

Parents of Traditionally Aged Community College Students: Communications and Choice

Author(s): Trudy Bers

Source: *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Jun., 2005), pp. 413-436

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40197374>

Accessed: 09-08-2017 19:16 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Research in Higher Education*

PARENTS OF TRADITIONALLY AGED COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: Communications and Choice

Trudy Bers^{*,**}

.....

Five suburban community colleges in a metropolitan area collaborated on a survey to parents of high school graduates of the class of 2002 who attended the colleges in fall 2002. The study was undertaken to learn more about parents' roles in their students' selection of community colleges, to give insights and information about this important community college constituency, and to assist community colleges to shape more effective ways to foster positive and supportive opinions among parents of potential students. Parents want the community college to provide students with credits and grade point averages enabling transfer, overestimate their students' academic skills as measured by course placement tests, engaged in a number of college choice activities, and indicate that factors associated with lifestyle and money were major reasons for selecting the community college. Associations between parents' social capital and perceptions of their students' academic abilities were found for a number of dependent variables examined. The study also revealed important differences in how participating institutions record and calculate key measures such as credits earned and grade point averages.

.....

KEY WORDS: community colleges; college choice; parents of college students; desired benefits of community college attendance.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Purpose

Colleges and universities implement a variety of programs to inform potential students and their parents about the institution and to build and sustain ties with high school guidance counselors and others who influence students' college choices. Relatively little is known of the role parents play in the college choice process of traditionally aged community college students, or about what parents want their students to achieve at

*Office of Research, Oakton Community College.

**Address Correspondence to: Trudy Bers, Office of Research, Oakton Community College, 1600 E. Golf Road, Des Plaines, IL 60016, USA. E-mail: tbbers@oakton.edu

community colleges. Thus community colleges lack key insights that could help them to improve literature, websites, and other means of reaching out to parents and enhancing the extent to which parents perceive the community college as a viable and positive option for their postsecondary students.

Nationally, the topic of “student success” has become prominent. For example, the Lumina Foundation has funded many projects associated with student success, and the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative recently launched a multipart project on student success. Researchers recognize that different constituencies define “success” differently, and that standard definitions of “success” such as graduation rates are ill suited to community colleges.

This study was undertaken to address the lack of information about parents of community college students, to identify how they define “success” for their students, and to identify potential activities and messages community colleges might adopt to improve the recruitment of traditionally aged students, gain the confidence of parents whose children attend the community college, and clarify to parents what the community college can and cannot provide (especially for parents whose goals for their students are unrealistic in light of students’ academic achievements and skills).

Many students transfer back to the community college after initially attending another institution immediately after high school. Even parents whose students are happy at other colleges and universities may encourage community college enrollment in summer school, where students can earn credits to transfer back to their home institutions.

For community colleges, parents are important not only because they may influence their students’ choice of the institution and may finance all or part of the costs of attendance. Parents are potential students at community colleges. The most recent AACC/ACT “Faces of the Future” survey revealed that 30% of full-time and 44% of part-time community college credit students aged 40 and above already held a bachelor’s degree or higher (personal communication, Kent Phillippe, September 2, 2003). Parents are taxpayers who support community colleges financially through the state and, in many cases, through local property taxes. As employers, parents may hire community college students, contract for customized training for their employees, or pay tuition for employees to attend community college classes. Consequently, regardless of whether their children attend a community college, parents can be viewed as important community college constituents.

As noted below, the literature about college choice and parent expectations for college outcomes does not contain much about community

colleges. This study was undertaken to learn more about parents' role in their students' selection of community colleges, to give insights and information about this important community college constituency, and to assist community colleges to shape more effective ways to foster positive and supportive opinions among parents of potential community college students. The study is primarily descriptive and explorative, although based on prior research (Bers and Galowich, 2002a; Bers and Smith, 1989), we did examine the associations among key parent attributes and their involvement in the choice process, expectations for their students, and students' college achievements.

LITERATURE ABOUT PARENT'S ROLES IN COLLEGE CHOICE AND PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS

Conceptual Approaches to Understanding the College Choice Process and Parent Expectations

Several conceptual approaches may be used to understand the role and desires of parents with respect to their children's attendance at college. "Social capital" is a resource affecting behavior (Coleman, 1988). With respect to college attendance, social capital comprises obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Parents who are educated and have financial resources have the social capital to invest in their children's educations. For example, they would create expectations of college attendance when children are still in grade school, use a variety of resources to obtain information about college, and function in a social environment that consistently reinforces expectations that children will go to college. Parents with high social capital would also be expected to have more financial resources to pay for college. Plank and Jordan (2001) found that social capital was associated with postsecondary attendance.

A second conceptual approach is to view college choice as a multiphase process in which each stage precedes the next. Hossler (1984) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified three discrete stages in the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. During the predisposition state, the student decides whether or not to continue education beyond high school. During the search stage, the student searches for attributes and values that characterize postsecondary alternatives and decides which attributes are right for him. Finally, during the choice stage, the student formulates a choice set of schools to which application is made and decides where to enroll if more than one option is available. Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith (1989) define college choice as "sa complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to

continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training” (p. 234).

A third conceptual approach is suggested by the work of Schneider and Stevenson (1999). They suggest that despite having high educational expectations for their students, many parents do not see a responsibility to help their adolescents formulate realistic plans for the future. Thus many teenagers have misaligned ambitions. They do not understand the amount of education needed for careers to which they aspire and they make college choices that do not prepare them for their desired careers. In this study, the concept of educational expectations is examined through comparing parents’ assessments of their students’ academic skills with students’ academic achievements. Where parents do not have realistic views of their students’ abilities, unrealistic plans for the future are likely to exist.

In summary, three conceptual approaches inform this study: social capital, college choice as a multistage process, and parent expectations for their students.

Research on Parent Roles in the College Choice Process

Parent encouragement and involvement has been shown to be a critical factor affecting students’ decisions to become prepared for college, to apply and then to attend, and to select certain types of institutions (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Choy, Horn, Nuñez and Chen, 2000; Flint, 1992; Hossler and Stage, 1992; Keller and McKewon, 1984; Somers, Cofer and VanderPutten, 2002). Students whose parents had more education and were more encouraging and involved about whether or not to attend college, were more likely to attend college, to have larger choice sets (number of schools seriously considered) and to attend more selective institutions.

Many studies show that parents’ level of education is associated with students’ college choice process, including preparation for college. Bodfish (2000) found that students who considered a larger number of colleges were more likely than students with smaller choice sets to have parents with education beyond the bachelor’s degree and to have fathers whose occupations were executive or professional. Nuñez and Horn (2000) found parents’ educational levels were associated with students’ choice of courses in high school—specifically mathematics—and, therefore, their preparation for college. The U.S. Department of Education (2001) found that parents’ education was associated with the likelihood of attending college, educational expectations for degrees, academic preparation for admission

to 4-year institutions, high school course selection, and assistance in applying to college.

Plank and Jordan (2001) used the concept of "talent loss" to examine postsecondary behavior and the role of parents and school personnel. According to Plank and Jordan, a "severe" definition of talent loss is "the failure of high-achieving students to enter 4-year colleges or universities" (p. 949). A less severe definition is "the failure of high-achieving students to enroll at any type of PEI (postsecondary institution) in the years immediately following high school." Using National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data, they found that communication among students, parents and school personnel was associated with attendance at PEI. The Plank and Jordan work is elitist, explicitly classifying attendance at a community college as of lesser value (more talent loss, controlling for other factors) than attendance at a 4-year institution.

Some recent studies (Bodfish, 2000; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001; Hurtado, Kurotouchi Inkelas, Briggs and Rhee, 1997; McDonough, 1997; Somers et al., 2002) suggest the college choice process may differ among racial-ethnic and income groups. Tierney (2002) and Jun and Colyar (2002) use the concept of cultural capital to argue that a student's culture and local context must be taken into consideration in constructing effective college preparation programs. For example, older siblings rather than parents may provide essential support in Latino families. Tierney asserts that parents and families are often not included in programs that prepare students for college.

A recent study by Stamats (2003) explored resources parents of high school students used to obtain information about college. Based on a nationwide telephone survey of 516 parents of college-bound high school juniors and seniors, the study found parents sought advice from their peers, from college Web sites, and from guidance counselors. Other key sources of information were campus tours, visits with current students, reading college marketing materials, consulting guidebooks, and talking with college admission counselors.

Research about Community College Choice

Most research about college choice and parent expectations about college is based on research of students attending 4-year colleges and universities. Exceptions include the work of Somers et al. (2002), Bers and Smith (1989), and Bers and Galowich (2002a, 2002b). Somers, Cofer and VanderPutten used National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) data and found that fathers of students who attended 2-year colleges were less likely to have high aspirations for their children than fathers of all

other students, while mothers of these students were somewhat more likely to have high aspirations.

The three studies by Bers and her coauthors focused directly on parents of community college students. Based on surveys of parents of recent high school graduates who attended the community college in the fall semester following high school, the studies found parents had high educational aspirations for their students, wanted their students to obtain credits and a grade point average that would transfer to a 4-year institution, said their students had always planned to attend college but not the community college, and said the decision to attend the community college was made by the student or jointly by students and parents. Most parents reported they engaged in some activity related to the college choice process and decision, and learned about the particular institution from written materials published by the institution and by word of mouth (friends, relatives, their student, and high school counselors). Parents overestimated their students' academic abilities. An acknowledged limitation of the three studies was that they were done at a single institution.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and Participants

The source of data for the current project came from a survey of parents of high school class of 2002 students who attended the community college in fall 2002. The survey was conducted simultaneously at five community colleges. All are located in suburban/exurban areas of a major midwestern city. Populations served by the colleges range from approximately 250,000 to one million district residents; median 1999 household incomes averaged more than \$64,500 in four districts and \$50,000 in the fifth district (the national average was \$42,000). The percent of residents age 25 or older with a bachelor's degree or higher range 25–49% (the national average is 24%). Fall 2002 enrollments ranged from 5500 to 30,000 including non-credit students taking courses eligible for state financial support. All institutions are open enrollment, and all offer baccalaureate-transfer and occupational programs, remedial education, and an array of non-credit and continuing education offerings. Three of the five colleges are located in close proximity to more than a dozen other colleges and universities, often located within the same geographical region, and students in all five community college districts have alternatives within a 45-minute drive.

The instrument was designed to elicit information about (a) parent expectations of the community college for their students and (b) their

involvement in the college decision process for students who attended the college in the fall semester immediately after high school. The survey itself was modified from an earlier instrument used by Bers and Galowich (2002a). Face validity was established through critiques by college professionals conversant with the college choice process and with the characteristics of parents and high schools in the districts.

The instrument contained three parts. Part I included questions concerning the process for choosing college in general, Part II included questions concerning the college decision process in regards to the specific college, and Part III included demographic questions about the respondents and their families. Data from each college's student information system were combined with parent responses for each student (surveys were coded to permit matching). Institutional data included each student's placement test results in reading, writing and mathematics, and college-credits earned and grade point average for the fall 2002 term.

The initial population surveyed was 6431 sets of parents/guardians (one survey was sent to each household). Surveys and postage-paid return envelopes were mailed in late fall 2002, with each college handling its own mailing. Second mailings were sent only to those who did not respond. The second mailing, including a second copy of the survey and another postage-paid return envelope, was sent out approximately 3 weeks after the initial mailing.

Of the 6431 surveys sent to parents/guardians, 2223 usable responses were obtained for an overall response rate of 34.6%. Response rates per college ranged from 29.8% to 48.5%.

Procedure and Data Analysis

We analyzed data using frequencies, χ -squares, analyses of variance and factor analysis. Simple frequencies provide descriptive information about parent and student characteristics, parent roles in the college choice process, and parent assessments about and expectations for their student's educations. Research questions included:

- What role do parents report playing in their students' college choice process?
- Where do parents get their information about colleges in general, and the community college specifically?
- What are parent expectations for their students at the community college and for higher education?
- To what extent are parents accurate in their assessments of their students' academic skills?

- What factors do parents perceive as influential in the decision their students should attend the community college?
- What lessons can be learned from this research to improve communication with and support from parents of potential community college students?

To investigate the choice process in more depth two independent variables were used to examine relationships between parent characteristics and perceptions of their students and college choice variables. The first was social capital, for which we constructed a proxy based on parent education. The variable had three levels: 1 = no college for either parent (14% of the respondents), 2 = some college for one or both parents (41%), and 3 = bachelor's degree or higher for one or both parents (46%).

The second independent variable was based on parents' perceptions of their students' academic skills. We reasoned that parents who perceived their students to be academically weaker or in need of remediation might engage differently in the college choice process and have different expectations for their students than parents who viewed their students as academic prepared or strong. This builds on the work of Schneider and Stevenson (1999) by examining the alignment of parents' desires for their students and students' academic skills.

Parents' assessments were based on responses to a survey item that asked the respondents to rate their students' academic skill levels on a 5-point scale where 1 = remedial/needs special help and 5 = honors/outstanding. To prevent small cell sizes we collapsed the scale into three categories, combining responses 1 and 2 into the low skill level and responses 4 and 5 into the high skill level. Ten percent of respondents assessed their students' skills as remedial/low, 40% assessed them as middle, and 50% assessed them as high.

We used the Spearman rank order correlation to examine the relationships between the two independent variables, parents' social capital and parents' ratings of their students' academic skills. Though statistically significant ($p < .001$), the small coefficient of $-.081$ indicates little substantive relationship between the two.

χ -Square analyses were used to test for associations between each independent variable and the dependent variables related to parents' role in the choice process and factors affecting the choice of the community college. ANOVAs were used to investigate relationships between the same independent variables with the engagement of parents in the college choice process (number of information sources used and number of activities in which parents engaged) and students' academic achievements as measured by grade point average. Factor analysis was used to identify underlying

reasons affecting students' decisions to attend the community college, and ANOVA was used to examine the association between parents' social capital and ratings of students' academic skills with each of the resulting factors.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Mothers completed most of the surveys (72%). The racial or ethnic identify of students of most survey respondents was white non-Hispanic (79%). Other racial or ethnic groups were Hispanic (8%), Asian or Pacific Islanders (6%), black (4%), and all others, including those who did not answer, 5%. The preponderance of white non-Hispanics among survey respondents made it impossible for us to examine results based on race/ethnicity. Parents reported the gender of their students as 53% male and 47% female.

Parents were relatively well educated. As noted above, our proxy indicator of parent socioeconomic status, based on the combination of mother's and father's highest education level, revealed that 14% of parents fell into the lowest group (no college for either parent), 40% fell into the middle group (some college for one or both parents), and 46% fell into the highest level (bachelor's degree or higher for one or both parents). Approximately 20% of both mothers and fathers in a family had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Parent Assessments of Academic Skills and Education Expectations for their Students

Parents' assessments of their students' academic skills, and the hopes they have for their educations after high school, can be expected to influence the involvement and role parents play in the college choice processes. We presented, above, parents' assessments of their students' academic skill levels. We also asked them to report their students' high school ranks. Twenty percent reported their students were in the top (highest) quarter, 35% in the second quarter, 31% in the third quarter, and 14% in the lowest quarter.

We also looked at the association between parents' ratings of their students' academic skills and class rank. Statistically significant associations were found between these two items ($X^2 = 1072$; $df = 6$, $p < .0001$). Fifty-eight percent of parents reporting their students in the lowest level of academic skill also said their students were in the lowest quartile of their high school graduating class, and 38% of those who rated their students in

the highest level of academic skill said their students were in the top half of their graduating class. However, 16% of parents who said their students were in the highest level of academic skills also said their students were in the bottom half of their high school class, an unexplainable disconnect in perceptions.

These findings imply parents have a general awareness of their students' academic competencies, at least as indicated by comparing parent assessments of academic skill levels with parent-reported student class ranks. However, college data reflecting students' academic skills suggest more students are under prepared for college than their parents realize or acknowledge. Table 1 presents students' course placements in writing and mathematics (data were not reported for all students, and one school did not report mathematics placement data at all).

Six percent of students who were tested placed into English as a second language (ESL) remedial writing courses, and 24% placed into remedial writing. That is, 30% of students tested placed into remedial writing courses. Results for mathematics show even more students placing into remedial work. Forty-eight percent of students tested placed into remedial mathematics and another 19% placed into intermediate algebra, a course that is considered to be remedial by some institutions. Put another way, only one in five students who took the mathematics placement test (and whose school reported data) placed into college-level mathematics courses.

TABLE 1. Course Placements in Writing and Mathematics

Discipline	Course Placement	N	Pct. Tested
Writing	English as a second language (remedial)	130	5.9
	Remedial	529	23.9
	College-level	1410	63.7
	No test taken	145	6.6
	Total	2214	
	Of those tested, placed into college-level		68.0
Mathematics	Remedial	825	47.2
	Intermediate Algebra	331	18.9
	College-level	311	17.8
	No test taken	282	16.1
	Total	1749	
	Of those tested, placed into college-level (excluding Intermediate Algebra)		21.2

We also looked at the number of remedial courses in which a student placed; this includes reading, writing, and mathematics. Of students taking placement tests in all three areas, 25% placed into all college-level courses, 28% placed into two college-level courses, 21% placed into one college-level course, and 26% placed into all remedial courses.

To examine the accuracy of parents' perceptions of their students' academic skills we compared parents' assessments and students' placement results. For this analysis we combined ESL and remedial writing placements because courses in both are at the remedial level. Statistically significant associations were found between parent assessments of their students' academic skill levels and students' writing and mathematics competencies as measured by placement tests (for writing, $X^2 = 68.9$, $df = 2$, $p < .0001$ and for mathematics, $X^2 = 177.7$, $df = 4$, $p < .0001$). Fifty-two percent of students whose parents said they had low level academic skills placed into remedial English; 24% of those whose parents said they had high level skills placed into remedial English. Eighty-two percent of students whose parents said their students had low level academic skills placed into remedial mathematics; however, 40% of students whose parents thought they had high level academic skills also placed into remedial mathematics. Though it is expected that students whose parents assess their students' skills at a higher level would demonstrate higher level skills, the fact that one quarter of parents misjudged their students abilities in English and two fifths misjudged them in mathematics is disconcerting.

We also looked at students' academic performance at the end of the fall semester to explore the extent to which parent perceptions of their students' academic skills were aligned with student performance. To do this we conducted an analysis of variance, using student grade point average¹ as the dependent variable and parents' assessments of their students' skills as the independent variable. Table 2 presents findings. Results indicate parents' evaluations of their students' academic skill levels are confirmed by student academic performance during their first semester at the college.

TABLE 2. Parent Reports about Academic Skills Levels and Student GPA
($F = 124.9$; $p < .0001$)

Students Academic Skill Level Reported by Parents	Number of Parents	Mean GPA	SD
Remedial—Low	187	1.71	1.28
Middle	769	2.19	1.08
Honors—High	923	2.83	1.02

TABLE 3. Important Gains or Outcomes Desired by Parents

Gain or Outcome	Pct. Parents Rating 4 or 5
Credits that will transfer	94.3
GPA will transfer	91.9
Sense of direction	86.1
Confidence in his or her abilities	84.8
Improved academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, math)	82.3
An Associate's degree	78.2
Social maturity	70.7
Training for a job	55.1

The analysis of variance achieved a statistically significant F -ratio and mean grade point averages are in the predicted direction, with substantially lower GPAs for students whose parents reported them in the lower academic skill level categories and the highest GPAs for students whose parents said they had higher level academic skills ($F = 124.9$; $p < .0001$).

Parents have high expectations for their students. Eighty-nine percent say they want their students to achieve a bachelor's degree or higher, while only 11% say they expect their students to attain an associate degree or less. They expect their students to achieve a variety of gains or outcomes from the community college experience. Desired outcomes relate primarily to student eligibility for transfer—not surprising given the emphasis on the bachelors degree—or to students' direction and self-perception. Table 3 lists gains or outcomes perceived to be important by parents (rated '4' or '5' on a 5-point scale where 1 = not important and 5 = very important).

In summary, parents value student outcomes that relate in large part to academic achievements and increased focus and confidence, including earning credits and GPAs that will transfer, improving academic skills, gaining a sense of direction and improving self-confidence. While parents have a general awareness of their students' academic skills, they do overestimate the level as measured by placement test results. For example, in 24% of the cases parents thought their students had high level academic skills, yet their students placed into remedial work in at least one discipline. We found that most parents want and expect their students to earn at least a bachelor's degree.

Parent Involvement in the College Choice Process

This study was designed also to enhance the understanding of the ways in which parents of community college students participated in the college

choice process of their students. Several aspects of the choice process were explored: when the decision to attend college and the community college specifically were made; sources of information about colleges used by parents; college choice activities in which parents engaged; factors influencing the choice of the community college; and who made the decision to attend the community college.

Timing of Decisions

We asked two questions related to the timing of college choice decisions: when parents perceived their students decided to attend college, and when they decided to attend the specific community college. Seventy-three percent of parents said their students had always planned to attend college, 21% said they decided during high school, and 6% said they decided to attend college only after high school was completed. Timing of the decision to attend the specific community college was different, however. Only 10% of respondents said their students had always planned to attend the specific institution, 63% said they made the decision during high school (most during the last 2 years), and 27% decided to attend the community college only after high school was completed.

Of the 2223 respondents, only 749 (34%) indicated their students had applied to an institution other than the community college, and 505 (23% of the total) said their students had been accepted elsewhere. Put another way, two-thirds of the recent high school graduates who attended the community college in the fall semester after high school applied only to the community college.

Community colleges are open enrollment institutions located in the student's home area; enrollment does not require advanced planning that involves completing applications, taking ACT or SAT tests (not required by community colleges), reserving space in residence halls, etc. Indeed, the decision to attend college and to enroll at the specific community college can be made virtually as a single decision as late as the first several days in which classes are offered in the semester. Thus students who plan to go elsewhere and determine at nearly the last minute that these plans would not work may still enroll at the community college. Though not evident in this study, anecdotal comments from admission personnel and advisors suggest that some students actually enroll at other schools, find early on that this would not work for them, drop out and then return to the community college for the same semester.

We asked parents who initiated the idea of their student attending the community college, and then whether the decision to attend was primarily theirs, the student's, or a joint decision. Respondents could indicate that

more than one individual "initiated the idea." We found that 62% of parents reported the initial idea to attend the community college was theirs, and 58% reported it was their students who initiated the idea of attending the community college. Twenty-nine percent of the parents indicated that *both* they and their students initiated the idea of attending the community college, suggesting cooperation between parent and student. The next most important initiator reported by parents was a high school teacher or counselor (cited by 18% of respondents), followed by friends of the student (13%), brothers or sisters (12%), and other family members (6%).

According to parents, the actual *decision* to attend the college was entirely or mostly the students' (in 49% of the cases) or a joint decision of student and parents (47%). Only 4% of respondents said the decision was mostly or entirely the parents.

Sources of Information

There are numerous sources of information about college that parents may use to inform themselves and their students. Table 4 provides a list of sources and the percentage of parents who said they used each. College publications and personal contacts are most often used, with mass media

TABLE 4. Information Resources Used by Parents

Source	Percent Using
College catalog	50.5
College class schedule	47.9
High school counsel or/teacher	35.5
Friends or relatives	35.2
Class of 2002 student	34.4
Other children in family	25.8
College brochures	26.1
College website	21.3
Spouse/partner	16.8
College faculty or staff	13.8
Friends of class of 2002 student	11.4
Employer or co-workers	7.9
Local newspapers	5.5
Admission staff from other colleges	2.6
TV or radio ads	1.1
Local cable or other TV ads	1.0
Radio	.8

(newspapers, radio, television and cable) least used. Twenty-one percent of parents said they used the college's website. On average, parents report using 3.4 different resources, with 59% using two to four resources.

We also examined whether the number of information resources used was related to parent social capital and assessment of their students' academic skills. Using analysis of variance where the number of resources used was the dependent variable, we found a statistically significant difference by parent social capital ($F = 3.64$; $p < .03$). However, in terms of a meaningful difference, results show little substantial variation by socioeconomic status. The highest status group of parents used, on average, 3.5 resources, the middle status group used 3.3 resources and the lowest status group used 3.2 resources. There was no significant difference in the number of information resources used by parents' assessment of their students' academic skills ($F = .46$; $p > .05$).

College Choice Activities

Research has shown that parents' involvement in college choice activities is related to the college choice process of students. We asked parents when they became involved in their students' college choice process. Fifteen percent of respondents said they were never involved, 37% became involved during their students' freshman/sophomore years in high school, 44% became involved during their students' junior/senior years, and 3% became involved only after their student was out of high school. We also examined whether the timing of parents' involvement was related to parent social capital and assessment of their students' academic skills. χ -Square analysis revealed a significant association between parent social capital and timing of parent involvement ($X^2 = 66.77$; $p < .0001$). Thirty percent of parents in the lowest social capital group were not involved, whereas only 11% of parents in the highest social capital group were not involved.

There was also a statistically significant association between parents' ratings of their students' academic skills and when they became involved in the search process ($X^2 = 12.06$; $p < .02$), but results are more complex to interpret. Parents who rated their students' skills most positively were slightly more likely to be completely *uninvolved* in their students' choice process.

Parents may also engage in a variety of college choice activities. We provided a list of such activities and asked respondents to check each one in which they had participated. However, we did not ask the frequency of participation in each activity; consequently this measure is a general indicator of parent involvement in the choice process, but may obscure the

depth of involvement if a parent participated multiple times in a particular activity.

Table 5 lists activities and the percentage of respondents who said they engaged in the activity. On average, parents participated in 3.5 different activities. Sixty percent of parents engaged in one to four different activities. Nine percent said they did not engage in any activities, whereas six percent engaged in eight or more different activities. The most frequently cited activities involved colleges directly or indirectly (e.g., reading catalogs and brochures, visiting campuses, attending college nights at the high school) and talking with high school counselors and teachers. More parents (48%) reported using college websites to learn about colleges in general than to learn about the specific community college (21%).

Like with sources of information, we also examined whether parental engagement in search activities was related to parent socioeconomic status and assessment of their students' academic skills. Analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant difference in the number of college choice activities in which parents engaged and their social capital ($F = 36.31$; $p < .0001$). Parents in the lowest social capital group engaged, on average, in 2.1 different activities; parents in the middle group engaged in 3.3 activities; and parents in the highest social capital group engaged in 3.9 activities. There was no significant difference in the number of activities and parents' assessments of their students' academic skills.

TABLE 5. College Choice Activities Engaged in by Parents

Activity	Percent Engaging
Read college brochures or catalogs	54.6
Talked to high school counselors/teachers	52.8
Visited colleges' websites	48.1
Attended an open house or information session provided by a college	43.0
Attended a college night at the high school	39.7
Talked to admission staff	29.5
Visited college campuses	26.7
Watched videotapes supplied by colleges	20.1
Talked to college faculty	15.4
Read college guides or rankings (e.g., U.S. News & World Report, Peterson's)	11.3
Talked to private college counselor	8.0

Factors Influencing Choice

Many reasons affect the decision about which college to attend. Parents provided with a list of college choice reasons and asked which ones influenced their students' decisions to attend the community college. Table 6 presents results.

In examining the factors that were most often cited by parents, it appears that reasons related to money and lifestyle are more influential than characteristics of the college itself. To examine these reasons further, we conducted a factor analysis to determine if the reasons fell into thematic factors. Table 7 presents results of the factor analysis, for which we used principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. Four factors accounting for 48.2% of the overall variance were revealed. The four factors were labeled Comfort (Cronbach's alpha, $r = .45$), Academic Certainty/Uncertainty (Cronbach's alpha, $r = .57$),² Lifestyle (Cronbach's alpha, $r = .45$), and Affordability (Cronbach's alpha, $r = .37$). The percentage of the explained variance accounted for by each factor was 13.8%, 12.8%, 11.0%, and 10.6% respectively. Five of the 13 reasons loaded onto the factor Comfort because reasons related primarily to connections to the institution through family and friends, the welcoming environment and assistance available. The college having an excellent reputation can be interpreted as a related reason because it could foster confidence that the institution would be comfortable and a good choice. The second factor, Academic Certainty/Uncertainty, included reasons

TABLE 6. Factors Considered in Decision to Attend the Community College

Factor	Percent Citing Factor
Student can combine work and school	66.7
Student wants to live at home	55.9
College was most affordable choice	52.8
Student wants to save money	48.5
Student needs time to decide what he or she wants to do	45.5
College has excellent reputation	44.2
Student is unsure about a major	41.0
Other family members have gone to the college	28.3
Student has friends who attend the college	27.3
College has program student wanted	25.2
College is a friendly and welcoming place	24.3
Student needs academic assistance that the college can provide	18.4
Student could not afford to go elsewhere	16.0

TABLE 7. Factor Analysis of Reasons for Selecting Community College

	Factor 1 Comfort	Factor 2 Academic Certainty/ Uncertainty	Factor 3 Lifestyle	Factor 4 Affordability
College is friendly, welcoming place	0.68953	-0.01197	0.03857	0.12331
College has excellent reputation	0.64603	0.04917	0.10429	-0.01606
Needs academic assistance	0.44861	-0.05508	-0.41184	-0.09682
Other family members have attended	0.42331	0.11618	0.10636	0.16988
Has friends who attend	0.41427	0.13028	0.22959	0.13000
Unsure of major	0.13205	0.83237	0.06793	-0.03668
Needs time to decide what to do	0.17015	0.82285	-0.04270	-0.04800
College has program student wanted	0.43106	-0.50322	0.08713	-0.11486
Wants to live home	0.19662	-0.10152	0.68227	-0.10956
Combine work and school	0.10805	0.02260	0.66977	0.07012
Wants to save money	0.09501	0.04603	0.48971	0.47409
Could not afford to go elsewhere	0.23968	-0.00245	0.10956	0.77437
Most affordable choice	0.23968	-0.00245	0.10956	0.66919

indicating students were either uncertain or certain about their majors or what they wanted to do. Note the negative loading of the item asserting the college had the program the student wanted; this was not a reason for selecting the college because the student did not have a declared major, so program availability would be irrelevant. The third factor, Lifestyle, included reasons associated with where students live and how they spend their time (living at home, going to school and working). The final factor, Affordability, drew items clearly related to the fact that community colleges are relatively inexpensive compared to alternative colleges. Interestingly, the item "student wants to save money" had nearly identical loadings on both the Lifestyle and the Affordability factors.

We then calculated a score on each factor for each respondent, and examined the associations between the independent variables of parents' social capital and perception of students' academic skills with each factor using analysis of variance. Table 8 provides the mean scores for each factor by independent variable, the *F*-ratios and the level of significance. As the table shows, each independent variable was significantly associated with the four factors, and there was overall statistical significance taking both independent variables together for each factor.

Parents with less social capital were not as concerned about Comfort or Academic Certainty considerations in their students' selection of the community college, and were more concerned with Lifestyle and

TABLE 8. Factors Related to Selected Community College, Parent Social Capital and Parent Assessment of Student Academic Skill Level

Independent Variables	N	Factors			
		Factor 1 Comfort	Factor 2 Academic Certainty/ Uncertainty	Factor 3 Lifestyle	Factor 4 Affordability
<i>Parent social capital</i>					
Low	311	-.136	-.137	.227	.063
Middle	885	-.027	-.006	.055	.048
High	964	.068	.063	-.118	-.078
F-ratio		4.06	3.96	12.01	3.35
p		<.02	<.02	<.0001	<.05
<i>Parent perceptions of student academic skill level</i>					
Remedial—Low	213	.256	.170	-.524	-.225
Middle	874	.052	.074	-.082	-.109
Honors—High	1073	-.094	-.082	.176	.120
F-ratio		11.77	8.24	46.47	17.36
p		<.0001	<.001	<.0001	<.0001
<i>For both independent variables</i>					
F-ratio		8.61	6.57	.974	10.77
p		<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Affordability. Conversely, parents with more social capital were more likely to cite Comfort or Academic Certainty considerations and less likely to identify Lifestyle or Affordability as reasons their students selected the community college.

Parents who perceived their students to have weaker academic skills said reasons associated Comfort at the college and Academic Certainty were more important than parents who perceived their students to have higher levels of academic skills. Conversely, Affordability and Lifestyle considerations were less important to parents who perceived their students to have weak academic skills and were more important for parents who assessed their students' skills at higher levels.

DISCUSSION

This study reflects a collaborative effort among five suburban community colleges to gain information about parents' expectations from a

community college and their role in their students' college choice process. The goals were to gain a better understanding of how parents perceive the factors influencing the college choice of their traditionally aged community college students and to explore the impact of parent social capital and assessment of their students' academic skills on the choice process, decision to attend the college, and parent expectations for their students' postsecondary educations.

The results provide insights into parent behavior, perceptions and expectations that might be useful in regional or statewide informational and outreach efforts to communicate with parents of prospective community college students who are still in high school. At the same time, by including multiple institutions, findings of the study may provide guidance to regional and statewide efforts to promote community colleges as viable choices for recent high school graduates.

Parents want the community college to prepare and enable students to achieve academic success, especially credits and grade point averages enabling students to transfer and earn baccalaureate degrees. They also want community colleges to help students improve their sense of direction, self-confidence and academic skills.

Parent expectations may be unrealistic, however, especially in light of their misperceptions regarding their students' academic skills. Students whose parents participated in this study need remedial work. Of those who took placement tests, only two-thirds (68%) placed into college-level writing and barely one fifth (21%) placed into college-level mathematics. One quarter of parents misjudged their students' abilities in English, thinking their students had strong skills when actual placements were at the remedial level, and two fifths of parents misjudged skills in mathematics, again thinking their students had strong skills when placements were remedial.

This study indicated that parents do play a role in their students' college choice process and decisions. Four of five parents reported they were involved in their students' college choice process. They used several resources to learn about the college, relying primarily on college publications and conversations with high school teachers and counselors, their student, friends or relatives and other children in the family. Mass media such as cable, TV or radio ads were rarely used, and the website of the institution attended was used by only 21% of respondents.

Parents were engaged in a variety of college choice activities, most involving personal contacts. Factors influencing the decision to attend the community college were primarily those related to finances or to students' academic skills and maturity. The actual decision to attend the college tended to be made by both students and their parents together. The fact

that two-thirds of the students applied only to the community college suggests other schools were not seriously considered.

Survey respondents identified four sets of factors associated with their students' decision to attend the community college. Factors dealt with Comfort at the college, Academic Certainty/Uncertainty, Lifestyles and Affordability. Both parents' social capital and assessments of their students' academic skills were associated with the factors. Not surprisingly, parents with less social capital were more likely to indicate factors of Lifestyle and Affordability were important in the decision, while parents who assessed their students academic skills as weak were more likely to say that factors of Comfort and Academic Certainty/Uncertainty influenced the attendance decision.

Though not intended at the outset, through the collaborative process researchers also learned a great deal about the similarities and, more importantly, the differences in the ways institutions handled such data elements as grade point average and cumulative credits. By identifying differences, it became evident that conducting research across institutions, when drawing data from student information systems, could result in misreporting and misinterpretations of data because researchers assume, wrongly, that participating colleges use the same algorithms for compiling and calculating selected elements.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications. For both marketing and enrollment management, the study demonstrates the importance of providing information about the community college to parents throughout their students' high school years and even after, since a number of students made the decision to attend the community college only after high school graduation. High quality college publications and strong relationships with high school personnel should be maintained since parents rely on college publications and personal conversations more than on the mass media.

Enrollment management personnel might emphasize the value of students' remediating academic deficiencies, proving their ability to do college-level work, and earning transfer credits as reasons for not just enrolling in, but remaining at the community college for an appreciable length of time if not through completion of a degree. The heavy emphasis on transfer suggests that, for enrollment management and academic administrators, attention needs to be given to providing transferable courses to serve the demands and needs of recent high school graduates. The emphasis on transfer as compared to vocational preparation also

suggests that, for traditionally aged students, interest is likely to be much weaker for vocational programs.

The importance of transfer preparation and the pattern of associations among the four factors describing reasons for selecting the community college and parents' social capital and perceptions of their students' academic skills suggests at least three distinct messages might be directed to parents. The first message deals with the transferability of community courses and the extent to which community colleges enable students to transfer successfully and earn baccalaureate degrees. The second message focuses on the academic and social environment of the college, emphasizing the welcoming nature of schools, support services available, presence of familiar faces (friends and family) to ease the transition from high school to postsecondary education, and opportunity to earn college credits before committing to a major. This message is likely to be particularly powerful for parents who recognize their students may be unready to leave home or are uncertain about what major they wish to pursue in college. The third message deals with the affordability of the community college and the opportunity it provides for students to continue living at home, working and saving money. Appeals based on high quality programs may be less effective for parents because neither quality programs nor faculty per se seem salient to them as they work with their students to select the community college.

Another implication relates to the multiple roles parents have with respect to the community college. In addition to being parents of traditionally aged students at the college, they may themselves be current or prospective community college students, employers who hire community college students, taxpayers who support the institution, and consumers of community programs and events. As colleges communicate with parents, they would be well served by keeping in mind these multiple roles.

This study has implications for institutional research as well. The project demonstrates that institutions can come together on a voluntary basis to collaborate on a study of mutual interest, so long as each institution has the necessary resources to compile data, the willingness to adhere to a standard research protocol, and comparable data elements to permit comparisons across colleges. It became evident through this project that the last requirement was not always met, and that even institutions in the same state used varying algorithms and protocols for calculating what are usually thought to be comparable measures such as grade point averages and credits earned.

As competition for students grows and geographical boundaries for attending community colleges become more permeable through distance

education and cooperative agreements across colleges, institutions will necessarily become more interested in effectively communicating with those who influence college choice decisions. The parents of traditionally aged community college students are clearly a crucial population to be considered. This study provides insights and information to further the understanding of their role in students' college choice decisions and to foster stronger and new ways to communicate with them.

ENDNOTES

1. The colleges use a 4-point grading scale where $A = 4$. Four of the five colleges exclude remedial courses from GPA calculations. Data from these four institutions were used in this analysis. GPAs from the fifth college, which include remedial work, are not comparable.
2. For purposes of calculating Cronbach's alpha we recoded the variable that had a negative loading on the factor.

REFERENCES

- Bers, T. H., and Galowich, P. M. (2002a). Parents and the college choice process for community college students. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College* 10(1): 25–40.
- Bers, T. H., and Galowich, P. M. (2002b). Using survey and focus group research to learn about parents' roles in the community college choice process. *Community College Review* 29(4): 67–82.
- Bers, T. H., and Smith, K. (Summer, 1989). Parents and the college choice decisions of community college students. *College and University* 64(4): 335–348.
- Bodfish, S. (2000). Size of choice set and its role in college choice decisions. In: *Paper presented at the 40th Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, Cincinnati, OH*. May, 2000.
- Cabrera, A. F., and La Nasa, S. M. (2000a). Overcoming the tasks on the path to college for America's disadvantaged. In: Cabrera, A. F., and La Nasa, S. M. (eds.), *New Directions for Institutional Research. Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students 107* (Fall, 2000), Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, pp. 31–43.
- Cabrera, A. F., and La Nasa, S. M. (2000b). Understanding the college-choice process. In: Cabrera, A. F., and La Nasa, S. M. (eds.), *New Directions for Institutional Research. Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students 107* (Fall, 2000), Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, pp. 5–22.
- Cabrera, A., and La Nasa, S. (2001). On the path to college: Three critical tasks facing America's disadvantaged. *Research in Higher Education* 42(2): 119–149.
- Choy, S. P., Horn, L. J., Nuñez, A.-M., and Chen, X. (2000). Understanding the college-choice process. In: Cabrera, A. F., and La Nasa, S. M. (eds.), *New Directions for Institutional Research. Understanding the College Choice of Disadvantaged Students 107* (Fall, 2000), Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, pp. 45–63.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (Suppl.): S95–S120.

- Flint, T. A. (1992). Parental and planning influences on the formation of student college choice sets. *Research in Higher Education* 33(6): 689–708.
- Hossler, D. (1984). *Enrollment Management: An Integrated Approach*, College Entrance Examination Board, New York.
- Hossler, D., Braxton, J., and Coopersmith, G. (1989). Understanding student college choice. In: Smart, J. (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 5), Agathon Press, NY, pp. 231–288.
- Hossler, D., and Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policy-makers. *College and University* 2(3): 207–221.
- Hossler, D., and Stage, F. K. (1992). Family and high school experience influences on the postsecondary educational plans of ninth-grade students. *American Educational Research Journal* 29(2): 425–451.
- Hurtado, S., Kurotsuchi Inkelas, K., Briggs, C., and Rhee, B.-S. (1997). Differences in college access and choice among racial/ethnic groups: Identifying continuing barriers. *Research in Higher Education* 38(1): 43–75.
- Jun, A., and Colyar, J. (2002). Parental guidance suggested: Family involvement in college preparation programs. In: *Paper presented at the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, LA*.
- Keller, M. J., and McKewon, M. P. (1984). Factors contributing to postsecondary enrollments decisions of Maryland National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists. In: *Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Chicago*.
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- Núñez, A.-M., and Horn, L. J. (2000). First-generation students and the track to college: Coursetaking, planning strategies, and the context of support. In: *Paper presented for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA*. April, 2000.
- Plank, S. B., and Jordan, W. J. (2001). Effects of information, guidance, and actions on postsecondary destinations: A study of talent loss. *American Educational Research Journal* 38(4): 947–979.
- Schneider, B., and Stevenson, D. (1999). *The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers, Motivated but Directionless*, Yale's University Press, New Haven, Connecticut.
- Sommers, P., Cofer, J., and VanderPutten, J. (2002). The early bird goes to college: The link between early college aspirations and postsecondary matriculation. *Journal of College Student Development* 43(1): 93–107.
- Stamats. (2003). ParentsTALK study. *StamatsSTATS, Vol. 4, no. 6*, <http://www.stamats.com/stamatsstats/stamatsstatsvol4no6.htm>.
- Tierney, W. G. (2002). Parents and families in pre-college preparation: The lack of connection between research and practice. In: *Paper presented at the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, LA*.
- U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. (2001). *Students Who Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment*, NCES 2001-126, Susan Choy, Washington, DC.

Received March 2, 2004.