicated financial aid packages, calculate out-of-pocket costs, and weigh the best offer (Woods & Domina, 2014). Finally, this study shows the impact that college counselors can have on secondary education and how involvement with high school counselors can elevate socioeconomic status and capital.
Definitions of Terms

*American School Counselor Association* – This refers to the professional school counseling organization that assists high school counselors understand their role to help students in the areas of academic, career, and personal/social emotional development.

*College enrollment behaviors* – This refers to behaviors and the decision making process students undertake if they plan to attend college. (Perna et al., 2008).

*College-going culture* – This involves the norms and behaviors within schools that promote college enrollment (Kim & Nunez, 2013).

*High school counselor* – Refers to an individual who is a licensed high school counselor employed in public Title I public high schools. This individual monitors student progress, encourages high academic student performance, and provides academic, career, and college planning.

*First-generation college student* – A student who is the first in their family to attend postsecondary education.

*Fiscal/structural elements* – Fiscal and structural elements in this research refer to (a) counselor shortage and larger student caseloads as a result of the state and local budget cuts in education (Cumpton & Giani, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014); (b) the difficulty counselors experience meeting with students because they are inundated with duties unrelated to their role (Belasco, 2013; Perna et al., 2008); and (c) confusion regarding job duties of a high school counselor which interfere with ensuring that students are properly prepared for the college admission cycle (Hill, 2012).
Gatekeeping – Refers to a practice used by counselors on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to discourage college attendance, or promote 2-year, rather than 4-year college attendance.

High socioeconomic status – According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education, school districts group communities for the purposes of determining socioeconomic status and examining student achievement. Families who make a median income of $75,000 are considered high income. There are two school districts, one 8.0 miles and one 6.8 miles from my study location that meet the qualifications of high socioeconomic status and have vastly different educational results than inner city youth.

Human capital – The belief that financial resources are tied to whether and where a student attends college (Belasco, 2013).

Informational resources – The data and information used by an organization or a person for the benefit to assist or produce something to its utility or worth. This resource can be classified into renewable and non-renewable resources. (Brown et al 2016)

Institutional agents – Refers to individuals such as counselors, teachers, and family members who have a commitment and capacity to transmit institutional resources such as information about college admission, assistance with career decision making, and academic tutoring and mentoring (Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

Low socioeconomic students – According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2012), low socioeconomic status is assigned to students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which is tied to the federal definition of poverty and through Title 1. Other factors used to determine low socioeconomic status
include parental education and occupational level, family income, and access to resources.

**Minority** – Defined as a member from an underrepresent group (Latino, Hispanic, Native Pacific Islander, Black, and Native American).

**Non-counseling activities** – This refers to those activities performed by the school counselor deemed inappropriate by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2012).

**Postsecondary** – This refers to any program or institution that provides education or training beyond 12th grade.

**Role confusion and conflict** – This refers to differences in opinions and expectations from school administrators, teachers, parents, and students (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2019).

**Social capital** – The collective value of all social networks and the power they possess.

**Social networks** – Groups to which people belong that can be based on socioeconomic status, gender, race, and class.

**Title I** – Financial assistance provided to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018)

**Urban schools** – This refers to a school located in a greater metropolitan area where approximately 50% of families qualify for free or reduced lunches (Catapano & Gary, 2017).
Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of this qualitative phenomenological study. The three research questions, which were developed and aligned with the problem statement, were intended to address how school counselors influence college enrollment decisions for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and what budgetary and structural elements within schools, or at the district/state level potentially interfere with their ability to support college trajectories. The qualitative methodology was further aligned to the research questions and provided the framework to understand the phenomenon.

High school counselors are in a unique position to assist and assure college success for all who desire to go to college. Unfortunately, many high school students in socioeconomic disadvantaged communities are not moving successfully from college aspirations, to access, to persistence in college, and finally to a degree. The research suggests that high school counselors are in a unique position to assist students in their pursuit of college choice, by using social capital to gain access and help change the trajectory and improve college admission and perseverance. Chapter 2 examines the literature that focuses on social capital and college enrollment, and discusses the challenges high school counselors face providing postsecondary counseling and strategies for promoting successful postsecondary enrollment behaviors. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the study, explaining the research context and participants. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of how the data were analyzed, an explanation of the coding system, and a written and graphic summary of the results. Finally, Chapter 5 includes implications and further research recommendations.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

A thorough review of the literature identified the need for the United States to improve college enrollment rates among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The literature further revealed high school counselors as a potential avenue to address the identified need. Shamsuddin (2016) suggested that high school counselors are central to helping low socioeconomic students learn, understand, steer, and pursue the steps required for postsecondary enrollment. However, it is not known how high school counselors influence postsecondary enrollment. This chapter reviews several topics which emerged related to the high school counselor influence on postsecondary enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The first topic includes the high school counselor as a form of social capital who serves as a key college-related resource for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds during the college enrollment process. The second topic conveys challenges faced by high school counselors that prevent postsecondary counseling. The last topic relates to strategies used by high school counselors that promote postsecondary enrollment behaviors. Based on an extensive review of the literature, each topic was relevant.

Social Capital and College Enrollment

This section of the literature review examines those individuals who served as sources of social capital during the college preparation and enrollment process for low socioeconomic students. This section also investigates other forms of social capital and
scrutinized whether social capital and networks are intrinsic in the lives of all students. More specifically, this section explores several topics identified and supported by the literature, including: (a) high school counselors are often the primary form of social capital for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014); (b) parents and families from low socioeconomic backgrounds lack the college-related knowledge to support students navigating the college experience (Holland, 2015; Ryan, 2016); and (c) criticisms exist on whether students from low socioeconomic background are without social capital (information and resources) required to navigate the college enrollment process.

This section on social capital and college enrollment demonstrates the relevance for the selection of this topic. Each topic provides valuable insight into the effects of social capital on postsecondary enrollment outcomes for low socioeconomic students. The justification for the topic of social capital and college enrollment for this study is based on the current literature on college access. Gonzalez (2013) and Belasco (2013) maintained that when examining and analyzing low socioeconomic students’ postsecondary access in the high school context, the exploration of social capital is relevant. The journey to college enrollment among students from low socioeconomic groups is evidenced by inequities in access to college information, preparation, and knowledge. Researchers have documented the differences and effects of socioeconomic status and postsecondary enrollment and examined the reasons why disparities in college attendance exist among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Belasco, 2013; Cox, 2016; Shamsuddin, 2016). The most notable determinants included the lack of social capital (access to information) (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Perna, 2015).
Much of the research to determine the impact that relationships have on why some students apply, enroll, and graduate from college use social capital. Social capital, first conceptualized by Bourdieu (1986) and later expanded by Coleman (1988), refers to the degree to which individuals can access information and resources in their social networks (Tzanakis, 2013; Wohn et al., 2013). Coleman’s (1988) concept of social capital exists within personal relationships among people and institutions such as schools, churches, and organizations (Hopkins et al., 2013), which forms social networks (Hill et al., 2014; Tovar, 2015). Coleman theorized that social capital focuses on tangible resources embedded in relationships, such as information transferred from one person to another (Tzanakis, 2013; Wohn et al., 2013).

Social capital is broadly defined as information and resources embedded in social networks that individuals access through relationships with parents, peers, and high school personnel to achieve his/her goals (Hill et al., 2014; Stephan, 2013). Researchers have identified a clear connection between social capital (access to information and resources) and the successful enrollment into 4-year colleges (Hill et al., 2014; Holland, 2015; Klevan et al., 2015; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Wohn et al., 2013). Further, several students have revealed the importance of social capital especially for low socioeconomic students when navigating the college-going process. (Belasco, 2013; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Wohn et al., 2013). Thus, to fully understand the effects of social capital on college enrollment, various sources of social capital as well as criticisms will be examined.
High School Counselor

Students acquire social capital through networks with others. Within schools, high school counselors serve as a valuable source of social capital among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds due to disparities in college informational resources (Brown et al., 2016; Comer, 2015; Lai et al., 2015; McKillip et al., 2013; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Further, Belasco (2013) and Holland (2015) argued that high school counselors are an important source of social capital to help plan and facilitate the transition from high school to college. In an early qualitative study, Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) described high school counselors as “information channels,” where students obtain the expertise and resources from the network member to whom the individual may not ordinarily have access. However, all of the researchers agree that high school counselors provide tangible college-related information and support, (social capital) which benefit students as they prepare, apply, and enroll in college (Belasco, 2013; Comer, 2015; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Holland, 2015; Lai et al., 2015; McKillip et al., 2013; O’Connor et al., 2010; Savitz-Romer, 2012).

When high school counselors develop a relationship with their students, social capital is created. Through those relationships, students gain college knowledge, advice, and resources, which play an important role in shaping their future (Woods & Domina, 2014). Social capital factors, such as supporting students to complete the college application and offering encouragement, are closely linked to the likelihood of 4-year college enrollment, particularly for African American and Latino students (Woods & Domina, 2014). Such factors contribute to predicting college attendance (Perna et al., 2008). Along those same lines, researchers contended that building and cultivating
relationships between students and counselors can help students manage the unfamiliar landscape of college admissions, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (O’Connor et al., 2010; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

While school personnel have been identified as a valuable form of social capital, especially among first-generation, ethnic/racial minority, and low-income groups, barriers exist. Although Holland’s (2015) study emphasized the building of trust between students and counselors as a link to social capital, obstacles were also identified. Counselor related obstacles to trust in Holland’s (2015) study included ambivalence on the part of the school counselor, inconsistent contact and ambiguous information. Another finding from the study revealed that the school context (multiple job duties performed by the school counselor) created structural constraints that contributed to distrust. The researcher also indicated that when trust is not created, less advantaged students may avoid counselors and miss valuable college information. Similarly, Martinez and Welton (2014) conducted an intersectional analysis from two qualitative studies to investigate how sources of social capital available in three high poverty, high minority Texas high schools shaped college opportunities for Latino and African American students. The findings from the study revealed that while counselors provided tangible college-related information, they were less accessible to provide individual assistance to students due to large caseloads and other duties.

Although high school counselors are capable of building trusting relationships and serve as a valuable source of social capital, their ability to influence the educational outcomes of students has faced scrutiny. Drawing from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 12,144 participants, a quantitative study conducted by
Kushner and Szirony (2014) examined the effect high school counselors’ academic and personal counseling had on postsecondary degree attainment. Results from the study indicated that counseling provided by high school counselors did not positively influence postsecondary degree completion. Another finding revealed that personal counseling provided by the high school counselors had a significant negative effect on postsecondary degree completion. Similarly, Cumpton and Giani (2014) noted that while high school counselors play a significant role in guiding students through the college choice process, isolating the causal effect of the high school counselors’ influence on postsecondary enrollment has been challenging.

The findings from Kushner and Szirony (2014) and Cumpton and Giana (2014) noted the difficulty quantifying the influence of school counselors on postsecondary outcomes. Moreover, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) argued that it should not be assumed that providing access to information and connecting students to additional resources from the high school counselor are the solutions to address the disparities in postsecondary enrollment. In addition to challenges and barriers experienced by high school counselors providing college counseling, some researchers focused on unpleasant encounters between students and high school counselors.

Other scholars identified negative interactions between the student and counselor that can dissuade students from approaching the counselor for college-related information. Several researchers argued that some high school counselors have low expectations of students (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 1997). Moreover, some students view high school counselors as schedulers and place blame for incorrect course placement (Corwin et al., 2004; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014).
Further, some high school counselors have been accused of underestimating students’ academic potential and scheduling them in less rigorous courses, particularly Latino students (Vela et al., 2014).

**Parents and Families**

Parent, family, peers, teachers, and high school counselors are important sources of social capital during the college enrollment process. Several studies detailed the strong influence of parents and families on college trajectories (Belasco, 2013; Lai et al., 2015; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Martin (2013) conducted a quantitative study of 1,181 college-aged students on the role of social networks and family resources during the college admission process for an elite university. The researcher examined the extent to which students from high, middle, and low socioeconomic backgrounds accessed their social networks. Results from the findings indicated that class background predicts the quality and amount of social capital students access, including professional expertise and valuable college-related information. Further findings indicated that students from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds had greater access to family resources, such as parents who attended an elite university, and financial means to attend facilitate admission preferences. However, Klugman’s (2012) study on resource inequity in social capital and college destinations revealed that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with limited or no social capital within their families faced challenges in their decision to apply to college.

The lack of, or limited social capital for students from low socioeconomic families is a potential roadblock on the path to college. The amount and quality of college information that students have access to potentially influence their postsecondary
behaviors (Holland, 2015; Ryan 2016). Several studies have documented that students from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds have different levels of access to college-related social capital (Hopkins et al., 2013; Stephan, 2013). For example, families from high socioeconomic backgrounds often hold college degrees, send their children to private or parochial high schools with greater access to advanced placement courses, possess the resources to pay for college, and have the ability to activate their social capital to access college-related information to help their children when applying to college (Klugman, 2012). Further, these families place higher value and emphasis on educational achievement (Moller et al., 2011), resulting in positive college enrollment outcomes (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013). In contrast, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have parents who did not attend college, thus face difficulty in the college application process.

As students contemplate their decision to apply, enroll, and attend college, they encounter challenges. Many students from minority, low socioeconomic, and first-generation backgrounds face barriers understanding the norms and actions required for college access (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2015; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Ryan, 2016; Welton & Martinez, 2014). While many are academically qualified and capable of attending college, many students do not complete the steps necessary to enroll (Goodman et al., 2015; Ryan, 2016). Moreover, they hesitate in applying to college for many reasons, including financial constraints, lack of preparation (Rivera, 2014), and unfamiliarity with the order of the steps (Ryan, 2016). Some of the steps involve ensuring enrollment in the correct courses and preparing, completing, and submitting college and financial aid applications (Klasik, 2012; McKinney & Novak, 2015; Roderick et al.,
Navigating the steps required for college enrollment depends on access to resources, assistance, support, and college knowledge (Klasik, 2012). As such, these students often rely on family and friends for college information because of high levels of trust (Jeon et al., 2016; Stephan, 2013). However, often, family and friends from low socioeconomic backgrounds are limited in resources or personal experience (Stephan, 2013), resulting in the decision by many of these students to opt out of applying to college (Belasco, 2013). When families are limited in social capital, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds seek out other means to understand applying, enrolling, and attending college.

**Criticisms of Social Capital**

Some studies have criticized the shortsightedness of social capital theory. For example, Robinson and Roksa (2016) and Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen (2012) suggested that social capital and networks are inherent in all school, family, and community contexts. Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen (2012) further argued that while low socioeconomic students have different levels of social capital than other students, close personal networks, such as their peers and school personnel, positively drive postsecondary enrollment decisions. Many researchers agreed that the issue of limited and lack of social capital is heightened for this population because the amount and quality of social capital is the determinant for whether students from low socioeconomic backgrounds enroll in college (Belasco, 2013; Hill et al., 2014; Holland, 2015; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Consequently, without adequate amounts of college related social capital, the chance of these students attending college decreases. (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Rivera, 2014).
The literature review in this section describes and synthesizes how the absence or presence of social capital (information and resources) affects college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic groups. The findings from Martin’s (2013) study indicated that class background predicts the quality and amount of social capital students access, including professional expertise and valuable college-related information. However, Dyce et al. (2013), Rios-Aguilar and Deil-Amen (2012), and Robinson and Roksa (2016), argued that social capital is never absent, but inherent in all social networks including schools, families, and communities. Nevertheless, Klugman (2012) contended that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often face challenges in their decision to apply to college when social capital is limited or absent in their homes and families. When parents and families of students from low-income, first-generation, and ethnic/minority groups have little or no social capital, Belasco (2013) and Holland (2015) argued that high school counselors are the primary source of social capital to help plan and facilitate the transition from high school to college. However, the studies conducted by Hoxby and Avery (2013) and Hoxby and Turner (2013) revealed that counselors working in schools with high concentrations of low income and ethnic minority students often lack the expertise and training to support students, particularly those applying to highly selective colleges and universities.

Although high school counselors have been identified as the primary source of social capital during the college choice, preparation, and enrollment process, other studies suggested that peers are also important sources of social capital for low socioeconomic students. Rivera (2014) and Perez-Felkner (2015) argued that peers positively influenced the 4-year college enrollment decision among low income and ethnic minority groups.
Challenges High School Counselors Face Providing Postsecondary Counseling

This section of the literature review explores the fiscal and structural challenges encountered by high school counselors when helping students navigate the college admission terrain. Specifically, this section examines topics consistent with the literature including: (a) counselor shortage and larger student caseloads as a result of the state and local budget cuts in education (Cumpton & Giani, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014); (b) the difficulty counselors experience meeting with students because they are inundated with duties unrelated to their role (Belasco, 2013; Perna et al., 2008); and (c) confusion regarding job duties of a high school counselor which interfere with ensuring that students are properly prepared for the college admission cycle (Hill, 2012). Each topic is appropriate to better understand the effects of constraints within the high school context on the high school counselor’s ability to support low socioeconomic students to prepare, apply, and enroll in college.

Understanding barriers that interfere with school counselors’ ability to influence postsecondary enrollment may help address the low college enrollment gap between low and high socioeconomic groups. Woods and Domina (2014) noted that high school counselors are positioned to influence student’s college predispositions. However, Bryan et al. (2015) contended that high school counselors face challenges providing postsecondary counseling in schools serving more low income and ethnic minority students because the student-to-counselor ratios are higher, few college planning resources are available, and less school-wide emphasis is placed on college access. The justification for the selection of this topic is based on the identified need for this study, which is to reduce the college enrollment gap between low and high socioeconomic
groups by examining why and how high school counselors are able to improve college enrollment, admission, and perseverance. Further justification for this topic is due to the literature which highlights factors that prohibit counselors from providing college-related support including assignment of unrelated duties, limiting time, (Belasco, 2013), large caseloads (Woods & Domina, 2014), lack of clarity of job duties (Paolina & Topdemir, 2013), and disproportionality of resource availability in schools with high concentration of low-income and ethnic/minority students (Bryan et al., 2015; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Kushner & Szirony, 2014; Rikoon et al., 2015).

Counselors face a variety of challenges in a unique set of demands providing counseling services to students. Some of the challenges have been debated since the inception of the high school counselor position (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Gysbers & Stanley, 2014; Paolini & Topdemir, 2013; Woods & Domina, 2014). Other major responsibilities include crisis intervention, test administration, discipline, scheduling, developmental counseling, and assessment and evaluation (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013; Perna et al., 2008). Belasco (2013) noted that the many counseling activities assigned to the school counselor interfere with the ability to support student’s college preparation and enrollment decisions.

High school counselors, particularly those who with high populations of African American and Latino students, experience imbalance of resources within schools (Engberg & Wolnaik, 2010) and higher counselor caseloads. High caseloads prevent them from being available to proactively engage and reach out to students to provide needed support (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). In addition, researchers noted that high school counselors do not have enough time to dedicate to postsecondary counseling and at most,
spend one-fifth of their time on college-related activities (Belasco, 2013). Third, barriers such as limited knowledge on postsecondary counseling, inadequate resources, and structural constraints in schools serving predominately African-American and Latino students affect the quality of the counseling program and types of postsecondary activities that high school counselors are able to provide (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2004; Perna et al., 2008).

**Budget Cuts, Counselor Shortage, and Caseload**

Many school related conditions influence the extent to which postsecondary counseling is provided in K-12 public schools. Researchers have looked at both state and local levels to determine the conditions that interfere with postsecondary counseling (Bryan et al., 2015; Kushner & Szirony, 2014; Perna et al., 2008). Perhaps the most significant obstacle identified by researchers is the student-to-counselor ratio (Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2018; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Kushner & Scirony, 2014; Perna et al., 2008; Welton & Martinez, 2014; Wood & Domina, 2014). Woods and Domina (2014) noted that counselor caseload is often referred to as student-to-counselor ratio and is usually measured by the number of students in a school divided by the number of counselors in a school. ASCA recommends a 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio; however, in many schools, the number has fluctuated, in some cases doubled and tripled (ASCA, 2012 Clinedinst et al., 2011; Woods & Domina, 2014). These factors determine how time is spent with students. However, Cumpton and Giani (2014) noted that state policies and budgets determine counseling availability to provide postsecondary counseling, while the Perna et al. (2008) study found that in many states, policies at the state level are unrelated to the availability of counselors. Nevertheless, Perna et al. (2008) conceded that without
policies to mandate counselor caseloads, many counselors, particularly those who work in schools serving low-income and ethnic/minority schools, experience higher student-to-counselor ratios.

It is important to note that there are differences in the way that states organize their educational systems. For example, some states leave educational governance to local school districts, while others maintain administrative authority to mandate educational decisions (Carey & Martin, 2015). In New Jersey counselor caseload fluctuates based on funding provided at the state level. Another notable factor identified by the researchers was the shortage of counselors brought about by limited funding in education. The number of high school counselors in the United States is relatively small given the number of students they serve (Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Kushner & Szirony, 2014).

Budget cuts in various states have resulted in the elimination of key school level positions. In public schools in the United States, high school counselors are nationally underrepresented (Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Kushner & Szirony, 2014). There are not many high school counselors to serve students, and in schools with high populations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds there are fewer high school counselors’ (Hurwitz & Howell, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics (2018) there are 362,300 high school counselors who support 61,202,324 students. A shortage of high school counselors, particularly in urban schools, which are affected by poverty, violence, low achievement, and limited resources means that high school counselors face more complex demands. (College Board, 2018; Hurwitz & Howell, 2013, 2014; Iasevoli, 2015).
Limited school-based funding limits overall capacity to provide key services to students. Scholars have argued that counselors experience challenges providing postsecondary counseling to students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds because their caseloads are too high (Belasco, 2013; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014). These students are considered at-risk of not applying to college for a variety of reasons. When counselors have insurmountable caseloads they cannot adequately provide the appropriate support information to students (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014). Students who receive lower levels of information on college are less likely to apply or enroll in college (Roderick et al., 2011). Limited funding and capacity increases the overall number of students each counselor must serve.

When caseloads are higher, counselors experience difficulty meeting with all students. Moreover, larger caseloads prevent high school counselors from reaching out to support students (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014), while counselors with smaller caseloads produce higher college going rates (Dounay, 2014). When the counselor’s case load is large, students are left to seek out information from other sources (Perna et al., 2008). Further, counselors with more than 500 students on their caseload spend significantly less time on full secondary counseling than counselors with smaller caseloads (Clinedinst et al., 2011; Woods & Domina, 2014). Researchers noted that counselors within schools with more than 2,000 students had an average caseload of 502 students compared to those schools with fewer students (College Board, 2017; National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 2018).
Strained resources within schools negatively impact adults as well as students. Several empirical articles indicate the negative effects that high student-to-counselor ratios have on the high school counselor’s performance (Corwin et al., 2004; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2005; Wood & Domina, 2014). For example, in an earlier study, Corwin et al. (2004) conducted a qualitative case study of how overcrowding in schools affected school counselors’ abilities to advise, offer effective guidance, and illustrate the structural constraints and student perceptions on college support systems. The study revealed that in schools where there were predominately African American students, the student-to-counselor ratios were higher; fewer college planning and preparation resources were available; and minimal emphasis was placed on college access. In addition, the study found that the high school counselors’ efforts to advise students were impacted by the number of non-counseling activities undertaken such as scheduling, testing, and creating social support systems. Lastly, high school counselors who worked in high poverty schools with higher concentrations of African American and Latino students were unable to provide sufficient guidance due to funding limitations, time constraints, and large caseloads.

Further studies have explored positive and negative factors associated with smaller caseloads. Woods and Domina (2014) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the relationship between the high school counselor and the high school counselor's caseload to college pipeline. The findings from the study indicated that students within schools served by counselors with smaller caseloads experienced higher levels of success navigating through the pipeline. Further findings revealed that students who attended schools where the school counselor had higher caseloads were less likely to
speak to a school counselor regarding college related plans, take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), or enroll in a 4-year college.

Another quantitative study by Engberg and Gilbert (2014) examined the relationship between the average counselor caseload and hours spent on college counseling and resources in college going rates. The result from the study indicated that counselor caseload, hours spent on postsecondary counseling, and resources provided were strong predictors of a school’s 4-year college enrollment rate. However, several studies identified school level threats as factors that interfered with high school counselors providing postsecondary support to students.

**Non-Counseling Activities**

Many expectations and demands are placed upon high school counselors. They are expected to play a considerable role in promoting the academic success of all students (Carnes-Holt et al., 2012). However, the counseling activities of the high school counselor are broad (Hassard & Costar, 2012), unmanageable (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014), inconsistent (Goodman-Scott, 2013), and generally revolve around testing, scheduling, and helping to deal with suicide prevention, drug abuse, pregnancy, crisis, and sexuality (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013). Traditionally, high school counselors have undertaken non-counseling activities to meet the demands of multiple stakeholders, including principals, parents, teachers, and students (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013). ASCA (2012) defined non-counseling activities as those administrative tasks not supported by the national model (foundation, delivery system, management system, and accountability). Examples of non-counseling activities include classroom coverage, master schedule duties, student discipline, grade-point average computation, hall and lunch duties, and student record
maintenance, etc. (ASCA, 2012). Such activities consume time, compromise the high school counselors’ ability to provide postsecondary counseling, and result in conflict regarding the appropriate role of the school counselor (Belasco, 2013; Stone-Johnson, 2015).

High school counselors also face challenges when their roles are unclear and misunderstood. The literature on the role and activities of the high school counselor indicates that key stakeholders, namely district leaders, teachers, and school principals, do not always know or agree on what the role and activities of the high school counselor should entail (Carnes-Holt et al., 2012). More specifically, some researchers argued that many school principals do not have an accurate understanding of the activities and duties that should be performed by the high school counselor (Carnes-Holt et al., 2012; Cigrand et al., 2015; Paolini & Topdemir, 2013; Wachter-Morris & Slaten, 2014). Researchers argued that the assignment of non-counseling duties to high school counselors from the principal is further exacerbated by declining school budgets, daily emergencies, and instructional regulations that lead many school principals to delegate duties to high school counselors, which fall outside their professional roles (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2014; Stone-Johnson, 2015).

High school counselors are advocates and leaders in schools. However, few undertake the lead in informing school administrators and parents about their daily activities (Shimoni & Greenberger, 2015). In fact, researchers have noted that high school counselors should take a more proactive role in educating administrators, parents, students, and the community on the appropriate role and activities to advance the perception by stakeholders of appropriate services (Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Shimoni
& Greenberger, 2014). Finally, when school principals’ beliefs about assigning non-counseling activities are not congruent with ASCA recommendations (Carnes-Holt et al., 2012), role confusion and conflict occur (Tovar, 2015).

Misunderstandings held by the school administrators and parents, and demands placed on high school counselors by multiple stakeholders creates confusion. Role confusion and conflict are not new but continue to remain the greatest challenges facing high school counselors (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013). Role confusion and conflict occur when there is a lack of understanding and clarity about the role, expectations, and responsibilities of the job (Tovar, 2015). Since the establishment of the school counseling profession in the United States over 100 years ago, there has been ongoing confusion and debate regarding the role and activities of the school counselor (Paolini & Topdemir, 2013). Researchers noted the ongoing debate on the primary purpose of the school counseling position, which continues to fuel role confusion and conflict (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). For instance, ASCA (2012) posits that the primary goal of the school counselor is to promote academic achievement. However, the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA), which was established by the College Board, as well as the National Association for College Admissions (NACAC), emphasized that the primary role of the school counselor is to promote college access and readiness (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Even though each professional counseling association has identified the primary role and responsibilities of the school counselor and emphasized academic and college planning, role confusion and conflict persist.

High school counselors experience high levels of role confusion and conflict daily. Engberg and Gilbert (2014) contended that role confusion persists because of the
many duties and activities placed on them by the school principals, teachers, parents, and students. In most high schools, high school counselors are expected to deal with issues ranging from mental health, maintenance of records, meeting with parents, monitoring graduation status, crisis and conflict prevention and intervention, and attendance intervention (Paulini & Topdemir, 2013). As a result, role confusion occurs.

**Strategies Promoting Successful Postsecondary Enrollment Behaviors**

This section of the literature review examines counseling strategies utilized by high school counselors that promote successful postsecondary enrollment behaviors. Specifically, this section explores college preparation, application support, and intensive intervention strategies. This topic is appropriate to better understand the effect of the high school counselor, which facilitates how students successfully prepare, apply, and enroll in college. Understanding those college-related strategies utilized by high school counselors that promote successful postsecondary enrollment behavior may help address the college enrollment gap between low and high socioeconomic groups. The justification for the selection of this topic is based on the identified need and literature which indicates active and intensive direct support from the high school counselor has been proven to have a positive impact on students (Castleman & Goodman, 2015; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). McDonough’s (1997) study, the first to call attention to the role of high school counselors and college choice, indicated that daily support and interaction from the high school counselor reinforced college aspirations. In a follow-up study McDonough (2005) noted that active and direct support from the high school counselor to help students from low-income, rural, and urban schools prepare for college
rather than just disseminating information, has a positive effect on chances a student will enroll in college.

**College Preparation**

High school counselors provide students with college-related information to prepare and complete the steps required for college. McDonough (2005) suggested that high school counselors are instrumental in helping to prepare students for college beyond printing and publishing information on college. However, Shamsuddin (2016) conducted observations and interviews of 24 high school counselors and the types of college-related information provided to students from 20 urban high schools. The findings revealed that although counselors provided a strong college preparation foundation and focused on the mechanics of the college application, students attending urban schools needed more supporting context (college admission requirements, how the high school grade point average affects eligibility, etc.).

Along those same lines, Savitz-Romer (2012) conducted a phenomenological study to investigate 11 high school counselors’ lived experiences preparing students for college. The participants from the study indicated the difficulty in preparing urban students for college due to student apathy, lack of understanding about college norms, personal issues, and limited college knowledge. However, Ryan (2016) noted that building student counselor trust was an important precursor to supporting those harder to reach students as described by Savitz-Romer (2012).

**College Preparation and Aspirations.** College aspirations are not the same across race and socioeconomic groups. Researchers noted that as socioeconomic status increased, college aspirations increased, and students were significantly more likely to
attend a 2- or 4- year college versus not enrolling at all (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014). In contrast, those students whose parents had not attended college often lacked the knowledge about college to encourage college aspirations (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 2004). Many students rely on individuals within their family to provide the knowledge about college, but not all students have family members with adequate knowledge about college to encourage college aspirations (Klasik, 2012; Pham & Keenan, 2011). Socioeconomic, low-income, minority, and first-generation students will often lack the college knowledge needed to understand the steps necessary, which include determining how to prepare for college; knowing about financing a college education; and understanding how to complete the college application (Means & Pyne, 2015). Thus, these families must then rely on social or college-linking networks and institutional agents such as high school counselors, teachers, peers, or other adults to influence college aspirations and provide college-related information (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Tovar, 2015).

High school counselors can prepare students for college by influencing college aspirations. Aspirations are expressed as hopes, desires, and dreams students have regarding his/her future (Bryan et al., 2013; Knaggs et al., 2015). The literature suggested that high school counselors could potentially have a positive influence on college aspirations, choice, and rate of applying to college (Bryan et al., 2009, 2015; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Shamsuddin, 2016). Research has shown that resources accessed through social networks among urban students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are limited (Engberg & Wolniak, 2014). Thus, these students rely heavily on high school counselors to facilitate college preparation by encouraging college aspirations (Belasco,
More specifically, institutional agents like the school counselor give students from low socioeconomic backgrounds the opportunity to access information, privileges, and resources needed to increase college aspirations (Tovar, 2015).

Providing college-related information and resources to all students is one of the many duties of the high school counselor. Such resources must be easily accessible and current. Informational resources provided by many high school counselors to increase college aspirations include access to college knowledge (Savitz-Romer, 2012); support with college planning and matching; and college application assistance (College Board, 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). In addition, when high school counselors support students with information on financial aid, college fairs, and academic assistance programs, they help to facilitate college transition behaviors and increase the percentage of students who attend 4-year colleges (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Previous studies indicated that counselors who arranged college visits had a positive and significant effect on 2-year college enrollment rates (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Thus, high school counselors serve as an important source to support college aspirations as students engage in postsecondary planning for both 2- and 4-year colleges (Martinez & Welton, 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Throughout the research, high school counselors help to encourage college aspirations, however, other studies explored how college aspirations vary across groups.

**College Preparation and Expectations.** While college aspirations are essential for students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, there is debate among researchers on the viability of expectations over aspirations. Holland (2015)
suggested that college aspirations do not always translate into 4-year college enrollment. For example, a quantitative study of 323 students conducted by Roderick et al. (2011) examined the extent to which college-going climates in urban high schools were associated with students applying, enrolling, and choosing a 4-year college. The findings suggested that college aspirations and academic qualifications did not translate into college enrollment unless urban schools developed college-going norms and structures that actively supported students through the college application process. In sum, the researchers argued that when urban schools create norms where the teachers have high expectations, where the school culture supports college attendance, and where more students complete the financial aid application, students will likely apply, attend, and enroll in a 4 year college that matches their interests and qualifications. Some researchers suggested that college expectations are better predictors of the student’s behavior to attend than aspirations (Kim & Nunez, 2013; Niu & Tienda, 2013; Parker et al., 2016). Moreover, Niu and Tienda (2013) argued that students who reported they expected to attend college pursued college-preparatory courses, took college entrance exams, and excelled in high school, and thus were more likely to attend college. Researchers noted that having high expectations coupled with taking active steps are predictors of college enrollment.

The development of college expectations is essential. Researchers argued that college-related expectations are more important than aspiring to go to college as well as completing the necessary steps towards college (Klasik, 2012; Ryan, 2016). Bryant (2015) noted the important role high school counselors have at setting high expectations for students. In addition to high school counselors having high expectations of his/her
students, findings from the literature suggest that students’ expectations are also important. A study conducted by Ryan (2016) investigated Latino students who maintained expectations of obtaining a bachelor’s degree through the end of high school. Results from the findings indicated that college enrollment was associated with the degree to which Latino students’ college expectations aligned with the completion of steps required for college. In addition, Klasik (2012) conducted a quantitative study, surveying 15,000 10th grade students across 150 high schools to examine the steps to college enrollment for students from different academic, family income, and racial/ethnic groups. The findings revealed that students with higher levels of social capital and expectations completed the required college preparation steps for 4-year college enrollment, which included:

1. Meeting with a high school counselor and college representative.
2. Expressing interest in a 4-year college by 10th grade.
3. Maintaining that interest to 12th grade.
4. Taking college entrance exams; attaining minimal requirements for college and
5. Applying to college.

In addition, students who met with the high school counselor and a college representative were significantly more likely to apply to a 4-year college. Moreover, Hurwitz et al. (2015) found that mandating college entrance exams, such as the SAT increased the 4-year college enrollment rates of students by 2 to 3 percentage points.
College Application Support

Researchers agree that the completion of the college application is a necessary step in the college admissions process. Robinson and Roksa (2016) identified the college application as a crucial step in the college enrollment process, particularly for students from low socioeconomic groups who do not always apply to college despite being eligible to attend. While multiple factors that prevent students from applying to college are outside the control of the high school counselor, Robinson and Roksa (2016) argued that they have more influence on whether students apply, where they apply, and if they actually enroll. The results from the researchers’ study indicated that consulting with a counselor played an important role in students’ decision to complete a college application, particularly those who applied to a few colleges, which increased the likelihood of college enrollment. Along those same lines, Pallais (2014) found that low-income students submitted more college applications when the ACT increased the number of free college entrance scores students were able to send to colleges and universities, which resulted in college matriculation. While the strategies described by researchers emphasized the value of seeing the high school counselor to complete the college application as a viable strategy and a huge resource, Hill (2008) highlighted the importance of providing intensive counseling as a critical intervention strategy that influenced college enrollment.

Intensive Intervention

The impact of the high school counselor is illustrated in several studies that focused on college-related interventions and strategies that promote college enrollment. Results from the studies suggested that rigorous college-related interventions have
meaningful impacts on college enrollment among low socioeconomic students (Carrel & Sacerdote, 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014; Castleman & Goodman, 2015). For example, Castleman et al. (2012) conducted an experimental study of 162 seniors from seven small charter schools to investigate the effect of offering intensive postsecondary counseling to low socioeconomic students on college matriculation. This was conducted during the summer immediately after high school graduation. Researchers found that counselors who provided intensive postsecondary counseling during the summer to low socioeconomic students resulted in substantial improvements in college enrollment, such as (a) helping students secure financial aid, (b) completing and submitting required paperwork to colleges, and (c) alleviating stress about leaving home to attend college. Researchers noted that the effects from this study were statistically significant (Castleman et al., 2014). Other analysis on counselor-related interventions had similar findings.

To summarize, the literature in this section describes the effects of college-counseling strategies on the college plans of low-income students. McDonough (2005) suggested that high school counselors are instrumental in helping to prepare students for college. Furthermore, Engberg and Gilbert (2014) and Martinez and Welton (2014) argued that when counselors provide college preparation support, they help to facilitate college transition behaviors. However, Shamsuddin’s (2016) study revealed that while high school counselors typically provide strong counseling infrastructures dedicated to college preparation and application support, students attending urban schools often require more support.
Along those same lines, Savitz-Romer’s (2012) study found that high school counselors faced difficulty preparing students for college due to student apathy, lack of understanding of college norms, and limited college knowledge due to low college expectation. Researchers noted that the lack of apathy was due to low aspirations and expectations, in which the latter is more closely tied to 4-year outcomes (Klasik, 2012; Roderick et al., 2012; Ryan, 2016). Nevertheless, Robinson and Roksa (2016) indicated that while multiple factors prevent students from applying to college, high school counselors have more influence on whether students apply, where they apply, and if they enroll. Other studies discussed intensive intervention. Researchers noted that intensive counselor guidance and strong relationships have a positive effect on chances a student will enroll in college (Castleman & Goodman, 2015; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; McDonough, 2005; Ryan, 2016). In general, the college-related strategies presented in this section may help to bolster college enrollment rates among low socioeconomic students.

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review focused on high school counselors and how they improve college admission and perseverance of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This literature review gave information on social capital and its influence on college enrollment (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2015; Holland, 2015); challenges high school counselors face when providing postsecondary counseling (Cumpton & Giani, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014); and college counseling strategies (Castleman et al., 2012; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Shamsuddin, 2016).
High school counselors in the United States are tasked with providing support to students as they prepare, select, apply, and enroll in college. However, they perform various duties and face numerous challenges and barriers, preventing them from consistently providing support (Belasco, 2013). Among those challenges are large caseloads, gatekeeping practices, non-counseling duties, limited availability, fiscal and structural constraints, little training on postsecondary admission, and conflict and confusion by school administrators, teachers, and parents on the role of the school counselors (Egberg & Gilbert, 2014; Perna, 2015; Woods & Domina, 2014). Despite these challenges, researchers noted that high school counselors have a positive impact on students (Savitz-Romer, 2012) and are key to facilitating the transition from high school to postsecondary college enrollment and achievement. (Avery et al., 2014; Belasco, 2013; Perna et al., 2008). Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the study explaining the research context and participants.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate high school counselors' influence on the college enrollment decision of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while they attended Title I public high schools in northern New Jersey. In addition, this study examined the fiscal and structural elements that impact high school counselors’ ability to influence low socioeconomic student’s college enrollment decisions. The following three fiscal and structural elements were examined:

1. Counselor shortage and larger student caseloads as a result of the state and local budget cuts in education (Cumpton & Giani, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014);

2. The difficulty counselors experienced meeting with students because they are inundated with duties unrelated to their role (Belasco, 2013; Perna et al., 2008); and

3. Confusion regarding job duties of a high school counselor which interfered with ensuring that students were properly prepared for the college admission cycle (Hill, 2012).

High school counselors are pivotal in facilitating (influencing) students’ college enrollment decisions (Belasco, 2013; Shamsuddin, 2016). This study identifies the school counselors’ activities that shape and influence postsecondary college enrollment behaviors. Due to the limited qualitative studies on high school counselors and their
influence on student’s enrollment outcomes (Belasco, 2013), this study examined the nuanced role of high school counselors and how they influenced college enrollment decisions. The research findings advanced the knowledge and dialogue within the counseling profession, particularly among new counselors, on effective strategies to influence students’ college enrollment pathways. This chapter provides an overview of the problem under investigation, methodology, and research questions. This chapter also describes how data was collected, categorized, and thematically analyzed.

**Problem Statement**

This exploratory approach examined the perceptions of how high school counselors influenced postsecondary enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while they attended Title I public high schools in northern New Jersey. It is also unclear how fiscal and structural elements at the school and state levels are perceived as having influenced high school counselors’ ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Previous research has uncovered the significance of the high school counselor on students’ college plans, particularly those from minority, low-income, and first-generation backgrounds (Cox, 2016; Holland, 2015; Lapan et al., 2012; Savits-Romer, 2012, Welton & Martinez, 2014).

However, high school counselors are often discounted in the research on college enrollment and attainment (McKillip et al., 2013). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018) research findings of the educational widening gap (four out of 10 students who enter college graduate within 6 years) in college enrollment and attainment among low socioeconomic groups and the benefits associated with earning a college degree (Cox, 2016, Knaggs et al., 2015; Ng et al., 2014), the role of the school counselors
has become critical (Bryan et al., 2015). The researcher posed important questions for this study about how high school counselors can help encourage and facilitate college enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and why they can influence college prospects.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for the qualitative phenomenological study were motivated by a desire to describe a common experience among high school counselors on how they feel they can influence the college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and how school and state-level fiscal and structural elements are perceived to impact the high school counselor’s ability to influence college enrollment outcomes. Based on this, the following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** To what extent are high school counselors able to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at institutions of higher education?

**RQ2:** How do high school counselors feel they influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll in higher education institutions?

**RQ3:** How do fiscal and structural elements at the school and state level influence the high school counselor’s ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socio-economic backgrounds?

The interviews provided a detailed description on the high school counselor and their influence on postsecondary enrollment decisions of low socioeconomic students. They created a vivid picture of how high school counselors use district allocation of funding resources to school sites and the impact on the counselor’s ability to support postsecondary decisions.
Research Design

The research design was a phenomenological qualitative study. This qualitative study examined Title I high school counselors’ perspectives on the phenomenon of college readiness on low socioeconomic students. Creswell and Poth (2019) contend that qualitative research design is appropriate when an issue or problem is complex and hard to understand. The design facilitates obtaining a detailed understanding of a problem or issue that can only be expounded upon by speaking directly with individuals and allowing them to share their stories.

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, collecting data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under the study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the researcher’s reflexivity, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (Creswell & Poth, 2019, p. 42)

For these reasons, a qualitative phenomenological study was used to explore the phenomenon of how Title I public high school counselors influenced college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic conditions. Baskarada (2019) indicates that the research design is a blueprint for the research and links the research questions to the conclusion through the data collection and analysis process. The main sources of data
used in this study were virtual interviews and archival data to address the research questions.

**Research Context**

This study was conducted in nine public, urban high schools in one school district in northern New Jersey. Each of the high schools in this study are Title I high schools. These Title I high schools receive federal funds to support the operation of the Title I programs in the schools. The goal of Title I is to provide academic opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and skills according to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards and prepare high school students to graduate high school and enter postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

There are 8,500 students enrolled in high school in this northern New Jersey school district with 52% female and 48% male students, and with 50.9% Hispanic, 40% Black, 7.8% White, 0.9% Asian, 0.2% Native American, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). According to the New Jersey Department of Education 82.9% of the population receives free or reduced lunch while 17.1% pays for lunch in this northern New Jersey school district. The district has 14 high schools. The study was conducted virtually via Zoom with counselors who represented nine of the 14 urban Title I public high schools located in the district.

**Research Participants**

The research participants are Title I high school counselors in northern New Jersey who work or worked in Title I public high schools within the last 3 years. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019) database there are approximately 400 Title I public high school counselors in northern New Jersey. Of the 400 Title I public high school counselors, 10% were identified for the study as suggested by
(Creswell, 2018). The research participants were identified through the Department of Education Powers School database. The database is a depository of the retired counselors of 1 year as well as active and current counselors. The target population included 40 Title I public high school counselors who work (or worked) in a specific district in northern New Jersey. The researcher randomly selected high school counselors at the Title I schools who met the following criteria:

1. Licensed high school counselors who work(ed) in a Title I public high school in northern New Jersey.
2. Licensed high school counselor who work(ed) as a high school counselor for at least 5 years; and
3. Licensed high school counselor who work(ed) directly with high school seniors within the past 3 years.

The researcher established a sample population of 12 high school counselors employed in nine Title I public high schools in northern New Jersey.

Although researchers have debated the rules governing sampling size in qualitative research, there is agreement that the adequate sample size is one that adequately addresses the research questions (Griffith, 2017). Qualitative studies have sample sizes that will yield relevant data to understand the phenomenon until saturation is met (Baskarada, 2014; Cleary et al., 2014) and are relatively small. Griffith (2017) recommends that the minimum sample size of 12 participants is an adequate sample size for qualitative studies.

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to select the interviewed participants. The motivation for this was to deepen the researchers understanding of the perceived influence on low socioeconomic student’s college enrollment decisions. Prior
to recruitment of the research participants, the researcher received a letter of support from
the northern New Jersey Board of Education to contact high school counselor personnel
and approval from the Institutional Review Board from St. John Fisher College. The
Board of Education letter of support allowed the researcher to use the public domain e-
mail list from the Board of Education to reach out to the high school counselors directly
to request their participation in the interview process. The public domain e-mail registry
also included counselors who have recently retired and were included in this study.

A request for permission to interview counselors was sent to the principal
(Appendix A). After approval, the researcher sent an e-mail notification that included a
counselor letter of invitation (Appendix B) to 900 employees in the counseling
department in northern New Jersey requesting their participation in this study. Out of the
900 notifications sent the researcher received 87 responses from potential research
participants. The researcher then sent 87 potential participants a demographic
questionnaire (Appendix C) and informed consent to participate (Appendix D).
Demographic questions (Appendix C) were sent to the counselors in advance of our
meeting. The remainder of the questions were asked during the session.

Out of the 87 e-mails sent by the researcher, 40 participants returned both the
demographic questionnaire and the informed consent. Out of the 40 potential
participants, 10 did not fit the criteria. Out of the remaining 30 potential participants, the
researcher selected 12 participants based on their responses and availability to meet the
timeline of this study.

**Participant Demographics**

The sample for this study consisted of 12 high school counselors from nine Title I
schools in northern New Jersey. Twelve high school counselors participated in the
individual interviews, two male and 10 female (Table 3.1). Each participant held a master’s degree and a School Certification or Licensed Counseling Certification from the State of New Jersey (Table 3.2). The age range of the participants (Figure 3.1) was 25 years and beyond the age of 55. Each participant had been a school counselor for more than 5 years, specifically, a high school counselor between 5 and 20 years. The average student-to-counselor caseload was 506:1. Tables 3.1 and 3.2, and Figures 3.1 and 3.2 were drawn from the demographic information derived from the individual interviews.

Table 3.1

*Interview Inclusion Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>$N$</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Worked a minimum of 5 years as a High School Counselor</th>
<th>Minimum of 4 Years Working with High School Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title I High Schools Counselor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>F($n=10$) M($n=2$)</td>
<td>n=12</td>
<td>n=12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Demographic information drawn from interview participants.
Table 3.2

Characteristics of Counselor Participants – Individual Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Title I High School</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Student Caseload</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>MS, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 2</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 3</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 5</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 6</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MA, LPC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 8</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>MA, LPC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 9</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MA, LPC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 11</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 12</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>MA, SCC</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Demographic information drawn from interview participants. All numbers in the table have been rounded to protect the identity and anonymity of the participants.

Figure 3.1

Participant Age Range

The length of experience of the participants varied. Data collected from the demographic information provided by the participants revealed that six participants
worked as high school counselors for 5-10 years. Five of the participants possessed 11-15 years of experience working as high school counselors. However, one participant worked for more than 15 years as a high school counselor (See Figure 3.2).

**Figure 3.2**

*Participants’ Length of Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants Length of Experience</th>
<th>5-10 years 50%</th>
<th>11-15 years 42%</th>
<th>15+ years 8%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note: Length of experience. This figure illustrates the length of experience of the participants in percentages.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant Time**

Participants indicated that, on average, 51% of the time was spent on postsecondary counseling. Belasco (2013) noted that, on average, high school counselors spend 20% on postsecondary counseling. Further, high school counselors noted that 15% of their time was spent on supporting students to prepare for college throughout grades nine through 12, 21% was spent on supporting high school seniors apply to college, and 15% was spent on helping high school seniors enroll in college. The percentage of time dedicated to duties unrelated to postsecondary counseling was 55% (Figure 3.3).
In 2019, the college and graduation date for the district, which was retrieved from the New Jersey Department of Education’s website, indicated 76% of students graduated with a high school diploma, 11% dropped out, and 13% other. Further, 44% of the students satisfied the 4-year college eligibility requirements to attend a college/university in the State of New Jersey. In addition, 39% enrolled at a 4-year college or university, and 35% enrolled at Essex, Hudson, or Union County Community Colleges (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019).

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

This study aimed to understand the counselors’ experience that helped describe the phenomenon and capture the participants’ viewpoints and perceptions (Baskarada, 2019, Yilmaz, 2013), and address each research question. The primary tool used for data collection was virtual interviews using the Zoom platform with semi-structured interview
questions. The interview questions were modified to incorporate feedback during the expert review session and were aligned with the research questions.

According to Creswell and Poth (2019), the semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks a series of predetermined, but open-ended questions. This structure allowed the researcher to capture Title I high school counselors’ day-to-day experiences to better understanding how high school counselors influenced the college admission process for low socioeconomic students. Table 3.3 identifies the interview questions and how they were aligned to the study’s research questions.
Table 3.3

*Interview Question in Alignment to Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Aligned Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe your background before becoming a school counselor and why you chose to become a school counselor?</td>
<td>RQ1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe all of your job duties that are involved with being a school counselor at your school site, particularly your duties related to postsecondary counseling, and what challenges, if any, do you face in your role? Is there more that you want to add?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe what makes a student from a low socio-economic background defined as a student on the free and reduced lunch list, academically and motivationally prepared for postsecondary education?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain what specific obstacles students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face which prevent them from being prepared for postsecondary education and how, as a counselor do you support those students when they experience challenges.</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe how you encourage students through the use of college-related curriculum, presentations by topic, or the aid of the Internet as examples, for postsecondary preparation and at what point in their high school tenure? Why at that particular time? Please describe how successful these strategies are?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe how you assist and encourage students with applying to postsecondary institutions? Describe how successful are the strategies?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share one success story that stands out in your mind where you successfully guided a student from a low socioeconomic background through the college preparation, application, and college enrollment process. Please specify the preparation, application, and college enrollment steps you used and whether those were one-time strategies or intensive? Please explain?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe what competencies (educational/professional development) you need to help these students prepare and apply for college?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe what competencies you gained to help students prepare and apply to college in your school counselor education program? When and how did you gain those competencies?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe in what specific ways do fiscal (budget) and structural (time and counselor availability) factors at the district and school level affect your ability to provide postsecondary counseling.</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had unlimited time and resources, what college-related activities would you provide to students to prepare, apply, and enroll in college?</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

57
The interview questions were open-ended, which facilitated discussion and reflections that offered the researcher a clear understanding of the participants' perspectives. The questions were peer-reviewed by senior counselors and administrators in the field of counseling psychology for validity.

During the interviews, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to each participant to protect all participants’ identities. The theoretical framework informed the semi-structured interview protocol and literature review to address a broad range of questions relating to the counselors’ lived experiences as they supported student transition into college. The interviews were taped and recorded using Zoom and transcribed by REV.com. Each interview lasted no longer than 60 to 90 minutes in duration. All interviews will remain stored in a locked filed cabinet for 3 years and the researcher has sole access to the storage cabinet. The data from this study may be used in presentations, reports, or publications to inform future school leadership trainings for school leaders and counselors, but participants’ names, schools where they worked, or any information that could identify them will not be disclosed.

In addition to semi-structured interviews the researcher retrieved archival data from the U.S. Department of Education website, which is in the public domain, to answer the fiscal and structural elements school counselors face to improve college admission and perseverance for low socioeconomic students. The archival data showed the student/counselor ratio caseload and the number of counselors at each school. That data were compared to what is recommended by the American Counseling Association for counselors to work effectively with a school population.
Procedures Used for Data Collection

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of how high school counselors improved college admission and perseverance for low socioeconomic students. The researcher sought to hear, in the participants’ own words, what factors contributed to a student’s enrollment into postsecondary institutions. The main sources of data collected for this study were virtual zoom digital recordings using a semi-structured interview format. Utilizing this interview process allowed for the researcher to obtain the interviewees views, perceptions, and experiences in detail. This also allowed for the researcher to identify and evaluate relationships throughout the data.

The researcher applied the following guidelines before, during, and after interview sessions: (a) secured permission to conduct research from the New Jersey Board of Education; (b) secured IRB approval from St. John Fisher College; (c) identified participants through purposeful sampling; (d) sent consent form for each participant (Appendix B) and secured a confidentiality statement (Appendix E); (e) scheduled interviews and solidified dates and times for video conferencing were convenient for all participants; (f) reminded participants that participation in this study was voluntary and at any time, he/she may withdraw from the study; and (g) used a reliable digital recorder for each session gaining permission from the interviewee to use during the session. Each interview was conducted according to the interview protocol outlined in Appendix F. To answer the research questions, data were collected from individual interviews. After the data were collected and transcribed, codes and themes were established.

Procedures Used for Data Analysis

The researcher conducted 12 interviews and analyzed the data retrieved from the interviews in different stages. The first stage began with reading the transcripts while
highlighting phrases in the same color to indicate general emerging themes. The second stage the researcher coded the emerging themes. According to (Saldaña, 2016) the coding process is a “short word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (p. 4). In the third stage the researcher developed a codebook that included codes, definitions, and examples from the participant interviews. The codebook is stored electronically, and it is password protected. The results have been transcribed, the interviews have been arranged and presented in tables in Chapter 4. Once the transcripts were read, analyzed, and coded by the researcher the participants were offered member checks, where they were invited to review notes and clarify any errors.

The alignment of the research questions and data collected were instrumental to the data analysis process. The method of analysis selected for this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involved identifying patterns, insights, or concepts in the data that helps to explain why those patterns are there (Clark & Braun, 2013). This process helped with pattern recognition with the data, where themes that emerged became categories for analysis (Vohra, 2014). The level of analysis for this study was interpretative, which involved a progression from description to interpretation (Ibrahim, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The thematic analysis approach was justified because it (a) complimented a phenomenological design; (b) aligned to the primary research question: why are high school counselors able to influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds decision to enroll at institutions of higher education; (c) provided rich detail that described the realities of participants; and (d) interpreted numerous aspects of the research topic (Clark & Braun, 2013; Vohra, 2014). Since the purpose of this study was to capture in-depth detail on the perceived influence of the high
school counselor on postsecondary enrollment for low socioeconomic students, the thematic analysis approach was appropriate.

Data sources collected for analysis included virtual interviews and archival material. After collecting data from multiple sources that were used to answer the research questions, the results of the findings were analyzed. Analysis included the moving back and forth between all of the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Ibrahim, 2012). According to Yin (2014), data analysis involves various steps which includes thoroughly examining information; categorizing the information; testing; and tabulating the evidence to produce empirically based findings.

Summary

The phenomenological qualitative study examined Title I high school counselors’ perspectives on the phenomenon of college readiness of low socioeconomic students. The semi-structured interviews conducted for the study provided a forum to explore the counselors’ perspectives on the work they do daily and share their perspectives and experiences on their influence in aiding high school students through the college process. The results the study are summarized through the development of a narrative report that contains descriptions and themes interpreted from the data. The study results can be used to improve how school districts utilize the resources of high school counselors to aid in the success of college enrollment for low socioeconomic students. The research findings are discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

It is not known why and how high school counselors influence postsecondary enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while they attend Title I high schools in northern New Jersey. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to investigate the school counselors' perceived influence on college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Over the years, the United States has grappled with ways to increase minority and low-income students’ college enrollment (Brown et al., 2016; Cox, 2016; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Shamsuddin (2016) noted that students from these groups have less access to college guidance and information than their counterparts from high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Researchers have identified the high school counselor as a valuable and primary source of college-related guidance for low socioeconomic students (Belasco, 2013; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Shamsuddin, 2016); however, their role and influence has been overlooked in the research on postsecondary outcomes (Belasco, 2013; McKillip et al., 2013). Despite the vital role that the high school counselor plays in supporting students through the college process (Shamsuddin, 2016), little is known about their influence on postsecondary enrollment in this group (Belasco, 2013). Consequently, there was a need to research how school counselors encouraged the postsecondary enrollment decisions of low socioeconomic students (Belasco, 2013).

To effectively understand how high school counselors can influence the college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and how resource availability at the school and state level affect their ability to support students, a qualitative method was used. This method allowed for a more comprehensive description
from the viewpoint of the high school counselor of those college-preparation activities that propel college trajectories for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, a qualitative approach offered the researcher the opportunity to explore the phenomenon better (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015) and understand the perceptions of those within the environment. Moreover, a qualitative approach supported examining how budget priorities within northern New Jersey and at the school site level affected high school counselors’ abilities to adequately support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Research Questions**

To explore how school counselors influenced college-related decisions among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, three research questions guided the data collection from this phenomenological study.

**RQ1:** To what extent are high school counselors able to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at institutions of higher education?

**RQ2:** How do high school counselors feel they influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll in higher education institutions?

**RQ3:** How do fiscal and structural elements at the school and state level influence the high school counselor’s ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

The research questions were based on scholarly literature. The semi-structured virtual interviews were the sole interview technique utilized in this study. The research questions and themes organize the data and findings in this section. This chapter
summarizes the results of this study and presents a summary of the findings that answer the research questions and the interview questions that were used to probe answers.

**Results**

Results for this study were framed within the context of the three research questions followed by each theme. Direct quotes from the participants were used to provide insight into high school counselors' perceived influence on low socioeconomic students' college enrollment decisions and strengthen the results of this study.

Themes emerged from the individual interviews are displayed in Table 4.1, which highlights the codes, subcategories, and themes that the study participants uncovered. These codes, subcategories, and themes are supported by the comments of the individuals in this chapter.
Table 4.1

*Codes, Subcategories, and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student success, belief, student connectedness, counseling support,</td>
<td>Promoting College Aspiration</td>
<td>Counselor as a Source of College Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guidance, help students, navigate college, assisting students,</td>
<td>High Expectation College Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resource, resourceful, open-door-policy, understanding college,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support, student relationship, one-on-one support, career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploration, college application, navigate college, enrolling in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college, college field trip visits, time and availability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role model, caring, expectation, career exploration, helpful,</td>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>Relationships that exist between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socioemotional support, relationship building, trust, caring,</td>
<td>Shared Experiences</td>
<td>Counselor/Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| one-on-one meetings, conversations, teaching, skills (social/emotional), meetings with parents, early preparation, belief in students
| Postsecondary counseling support, counselor preparedness, counselor training programs, professional training, counselor on the job training, academic remediation, ACT/SAT, encouragement, expectations, family support, aspiration, resources, scheduling, successful strategies, belief in students
| College field trips, mechanics of college application, admission process, step by step instruction, college enrollment steps, education, informing on college financial outcomes, parental buy-in, successfully completing applications including FASFA
| Resource availability, resources, internal and external elements    | Fiscal Budget                         | Budget Priorities                          |

**Research Question 1**

The researcher used interviews and archival materials to answer RQ1, which was "why are high school counselors able to support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decisions to enroll at institutions of higher education?" RQ1 investigated the high school counselor's perception of ways that he/she supports and
encourages the college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Interview Questions 1-11 were used to probe the participants and answer this research question.

Three themes emerged across the data source: school counselor as a source for college information, counselor-student relationship, and counselor competency and preparation. Theme 1 focused on the school counselor as the primary source of college information for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Theme 2 focused on the relationship that exist between counselors and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Theme 3 focused on the competencies needed by counselors to support students as they prepare to apply to college. These three thematic categories were related to RQ1.

**Theme 1: School Counselor as a Source for College Information.** The first theme focuses on the school counselor as the primary source of college information for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants provided detailed information through their quotes on four concepts within Theme 1, which demonstrate why school counselors are a source of college information support for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and include: (a) role of the counselor in promoting college aspirations, (b) high expectations, (c) types of college information offered, and (d) barriers faced providing college information to their students and families.

**Role of Counselor in Promoting College Aspirations.** Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated an understanding of their role in promoting college aspirations. A factor identified by participants that led to their ability to promote college aspirations were low or limited college knowledge of parents. To further illustrate this point, participant C9 stated:
From a counselor’s standpoint, we find that students that are in low socioeconomic households that their parents work a lot. I find that some of my parents have two jobs sometimes. To find the academic motivation at home sometimes is difficult with parents balancing raising children versus working to provide for the household. For some of those cases, the responsibility really, truly falls on the school, especially the counselor, in order to make sure that we fill those gaps. We make sure the kids are covering the basis for admission. We know that students that come from those backgrounds are ones that might need a little extra attention from us in order to have that college mindset and look at postsecondary options that the families might not even know about because mom and dad have to go to work to provide for the family. College is, even the application and the transition into postsecondary 4-year institution or a 2-year institution, sometimes a foreign language for parents.

Participant C5 further added:

We have parents who themselves may not have much education, may in fact be undocumented, may in fact be truly struggling, but somewhere along the line decided that college is really important . . . and this is where the counselor comes in to provide support.

Along those same lines, participant C2 stated:

Many of our students’ parents did not even graduate from high school. A lot of the students do not have the foundation that education after high school is essential. A lot of our parents don't know how to guide them towards college, which prevents students from being prepared.
Similarly, participant C4 added:

We have students who live in one house with multiple families. They’ll say, “I finished high school, and that was it. I didn’t take an SAT. I don’t know how to fill out an application of any kind.” At that rate, they give me permission to “do whatever it takes to motivate them.”

Participants further emphasized the importance of the school counselor in the lives of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly when parents have a limited understanding of the college admission process. For example, participant C7 indicated: “Parents that lack the knowledge and expertise to help students understand the college process, tap into their aspirations, help them understand grades required for college eligibility, the role of the counselor becomes increasingly important.”

Similarly, C4 described:

As a counselor, I’m their go-to person. I am their father between the hours of 7am to 3pm and I see them as my children while school is in session. . . . we are a bridge for those students to connect them to college, and my role is to help them, and later their siblings, get there.

Another participant C7, described her role as a non-judgmental safe zone, where students come to receive advice and stated:

They’re looking for answers...they’re looking for a non-judgmental place where what they express is safe. I tell my students that their schedules and teachers change each semester or year, but my role in their lives is constant…my role is to inspire their college goals, aspirations, and build on the relationship I have with them, you know? (C7)
Participant C4 said, “Many of my students seek me out for both academic and non-academic advice because in many ways, I’m their stand in parent. My job is to protect, guide, advise, and support them.”

**High Expectations.** Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated knowledge pertaining to high expectation that their students apply and attend college. Several participants confirmed that they expected that their students attend college. Participant C2 stated: “They can go to college and they can graduate from college even if their parents didn’t or those before them did not . . . it is part of our expectation.” Similarly, participant C6 stated: “At our school, all students are told that college is an expectation.” Likewise, participant C10 added:

> Take a look at our calendar . . . here’s an example of what we do with our kids throughout the year. Every week during the months of September through December, we are in the classrooms, working in groups and individually on credits, courses, grades. We are literally pounding the idea that college can be their reality. They need our help to see themselves there because when we expect it, they do it.

Along those same lines participant C10 stated: “There is an expectation that they attend school daily, do their best in all academic areas, graduate from high school, and attend college.” Participant C1 stated: “I am such an optimist, that every time they graduate, I think they’re all going to college because that is what we’ve discussed.” Participant C4 described a conversation with one of his students regarding college as an expectation:

> I talked earlier about this one student who graduated several years ago. His dad left his mother for another woman who lived out of the country. His mom didn’t really speak English, so the student wanted to quit high school and work to help
his mom. Of course, I said, “No, you’re going to stay in school and I expect you to graduate and go to college.” Although his grades were not stellar, we worked together to fill out his application to the community college and enroll in classes. That story will always stand out in my mind because he said, “I’m done with school. I’m going to go work.” I told him “no, you need to finish high school and help your mom by doing well for yourself by going to college.” Well, he graduated from high school, college, and now is able to help his mother financially. I feel good every time that I share that story.

Participant C10 had a similar viewpoint:

My job is to push them to reach higher . . . if you have high expectations of them, then they will have and met those high expectations that have been set forth. That’s why we offer rigorous coursework such as AP courses, have them take college entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT, and complete the college and financial aid applications.

While counselors have high expectations for their students to attend college after they graduate from high school, many recognized that some students struggle with having low expectations of themselves. C7 described: “Some of my students enter high school with low expectations and their ambitions are low, which interfere with them having high expectations of themselves.”

**Types of College Information offered.** Throughout the interviews and evidence captured when some counselors shared college activities calendars, guidance lessons, and college curriculum, participants demonstrated knowledge that when the parent’s knowledge about college was low and access to college information was limited, school counselors provided workshops and presentations on college for students and parents.
According to the Naviance curriculum and based on statements made by the participants, college-related lessons were offered on college and career exploration, goal setting, budget planning, financing a college education, and postsecondary planning. For example, participant C11 stated:

When working with students on college planning, the first thing that I suggest is to “let’s go onto the computer and look at Naviance.” Naviance offers students career assessment and exploration lessons to help students figure out what they might want to do in life. It helps me have conversations with students early on about their plans beyond high school.

Participant C12 said:

In the past, counselors had to use college handbooks, of course, and we did not have enough handbooks for all of the students, so we have to make xerox copies of all of the lesson plans. Now that we have Naviance for all grade levels it really helps us have meaningful conversations with our students.

Along the same lines participant C10 stated:

Anytime you are able to use guidance lessons with students on goal setting and postsecondary planning, it’s a home run. Kids get excited about their future and possibilities when they’re introduced to college concepts, which is important for the population that we serve.

In addition, according to the college activities calendars (see Table 4.2) provided by the participants, over 30 college information sessions were offered throughout the academic years at various high schools during the daytime and in the evenings. Participants confirmed that the types of college-related information delivered to students and their families that support postsecondary readiness were (a) early college awareness,
(b) grades, and (c) college eligibility. The topics on college awareness, grades, and college eligibility were prevalent at the ninth and 10th-grade levels and evident in the participants' college activities calendars collected by the researcher.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Related Informational Sessions</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
<th>C4</th>
<th>C5</th>
<th>C6</th>
<th>C7</th>
<th>C8</th>
<th>C9</th>
<th>C11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early College Awareness</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Eligibility</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant C2 explained:

Every grade level receives a presentation on college at least twice. This year, we decided to start working with students to get them to start thinking about college and career earlier than maybe just their junior year. In the ninth grade and 10th grade, we started with specific presentations on career and college awareness. Specifically, goal setting, career exploration, what is college, how much does college cost, and college match. I think there is a lot of good to that, because sometimes the kids in the ninth grade, the 10th grade are immature and they don’t think about those things until later, until they know they have to apply.

Participant C6 stated:

I think it’s important to first, demystify college. I think that’s important because sometimes they think that college is something beyond their reach. What I try to do is get the hook early. College is part of the culture. We need to mention it
early... for the younger grades, we need to start introducing it to get them to buy in so that they make sure that they keep their grades up.

Participate C9 added:

We do grade level presentations early and throughout the school year where we teach the kids the requirements for college based on NJ state requirements to graduate. We would do it in larger groups and talk about the financial aid aspect, the cost of college, and the benefits to going to school and continuing your education. We do PowerPoint presentations on college eligibility and disseminate college information handouts in order to make sure that we’re building that college going culture from the ninth grade up.

Participant C3 stated:

We’re going through the college requirements with our ninth grade and talking about the importance of their GPAs [grade point average] and their study habits. At different grade levels, students start exploring college majors based on their interest, what careers they like, and based on their strengths.

Participant C4 added this: “Our counseling team covers a range of college information topics including financial aid, scholarship availability, NCAA requirements, understanding your grades, reading a high school transcript and graduation requirements.” Participant C7 added these comments:

We do grade chats. When grades come out, we’re chatting with students about how can they improve their grades, so that one piece in terms of the academic part. We always tie that in with, how does what you’re doing now relate to your goals? How is this going to help you be successful later on? I think any opportunity that we can, any interaction that we have with the students, it’s
always about them and what they’re doing to prepare themselves, really, and how we can support them better. If it means that we remind them, encourage them, listen, all of those kinds of things, problem-solve, if it means getting them a bus pass or helping them to have access to a computer, then we do that.

In addition to offering college informational workshops and presentations for students and their families, all interviewers discussed how they leverage college representatives. Each participant discussed partnering with their local community colleges, Rutgers University, NJIT, and Kean College campuses and private colleges and universities to conduct targeted presentations on the cost of college attendance, financial aid, college life, college requirements, university demographics. This is all done in an effort to encourage and engage families. It has been noted by students and families that starting with local colleges allows them to have an understanding of what to look for and ask for if they consider schools outside of the state.

Participants expressed that their time and energy was devoted to educating students and families on college-related information via presentations and workshops. Participant C5 stated: "this is certainly not a 7:00a.m. to 2:30p.m. job". However, the participants expressed a willingness to offer more college-related activities that helped promote an understanding of higher education institutions. Participants C2, C3, C4, C6, C9, and C11 indicated that presentations on college were offered before and during school, lunchtime, after-school, and in the evenings for students and parents. Participant C4 stated in his interview session:

We hold lunch workshops, before-school workshops, and after-school workshops. Just to let them know that "Okay, you don't have information on college at home but, we have it here at school." We do several college informational sessions for
families in English and Spanish and distribute college-related materials in both languages as well.

Participant C1 discussed their support:

We’re doing a bunch of workshops right now. I have a brochure that I disseminate to students on three community colleges and all the offerings that they have listed. I’ll usually go through it with them, and give them an idea of what the offerings are and where they are. The brochures have the e-mail addresses and all the information about how to apply for programs, scholarships, and financial aid. What I really emphasize is to have the students look at the array of things that the colleges offer. It’s amazing.

Participant C8 indicated this, “we also provide evening presentations where the student can come in with their parents to get that information on college.” Participant C7 expressed their availability for students: “I am always willing to see kids on their lunch. If they’re willing to give up their lunch, I’m willing to see them. Anytime they need me, I say, you come on your lunch, and we’ll get it taken care of.”

**Barriers Faced Providing Information to Students and Families.** Throughout the interviews participants discussed that although students were exposed to college information early and throughout the school year, barriers existed. Barriers identified by participants related to academic performance and financial limitations. Participants C3, C5, C6, and C9 suggested that some students were failing in the areas of math and English, which were necessary for college eligibility. Participant C3 described the challenges her students often face and explained:

Academic remediation, that’s a big one, because they are entering high school and trying to do ninth grade English when they read at a fourth-grade level, or they are
then moved on to biology or chemistry when they are still doing math at who
knows what level. They failed math ever since fifth grade. That is a big
challenge. What I can do mostly as a counselor is just offer the tools that are
available and outside community resources that are available. For instance,
certain colleges have free homework hotline, and you could either show up, you
can call, that’s free tutoring over the phone. I’ve had situations where all my kids
had a 98% attendance rate but were failing five classes. I was able to call the
reading specialist and say, “can we get them a read test”? Academically, I think
socioeconomic students are missing foundational skills, and they need
remediation.

Participant C12 made similar remarks and stated:

I think the biggest one is the remediation process. We just somehow can’t have
the resources to work with the students coming from middle school and that
transition to ninth grade and then into 10th grade with their remedial skills. Math
is the biggest struggle. Another one would be having enough classes for the
modern language. The students who are motivated can still get it done, but it has
to be postponed until their 11th grade, which the ones who are fluent Spanish
speaking, that’s the one we kind of do postpone because they can take Spanish 3
in their junior year and still make 3 years, so again, the number of classes that we
offer them and I think remedial classes is what prevents them from being more
prepared for postsecondary education

Participants C5 noted:

My case load is currently 2,100 and have been for the last year and a half. I am
working alone to support all grade levels. This was prompted by one counselor
finding better employment and another one retiring. The district has not made it a priority to find other help, so I am relying on teachers to assist me in matters that they really do not have any expertise in. It is impossible for me to reach all of these students with any accuracy. I hold large group workshops but I could be there all night with that number ratio and parents, students, and myself are frustrated. My caseload is my biggest barrier.

C2, C3, C4, C8, and C9 also commented about their large caseloads and agreed that it was unreasonable to think that they could have meaningful relationships with all those students and meet their college needs and assist with them getting into college.

Along those same lines, participant C9 added: "academically and financially, those are the two biggest obstacles we find in order to prepare the students, and that's what we find oftentimes might prevent them from seeking postsecondary education."

Participant C5 commented: “students have to have opportunities. We have to make sure that we’re offering rigorous coursework, coursework that satisfies the college requirements, and that there’s a counseling staff and others who are paying attention to what the students need.”

Eight participants (C2, C4, C5, C6, C7, C8, C9, C11) mentioned that limited financial resources within families was another challenge that low socioeconomic students encountered. Participants identified that when families struggle financially, students decide to focus more on finding a job rather than focusing on academic and college readiness. Further, participant C9 mentioned that the idea of focusing more on work came from within the family unit and stated:

Sometimes the family also values work, and sometimes we find that, in order to encourage students to continue their education, we are working against the families
desire for them to go to work in order to provide for the household right out of high school. That presents another challenge unto itself. (C9)

Although some students expressed interest in working after high school instead of attending college, participants agreed that they continue to offer college informational opportunities and materials to those students and families. Participant C6 stated:

Sometimes the students will want to try to work to help earn money for their family or they don’t have time to go to tutoring and get extra help because of that. I can’t prevent them from working, but I try to emphasize the importance of trying to keep up their grades, trying to make sure to get help when we talk in groups. We show them a chart, it basically shows wages, and it shows, unemployment rate, and so we try to explain how investing in themselves for 4 years could save them, like 30 years of their life of working extra hard.

Participant C9 stated:

Now one of the other challenges again is that sometimes when the kids have that work mentality, because that’s coming from the family to provide for the household, we are combating that. How do we get you to work but still have you dedicate that hour after school so that you are getting the additional help that you need? We have to sit a lot of times one-on-one with the student and brainstorm and figure out how we are going to get the family expectation to work with what we need for them to be prepared for the postsecondary route and overcoming any of those obstacles that might be in their way obtaining the grades necessary in order to meet the requirements to graduate. Sometimes the family also values work, and so sometimes we find that, in order to encourage students to continue their education, we were working against the family’s desire for them to go to work.
in order to provide for the household right out of high school. That presents another challenge in itself.

**Theme 2: Counselor-Student Relationships.** The second theme focuses on the relationship that exists between counselors and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The individual interviews supported the development of this theme. Results from the data analysis indicated that high school counselors believed that the relationship built between the counselor and student was essential, particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants attributed the success of guiding students toward postsecondary success to building relationships with students by providing ongoing encouragement that college can be their reality.

This theme is consistent with the literature findings that when students and counselors can connect, they can become influential agents in the college choice process (Holland, 2015). In other words, when school counselors develop a relationship with their students, social capital is created. Through those relationships, students gain college knowledge, advice, and resources, which play an important role in shaping his/her future (Woods & Domina, 2014). Among the strategies suggested by participants to connect and build relationships was through (a) conversation, (b) encouragement, (c) one-on-one meetings, and (d) shared experiences. To support this finding, participant C11 stated during the interview:

I find just talking to them. Finding out what they’re interested in doing and I try to make a connection with them. What I try to do is not just look at their grades, but look at what they want to do, come up with a plan, build relationships with them, rapport, get to know them so that they know they can talk to me if they have a challenge.
Along those same lines, participant C6 added: “group activities are another way we try to support students. We talk to them in small groups, bringing out the agencies to talk if they really have problems that need to be addressed before the college part of it.”

Participant C6 mentioned that by talking to her students about college, she hoped to inspire them. While participant C5 mentioned that having close connections with a student potentially influenced their decision toward pursuing college, participants C1, C3, and C10 expressed that genuine care, compassion, consideration, dependable responsiveness, and kindness were attributes that led to a strong counselor-student relationship. Participant C12 emphasized that sharing a similar background to many of her students has helped foster connectedness. Participant C2 said:

I think again just when you tell students that you know they can go to college and can make it, just calling those kids into my office and encouraging them one-on-one and even in group settings like, “You can do this. You can go to college.” Sometimes, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have a notion and some of it comes from their parents that they can’t afford college when those students are the ones that would probably have the most financial aid, but they don’t realize that, so they get it in their head that they can’t go. Just giving them the information that, yes, you can go, anyone can go to college and they can get college paid for. Anyone can. I think when they realize that, then they’re more onboard to apply and realizing that they can do it.

Participant C12’s perspective centered on having a similar background and experiences as her students. C12 stated,

Well, what’s nice is that we’re able to move with them for 4 years, and for me, I guess, connectedness, I bring them in, and I speak to them as a young adult. I tell
them the way I see the world through my experiences, and a lot of times it's similar, and they can connect with that. I think that is how I make my connection, because I had a similar life as they did.

Similarly, participant C4 stated:

I’m relatable. I tell my students that I have a big huge family and out of all the counseling, three of us have college degrees where everybody else are in- and out of jail. I relate to them, and I talk openly to them.

Along those same lines, participant C1 said: “I relate to my students through basketball. I love basketball. I relate on the levels so that it’s easier to build that connection.” C7 added during his interview:

I encourage my kids daily, even on the way to the restroom. We have chats about, “what do you want to do when you graduate,” “do you want to go to college,” we relate what they are doing now in high school and how it relates to the real world. I try to support my students in all areas of their life, so if that means that I need to constantly remind them, discuss their potential for success, and be willing to listen, then that is what I’ll do . . . recognizing the potential versus what they’ve done in the past, and we see that especially with our kids here and we always encourage them for a better tomorrow, for a better future, and kind of along the line, exposing them to different things, whether it’s like, “Oh, there’s a cool video on Road Trip Nation,” or on You Tube, or “Hey, the representative from the military, or from this college or that type . . . just come to a college fair and see, it’s no harm in looking.” I just believe in opening their eyes to the possibilities so that they are not limited to just the little bit that they’ve been exposed to so far. I think when you have that kind of relationship, they’re more
inclined to listen when they know that you genuinely are having their well-being, their future in mind, and that’s what you are working toward. I think that as counsellors, that’s what we try to convey.

The consensus among the interview participants was that high school counselors must build and foster relationships with students and their families to promote student success. Some participants referenced meeting with students one-on-one or simply discussing students' interests, while other participants stressed, at times, different characteristics perceived to help build strong relationships with students as they guided them on the road to college.

**Theme 3: Counselor Competency and Preparedness.** The third theme focused on the competencies needed by counselors to support students as they prepared and applied to college. The individual interviews supported the development of this theme. Results from the data analysis indicated that while high school counselors’ primary role is to provide postsecondary counseling services to their students, most participants (C1, C2, C4, C6, C8, C9, C10, C11, C12) agreed that their counselor education program did not prepare them for their current responsibilities. Participant C9 expressed views and added:

> You go through our educational programs which, if I’m going to be honest, I went through a preparation program that I didn’t feel really prepared me for high school counseling. There was small emphasis placed on things like transcript evaluations and scheduling, all of the academic stuff, and very high emphasis placed on personal/social, which I thought was interesting for me because, when you come into the high school setting, the primary focus of your job is the
academic college and career components, which was not the focus of my program.

Participant C11 offered a perspective and added: “not much: I didn’t even learn how to read a transcript in my counseling program. We learned a lot about the social emotional part but preparing a student for college, no.” Offering a similar viewpoint participant C2 stated: “honestly, I feel like I didn’t gain those competencies in the counseling program in college. That was on-the-job training. The application process and helping students to prepare to apply, that’s just been on the job for me every year.”

Along those same lines, participant C6 remarked:

Honestly, everything about my counselor program was social and emotional. It was about taking care of the students at that level, and there wasn’t anything that I could remember on postsecondary, or anything. Everything that I’ve gotten has been through conferences that I attended or learning from colleagues or additional study that I do for professional development.

Offering a different perspective, participant C3 mentioned:

In my program, I was doing career development before I did my counseling program. To my surprise career development theory was a part of my program. That supplemented what I was already doing in the career development. I knew the emotions and how to get them to find what they needed, but I had no idea about the theory behind it. That’s one of the first light bulbs in my education program that went on. The second thing is I didn’t understand, and I learned it through my counselor education program, was how to deal with all their crazy situations. In the program, I learned that we absolutely, by dealing with the crisis
and the resiliency and all those soft skills, are still helping them be successful academically, because I used to feel limited when I came into a school.

However, all participants agreed that they learned about postsecondary counseling while working at the school sites and professional development. Participants C3, C9, and C11 mentioned that they learned about private colleges and universities, financial aid, the Dream Act Law, and how to read and evaluate high school transcripts after being hired at their school site. Participant C11 acknowledged that those skills should have been learned in the counselor education program to help support students' needs.

When participants were asked what counseling competencies they needed to help their students prepare and apply for college the responses were similar. Several participants in the interviews (see Table 4.3) indicated that attending New Jersey American Counseling Association and American School Counselor Association conferences helped them remain informed of expectations, changes in policies, enhancements to the personal essay, and whether the eligibility requirements changed or had pending changes.
**Table 4.3**  
*ACA and ASCA Counseling Competencies Learned at Conference*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
<th>C5</th>
<th>C6</th>
<th>C7</th>
<th>C8</th>
<th>C9</th>
<th>C10</th>
<th>C11</th>
<th>P12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Counseling Expectations, Knowledge/Remain Informed</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Policies/Procedures</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancements to Personal Essay</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New/Pending Eligibility Requirements</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, participant C11 described her experience:

> Knowing about the universities, their options, not just New Jersey universities but universities that are outside of New Jersey. Opening up that option for students, I think that’s really important. Being knowledgeable about athletes. There are so many small pieces of counselors’ job that we have to know.

Participant C2 stated:

> I think going to the conferences is very helpful because it keeps you up to date yearly if there are any changes on the application process. Then obviously, it helps us when we are helping the students with the applications. I think aside from the college application process and a little more professional development is needed in the areas of preparation on the financial aid will help us better serve our students.
Participant C9 stated a viewpoint by adding:

What else has helped is going to conferences. Conferences are always hit and miss, but even the ones that are really bad, for lack of a better term, there is always one or two little things that I didn’t know before that I walk away with. I may have sat there for 5 hours, but those 2 minutes were critical to make me a better counselor.

Participant C4 echoed those remarks by stated: “every year we go through the conferences at ACA. It’s kind of the same information but, we need to be aware of what math will validate a subject and stuff like that because it changes.”

All participants from the individual interviews agreed that professional development was critical to their role as school counselors. In addition, the competencies that were needed to support the college aspirations of their students centered on the college admissions and financial aid process. However, participant C3 offered a different perspective by adding:

I think in terms of counseling competencies; you have to get updated professional development on what colleges are requiring from our students. You have to keep up with technology and be competent in that area, or you are not going to be able to help them create college accounts for themselves, or learn how to e-mail the schools and attach documents for the admissions office. I think you also need to keep up with your profession as a whole, because there is always new ways to help students overcome things, and if you can learn new ways it is only going to help students. I also think you need to be holistic. Some counselors say, “This is my job, and that’s not, so I don’t need to learn about it.” The truth is that, and I use career technical education, just because it’s new and you are not trained on it
does not mean that our students cannot benefit from it. We should learn about it. Just because we don’t have to manage money at our school site doesn’t mean we shouldn’t know what the state requirement is requiring from us as counselors and how it affects our job. I think we also need a big picture of education. We need the academic professional development. We also need intrinsic competency. We say as counselors you have to know that you can do it and be successful at it to affect your students in a positive way.

**Summary of the Findings from Research Question 1.** Based on the responses from the individual interviews, high school counselors indicated that being a source of college information in the lives of their low socioeconomic students is vital to inspire college aspirations. Specifically, high school counselors provide tangible college information on college awareness, grades required for college admission, and college eligibility requirements to foster college aspirations. Counselors believed that they served as a conduit to promote college aspirations by relentlessly offering the information and support needed to help prepare, apply, and successfully enroll students in postsecondary education. Further, counselors believed that setting high expectations for students was paramount to influencing their aspirations about college. By cultivating positive and supportive relationships with students, counselors expressed that they can encourage students to explore and pursue postsecondary education. In addition, counselors believed that although they did not receive the necessary training on college counseling through their college education program, through professional training received on the job on college admissions policies and standards, they could successfully guide students towards college.
Research Question 2

The researcher used interviews and archival materials to answer RQ2: how do high school counselors feel they influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll in higher education institutions? Essentially, RQ2 investigated the strategies and activities used by high school counselors to influence the college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Interview Questions 4-12 were used to answer this question as well as college activities archival materials. Two themes emerged across all data sources: strategies used to promote postsecondary success and curriculum usage to support postsecondary counseling. These two thematic categories were related to RQ2. Data coded from all sources substantiated the establishment of the themes (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

Data from Interviews, Archival Material Supporting Theme 4: Strategies Used to Promote Postsecondary Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Corresponding Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>“Handholding. I print everything for them. I walk them through websites. Whenever possible, we do things on it. If a student is interested in a college, lets get on the website. Let’s actually type in your name and address so that you can be on their mailing list. (C7) We do bring in representatives from different colleges, so they have opportunity to meet with different college representatives and learn about college life and requirements (C12) We go through Naviance so they can start researching their majors and careers after high school (C11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archival Materials</td>
<td>College activities calendars, Naviance, DOE Website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 4: Strategies Used to Promote Postsecondary Success. This theme focused on postsecondary counseling support for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The data collected from interviews and archival material supported the
development of this theme. Participants provided detailed information on four concepts within this theme which demonstrated successful strategies used by the high school counselor to promote postsecondary success for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and included (a) college and career field trips; (b) the mechanics of the college application and admission process, step-by-step; (c) college enrollment steps; and (d) successful postsecondary college acceptance and enrollment outcomes. In addition, the college-related archival materials supported the concept of the mechanics of the college application process, step-by-step. This theme is consistent with the literature findings that identified completing the college application as a crucial step in the college enrollment process, particularly for students from low socioeconomic groups who do not always apply to college despite being eligible to attend (Robinson & Roska, 2016; Shamsuddin, 2016). Table 4.5 captures and describes those concepts.

**Table 4.5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Concepts Within Strategies Used to Promote Postsecondary Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and career field trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics of the college application and admission process, step by step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College enrollment steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful postsecondary acceptance and enrollment outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**College and Career Field Trips.** Interview participants discussed visits to colleges as a strategy to expose students to college and inspire interest. Participant C4 mentioned that students enrolled in the Upward Bound Program at each school site could visit colleges; however, non-college-bound students, needed exposure to college
but did not have the same opportunities. C4 further suggested that in an ideal world, all
students, at every school would have the opportunity to visit at least one or two colleges
every year while in high school. Similarly, C1, C2, C4, C7, C9, C10, and C11 described
the importance of taking students on college visits. Throughout the school year,
participant C7 encouraged his students: When I see my students on campus, I say,
"don't forget to sign up for the field trip." Participant C9 offered his perspective on the
value of taking students on college and career visits:

One thing that was really exciting that we had started last year was that we started
making arrangements to take juniors on college visits to get them excited for
going to college. Because the junior class is large, we do not have the resources
to take everyone, so we usually do a pool and take about 90 students, we then
usually make sure that these students are ambassadors for the junior class and
they are responsible for documenting the experience so the rest of the students
who did not get a chance to go can experience it. While this is a really good
experience it shines a light on the fact that we need more money as we should not
have to choose who we can take on college visits. Students should all be able to
go.

Participant C10 offered these thoughts:

As counselors, we know that many of our students have never stepped foot on a
college campus. We realize that for many of our students, once they have an
opportunity to visit a college and see people there that look just like them, they
will start to picture themselves there and potentially apply. Visits to college is a
great strategy to jumpstart their interest in college.
Participant C11 expressed:

We take students on field trips. We try to explore the different options that represent colleges. We take them into the city to see what it would like to go the NYU or Columbia. We take them to historically Black colleges. We take them to rural and city colleges. We also take them to predominately White colleges. We try to expose them to the culture at each site and discuss things like culture, and environment, distance away from home, and finances. Schools are usually gracious as they give us students to pair students with to have them understand what is required of them when they came in. It is helpful to have students learn from other students and to talk to them in ways that an admissions rep would not talk to them. We believe that strategy is successful because we do a survey after each field trip and students tell us what they think. We get data from the students about what they like, what they didn’t like, and what they want to change. We have learned that once students learn and love things they are willing to share it with their peers.

Mechanics of the College Application and Admission Process, Step By Step.

Results from the interviews and archival materials indicated that several strategies were practiced by high school counselors, which attributed to students' success in applying to college. Participants described the step-by-step process with their students as "all-inclusive." In other words, participants indicated that they take their students from start to finish in the college application and admissions process. Participant C7 described the step-by-step process she used with her students:

Handholding, I print everything for them. I walk them through websites.

Whenever possible, we do things on it. If a student is interested in a college, let’s
get on the website. Let’s actually type in your name and address so that you can be on their mailing list. When we’re doing our presentations, I give them a list of things. “This is what you need. This is the information that you need to complete the application. When you are ready, you can come make an appointment or come see me”. Sometimes it’s just like, “Come on. Let’s see your college application. Let’s do it now.” I even go as far as to have students store their passwords in a folder in my office when we meet, this way they will be able to locate it, because my experience tells me they will forget.

Participant C6 described her experience: “With the seniors, we are basically walking them step-by-step on applications and sitting there with them, having open labs going on the weekends.” Participant C2 recalled similar experiences with students: “I take students step-by-step through the college application, so I have them type in their name, create an account and enter into the application their demographic information and transcript information.” Participant C3 added these points:

I have a step-by-step process, and checklist that I give my seniors. Then I would say, “Okay, here’s a checklist.” Let’s start by using Naviance Career Zone to complete a career interest profiler. Once students identified their interest, then I have them log onto Naviance websites to see which colleges offered their majors, and if they were any private schools that offered their majors. With the actual college applications, we go to the computer lab and through lunchtime, afterschool, and before school complete the entire college application. I also use the computer labs to meet with my seniors about the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]. Each student is given a cheat sheet. If a student does not complete the entire college application, we invite them back to the lab times
to finish up. I also survey all my seniors to determine where they applied, where they were accepted, and where they plan to enroll.

Participant C12 added:

I usher my students into the computer lab and walk them through Naviance lesson plans and career assessments and all that it has to offer. I also use a brag sheet to help have them think about what they want to do and what is important to them. These tools are important to use before the college application process starts so that kids have an idea of which colleges they want to apply to.

Participant C9 discussed workshops:

For applying, we host application workshops. Every workshop is on our calendars, which is posted throughout the school. Students have the opportunity to come into the counseling center to sign up for those workshops. The computer lab was filled to capacity with students. We have a computer lab attached to the counseling center and a couple of counselors went over there, myself included, for each of the periods and we just had the kids start their college applications. The kids would begin and, as questions popped up, we were working individually with those kids to get them through those applications so they are ready to submit on November 1st. We have open hours following so if students have questions they can come in and ask. Students can also make appointments with counselors individually to answer specific questions.

Participant C11 stated:

I meet with them individually but then also our counselors go out to the classroom and we do application workshops where the students are in their English classes, all of the students that are there, we are working with them on applications
whether it’s application to a 4-year or it’s an application to a 2-year community college. That’s one-on-one. After we go into the classroom to conduct presentation on the college application, then we offer application workshops after school and then they can always come in and during their lunch time, before school, or after school, or make an appointment and see us or see me to help them with their application. Then I follow up with each student. Just constantly reminding them how important it is because I think a lot of them are a little bit scared and its overwhelming.

C4 Participant added how alumni can be helpful:

We also invite corporate partners, and alumni from the colleges to assist in the college application process. Students prefer alumni because they feel a connection, it is always helpful if the alumni are current [college] students as they cannot only talk about the application process, but they can speak to the college experience.

While discussing the hands on step-by-step approach of walking students through the college application completion cycle, participants also identified challenges. Participant C4 described a student who struggled to understand portions of the college application and stated: “Some of the students sometimes have trouble entering their home address or understanding the difference between an international or domestic zip code.”

Participant C7 described an obstacle with some low socioeconomic students:

I think the obstacles that we see at my school, and in this community, as well is we talk about not having role models or the family members or people around them that have gone through the process before, so a lot of them are first in their family to go to college. I think that what we see are students who come to us
defeated, so they have very low goals and expectations, very low ambition, and I think that we do as counselors is we are just unrelenting in our push to help them better themselves by graduating from high school and transitioning to college. Whether we have to explain the information five times, 10 times, walk them through it that many more times, we do that.

Participants C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C8, C9, C10, C11 noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they saw many problems that prevented students from applying to college. All counselors noted that the physical school building has always been a safe space for most inner-city students, even when they did not want to be there. Since the buildings were closed and school was remote, it made it harder for students to be able to complete their college applications, especially with the added stress of housing and food insecurities at home. Also, some parents do not encourage the behaviors practiced in the guidance office.

**College Enrollment Steps.** In addition to discussing the college application steps used by high school counselors, participants also discussed ways to support the college enrollment process. Participants C1, C2, C3, C6, C8, and C12 stated that their school sites had established strong partnerships with the local community colleges. Representatives from the college physically go to the school site and offer course-level placement assessments for interested students, help the students complete the application, and help them schedule classes for the upcoming fall semester. However, the college enrollment steps discussed by most of the participants varied. For example, participant C2 indicated:

I think we are really successful with our community college partners, for instance, because they actually come on campus and they help us to help the students
apply. Then by end, they are registered for classes. But we spend very little time helping with the college enrollment process with the 4-year universities.

Participant C6 further added:

For the enrolling, we have the local community college come on campus, so that helps those students. They get the counseling, they take the assessment testing and they get their ID [identification] number, and could even start taking up classes. Then they come to us on an individual level when it comes to deciding what classes they might want. We direct them a lot to going to the college also. I can look on the college course list and say if it’s transferable or not, but I want to make sure that if it’s asking about a specific math or English [class], that they are talking to a counselor also on the college campus. In terms of other universities, most of the time those who are getting accepted to the universities already know how to do it themselves, so we don’t really help them unless they come to us for extra help. I always tell them, no matter what, even if they are in a university, that there are counselors there, there are people in charge of that major that they need to make sure to talk to all of the time, making sure that they are taking the right classes.

Participant C8 offered:

I see enrollment as fully complete once financial aid is in, once all your documents are in, and you are enrolled in the class. Not simply going on the computer to fill out an application. As far as supporting the process, the students leave at a certain point and the enrollment process is still continuing. I assist the kids through our open-door policy before school, during lunch, even within the school day. Then, when the students have follow-up questions second semester,
they e-mail me. “What is it that I’m supposed to do?” This is when we actually do hands-on and tell the students to pull up the laptop, open your account, and let’s figure it out. Sometimes the question is specifically pertinent to the student, and that’s when I sometimes have to pick up the phone, have the student call the college. In assisting them with the college enrollment process, they need to get ready for the real world. I say get on the laptop, get on the phone, and I’m here to assist you, but teach them how to do it on their own. As for the community college enrollment process, we have a counselor come on campus, let the kids know so that they can sign up and we assist with the process. As for the 4 year colleges, I help those students with choosing a college which sometimes is based off of finances and sometimes it is based off of where they want to go given their academic progress and SAT scores.

Participant C5 discussed the process:

Mainly we rely on students coming to us. That was the other thing they had to verify where they were attending. Usually then that was the opportunity to have a conversation about, “have you done these things”? Because nowadays there is a pretty good communication between schools and kids with using social media but also using cell phones, that most of the kids seem more aware than in the past, but not all. I’m afraid we still count on a lot of students waving their hand in front of us and getting our attention in order to figure out how to help them or approaching us to say “what do I need to do?” I remind quite a bit of students what they need to do to assure they get in college. For seniors financial aid seems to the major concern.
Participant C7 comments:

I think for the purposes of enrolling, a lot of them will come back with questions after they have completed the application. It's really more answering general questions . . . for example, they don't know how to log into their web advisor account or their student portal. It's like I need to follow up with step-by-step instructions on how to log in. Once they're in we show them all the specific things that are available to do, how to review their schedule, how to pay tuition, how to register for classes, and all kinds of stuff. Even explaining just how the course system is, the units in the course numbers and prerequisites, that type of thing. That's not something that we tell them in advance in terms of the original or the initial presentation about college, but a lot of times it comes up when you're logging into the system.

Participant C9 added these comments about financial aid:

One of the biggest hang ups that we have is waiting for students’ financial aid packages to help them decide where they're going to go to college. In lower income families this is a major hurdle and must be taken into consideration when making a decision about where a student will go to college. I would like to think that finances are not an issue, however with this demographic it is a major concern.

Successful Postsecondary Acceptance and Enrollment Outcomes. Interviewees (C1 - C12) described at least one student who they successfully guided through the preparation, application, and enrollment stage. Each recounted those students who wanted to go to college, but simply needed a push in the right direction. Participant C11 recalled a student who was smart, reserved, and mainly kept to herself. She remembers
reaching out to the student to discuss her course schedule, which led to a conversation on what she wanted to do, post-graduation. She mentioned that the student wanted to go to college, but wasn't sure what name the major would fall under. Participant C11 described the student:

She wanted to be an engineer with a goal in mind to specifically work in the medical field to assist paraplegics be able to walk without the bulky materials that they currently use. She wanted to learn how to make different prosthetics. We researched it, we found the colleges that had a major that closely matched her interests. It wasn't clear cut, however during her senior year we focused on those majors that seemed to closely fit what she thought she wanted to do at that time.

Participant C6 shared this experience:

One that stands out to me, she graduated last year, and she was actually a junior, she came to me and junior year we developed a plan for her so that she could graduate a year early. The student was taking a dance class and was taking college courses at the community college once the student had enough credits to graduate. She was applicable to graduate a year early, she was also interested in the military because of her ROTC background, therefore she decided to enlist in the military and commit to 4 years and began going through college that way.

Participant C2 shared an inspiring story:

One particular student that stands out was from last school year. It was a foster student. She was very motivated, a very bright girl. She was motivated to go to college. There was a lot of reassuring her that she could still do this because sometimes she would fall apart because she was afraid to do it on her own without parents. She knew when she left from high school, a place where she felt safe that
she would be on her own. There was a lot of struggle with that. I just kept reassuring her and gently pushing her. I got through the college application process and wrote many letters of recommendation for her. She received several scholarships. That was nice. Then she ended up getting accepted and going to the school she wanted, which was Columbia University. I felt like I spent probably the most time with her and I had probably the best results. It was most rewarding to see a child motivated and who had been on her own for so long. The best part for the student was that she received a full ride from Columbia University. Therefore as long as she met her GPA requirement she would exit school with no debt. Her first year in school she receives a 3.9 GPA.

Participants C9 shared:

I had a young man who turned out to be the valedictorian a couple of years back. He was the first one of his family to go to school. While he was very much on top of things, without that prior knowledge and the family support helping him navigate through, it became critical for me to help him understand what he needed to do to get into college. As we looked at his transcript we realized he had all the criteria to go to college. His SAT scores were above average. Because his ultimate goal was to be a doctor we looked at majors that would point him in that direction – pre-med majors. His challenge was unique in that he had two parents at home that made significant money, therefore based on finances and what his parents could afford to pay he elected to take classes at the community college which was less expensive in the hopes to do well and achieve a scholarship to a 4-year school. In his case, because the county colleges have matriculation agreements with 4-year institutions he navigated this process and was able to end
up at Rutgers pre-med program with a full ride. This was the best decision for this student and we walked him through navigating this process successfully.

Summary of Findings from The Responses to Research Question 2. High school counselors' experience working with low socioeconomic students in Title I schools in northern New Jersey indicated that various strategies were used to promote college preparation, application, and enrollment. Counselors believed in the critical nature of allowing students to visit colleges and explore different career industries. This allowed students to “see” what their life could be after high school. Counselors also indicated that college and career-related field trips supported the college application process. High school counselors' strategies to encourage postsecondary education ranged from guiding students through each step of the online application process to verifying that each college application was submitted correctly.

Counselors further perceived that those steps used to support students during the college enrollment process varied. Several counselors revealed that they supported students with college enrollment if they specifically asked for assistance, while others provided a detailed description of how they supported each step of the college enrollment process. Nevertheless, most counselors indicated that they also supported students in deciding where to go to college.

Counselors also discussed using a college-related curriculum to promote and encourage college awareness, preparedness, application, and enrollment. Each counselor discussed the usage of Naviance, a resource purchased by the district office, as a tool to expose students and parents to college. All counselors discussed how Naviance was a resource embedded into the classroom, taught by counselors, to expose and teach students the importance of preparing and applying for college. Other counselors discussed the
heavy usage of the career inventories in Naviance to identify college majors or career fields to support the college planning process.

**Research Question 3.** The researcher used interviews as a data point to answer RQ3: how do fiscal and structural elements at the school and state level influence the high school counselor’s ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds? Essentially, RQ3 investigated the high school counselor's perception of ways that the state, district, or school site’s budget affected his or her ability to provide postsecondary counseling. Interview Questions 4 through 14 were used to guide the participants and answer this research question. One theme emerged across all interviews: budget priorities. See Table 4.6 for specific information.

### Table 4.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Corresponding Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interviews</td>
<td>“Budgeting time for counselors to have not a longer working day because more days so more days where we can focus on the student” (Participant C11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Some schools haven’t put their budget to build computer labs or maintain. That affects the ability to stay up with the time” (Participant C3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The budget runs everything (Participant C9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Budget Priorities.** This theme focused on ways that the budget within schools and at the district and state levels affected school counselors’ ability to provide postsecondary support to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Data from individual interviews supported the development of this theme. Participants provided detailed information on two concepts that demonstrated how internal and external
elements affect the school counselor's ability to support postsecondary counseling and included: (a) resource availability, and (b) counselors time and availability. Table 4.7 describes those concepts.

Table 4.7

Resource and Time Availability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource Availability</td>
<td>This pertains to the distribution and availability of resources within schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor’s time and availability</td>
<td>This refers to the amount of time that counselors spend with students on postsecondary education and whether they have enough time to meet with and support students on their caseloads.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resource Availability. The data analysis process indicated two factors within high schools, at the district office, and the county office of education. These factors were perceived to have negative impact on postsecondary counseling. One of the factors discussed during the interviews was how limited funding impacted resource availability at the school site level. For instance, participant C9 elaborated:

The budget runs everything, especially going through the financial crisis and especially during the pandemic when they were looking at ways to cut programs and what needed to be cut to meet the district needs, which I totally get. One of the ways that they cut counseling was to cut counseling altogether and restructure under a different plan that was financially affordable and offered some of the same services that counseling used to offer. You have married interests. It always depends on who is in power. If you have a school board that is really passionate
about one thing which I've seen over the years then that's one way to go. Or if you have a director of secondary education, or people that are at the district level that are making structural changes in order to shift the focus to meet the district goals. At one point we had no tools in place to assist in visually helping students decide where they wanted to go to college, Then we discovered Naviance and presented it to the board. The district made the decision to buy and purchase Naviance. In addition, as people change within the district, the district vision changes. Although difficult at times, it's our job to make sure that we are aligned with that vision to do what it is that the district wants us to do. Budget in structural changes based on district priorities absolutely have always affected every single thing that I've done as a counselor.

Similarly, participant C8 offered:

The budget at the state and district level affects school site personnel tremendously. School counseling positions are based on what is determined by the board, I don’t even think they are mandated. We're not always seen as a valuable resource for schools, so when things get tight we are the first ones to be let go so that's how the budget affects us.

Participant C3 stated:

Some schools haven't put in their budget to build computer lab so that students can work on college applications. That affects the school's ability to stay up with the time. Another thing, the budget affects us whether it's the curriculum that we offer, the amount of programming we can do. It affects us with extra programs we can offer. Indirectly if they don't use the budget to provide remediation it affects our work and the future of our students. Lastly, some principles don't see social/
emotional as important as just the academic piece. That demonstrates where they put things in their budget. Are they going to send their one counselor to a seminar and pay for that or would they rather buy more library books that are needed for grade level reading? We have to make the determination.

C4 discussed the challenges counselors faced:

In my school we have limited computer access. We recently received 15 laptops for over 300 students. The city district office is aware getting juniors and seniors laptops does not seem to be a priority despite the demand to get students into colleges. The district also eliminated career centers and decided that as long as they have full time counseling staff that we should be able to handle career initiatives as well.

Counselor time and availability. Another factor described by participants that impacted secondary counseling was the amount of time that counselors must work with their students and whether they are available to meet with them. Participants C1, C4, and C7 all mentioned that school counselors used to have secretarial support for administrative tasks, schedule maintenance, and helping to process students’ applications, and transcripts. Additionally, they worked with teachers to schedule classroom presentations. Each participant expressed that their time and energy was spent being consumed in paperwork rather than spending the time needed to meet with students.

Each participant also expounded upon the idea that they spent a large amount of time proctoring exams such as the PSAT [Practice Scholastic Aptitude Test], SAT, covering classrooms, and dealing with discipline issues, among other non-counseling related tasks. However, participant C5 mentioned in her individual interview that school counselors should have longer workdays so that they can help and support more students.
Participant C11 expanded upon the idea of longer workdays and offered more details on why longer work days were needed:

I know in our district we have had our time cut and it's been a huge problem because there is just not enough time to meet with students, parents, schedule forces, conduct presentations across all grade levels, work evening events, go on field trips, address students experiencing personal struggles, deal with cutters, runaways, foster youth, homeless issues... It used to be that we would have 2 full weeks ahead of the school year so we could review our transcripts, make the appropriate changes, maybe even call in those kids that are on the cusp of either dropping out or may not make it to graduation. We can do all of those things within those 2 weeks. Now we don't have that time we are constantly . . . I am constantly, running. It's because I don't have the time that I need to be as effective as I would like to be. I think I could be much more effective if I had more time to review transcripts, review schedules, come up with plans. It affects what presentations we have during the school year because everything is done within a finite amount of time and long-range planning is just being able to have an increase in school budget or have more time negotiating into our contact. We need more time! I don't have as much time as I would like to build those relationships and to plan as thoroughly as possible. Budget for more things, budget for activities, for curriculum, for field trips for us, incentives. It impacts the amount of quality time that I can spend with my students and that's what I'm here for and not paper work, when there has to be paper work that needs to be done right now and I would have the time to do it but that but I don't. I'm trying to get these students recommendation completed. I got to get this project done and it's all
condensed in a short amount of time where if I had that time before school started
I could get more done.

Participant C6 offered a different opinion:

The challenges are just that, like I said before, a lot of them [the students] come
from very damaged backgrounds, and not necessarily those who are applying for
college, but I have other students who are not taken care of also. That competes
for a lot of my time. When it comes to, should I be in a lab helping a class or
helping someone who is suicidal. Then obviously the needier student is the one
who I feel needs my attention the most.

Summary of the Findings from RQ3. High school counselors perceived that the
budget at the district and school level negatively affected counselors’ time and
availability to frequently meet with their students. Counselors indicated that the state and
district funding impacted decisions on hiring or firing counselors; contract negotiations to
extend the counselors work schedule, academic remediation, course offering, tutoring
availability, and access to computers to support students. Counselors described the
ongoing struggle with school administrators and competing with classroom teachers for
resources to support students. Other challenges described by counselors were not having
enough time and availability to meet with their students. Counselors expressed feeling
absorbed in paperwork, administrative duties, and non-counseling related duties that
pulled them away from meeting their students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Summary

Twelve high school counselors who worked across nine Title I high schools in
northern New Jersey were interviewed. Data from individual interviews and college-
related archival material were used. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in the process of open and axial coding categories and established themes.

Six thematic categories emerged from the data sources, which aligned directly to the research questions. Three thematic categories (school counseling as a source for college information, counselor-student relationship, and counselor competency and preparedness) were used to answer RQ1. Two thematic categories (strategies that promote successful postsecondary counseling and support curriculum usage to support postsecondary success) were used to answer RQ2. One thematic category (budget priorities) was used to answer RQ3.

The results from the study identified how and why high school counselors are able to influence the postsecondary enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The results revealed that (a) high school counselors are the primary source of college information for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; (b) counselor-student relationships are meaningful; (c) professional development and college admission competencies are essential to support the college endeavors of students; and (d) intensive step by step support of the college application, financial aid, and college admission all were perceived as being successful strategies.

The results from the study further identified those perceived elements that affected high school counselors’ ability to provide postsecondary counseling support to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings indicated that budget priorities within the state, county, and local levels affected high school counselors' role, time, availability, and programs offered to support students.

Overall, the findings from the study revealed that high school counselors are instrumental in supporting and influencing the college decisions of students from both
social economic backgrounds, particularly when families lack the knowledge required for
college preparation in admissions. Further, participants perceived that they could also
influence college enrollment decisions by building relationships and providing ongoing
encouragement. In addition, participants indicated that remaining current on admissions
policies and practices, walking students step-by-step through the college application and
admissions process, exposing students to different colleges and careers, and leveraging
postsecondary curricular strategies to help bolster college outcomes were crucial.
Participants further answered questions related to the resource and time limitations that
interfered with adequately supporting their students.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

It is not known how high school counselors influence postsecondary enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while they attend Title I high schools in northern New Jersey. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory phenomenological study was to investigate the college-related counseling strategies used by high school counselors that influence a successful path to college attainment for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. High school counselors in the United States are poised to support students as they prepare, apply, and enroll in college. Robinson and Rosksa (2016) noted that high school counselors provide valuable guidance and advice to facilitate the college access process for low socioeconomic groups. However, students from these groups do not always have access to college-related information resources like their counterparts from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Shamsuddin, 2016). Since the guidance of high school counselors is critical to helping students navigate the complexities of college, particularly for low socioeconomic students, it is crucial to explore the high school counselor's perceived influence on college enrollment first-hand.

This qualitative phenomenological study was driven by previous research on declining college enrollment rates among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the United States. The problem statement was that it is not known how high school counselors can influence low socioeconomic students’ college enrollment decisions. The
problem statement led to the development and selection of the research questions, which included:

**RQ1:** To what extent can high school counselors support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at higher education institutions?

**RQ2:** How do high school counselors feel they influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to enroll in higher education institutions?

**RQ3:** How do fiscal and structural elements at the school and state level influence the high school counselor's ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

The qualitative phenomenological design of individual interviews allowed the researcher to explore and gain a comprehensive understanding of the high school counselor's experience, perception, and influence on college enrollment. The sample for this study was based on the literature findings. Shamsuddin (2016) and Bryan et al. (2015) revealed that high school counselors are vital sources of college-related information for low socioeconomic students. They help these students navigate the college application process. Therefore, this research targeted and recruited high school counselors who served as the primary source of college-related information for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds attending Title I high schools. In addition, the high school counselors leverage the college curriculum as a strategy to inspire and motivate students to prepare, apply, and enroll in college. This approach was consistent with Shamsuddin’s (2016) findings that college information should be embedded and integrated into course curricula where counselors interpret the information. Therefore, a
detailed description from the viewpoint of the high school counselors of those college
counseling activities and concrete practices that influence low socioeconomic students’
decision to apply and enroll in college was imperative.

The analysis of information provided through college-related curriculum used by
high school counselors to prepare and guide students toward college, using digitally
recorded Zoom sessions, were instrumental to this study. This research was needed and
designed to advance the knowledge and understanding of those successful counseling
strategies provided by the high school counselors that bolster college behaviors and
therefore contribute to the field of research. The findings from this study advanced the
awareness and understanding of the importance of focused, postsecondary counseling for
underrepresented students and will help district leaders recognize the need to shift
competing priorities that contribute to low college-going rates among students from low
socioeconomic backgrounds. In Chapter 5, the implications of the findings, limitations,
and recommendations that contributed to understanding the research are discussed.

Implications of Findings

Several practical implications emerged based on the findings in Chapter 4. This
study was designed to address the gap in the literature on how school counselors
perceived their influence on the college enrollment decisions of students from low
socioeconomic backgrounds in Title I schools. While this study was specific to high
school counselors in northern New Jersey, the research identified counseling strategies to
bolster postsecondary application and enrollment for students from low socioeconomic
backgrounds. The researcher will discuss the implications of four specific findings.
First, high school counselors provide critical support to low socioeconomic students that encourages applying to and enrolling in college. The researcher discovered that high school counselors are the primary source of college information. Four concepts emerged under this theme (a) role of the counselor in promoting college aspirations, (b) types of college information offered, (c) high expectations set by the high school counselor, and (d) barriers faced providing college information to their students and families. The justification of this topic is directly tied to the literature review in Chapter 2. For example, within schools, researchers have maintained that school counselors serve as a valuable source of social capital to help facilitate the transition from high school to college among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds due to disparities in college informational resources (Belasco, 2013; Brown et al., 2016; Comer, 2015; Holland, 2015; Lai et al., 2015; McKillip et al., 2012; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Many researchers agree that school counselors provide tangible college-related information and support to benefit students as they prepare, apply, and enroll in college (Belasco, 2013; Comer, 2015; Lai et al., 2015).

However, many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have parents who did not attend college and face difficulty in the college application process. The lack of, or limited social capital for students from low socioeconomic families is a potential roadblock on the path to college. As such, high school counselors face challenges providing postsecondary counseling in schools serving more low-income and ethnic minority students (Bryan et al., 2015).

While school personnel have been identified as a valuable form of social capital to promote college aspirations, criticism exists among first-generation, ethnic/racial
minority, and low-income groups. Rosenbaum et al. (1996) argued that high school counselors are less aggressive about discouraging students from attending college and predominantly encouraged all students to attend, an approach known as college for all. Further, Smith (2011) noted that high school counselors are often reluctant to dissuade students away from college for fear of parental discontentment. Similarly, Perna et al. (2008) argued that some researchers had criticized school counselors for encouraging a college for all approach at the expense of not spending enough time to discuss academic achievement or other options.

The researcher found that high school counselors are a valuable source of college information for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds based on the data collected. The researcher further found evidence that high school counselors perceive their role in the lives of students as an essential bridge to help connect students to information and resources required for college admissions and college enrollment. Specifically, high school counselors believe that their job is to promote and foster college aspirations. The researcher found that high school counselors promote college aspirations by being relentless in providing information on college to parents and students before, during, and after school and during the evenings and weekends. The thought drove this belief that many students, mainly those eligible to attend college, would not apply without pushing them toward college. Further, counselors articulated that having high expectations that students attend college promoted college applications and enrollment.

High school counselors confirm that the types of college information offered to their students inspire college aspiration centered on early college awareness and the importance of their grades, relative to college eligibility requirements. Counselors
delivered college information through workshops and presentations, while college representatives delivered targeted workshops on admissions requirements, financial aid, and housing. The belief held by many of the counselors in the interviews was that early exposure to college information, presentations on the importance of grades, and discussing the academic profile for many colleges promoted a college mindset.

While data from the interviews revealed that counselors promoted the idea that college was a viable option through information delivery, many believe that some students did not have the foundational skills or understanding that education after high school was important. As such, results from the study found that academic performance (the need for course remediation) and financial limitations (the desire to work instead of attending college to help support the family) were potential roadblocks to students pursuing secondary education. However, the data confirmed that high school counselors allow low socioeconomic students to access information, positively impacting college aspirations.

Second, counselor-student relationships are crucial. This theme emerged and focused on the relationship between high school counselors and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This theme is consistent with the literature findings that social capital is created when high school counselors develop a relationship with their students. Through those relationships, the students gain knowledge, advice, resources, and encouragement (Woods & Domina, 2014). Other findings suggest that when students feel that counselors are responsive to their needs, they create personal relationships of trust, which influence educational outcomes.
Although school counselors are capable of building trusting relationships and serve as a valuable source of social capital, their ability to influence the educational outcomes of students has faced scrutiny. The quantitative study by Kushner and Szirony (2014) indicated that counseling provided by high school counselors did not positively influence postsecondary degree completion. Similarly, Cumpton and Giana (2014) noted that while school counselors play a significant role in guiding students through the college choice process, isolating the causal effect of the school counselor's influence on postsecondary enrollment has been challenging.

Based on the data collected in the literature findings, the researcher found that high school counselors perceive that their relationship with their students was positive. The researcher found further evidence that high school counselors believe that their connections with their students are based upon their ability to be relatable, offer ongoing encouragement, foster open communication, stay responsive to their questions or needs, and remain nonjudgmental. Counselors also attributed their positive relationship with students to their ability to look beyond grades and their current situation or background and see their potential for greatness. Often, the building of the relationship between the counselor and the student takes place one-on-one rather than in a large group setting.

Counselors confirmed that a strategy used to maintain positive relationships with their students was to find ways to tap into their hopes and dreams to inspire and promote college aspirations and choices. The researcher further found from the individual interviews that the high school counselors perceived that when relationships and connections were positive, their ability to advise, counsel, and influence their students' ideas and decisions about college increases.
Third, a counselor's continual professional development, competencies, and preparedness in college admissions and financial aid are critical when providing postsecondary counseling. This theme focused on the competencies needed by counselors to support students as they prepared to apply for college and is consistent with the literature findings in Chapter 2. High school counselors do not receive graduate training in counselor education programs to prepare them for their college counseling responsibilities, according to Savitz-Romer (2012). He further contended that informal counselor education programs focus primarily on the theoretical application in the areas of social and emotional, which leaves many high school counselors unprepared for their roles.

Based on the interviews, counselors perceived that professional development that emphasizes college admissions and financial aid was necessary to prepare and help students apply to college. The researcher found from the interviews that counselors attended professional development training on financial aid and college admissions to increase their understanding of the rules governing college eligibility and changes to current policies. During the training, counselors learned from, and interacted with university representatives and colleagues from other school districts to enhance their practices. However, findings from this study also indicated that counselors did not receive formal postsecondary counseling training before working in high school. The researchers found that counselors learned about college preparation and the mechanics of college applications while they are on the job or from their own experience. This aspect of the data aligns with the research findings in Chapter 2.
Fourth and finally, fiscal structural constraints within schools prevent counselors from providing intense postsecondary support. Budget priorities within the school and at the district and/or state level impacted school counselors’ ability to provide full secondary support to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. When the budget is restricted or cut, it impacts the availability of resources within the school and counselors’ time and availability to spend with students on postsecondary education. This theme is consistent with the literature findings in Chapter 2. Based on the interviews and archival information, the findings revealed that counselors perceived that the budget at the school level hurt postsecondary counseling. Specifically, counselors perceive that the limited budget of Title I schools' resources interfere with their time and availability. According to counselors of this study, when their time is limited, they cannot address the postsecondary and non-postsecondary needs of their students.

Counselors believe that the budget priorities (state, district, and school) determined the school counselors' level of support to their students. The perception held by some counselors was that resource in time allocation of high school counselors was determined by who sat on the existing school board, who led the secondary education or college and career readiness department, and what city initiatives were being mandated. These elements determine resources and time allocation of high school counselors. It was clearly stated in the interviews that counselors perceived that the budget affected whether the counselor's role expanded to support administrators, or whether they would face termination, or an increased caseload. Budgets also impact funding the purchase of additional computers or additional workdays; and influence whether professional development training would be offered to everyone or a select few.
Finally, the researcher found that counselors described battling with school administrators for school resources. Some counselors recall being denied attending professional development training on college admissions due to restrictions with the budget. Other counselors described having conflicts with the school administrators over whether additional computers could be purchased to support students in completing the college application. Several counselors discussed battling with teachers for access to the computer labs to support students in applying for college. However, most counselors expressed dissatisfaction with demands administrators placed on their time, availability, and workload. In contrast, other demands on the school counselor's time and availability were placed by district and county officials to respond to urgent requests for data. Overall, this study provided vital information that can be used in high schools in New Jersey and schools throughout the United States.

Limitations

Several limitations emerged in this study, which may affect the interpretation of the data analysis. The limitations of this study were sample size and demographic characteristics. The sample was limited to the perceptions of 12 counselors employed in Title I high schools in northern New Jersey in the United States, and was not representative of the larger high school counselor population. Further, this study would have benefited from small focus groups consisting of a minimum of four people, as suggested by Sagoe, (2018). A broader sample pool was needed to generalize the high school counselors to obtain a more representative sample. Yin (2014) argued that such a limitation might jeopardize validity and applicability. Another limitation was the demographic makeup of the participants. The number of female participants (10)
outnumbered the male (two) participants. The sample was not equally represented based on gender. The over-representation of females in this study might reflect imbalanced perspectives and influence the findings reported. Finally, COVID-19 proved to be a limitation in finding and meeting with prospective constituents face-to-face, which could have had an unknown impact on the research.

**Recommendations**

As districts and schools consider ways to bolster the college enrollment rates among those low socioeconomic students, administrators should identify a counseling structure that will best meet the needs of their students. While several studies exist that call attention to investigating the organization and structure of the counseling department to increase college enrollment, this study may serve as a springboard for districts and schools to further that dialogue.

A thorough review of the literature identifies the need for the United States to improve college enrollment rates among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The literature further revealed school counselors as a potential avenue to address the identified need. Shamsuddin (2016) suggested that high school counselors are central to helping low socioeconomic students learn, understand, steer, and pursue the steps required for postsecondary enrollment. As such, this research explored the perceived influence of high school counselors on students' postsecondary enrollment decisions and how structural and fiscal elements at the school and district level impact their ability to provide postsecondary counseling. The goal is to increase understanding of the activities and strategies used by high school counselors to increase the college application and enrollment rates of low socioeconomic students. Further, this study attempted to shed
light on those elements that impacted the high school counselor's ability to provide postsecondary counseling. This study identifies recommendations for future research on the high school counselor's influence on postsecondary enrollment concerning students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Based on the results from this study, recommendations for future research include:

1. This study focused on the perceived influence of high school counselors within Title I high school districts in one state. Therefore, conducting a study consisting of high school counselors from charter schools, charter school networks, or smaller Title I high schools throughout the United States would be beneficial in obtaining perspectives from a broader population of counselors.

2. Future research should include the perspective of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in high school, their parents, and school administrators across multiple districts on how school counselors influence postsecondary enrollment behaviors.

3. In addition to focusing on high school counselors’ perceived influence on postsecondary enrollment decisions, future studies are needed to determine which counseling activities used by counselors significantly influence postsecondary outcomes.

4. This study excluded school counselors with less than 5 years of experience working with high school seniors. Thus, conducting a study of school counselors with less than 5 years of experience is recommended for future
research. The experience of these counselors could offer additional insights and counseling strategies that were not covered by those who have worked with high school seniors for 5 years or more.

5. This study uncovered several professional development needs of high school counselors. Therefore, future studies are recommended to explore further how counselor education programs support the professional development needs of high school counselors, specifically in college counseling.

6. Future research should consider a future mixed method design to be able to study larger populations of counselors, administrators and students to gain a full perspective of how the school system can help get students attain college.

Conclusion

The three research questions in this study allowed for the exploration of those postsecondary counseling strategies used by high school counselors that influence the postsecondary enrollment decisions of low socioeconomic students. Results from college-related archival materials and individual interviews captured the intricate activities and strategies high school counselors use to support students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, in navigating the college application the enrollment process. The findings of this study provided an understanding of those specific activities and strategies that support the decisions of low socioeconomic students’ process to postsecondary education and were based on the college access literature.

RQ1 Conclusions

The qualitative phenomenological study design and approach, as illustrated in Chapter 3, allow for the exploration of how high school counselors can influence the
college decisions of students from those socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall, the findings aligned to help answer RQ1. The first two findings revealed that school counselors could encourage the postsecondary enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds by promoting college aspirations, setting high expectations, and providing college-related information. The literature supported these findings in Chapter 2 by researchers who argued that students rely heavily on school counselors to facilitate college preparation by encouraging college aspirations (Belasco, 2013; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Other researchers have noted the importance of school counselors setting high expectations for students (Bryan et al., 2015; Holland, 2015). Moreover, when school counselors support students with information on financial aid, college fairs, and academic assistance programs. They help to facilitate college transition behaviors and increase the percentage of students who attend 4-year colleges (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Thus, these findings advanced the body of knowledge on why school counselors can support the postsecondary enrollment decisions, thereby addressing the gap in the literature.

This study also found that positive relationships between the counselor and student, fostered by pushing and encouraging students that college can be their reality, positively influencing college aspirations and choices. This finding was supported by Holland’s (2015) study that found that when students and counselors can connect, they can become influential agents in the college choice process. This finding advanced the body of knowledge on the counselor-student relationship and revealed how those relationships influence college enrollment decisions for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby addressing the gap in the literature. The last finding was in
counselor competency and preparedness, which revealed that counselors could successfully guide students towards college when they receive professional development training on college admission and financial aid. While this finding was not explicitly stated in Chapter 2, its contribution is significant because it advances the understanding of precisely those competencies needed to influence the college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

**RQ2 Conclusions**

This qualitative phenomenological study design allows for the in-depth examination of how high school counselors feel they can influence the college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall, the findings aligned to help answer RQ2. The first finding was that high school counselors were instrumental in helping students search, identify, and select colleges by walking students through each step of the college admissions process. This finding is supported by Robinson and Roksa (2016) and Shamsuddin (2016), who argue the importance of helping students navigate the college application process. While this finding has been uncovered in previous studies, the contribution to this study was significant and advanced the literature on those specific college-related strategies and activities used by high school counselors to influence those low socioeconomic students' decisions to apply to college.

Further findings from this study revealed that high school counselors delivered a college curriculum during classroom instruction to introduce and reinforce those college application steps required for college admission. This finding aligns with Shamsuddin’s (2016) recommendation that the high school counselor college curriculum is infused into
curricula where counselors are the interpreter of the information. This is an effective delivery method by counselors. However, the most significant finding was uncovering how high school counselors supported students to make decisions about enrolling in college, which is a significant finding that advances the literature on college access.

**RQ3 Conclusions**

In general, the phenomenological qualitative study design supported the detailed investigation of fiscal and structural elements at the school and state level that influenced the high school counselor's ability to provide postsecondary counseling to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall, the findings helped to answer RQ3. The researcher found evidence that county and district officials and the site level administrators determine school counselors' resource and time allocation. Counselors believe that when they have limited availability to meet with students, it translates into not all students receiving the time and attention required to support the postsecondary and non-secondary needs. In addition, the researchers found that counselors perceived that their jobs were at risk when there is a fiscal crisis with the state, mainly because New Jersey is one of the many states where the position of school counselor is mandated by the Board of Education as only one school counselor per school, building regardless of the number of students. While these findings are consistent with the research, the conclusions do not advance the literature and are therefore not significant.


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Appendix A

Principals E-mail Requesting Permission to Interview
High School Counselors

(List Serve available on Public Data Base)

Title I High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

My name is Stephanie Baker. I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my doctorate degree in Executive Leadership to examine how high school counselors are able to influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at degree-granting institutions of higher education. As such, I would like to invite high school counselors at your school to participate in my study. The department of education in your district is aware that I am contacting principals and I have attached a letter for your review from the assistant superintendent indicating same.

If your counselors decide to participate, they will be asked to meet with me via Zoom for an interview regarding their role as a high school counselor. In particular, we will discuss how their role in helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary enrollment and success. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time virtually due to COVID 19 restrictions and should last no more than 60 minutes.

While you will not benefit directly from participating in this study, my hope is that society in general will better understand those activities by the high school counselors that have the greatest influence on college-enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participation is confidential and optional. Information for this study will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at a professional meeting, however no identity or school will not be revealed.

Counselors who agree participate can stop participation in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question they are not comfortable answering. Should you have questions about this study, you may contact me at any time at [redacted] or [redacted].
Appendix B

Counselor Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Title I High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

Dear High School Counselor,

My name is Stephanie Baker. I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my doctorate degree in Executive Leadership to examine how high school counselors are able to influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at degree-granting institutions of higher education. As such, I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me via zoom for an interview regarding your role as a high school counselor. In particular, we will discuss your role in helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary enrollment and success. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time virtually due to COVID 19 restrictions and should last 60-90 minutes. The session will be recorded via zoom and digitally recorded so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The digital recordings will only be reviewed by me or a possibly faculty employed by St. John Fisher College and then transcribed. After transcription, each participate will have one week to review his/her responses for accuracy and return to the researcher. Any changes made by participants will be incorporated into data for analysis. After the data are analyzed, within a three-year timeframe, the files and digital recordings will be destroyed.

While you will not benefit directly from participating in this study, my hope is that society in general will better understand those activities by the high school counselor that have the greatest influence on college-enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participation is confidential and optional. Information for this study will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at a professional meeting, however your identity will not be revealed. Taking part in this study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not wish to participate; you may also stop your participation in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering. If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the demographic survey. Should you have questions about this study, you may contact me at any time at snb03610@sjfc.com.
Appendix C

Demographic Questions

Qualitative phenomenological study Title I High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate the high school counselors influence on the college enrollment decision of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while they attend Title I high schools. The results from this study may be used in presentations, reports, or publications, but your name, school where you work, or any information that could be used to review your identity will not be disclosed. Your responses will be confidential.

Demographic Information:

1. First and Last name:
2. Preferred Phone number:
3. Preferred email address:
4. Name of high school:
5. Gender:
6. Please Indicate your age range and highest degree(s) held?
7. Number of years as high school counselor?
8. What is your current number on your student caseload?
9. What is the number/percentage of students on your current caseload that may likely attend any form of postsecondary education immediately after high school?
10. How much of your time is spent on postsecondary counseling?
11. How much of your time is spent on duties unrelated to postsecondary counseling?
12. Of the time that you indicated is spent on postsecondary counseling, what total percentage of your time is dedicated to supporting students prepare for college?
13. Of the time that you indicated is spent on postsecondary counseling, what total percentage of your time is dedicated to supporting student apply for college?

14. Of the time that you indicated is spent on postsecondary counseling, what total percentage of your time is dedicated to supporting student enroll in college?
Appendix D

Informed Consent to Participate – Individual Interviews

Title I High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate the high school counselors' influence on the college enrollment decision of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds while they attend Title I high schools in Northern New Jersey. Also, under investigation will be how fiscal and structural elements within schools support high school counselors' ability to influence low socioeconomic students' college enrollment decisions. This study is based on the research that indicates that high school counselors are pivotal to facilitating students' college enrollment decisions. This study seeks to identify the school counselor's specific counseling activities that shape and influence postsecondary enrollment behaviors by looking at multilevel student success models used to support college attainment.

RESEARCH

Stephanie N. Baker, is a researcher working on the above research study at St. John Fisher College and has invited your participation in a research study.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate how school counselors in Title I high schools in Northern New Jersey are able to influence college enrollment decisions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Further, this study will examine how the college-related counseling activities used by high school counselors influence college enrollment outcomes. Counseling activities are defined as those activities that put students on a successful path to college attainment. The proposed study will contribute to the counseling field by validating previous research on the positive influence school counselors have on college planning and aspirations, and potentially identify college-preparation strategies that will significantly influence college enrollment behaviors of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This study is unique in that it will examine the intricacies of the role of high school counselors and their perceptions of how they are able to influence college enrollment decisions. Further, the analysis of in-depth interviews will provide data to support the research.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY

If you decide to participate, then as a study participant you will join a study of up to twenty high school counselors involving research of virtual interviews that will take a minimum of 60-90 minutes.

RISKS
There are no known risks from taking part in this study, but in any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

**BENEFITS**

From a practical standpoint, this study may provide data on the role of the high school counselor and factors that influence postsecondary enrollment. Moreover, this study may uncover concrete counseling strategies and activities that affect college enrollment behaviors. Identifying counseling activities of the school counselor that influence college enrollment behaviors will have practical value for students, school site administrators, school counselors, educators, and leaders to address the gap in college enrollment behaviors, particularly among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

**NEW INFORMATION**

If the researchers find new information during the study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will provide this information to you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researchers will not identify you. To maintain confidentiality, the records will be numbered to conceal your identity (Participant 1/Counselor 1, Participant 2/Counselor 2, etc.). Each high school in this study will have a number (High school 1, High school 2, etc.). This process will assist the researcher organize the participant’s comments and statements and their school. In addition, the researcher will secure the notes, digital recordings, and interview responses in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s residence that only the researcher is able to access and destroyed through the process of shredding after 7 years.

**WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants will not receive money to participate in this study.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT**

Any questions you have concerning the research study or your participation in the study, before or after your consent, will be answered by Stephanie Baker at [666-666]. If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Dr. Eileen Lynd Balta, Chair of the Institutional Review Board, through the College of Doctoral Studies at [666-666].

This form explains the nature, demands, benefits and any risk of the project. By signing this form you agree knowingly to assume any risks involved. Remember, your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit. In signing this consent form, you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this consent form will be given (offered) to you.

Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in the above study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject's Signature</th>
<th>Printed Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Signature</td>
<td>Printed Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Confidentiality Statement

Qualitative phenomenological study Title I High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and Perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

As a researcher working on the above research study at St. John Fisher College, I understand that I must maintain the confidentiality of all information concerning research participants. This information includes, but is not limited to, all identifying information and research data of participants and all information accruing from any direct or indirect contact I may have with said participants. In order to maintain confidentiality, I hereby agree to refrain from discussing or disclosing any information regarding research participants, including information described without identifying information, to any individual who is not part of the above research study or in need of the information for the expressed purposes on the research program.

Signature of Researcher       Printed Name       Date

Signature of Witness         Printed Name       Date
Appendix F

Interview Protocol for High School Counselors

Below are the guidelines for before, during, and after the interviews:

1. Convenient dates, times, for virtual interviews will be scheduled by the researcher.
2. Before the interview, each school counselor will be sent the Consent Form to review via email at least two days before the interviews and a link to complete the demographic information survey which will be a google form.
3. At least two days before the interviews, each counselor will receive a phone call or email from the researcher and asked to bring a sample copy of a sample postsecondary plan and college-related activities calendars (if they have one).
4. Before the virtual interview begins, each school counselor will be asked to read and electronically sign a Confidentiality Statement.
5. Participants will be reminded that participation in this study is voluntary and at any time, he/she may withdraw from the study. In addition, participants will receive assurance of confidentiality.
6. Additional time will be allotted for participants to ask questions prior to signing the Consent Form.
7. Once written consent is obtained, interview will be digitally recorded and expected to last 60-90 minutes.
8. The digital recorder will be turned on and each school counselor will be asked to answer the interview questions.
9. Each interview question will be read to the school counselor and clarification will be provided, if needed.
10. To prevent bias, the researcher will not make assumptions based on what participants choose to share or attempt to present answers, but instead probe the participant through phrasing such as “tell me more”.
11. After the interview questions are asked, the digital recorder will be turned off.
12. The school counselor will be thanked for his/her time and acknowledged for his/her contribution to the study.
13. Following the interviews, the researcher will jot down reflective notes of observations and all data will be collected and transcribed.
14. After the interviews are transcribed, each participant will receive a copy of the transcribed interview to verify for accuracy.
15. Participants will have one week to review the transcripts for accuracy, make any corrections if necessary, and return to the researcher.
16. After one week, if the participant does not return the transcripts to the researcher, the researcher will move forward with the comments as is written. However, if changes are made, the researcher will include the changes in the data.
Welcome and Introduction:
Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin the interview session, I need to collect the signed copy of the Consent to Participate in Research.

Purpose of the Interview:
As stated in the Consent form, this interview is intended to collect information for a research study that explores the school counselors’ influence on college enrollment for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Title I schools. During this interview, we will simply talk about your experiences as a high school counselor and college-related activities that you perform. Please be candid in your responses, as there is no right or wrong way to answer the questions.

Confidentiality:
As a reminder, any information that you share with me today will be used for research purposes only. Information that could be used to identify you, such as your name and school, will not be used or published in any report or document. As discussed, today’s interview will be digitally recorded and I will be taking notes of the conversation. The digital recordings and notes related to this study will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet and password-protected laptop. All information related to this study will be destroyed after 3 years.

Please confirm that you meet the following criteria for this study:

Please confirm the following questions:

1. Licensed high school counselors who work(ed) in a Title I Public High School in Northern, New Jersey.
2. Licensed high school counselor who work(ed) as a high school counselor for at least 5 years; and
3. Licensed High school counselor who work(ed) directly with high school seniors within the past 3 years.
Appendix G

Letter to Board of Education to Conduct Research

Re: District Letter of Support for Research in Title I High Schools
Dissertation Topic: High School Counselors Perception of Influence on College Admission and perseverance on Low Socioeconomic Students

Dear Dr. Leon,

My name is Stephanie Baker. I am a native resident and a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College in New York. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my doctorate degree in Executive Leadership to examine how high school counselors are able to influence students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with their decision to enroll at degree-granting institutions of higher education. As such, I would like permission from the district to contact high schools to invite high school counselors to participate in my study. A letter from the Board of Education would suffice for my institutional review board in starting this process and then I can personally contact principals at each high school to obtain permission to talk to their counselors.

If counselors decide to participate, they will be asked to meet with me for an interview regarding their role as a high school counselor. In particular, we will discuss their role in helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary enrollment and success. The meeting will take place virtually and will last no more than 60-90 minutes. The sessions will be digitally taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The digital recordings will only be reviewed by me or possibly faculty employed by St. John Fisher College and then transcribed. After transcription, each participant will have one week to review his/her responses for accuracy and return to the researcher. Any changes made by participants will be incorporated into data for analysis. After the data are analyzed, within a 3-year timeframe, the files and digital recordings will be destroyed.

Please advise if you would be willing to provide me with the letter to share with the institutional review board granting permission to approach high schools in the district. For your convenience, I have attached sample language that could be cut and pasted onto district letter head and returned if you approve me doing research in the district.

Thank you for your consideration to this request. I can be reached at the above number or email address if you have any questions or require any further information.

Sincerely,

Stephanie N. Baker
Stephanie N. Baker, MA LPC