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Exploring the Impacts that an Urban Public High School Experience has on Bridgewater State
University Students' Perceived College Preparedness

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Sociology

Bridgewater State University

December 14, 2017

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Exploring the Impacts that an Urban Public High School Experience has on Bridgewater State
University Students' Perceived College Preparedness

Katherine R. Trudell
Sociology Honors Thesis
December, 2017
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Abstract

College preparedness is a widely researched topic within education. Previous research has found that an individual's college readiness is primarily determined by the rigor of their high school academics, their involvement in extracurricular activities, and their knowledge of the higher educational system (Conley 2008; Glater 2016; Glennie *et al.* 2015; Holles 2016). The purpose of this project was to investigate whether or not Bridgewater State University students felt that these factors affected their individual preparedness for college. For this project, I interviewed 18 students who attended urban public high schools in Southeastern Massachusetts in order to explore whether or not their high school experiences adequately prepared them for college-level academics. College preparedness is important to explore in urban communities specifically because research has shown the important role that an individual's socioeconomic status, race, and previous academic experiences can have on one's ability to matriculate and succeed in higher education (Glater 2016). Brockton, Fall River, Taunton and New Bedford are urban communities with a large proportion of low income and minority students, and it is important to add their experiences to the conversation surrounding college preparedness. During in-depth interviews, subjects discussed their coursework, extracurricular involvement, and employment in high school. In addition, the subjects described their college application process, their college coursework and their college employment. The data collected from these interviews shows the importance of mentorship for students preparing for college. Many interviewees cited a specific mentor who used their knowledge about college to assist their students. Additionally, those students who did not feel prepared experienced a lack of support and guidance as they were looking into pursuing higher education.

INTRODUCTION

College preparedness is an important topic within educational research. Scholars have not yet come to a consensus on how college preparedness should be defined, but it is clear that whether or not an individual is ready to matriculate and succeed in higher education is central to debates around high-stakes testing, longer school days, and federal and state education policies. Previous research has noted the significant impact that an individual's high school experience can have on their ability to prepare for college (Farmer-Hinton 2008; Glater 2016; Holland 2006; Reid and Moore 2008; Wimberly and Noeth 2004). Often students who are involved in extracurricular activities and complete advanced coursework in high school are more prepared to transition into higher education (Conley 2008; Farmer-Hinton 2008; Glater 2016; Reid and Moore 2008).

Previous research has also shown that students require sufficient knowledge about college in order to successfully apply and matriculate (Conley 2008). Furthermore, low income and first generation students require additional support from their high schools because they often do not receive information about college from their family members (Farmer-Hinton 2008; Glater 2016; Gullatt and Jan 2003; Holland 2009; Reid and Moore 2008; Wimberly and Noeth 2004). Therefore, it is important that high schools provide students with the academic and social skills that they need to successfully apply to and enroll in college. Unfortunately, Holland (2009:25) reports:

According to the United States Department of Education (2006), close to 70 percent of all twelfth graders expected to go on to earn a four-year degree or graduate degree and these aspirations were consistent across gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Yet, many African American and Latino students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds continue to be underprepared for, and underrepresented in, four-year colleges and universities.

Holland (2009) notes that underrepresented students are often dependent solely on their secondary schools to provide them with the information and assistance that they need for college. Therefore, it is important to examine the ways that high schools support or fail to support students as they prepare for college.

In this study, I interviewed 18 Bridgewater State University students from Brockton, Taunton, Fall River, and New Bedford, four small cities in southeastern Massachusetts. The purpose of this research is to identify whether or not participants felt that their high school experience adequately prepared them for college. The data collected from these interviews emphasizes the significant role that extracurricular involvement, advanced coursework, and college preparedness programs have on preparing students to transition into college. Students who have the opportunity to develop one on one relationships with faculty and staff that provide them with academic and social assistance are often better prepared to transition into college. Therefore, the data collected in this research reinforces the significant role that high schools can play in preparing students for the transition into higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining and Understanding College Preparedness

Previous research has shown that college readiness is best examined through multiple lenses, including a student's academic coursework in high school, his or her involvement in enriching extracurricular activities, and his or her understanding of the college process (Glater 2016; Glennie *et al.* 2014; Holles 2016). Because there are many factors which impact a

student's preparation for college, researchers argue that a simple quantitative examination of standardized testing scores does not provide enough of an in depth analysis (Conley 2008; Holles 2016). Rather, research on college preparedness should consider both students' academic and social preparation for college (Conley 2008; Glater 2016; Gullatt and Jan 2003; Holland 2009; Reid and Moore 2008)

Recent studies have concluded that a student's preparedness for college cannot be determined solely by their scores on a standardized test such as the SAT or the ACT. While these are fairly good indicators of college success, these tests do not reflect the social and cultural capital that a student needs in order to successfully complete a postsecondary education (Holles 2016). Bourdieu (1986) defined cultural capital as the knowledge and skills that an individual possess which can assist their social mobility. While academics are certainly important, students preparing for college must also have knowledge about how college is structured so that they will be prepared to succeed. Conley (2008) argues that students must have sufficient knowledge about "college culture" in order to succeed in higher education. They need to understand the application process, financial aid, and how to choose a school that fits their needs. Once they are enrolled, they must understand how to communicate with their professors, how to access academic resources, and how to manage their time in order to achieve academic success. Conley (2008) summarizes four categories of knowledge which a student must possess in order to successfully transition into college. Conley (2008) argues that students need: key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and knowledge. Therefore, not only do students need to have academic knowledge that could be quantified on a standardized test, they also need study-based skills, such as time management, so that they have the ability to manage the increased workload that collegiate academics demand independent of

their parents/ guardians and high school support systems. Therefore, college readiness cannot merely be measured through an individual's academic ability, because one's preparedness for college is impacted by multiple factors including academic performance, social and cultural capital, and college knowledge (Conley 2008).

Arnold *et al.* (2012:vii) found that "college readiness" was best defined as "the multidimensional set of skills, traits, habits and knowledge that students need to enter and succeed in college". While academics are certainly important, students must also possess sufficient social skills and knowledge about the college culture in order to succeed in higher education. These additional skills are often learned from family members or from one's experiences in high school. Conley (2008:3) explains that college preparedness can be understood by exploring "the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped [students] for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college". Therefore, it is important to examine the ways in which high schools help or hinder their students' academic and social preparation for college.

College Information and the Role of High Schools

Previous research has shown that preparing for college is particularly challenging for low income and first generation students. First generation students often do not receive assistance from their parents when preparing for college because their parents have had limited experience with college planning, as well as the application and financial aid processes. Holland (2009:25) found that "underrepresented students rely [solely] on their secondary schools for college preparation and guidance because they often have parents who have not completed college". Because low income and first generation students depend on their high schools to provide them with essential information about how to apply, enroll, and succeed in college, it is important to

further understand what these high schools offer to their students. For these students, their secondary schools are one of the only resources that is available to educate them about collegiate opportunities and support them through the college application process.

Wimberly and Noeth (2004:2) summarize the resources which high schools should be providing their students and families:

Part of the school's role is to provide postsecondary planning information, resources, and tools to assist students and their parents with educational and career plans. Parents who are unable to provide knowledgeable guidance to their children must rely primarily on the school to provide these resources. Schools, then, must assume a responsibility to help these parents at each stage of the high school-to-college transition process by providing timely and user-friendly information and guidance.

When students do not have immediate family members who have attended college, it is imperative that their high schools provide them with the information and support that they need to understand their options as well as how to navigate the college application process. It is important that high schools provide guidance for first generation students so that they can make informed decisions about their post-secondary education and take full advantage of the opportunities that are available to them.

Reid and Moore (2008) argue that first generation students also rely on their high schools to educate them about the social skills that they need for college. Because first generation students do not have parents who have attended college, these students are often unaware of the culture that exists in college. Reid and Moore (2008:243) identified the importance of "the interrelationship of the family and school in providing students with the social capital they will need for academic transitions." Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the social networks that connect individuals and allow for the transmission of information. First generation students must

develop relationships with individuals in their secondary schools so that they can learn important information about college. It is important that high school personnel educate first generation students and their families about the way that college is structured and provide them the tools that they need to navigate it successfully. Conley (2008:5) explains the importance of equipping students with the social skills that they need in college as he explains:

The pupil-teacher relationship changes dramatically [from high school to college], as do expectations for engagement, independent work, motivation, and intellectual development. All of this occurs when, for the first time, many young people are experiencing significant independence from family and from the role of child. It is no wonder that the transition from high school to college is one of the most difficult that many people experience during their lifetime.

As Conley (2008) notes, the culture in college is different from what many students experience in high school. First generation students are particularly at risk because they cannot rely on their parents to educate them about the social skills that are necessary for success in college. These students need to be educated not only on how to apply to college, but also on the important social skills that they will need to be successful academically at the college level. First generation students rely on their high schools to provide them with this preparation. Therefore, it is important to examine the ways in which high schools prepare or fail to prepare their students for the difficult transition between high school and college.

College Preparation Organizations

One key component of college preparedness is helping students to develop a clear understanding of what college entails. Glennie, Dalton, and Knapp (2015:963) examined the role that pre-college access programs played in student success across the nation. They found that these programs provided students with the opportunities to “seek more information about

college, apply to college and receive financial aid [than] non-participants”. Research such as this clearly demonstrates the noteworthy role that high school programs—especially programs geared specifically towards educating students about college expectations— can have on college preparedness.

Gullatt and Jan (2003:9) further explain the benefits that pre-college access programs can have for first generation and low income students. They explain that “these programs [are designed] to provide a student with high potential, but limited resources, with the support necessary to reach his/her individual academic goals, including college admission and enrollment”. College preparation organizations provide first generation and low income students with the academic and social support that they need to apply and matriculate in college. For first generation students who cannot rely on their parents for college support, these preparation organizations are invaluable resources. By explaining the college application process and providing students with academic support, these programs facilitate students’ transition from high school to college. Gullatt and Jan (2003:23) also argue that “exposure to college level work on college campuses gives disadvantaged students a vision of themselves undertaking and succeeding in postsecondary education”. Early exposure to college is particularly beneficial for students who may not know someone who has attended college. These programs provide students with access to college and the support that they need to make college a possibility for themselves.

Gullatt and Jan (2003) claim that college preparation organizations also provide students with important social support. Throughout high school, this mentorship can help students develop the academic and social skills that they need to successfully apply for and matriculate in college. First generation students are given the opportunity to develop a “close, caring

relationship with a knowledgeable adult who monitors the student's progress" (13). Because first generation students cannot rely on their parents to provide them with information about college, it is important that students have the opportunity to develop these mentoring relationships so that they can be knowledgeable about the college application process as well as the academic and social skills that are necessary for success in college. When high schools offer these college preparation organizations, they provide their students with the opportunity to visit universities, receive academic, social, and financial assistance, and receive support through the application process (Glennie, *et al.*, 2015; Gullatt and Jan, 2003). By providing these pre-college access programs, high schools contribute to the future academic success of their students.

Talent Search, Upward Bound, and GEAR UP are federally funded college preparation organizations that are available to low income and first generation students in Brockton, Taunton, Fall River, and New Bedford. These programs were established as part of Higher Education Act of 1965. These programs are designed to provide assistance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds so that they can successfully apply for and enroll in college. The Talent Search program specifically targets disadvantaged students who demonstrate academic promise. The program offers academic assistance, career counseling, exposure to college campuses, financial aid assistance, and support to students through the college application process. Upward Bound provides students with additional instruction in core high school subjects. This additional education is a mandated part of the program, and it helps students develop the academic skills that they will need in order to be successful in college. Upward Bound programs can also offer students financial aid assistance and counseling throughout the college research and application process. Finally, GEAR UP is a discretionary grant program that is designed to increase the number of low income students who enroll in college. Those who are

awarded grants are able to provide support systems for students at the middle and high school level as well as scholarship money to make college more attainable for students (U.S. Department of Education). These college preparation organizations are extremely beneficial because they provide low income and first generation students with the support and assistance that they need to apply for and succeed in college. Because these students often cannot rely on their families as college resources, these programs offer students the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills that they need to ensure that college is within reach.

The Benefits of Extracurricular Involvement

Glater (2016:106) also discusses the significant influence that other extracurricular experiences have on college preparedness as he discusses the role that debt and merit have on higher education access. He argues that “enrichment opportunities [are often] enjoyed by students whose families have greater resources”. Affluent parents have the financial capital to offer their children academic and social extracurricular opportunities which can impact their achievement on standardized tests, as well as their development of academic and professional skills that are integral to college success. Therefore, it is important that students who cannot afford private enrichment experiences have the opportunity to participate in activities provided by their high schools. Glater (2016) argues that extracurricular involvement helps students to develop important leadership and interpersonal skills which are key components of college success. Students who are involved in clubs and organizations in high school also build relationships with high school staff and faculty who can provide them with important information about college.

Conley (2008) argues that extracurricular involvement also helps students to develop important time management skills which facilitate success in college. Conley (2008:10) claims

that “time management is perhaps the most foundational of all self-management and study skills”. Students who are involved in high school learn to balance their academic and social responsibilities which equips them to manage a heavier course load in college. Therefore, students who are involved in extracurricular activities will have the opportunity to develop academic, social, and study-based skills which will benefit them in college.

Mentorship

Holland (2009:25) notes the important role that “social support” plays in helping students to prepare for college. She defines social support as “an organizational dynamic that fosters personalized relationships between students and staff so that frequent communication, academic norms, and the sharing of valuable resources exist”. These personalized relationships can be extremely beneficial for first generation college students. One on one relationships with high school staff and faculty provide students with the opportunity to ask questions about college and receive personalized assistance through the application process. Because first generation students cannot rely on their families for post-secondary educational assistance, high school mentors can be instrumental in helping students prepare for higher education. High school mentors can provide students with the social and cultural capital they need to enroll and succeed in college. Reid and Moore (2008:243) concur as their research concluded “that strong social and academic support networks are necessary for successful transition from high school to college, especially for first-generation students”. Therefore, students who develop relationships with high school staff and faculty will have important social and academic supports to help them successfully transition into post-secondary education.

Farmer-Hinton (2008:128) argues that these mentoring relationships are particularly important for first generation students:

Since students of color are less likely to have adults at home or adults residing in their neighborhood to help shape their college-planning activities, students will need to rely on their school networks where school leaders and teachers with collegiate experiences can supplement familial and local networks that have limited collegiate experiences. Besides the appropriate courses and academic support, students of color need the benefit of school networks to reinforce college expectations and provide college-planning tools and resources.

Therefore, first generation students benefit greatly from relationships with high school staff and faculty who can supplement the knowledge about college that students cannot receive from family members. In her research, Farmer-Hinton (2008) found that students who lacked important knowledge about the college application process and college expectations were able to achieve their academic goals with the support of their high school social networks. Students who received guidance from teachers, counselors, and other school staff shared that their mentors made post-secondary education attainable. Farmer-Hinton (2008:133) shares the results: “The focus group students reported that an interested adult considered them as having the ability to go to college and that adult helped to monitor their college-planning activities”. First generation students stand to benefit the most from high school staff and faculty mentoring relationships because they often rely exclusively on their high school to provide them the information and preparation that they need to succeed in college.

Wimberly and Noeth (2004:1) claim that postsecondary planning is often influenced by an student’s relationship with other “individuals, institutions, programs, activities, and experiences [that] provide students with information about school and college success, expand awareness of college and career options, increase educational expectations, identify educational opportunities, and help students make the transition to college”. Because college readiness is a multifaceted concept, there are many ways in which high school personnel and programs can assist students. Students who receive the supports outlined by Wimberly and Noeth (2004) will

be better prepared for the transition to college because they have been guided through the process.

Farmer-Hinton (2008) also notes the role that mentors can have in assisting students through the college application process. For first generation students specifically, high school staff and faculty are invaluable college resources. Farmer-Hinton (2008:133) reports that in her research “students relied on mentoring staff members for hands-on college planning support such as access to extensive knowledge about taking courses for college admission, preparing and taking college entrance exams, and getting financial aid for college costs”. Because first generation students cannot rely on family members for support and guidance through the college application process, Farmer-Hinton (2008) finds that students are dependent on high school resources to educate them about their post-secondary education options and to guide them through the application process. This research highlights the important role that high schools can play in preparing their students for college.

Urban High Schools

College preparedness is important to explore in urban communities specifically because research has shown the important role that an individual’s “socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and prior academic experiences” can have on one’s ability to matriculate and succeed in higher education (Glater, 2016:101). Holland (2009:25) explains:

Research has repeatedly reported that in very large schools, schools in urban areas, and schools that disproportionately serve African American and Latino students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students are less likely to have access to the human and material resources that are critical for college preparation. These students are less likely to be enrolled in academically rigorous courses or college preparatory tracks; and, the schools that many of these students attend have been less likely to provide students with sufficient

opportunities to develop relationships with high school personnel who are solely responsible for guiding students through postsecondary planning activities.

According to Holland (2009), urban high schools often have a high proportion of low income and minority students, and it is important to examine what college preparation services are provided in these environments. Holland (2009) argues that students who attend urban high schools are at a disadvantage because the school often cannot provide the same access to critical college resources that smaller suburban schools can. Researchers have noted the significant role that extracurricular involvement, academically rigorous coursework, and access to college information plays in helping students to prepare for college. However, Holland (2009) also notes that students in urban high schools are typically disadvantaged on all of these fronts. Therefore, it is important to understand how students navigate this high school environment and what impact their high school experience has on their ability to prepare for college.

METHODOLOGY

The Importance of Qualitative Inquiry

In order to understand whether or not students felt that their high school experience prepared them for college, it is first important to understand their experiences directly. Some researchers have advocated for a qualitative approach to the conversation surrounding college preparedness as it allows us to understand further each individual's experience. Holles (2016:121) explains that "college readiness is often studied with statistical data, but knowing how students perceive their readiness can reveal how their particular circumstances and experiences impact their sense of preparedness for college". It is clear that an individual's

preparation for postsecondary education is multifaceted as it is impacted by one's high school academics, extracurricular involvements, knowledge of the college application process, and whether or not one possesses the social and cultural capital necessary to succeed in a college environment.

Taking a qualitative approach allows me to gather a more in-depth understanding of what factors individuals identify as having significantly impacted their ability to prepare themselves for college level academics (Holles 2016). Qualitative research such as this is important to add to the growing literature on college readiness as it allows us "to investigate the meaning of social phenomena as experienced by the people themselves" (Malterud, 2001:398). Furthermore, Reid and Moore (2008:243) note that "there is little research [on college preparedness] from the perspective of the students, especially those who have already matriculated and are attending college". Therefore, interviewing students about how they perceive their own level of preparation can provide great insight into the ways in which students conceptualize college readiness in their lives.

Subjects/ Sample

For this qualitative study, 18 in depth interviews were conducted with Bridgewater State University (BSU) students who graduated from an urban public high school in either Brockton, Taunton, Fall River, or New Bedford. These specific communities were chosen for this study because many students who matriculate at BSU are residents of these nearby cities. In addition, these four small cities were chosen because this research focuses on the impact that urban public high schools have on students' preparation for college.

Participants for this study were recruited primarily through convenience and snowball sampling methods. Because only specific urban communities were targeted for this study, I used convenience sampling methods to contact potential interviewees whom I knew personally through my involvement with different organizations on campus. I knew certain students who were residents of the cities that I was interested in, and I contacted them via email to invite them to participate (Appendix 1). Information about the study was also published on the BSU class pages on Facebook in an effort to access additional participants. There is a Facebook page designated for each graduating class, and information about the study was posted on each of the pages for students currently enrolled. Any student who was currently enrolled at BSU and had attended a public high school in either Brockton, Taunton, Fall River, or New Bedford was invited to participate. Once some participants had agreed to be interviewed, snowball sampling methods were used to gain access to additional participants. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked if they knew any other BSU students who would be interested in being contacted for an interview.

Participants

The demographic characteristics of the 18 interviewees who participated in this study are listed in Table 1. The names of all interviewees have been changed in order to protect their identity. This sample consisted of 18 total participants, 12 of whom identified as female and 6 who identified as male. 10 interviewees graduated Brockton High School, 1 graduated from Taunton High School, 2 graduated from B.M.C Durfee High School in Fall River, 4 graduated from New Bedford High School, and 1 interviewee graduated from a public vocational school in New Bedford. When asked to identify their race, 8 respondents identified as white, 7 identified

as black or African American, 2 identified as Asian, and 1 participant identified as Dominican. In this sample, 15 out of the 18 participants identified as first generation students.

TABLE 1 **Sample Demographics**

Pseudonym	Sex	Race/Ethnicity	First Generation	High School (where graduated)	Year at BSU
Dianne	Female	Black/ Haitian	Yes	Brockton High School	Senior
Benjamin	Male	White	Yes	New Bedford High School	Senior
Nicole	Female	White	Yes	Brockton High School	Junior
Liam	Male	Black/ Haitian	Yes	Brockton High School	Senior
Ruth	Female	African American	Yes	Brockton High School	Senior
Jessica	Female	White/ Caucasian	Yes	Brockton High School	Junior
Kim	Female	White	Yes	B.M.C. Durfee High School	Junior
Samantha	Female	Caucasian	Yes	New Bedford High School	Senior
Ryan	Male	Black/ African American	No	Brockton High School	Junior
Rachel	Female	Dominican	Yes	Brockton High School	Junior
Fiona	Female	Black/ African American	Yes	Taunton High School	Senior
Claire	Female	White	Yes	New Bedford High School	Sophomore
Lawrence	Male	Southeast Asian	Yes	B.M.C. Durfee High School	Senior
Charlie	Male	Black	Yes	Brockton High School	Junior
Kaitlyn	Female	African American	No	Brockton High School	Junior
Megan	Female	White	Yes	Greater New Bedford Reg. Voc. Tech. High School	Senior
Faith	Female	White	Yes	New Bedford High School	Sophomore
Allen	Male	Asian	No	Brockton High School	Senior

Setting

Bridgewater State University (BSU) is a public state university with approximately 10,000 undergraduate students. A majority of BSU students are residents of the surrounding towns and cities in Southeastern Massachusetts. The interviews took place at Bridgewater State

University (BSU) in Bridgewater, Massachusetts between June and October 2017. The interviews were conducted in BSU's Maxwell Library. The length of interview varied between participants but lasted no more than 1 hour. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' availability.

Research Statements:

1. Students who were involved in extracurriculars in high school will report feeling more prepared for the transition into college than those who did not report being involved in extracurriculars in high school.
2. Students who felt supported through the college application process by their guidance counselors and teachers will report feeling more prepared for higher education.
3. Students who took Honors and Advanced Placement classes as part of their high school coursework will report feeling more prepared than those who did not enroll in higher level classes.
4. Students who were involved in college preparation organizations will report feeling more prepared to transition into college than those who did not join such organizations.

Instruments

The data collection method utilized in this study was semi-structured interviews. Collecting qualitative interview data provides a richer understanding of how the participants interpreted the social phenomena that they experienced and allows for their narratives to explain their personal perceptions (Holle 2016). Before each interview, participants signed a consent form (Appendix 2) which explained the nature of the research and ensured that the data collected

in the interview would remain confidential and the participants' identities would not be disclosed. The consent form also stated that participation in the study was voluntary and participants could leave at any time. All participants voluntarily agreed to be interviewed and allowed their interview data to be analyzed and reported in this study. During the interview, the participants' responses were audio recorded so that they could be accurately transcribed. The transcribed data was then coded for key phrases and organized by theme for further analysis.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of both descriptive and reflective open-ended questions which were designed to give the interviewees the opportunity to explain their high school experience in depth and comment openly on how it impacted their preparation for college. In the interviews, participants discussed their coursework, extracurricular involvement, and employment in high school. In addition, the subjects described their college application process, their college coursework and their college employment (full interview guide is available in Appendix 3).

Definitions

College Readiness— A multifaceted concept which includes the academic and social skills that an individual needs in order to apply for and succeed in college (Arnold *et al.* 2012). Within the scope of this study, college readiness will also be defined as the degree to which a participant's high school experience has prepared them for college (Conley 2008).

Mentorship— Relationships with individuals who are knowledgeable about college and are able to expand students' awareness of different college options, provide guidance and support which make college attainable, and help students to develop the skills that they will need to be successful in college (Wimberly and Noeth 2004).

College Preparation Organizations— Federally funded outreach programs designed to provide support to low income and first generation students so that they will be prepared to apply for and matriculate in college (U.S. Department of Education 2017).

Talent Search— “The program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to its participants and encourages them to graduate from high school and continue on to and complete their postsecondary education. The program publicizes the availability of financial aid and assist[s] participant[s] with the postsecondary application process” (U.S. Department of Education 2017).

Upward Bound—This program “provide[s] academic instruction, tutoring, counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, [and] work-study programs, [as well as] education or counseling services designed to improve the financial literacy of students” (U.S. Department of Education 2017).

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) — This discretionary grant program is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides six-year grants to states and partnerships who provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP funds are also used to provide college scholarships to low-income students” (U.S. Department of Education 2017).

Cultural Capital— An individual’s knowledge or skills which can facilitate social mobility (Bourdieu 1986:244).

Social Capital— Social networks that connect individuals and allow for the transmission of material goods, knowledge, and skills (Bourdieu 1986:250).

Limitations

Because of nonprobability research methods used in this study, the generalizability of this data is limited. The sample of 18 students in this study is not representative of the larger population of students who are currently enrolled at Bridgewater State University who graduated from a public high school in either Brockton, Taunton, Fall River, or New Bedford.

The data collected in the study is also limited because of the possibility of interviewer effect. Interviewer effect is when participants' responses or behaviors are altered because of the person that is interviewing them. Because convenience sampling methods were used in this study, the personal contact that I had with a number of the participants could have influenced the data that was collected from their interviews. Other limitations in this study may include participants misunderstanding questions, or misremembering past experiences which can impact the data collected in qualitative interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Statement 1: Students who were involved in extracurriculars in high school will report feeling more prepared for the transition into college than those who did not report being involved in extracurriculars in high school.

Extracurricular Involvement

Many interviewees remembered their involvement in high school extracurriculars as a support system which helped them significantly as they prepared for college. For Ben, from New Bedford, college became a reality for him as a result of his relationship with the Yearbook

advisor. Ben explains that his advisor “really pushed [him] to go to college [because he] hadn’t really thought about it much before that” (Ben, New Bedford HS). Similarly, Samantha, from New Bedford, recalls the Yearbook advisor being “like a second mom” who helped her with everything from understanding financial aid to picking out college classes (Samantha, New Bedford HS). Like many participants in this study, both Ben and Samantha identify as first generation college students, which meant that their family members were less able to offer advice about how to navigate the college application process. When family members were unable to assist, these high school mentors were an invaluable resource. The one-on-one relationships that club advisors often developed with the students in this study allowed them to share information about college and answer their students’ questions about college access and planning.

15 out of the 18 participants in this study reported being involved in at least one extracurricular organization throughout their high school experience. The interviewees who were involved in multiple organizations remember their involvement teaching them time management which they cited as an important skill that prepared them to balance the academic work load in college. When asked if being involved in clubs and organizations in high school was beneficial either academically or socially, Jessica from Brockton responded that “being in Honors classes in high school [as well as]...being in extracurriculars taught me...how to time manage” (Jessica, Brockton HS). Many of the students who reported being heavily involved in high school felt supported through the college application process by their club advisors and felt that their involvement in high school activities prepared them to balance multiple responsibilities at the college level.

These findings mirror what Glater (2016) found in his research concerning the benefits of extracurricular activities. He argued that involvement in extracurricular activities in high school facilitated one's success in college because students were able to build relationships with staff and faculty who could educate them about college expectations. The data collected in this study supports that finding as Ben and Samantha both report receiving beneficial assistance in the college application process from a club advisor. Ben and Samantha's reflections also reinforce the important role mentorship plays for first generation students. Both Ben and Samantha identify as first generation college students, and they both discussed the significant role that their yearbook advisor played in helping them apply for college. Similarly, previous research has found that one on one mentorship is particularly beneficial for first generation students as they cannot rely on their parents to provide them information about college (Holland 2009; Farmer-Hinton 2008; Reid and Moore 2008). The data collected in this study on the importance of one on one mentorship through an individual's involvement in high school activities supports what has been found in previous research.

Furthermore, Conley (2008) argues that involvement in extracurricular activities provides students the opportunity to develop interpersonal and organizational skills which facilitate one's success in college. In this study, Jessica noted that her involvement in high school activities taught her time management which she found to be an important skill in college. Conley (2008) notes that time management is an important skill for success in college as students must be able to independently balance academic, social, and financial responsibilities. Therefore, the data collected in this study reinforces what previous research has found: students who are involved in extracurricular activities develop beneficial relationships with staff and faculty, as well as personal skills which are integral to their success at the college level.

Lack of Involvement

3 out of the 18 interviewees reported that they were not involved in any extracurricular activities offered by their high school. One interviewee, Ryan, did not feel adequately prepared for college and looking back, Ryan expressed that he was at a disadvantage because he was not heavily involved in high school extracurricular activities. He explains that he “did not take applying to college seriously. I applied to one college just because I looked it up. I did not even [do] other research” (Ryan, Brockton HS). Reflecting back, Ryan believes that if he had made more connections with the staff and faculty in his high school, he would have had more knowledge about different college opportunities. Furthermore, Ryan saw the benefits of extracurricular involvement when he enrolled at Massasoit Community College (MCC). Ryan reported that he “knew about internships because [he] was involved, [and] because [he] was talking to people. [He] knew about opportunities.” (Ryan, Brockton HS). Ryan’s regret reinforces the important role that building relationships with high school faculty and staff has on a student’s preparation for college.

Ryan identifies as a first generation student, and previous research has noted the importance of mentorship for first generation students (Farmer-Hinton 2008; Holland 2009; Reid and Moore 2008). Ryan recognized after enrolling at MCC that building relationships with staff and faculty could provide him access to additional opportunities. In high school, Ryan did not get involved in extracurricular activities and he did not develop one on one relationships with the staff and faculty. As a result, he did not receive much advice or guidance through the college application process. As he explains, he only applied to one school and he did not explore other options because he did not know how to navigate the college application process. As a first generation student, without the aid of the staff and faculty or his parents as college resources,

Ryan did not take the college application process seriously and did not take full advantage of the opportunities that were available to him. Farmer-Hinton (2008) notes that first generation students often do not have enough information about college to successfully complete the college application process without the assistance of high school personnel, and Ryan's reflections evidence a similar conclusion. Ryan regretted not being more involved in extracurricular activities while in high school which reinforces the important role that the one on one relationships developed through clubs and organizations can have on students preparing for college.

Research Statement 2: Students who felt supported through the college application process by their guidance counselors and teachers will report feeling more prepared for higher education.

Guidance Counselors

Subjects in this study viewed guidance counselors as important mentors who helped them to prepare for college. Many interviewees who identify as first generation students noted the significant role that knowledgeable guidance counselors played in helping them apply for and prepare for college. First generation student Jessica from Brockton explains that she went into the application process "completely clueless... because neither of [her] parents knew much about how to apply...So, it was all through [her] guidance counselor" (Jessica, Brockton HS). Because Jessica could not rely on her parents' assistance in the application process, it was vital that knowledgeable guidance counselors were available to educate her on how to apply for colleges, and how to navigate the process.

Liam from Brockton also reiterated the important role that guidance counselors play in helping students to prepare for college. Liam emigrated from Haiti as a child, and he also

identified as a first generation college student. Therefore, Liam was reliant on his high school to provide him information and support throughout the college application process. Liam explained that the application process was “nerve-wracking [because he had] never seen [an] application before. [The guidance counselor had to] help me with everything...[and] tell me what to do.” (Liam, Brockton HS). Liam reported feeling stressed by the college application process because he had never seen an application like it before, and he could not rely on his parents to provide him any assistance. Liam was completely dependent on his guidance counselor to ensure that the applications were filled out properly, and even in college, Liam still remembers the impact that his guidance counselor had on him. By walking him through the application process, Liam’s guidance counselor made college more attainable for Liam.

Wimberly and Noeth (2004) argue that it is a high school’s responsibility to ensure that students have the proper information about how to apply for college. They note that this is particularly important for first generation students who cannot receive this support outside of their high school experience. Liam’s gratitude towards his guidance counselor for supporting him through the application process evidences the integral role that high school staff play in preparing students for college. Students who felt supported by their high school guidance counselors remembered how important that assistance was in helping them to apply for college.

Kim from Fall River fondly recalled activities that her guidance counselor planned to help prepare her and her peers for higher education. Kim explained that they were given a semester budget and with assistance from the guidance counselors, the students had to budget for college expenses and decide how many hours in a week they would allocate for study and work. Kim also explained that “mandatory meetings” were set up between B.M.C Durfee students and academic advisors from Bristol Community College where students discussed “what applications

we wanted to fill out and what GPA we needed to have” (Kim, B.M.C. Durfee HS). Kim remembers these activities and meetings as extremely helpful because they helped her to understand how to make college a reality, and taught her how she could set herself up to succeed in higher education.

Previous research has shown that it is important for students to not only understand the college application process, but to also understand how to succeed once they enroll in college. Activities such as the one that Kim reports are extremely beneficial to students as they educate them about the importance of budgeting both finances and time in college. Conley (2008) argues that students who are adequately prepared for college need to have sufficient knowledge about college culture. Guidance counselors who provide their students with educational activities concerning finances in college help their students to understand how to navigate important aspects of college culture.

Lack of Knowledge about College

Other interviewees felt that they did not receive the support they needed from their high school guidance counselors. Without the proper mentorship, or knowledge about college from family members or high school staff, these students were easily frustrated by the application process. Rachel, from Brockton, explains:

I didn't know the questions that needed answers. I didn't know [anything] about college because no one really spoke about college, and the application process or what you should be looking for... And it was definitely overwhelming because I didn't have that skill or that level of preparation to go into these applications and fill everything out correctly (Rachel, Brockton HS).

Rachel was a first generation student who relied on her high school to provide her with the information she needed about college. When guidance counselors and other high school staff

failed to offer the support she needed, Rachel struggled to get through the application process and take full advantage of potential opportunities. Farmer-Hinton (2008) argues that first generation students are able to achieve their academic goals with sufficient support from high school staff. However, when that support is lacking, first generation students such as Rachel report experiencing a considerable amount of frustration. Rachel believed that she did not know enough about college to go through the application process without support. As a first generation student, her parents were not able to assist her in the application process, and she was reliant on her high school to provide her the support that she needed. When that support was lacking, she struggled to even complete the application process successfully.

Fiona from Taunton shared similar frustrations as she feels she could have made a more informed decision about what college to attend if she had received the proper support from her guidance counselors. She reports:

I didn't know about any schools. As a senior, I was just like 'I don't even know where I want to go [and] I don't know what I want to do'. Usually guidance counselors should be helping you [but]... I really didn't have a sense of what schools were out there (Fiona, Taunton HS).

Reflecting on her college application process, Fiona was frustrated that her guidance counselors did not offer her more support. She felt that she did not have enough information to make an informed decision about college, and she felt that the guidance counselors in her high school failed to provide her the support that she needed. Looking back, Fiona complains:

I wish I had more information when I was applying, because I could've gotten into other schools focused on my major. I feel this school focuses a lot on education. So, I feel like if I went to a school that focused more on medicine or Biology or nursing, then that would have been like a better choice for me. (Fiona, Taunton HS).

While Fiona reported feeling academically prepared for college, she regrets not applying to universities that were better suited to her major. As a first generation student, Fiona wishes that her high school had provided her more opportunities to learn about a variety of different schools. She felt that she was not educated enough about the different college options that were available to her, and in hindsight she believes she would have had more success if she had attended a different university.

Fiona's experience evidences the importance of understanding college culture when preparing for college. Conley (2008) argues that students should not only be academically prepared to succeed in college, but they also must have enough knowledge about college to truly understand the application process and choose a school that best fits their needs. Fiona did not receive enough support from her high school guidance counselor and ended up regretting the school that she chose to attend. As a first generation student, Fiona had to rely on her high school to provide her with the guidance and support that she needed to successfully navigate the application process. Without the proper support from her guidance counselor, Fiona reported feeling frustrated by the application process and disappointed that she did not have even information to make a more informed decision.

Finally, Nicole from Brockton resented her high school guidance counselor as she believes that her guidance counselor "messed up a lot with things [and] miss[ed] half the deadlines" (Nicole, Brockton HS). Nicole did not have any family members who had attended college, so she was dependent on her high school to provide her the information and support that she needed to make higher education a reality. Therefore, Nicole was infuriated when her guidance counselor's negligence limited her opportunities. She explains in her interview that she was often left in applicant waiting pools or deferred until the spring semester because her high

school transcripts were not sent on time. After high school, Nicole decided to enroll at Massasoit Community College in a “spur of the moment” decision because “it was the summer after [she] had graduated, and [she] still didn’t know where [she] was going” (Nicole, Brockton HS). When high school students are reliant on guidance counselors to send the proper paperwork to colleges, it is important that they are knowledgeable and organized enough to assist their students. When students lack that assistance, they often find themselves struggling to even get into college. Rachel, Fiona, and Nicole are all first generation students, and as a result, they are much more dependent on their guidance counselors because their family members are unable to assist them in the application process. These interviewees’ accounts evidence the important role that guidance counselors can play in helping students to prepare for college.

Holland (2009) explains that first generation students must depend on their high school for college preparation and guidance because they cannot utilize their parents as college resources. Therefore, it is imperative that high school staff are equipped to support their students through the college application process. When guidance counselors fail to support their students, first generation students like Nicole struggle to navigate the college application process. Nicole explains that she applied to Massasoit simply because she did not know where else to go. Without support from her guidance counselor, Nicole was not able to take full advantage of her college opportunities. Rachel, Fiona, and Nicole’s frustrations reinforce the important role that high school staff play for first generation students who are reliant on them for support through the college application process.

The Role of Teachers

Multiple interviewees also noted the important role that classroom teachers played in helping them prepare for college. Beyond providing them the necessary academic skills, many

interviewees reported that their teachers would invest personally in assisting their students in the college application process. When asked who provided the most assistance during the college application process, Ben from New Bedford explained that “teachers...were the ones who were driving us towards ‘well, what are you going to do when you get out of here?’” (Ben, New Bedford HS). As a first generation student, Ben did not see college as a possibility until high school. When his teachers, and other staff at the school, invested in him and challenged him to think about the future, he recognized his potential. Without the support of teachers and staff, Ben may not have chosen to pursue higher education. In response to the same question, Claire from New Bedford had a similar reflection. She reported “teachers who I had a close relationship with would sit down and talk to me about money and scholarships and what they thought would be best for me career-wise...I think that was the most influential.” (Claire, New Bedford HS). Claire reiterates the impact that teachers have on their students’ post high school plans.

Farmer-Hinton (2008) notes the importance of mentorship in assisting students in their preparation for college. In her research, Farmer-Hinton (2008: 133) explains that many students in her focus group reported the significant role that a specific “interested adult” played in helping them to recognize college as a possibility and guiding their college planning activities. Ben’s reflections mirror what Farmer-Hinton found her research as he reports that college became a real option for him as a result of the investment that his high school teachers made in his academic potential. Furthermore, Claire remembers the benefits of developing one on one relationships with her teachers as they offered her personalized guidance and support through her college application process. Therefore, the data collected in this study reinforces what previous research has shown: teachers who saw potential in their students and invested in helping them realize their academic goals were remembered by students for the positive impression that they

had. The one on one relationships that some interviewees developed with their teachers helped them to understand the college application process more fully and facilitated their future collegiate success.

Research Statement 3: Students who took Honors and Advanced Placement classes as part of their high school coursework will report feeling more prepared than those who did not enroll in higher level classes.

Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors Coursework

Participants who enrolled in Honors and AP level classes in high school remembered how those advanced courses prepared them for college-level academics. Jessica, from Brockton explains: “my AP teachers would always talk about college and how important AP was because it could help us in college” (Jessica, Brockton HS). Jessica reported that she felt adequately prepared for college-level course work because she was exposed to college-level classes in high school and her teachers helped her to succeed at that level. Teachers who saw academic promise in their students, challenged them to rise to college-level standards, and explained the significance of completing advanced coursework in high school were remembered by the interviewees for their important advice.

Previous research has shown that students benefit greatly when staff members invest in them (Farmer-Hinton 2008). Jessica’s reflection on her AP experience reinforces the important role that motivating faculty can have on a student’s preparation for college level academics. Jessica felt supported by her high school teachers and developed confidence in her ability to work at a college level successfully. Conley (2008:10) also notes the importance of “cognitive strategies, content knowledge, [and] academic behaviors” as components of success in college.

Advanced Placement classes challenge students to complete academic work at the college level and instill important academic concepts and study based skills in their students. Jessica remembers her teachers discussing the importance of AP courses in high school, and looking back, she recognizes how she has benefitted academically from her experience in her AP classes. Completing college level course work in high school made Jessica develop confidence in her academic abilities and she reports feeling academically prepared for college as a result of her experiences.

Allen from Brockton also remembers being challenged by honors level work as he comments that the work load was “intense,” but he appreciated that “it really gave [him] a sense of how college would be” (Allen, Brockton HS). While challenging at the time, Allen appreciates that he took higher levelled classes in high school because the work was similar to what he would be asked to do in college. Allen felt that the transition to college academics was fairly smooth because he had worked at that level before. Ruth from Brockton reiterated a similar sentiment: “based off of what I had to do in high school, I was prepared [for] what I have to do in college. I know I can manage it because I’ve done something similar before.” (Ruth, Brockton HS). Both Allen and Ruth felt that taking Honors level courses was an important part of their preparation for college because the work load was similar to that of a college class. Therefore, they were able to gain some experience working at a college level and as a result, they felt more confident transitioning into higher education.

Conley (2008:3) defines college preparedness as the “degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped [students] for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college”. Students who enrolled in Honors and AP classes in high school reported feeling prepared for college level academics. By exposing students to college level work

in high school, these classes help to prepare students for the academic demands they will encounter in college.

Lack of Investment in High School Academics

Some interviewees regretted not taking their high school academics seriously. Kim from Fall River enrolled in AP classes, but she did not invest in them. She comments that her AP teachers “didn’t really stress how important it would be to pass the [AP] exams, and how it would help you in college” (Kim, B.M.C. Durfee HS). Because Kim did not understand the benefits that she could receive from her AP courses, she did not take the courses very seriously. Now that she is in college, she expresses regret as she recognizes how much AP credits could have helped her academically. Kim explains that she “had a lot of friends that passed the exams and are really [academically] advanced. [For example, her] roommate went to a different high school, but she was almost done with her freshman year when she came. And I think, if I would’ve known how advanced I would’ve been, it would’ve helped me (Kim, B.M.C. Durfee HS).

Reid and Moore (2008) note the importance of both academic and social supports for students preparing for college. Because Kim did not understand that her AP exam scores could be used as college credit, she did not invest in those courses. Kim regrets not taking her AP classes seriously because she reports feeling as though she missed out on an opportunity to get ahead academically. Therefore, the data collected from this study reflects Reid and Moore’s (2008) findings as Kim wishes she had been more supported academically in high school so that she could take full advantage of the opportunities offered by her AP courses.

Other interviewees felt the repercussions of not investing in high school coursework when they got to college. Megan from New Bedford explains that “high school was very social” for her (Megan, Greater New Bedford Reg. Voc. Tech HS). She explains that she “did not pay attention and [she] did not like to do work” which is why she had to “go to a community college” because her “grades were not that great” (Megan, Greater New Bedford Reg. Voc. Tech HS). As a college student, Megan recognizes how her low grades in high school limited her collegiate opportunities. Kaitlyn from Brockton also faced challenges because she did not invest in her coursework in high school. She explains:

I was not your top notch student. If anything, I was lazy and I cut corners. When I brought that over to my college career, it was not cutting it.... I got on academic probation my freshman year (Kaitlyn, Brockton HS).

Kaitlyn struggled to keep up with college academic work because she did not invest in her high school coursework either. She explains that her lazy attitude prevented her from doing well in high school, and in college it got her into more serious trouble. Kaitlyn later elaborates saying that if she had established better study skills in high school then she believes she would have performed better in her first year of college, and she would be happier with her overall GPA. Megan and Kaitlyn’s regret reinforces the important role that high school coursework can play in preparing students to transition to college level academics.

Megan and Kaitlyn report not taking their high school academics seriously and not recognizing the implications of their actions until they got into college. Conley (2008) notes that the academic culture in college is different from high school as students are expected to complete work at a higher level and with more independence. Therefore, students such as Megan and Kaitlyn who do not develop important study based skills while in high school can fall behind

academically in college. Conley (2008) also argues that developing study based skills is an important part of an individual's academic preparation for college. Therefore, it is important that students understand the importance of high school academics as a pathway to academic success in college.

Research Statement 4: Students who were involved in college preparation organizations will report feeling more prepared to transition into college than those who did not join such organizations.

College Preparation Organizations

Some high schools offer clubs that focus solely on preparing their students for college. Because first generation students do not have parents who have attended college, and because low income families may not have the finances to send their children to college, it is important for these students to gain access to college information and resources from their high schools. Gullatt and Jan's (2003) research on college preparation organizations shows that these programs can offer low income and first generation students both the academic and social support that they need to succeed in college. These programs help students to recognize that college is an option for them and they provide guidance to students throughout the college planning and application process. Interviewees who participated in college preparation organizations recounted the many programs that these clubs offered that were able to help them learn more about how to matriculate and succeed in college.

Dianne, from Brockton, reflects on her involvement in Brockton Talent Search, an organization that provided her academic assistance, as well as information about college applications and college life. Dianne describes:

They have waivers to apply for college. They help with filling [out] the FAFSA. [They] give [school supplies], SAT Prep, college [tours] etc. [And] people that participate in the program that go to college can come and tell those high school students about their college experience, and what they should expect, what they should know (Dianne, Brockton HS).

Dianne recalls that her experience with Brockton Talent Search was instrumental in her preparation for college. Dianne is a first generation immigrant, so she was reliant on her high school to provide her academic and social support so that she could get accepted and succeed in college.

Ryan from Brockton was also involved with the Brockton Talent Search program. He remembers that his involvement with the organization helped him to make “a lot of contacts... [he] got to know a lot of people that knew more about colleges than [he] did.” (Ryan, Brockton HS). Ryan’s involvement with Brockton Talent Search provided him the opportunity to build relationships with people who had college experience and could assist him through his application process. For many first generation students in this study, college preparation organizations are what made higher education a real possibility for them.

Gullatt and Jan (2003) argue that one of the main benefits of college preparation organizations is that they provide students with access to college. These programs provide students with the opportunities to visit campuses, to hear from college students about their experiences, and to connect with those who have more knowledge about college than they do. These programs are particularly beneficial to first generation students as their parents often do not have enough information about college to offer their children the experiences that these programs are able to offer. First generation students such as Dianne and Ryan benefit greatly

from these college preparation programs as they offer them the chance to visit colleges, learn more about college life, and receive assistance with the college research and application process.

Another college preparation organization that interviewees from Fall River referenced was Upward Bound. Lawrence describes all that the organization provided students:

During the school year, they would offer after school tutoring sessions. They would offer that once a week; I would attend that. And then during the summer, they select a college campus, and we would kind of see [what] it would be like to live on campus, and also at the same time, we were doing a lot of activities that were really preparing us for college. We had to do practice applications, filling out waivers... practice SAT, and we also were taking classes. At the senior level in high school, you were able to take a class that would count towards your [college] credit (Lawrence, B.M.C. Durfee HS).

Upward Bound offered a myriad of academic supports for their students. Lawrence commented later in the interview that a majority of the information that he learned about different college opportunities was through his involvement with Upward Bound. Gullatt and Jan (2003) explain that exposure to college campuses can be a crucial part of preparing a first generation student for college as their experience on campus can help them envision themselves succeeding as a college students. For first generation students who may not know anyone who has attended college, it is important for them to recognize that college is an attainable option for them, and these college preparation programs offer students the chance to see that.

Claire from New Bedford discussed how Gear Up, a college preparedness organization, “opened [her] eyes to many possibilities” for college (Claire, New Bedford HS). She explains that Gear Up focused on helping students:

writing essays... applying to college...applying for SAT's and prep SAT classes...[They] brought us on college tours... We had guest speakers from colleges and they'd bring back kids who graduated from New Bedford High who went to college or graduated from college and just had them talk to us and they

had people who didn't go to college and then later on in life went to college come back and talk to us...[and] they offered a scholarship (Claire, New Bedford HS).

Claire references the importance of hearing from people who attended New Bedford High School and then went on to attend college. Hearing from college students helped Claire and her peers recognize that college was an option for them as well. The program educated her about the benefits of earning a college education and provided her the academic and financial support she needed to apply and be accepted into a university.

Glennie *et al.* (2015) examines the role that college preparation organizations have on student success and finds that these programs offer students the opportunity to learn more about college and receive support throughout the application process which facilitates their future successes in college. These programs provide first generation students the support and guidance that they need to make college a reality. Because first generation students cannot utilize their parents as college resources, these college preparation organizations are invaluable resources that guide students through a variety of aspects of college planning and application processes.

Lack of Social Preparation

Looking back, some participants also felt that while they may have been academically prepared for college, they lacked the social skills necessary for the high school to college transition. The culture in a college setting is very different from what many students experience in high school, and first generation students especially noticed that they did not have the preparation they needed to succeed socially in this new culture because their parents could not advise them.

Conley (2008) notes that college culture is different from what many students experience in high school. He argues that students are expected to handle a heavier course load in college and complete their work without as much assistance. Therefore, it is important that high school students understand what will be expected of them academically in college. First generation students particularly need to be educated about college culture because they cannot rely on their parents to provide them advice or information. Beyond the application process, students also require support in preparing for the higher demands and expectations of college.

Liam, from Brockton, remembers that the staff at his high school “didn’t really tell us what to expect, and what college was about” (Liam, Brockton HS). Liam explained in his interview that he felt that without this it was difficult to develop the social skills necessary to successfully navigate collegiate academics. He explained the significance of understanding how to access college academic resources, as well as knowing how to converse with professors. While he felt that having these social skills was an important part of his academic success, Liam expressed that he did not learn about the social expectations of college until he had enrolled. Liam further explained that if he had received more information about college culture from his high school experience, he would felt more prepared for the high school to college transition.

Ruth from Brockton shared a similar sentiment: “high schools would be better if they helped not just preparing [students for] school work, but help[ed] students with adapting to college life, and [had] more people come into speak about it.” (Ruth, Brockton HS). While a majority of the interviewees in this study felt that their high school offered academic programs and application assistance which helped prepare them for college, some noted the lack of social support. First generation students especially may not have an understanding of what college is like because they do not have family members who have attended college. Therefore, it is

important that high schools work to prepare their students both academically and socially for the transition into college.

Reid and Moore (2008:243) identified the importance of “providing students with the social capital they will need for academic transition”. First generation students may not understand how college is structured or what social skills are necessary to navigate college life and access academic resources in college. Therefore, it is important that high schools educate first generation students and their families about the social skills that students will need to succeed in college. Liam and Ruth recognized the importance of this education when they enrolled in college, and they expressed frustration that their high school did not prepare them to succeed in college beyond the application process. Liam and Ruth’s frustrations reinforce what Reid and Moore (2008) found in their study: social capital is an important component of college preparedness for first generation students as they need to understand how to navigate college culture once they are enrolled.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to understand whether or not Bridgewater State University students felt adequately prepared for college by their experience in an urban high school in either Brockton, Taunton, Fall River, or New Bedford. Based on previous research, this study examined interviewees’ involvement in extracurricular activities and college preparation organizations in high school, their high school course work, and their knowledge about the college application process as well as the overall culture of college as indicators of college preparedness (Conley 2008; Farmer-Hinton 2008; Gullatt and Jan 2003; Reid and Moore 2008).

The first research statement that this study aimed to address was the role that an individual's involvement in extracurricular activities has on their preparedness for college. The data collected in this study supports the hypothesis that those who are involved in clubs and organizations while in high school will report feeling more prepared for the transition into college than those who were not involved. Interviewees reported that their involvement in extracurricular activities in high school facilitated their success in college because it gave them the opportunity to develop one on one relationships with club advisors, and it taught them time management skills.

First generation students in particular benefitted from being involved in clubs and organizations in high school because it helped them to foster one on one relationships with the faculty and staff of the high school. Participants reported that these mentors were often instrumental in assisting the students with the college application process. First generation students reported feeling comfortable using a club advisor as a college resource and appreciated having someone to go to with questions and concerns about college when they could not rely on family members to provide the same information. This data reflects what previous research has found in terms of the mentoring role that high school staff and faculty can provide for first generation students preparing for college (Farmer-Hinton 2008; Holland 2009; Reid and Moore 2008; Wimberly and Noeth 2004).

Interviewees also noted the importance of time management and referenced learning that skill through their involvement in extracurricular activities in high school. Conley (2008) argues that time management is a foundational skill that students need in order to be successful academically in college. Participants in this study reported that being involved in clubs and organizations while in high school taught them how to manage their academic and social

responsibilities. Therefore, they reported a smoother transition into college because they had already developed important skills that would facilitate their ability to manage their time and balance a heavy college-level course load. Interviewees in this study reported that their extracurricular involvement was an important part of their college preparation as it gave them the opportunity to develop relationships with high school staff who would become mentors, and it helped them to develop important time management skills.

The second research statement that this study addressed was the importance of college knowledge for students who were preparing to transition into post-secondary education. Interviewees in this study reported that guidance counselors and teachers were often mentors throughout the college application process. Many of the interviewees identified as first generation students who were dependent on their high schools to provide them with the information that they needed about the college application process. Students who felt that their high school provided them with the proper support through this process often noted a specific teacher or guidance counselor who was able to provide one on one assistance. For first generation students, these mentors were invaluable resources. Because first generation students could not utilize their parents as college resources, it was crucial that their high school provide them with support and guidance throughout the college application process. The data collected in these interviewees mirrors what previous research has found concerning the significance of mentorship for first generation students. Farmer-Hinton (2008) notes that first generation students are particularly reliant on academic and social support offered through their high school because they often do not have family members who have had experience with the college application and enrollment process. Therefore, it is crucial that high schools are equipped to support first generation students through the college research and application processes.

Some interviewees reported experiencing a lack of support from high school guidance counselors. These students subsequently felt frustrated, lost, and discouraged throughout the college application process. The interviewees reported that they did not feel educated enough to navigate the college application process without assistance, and they expressed frustration when that support was lacking. Without adequate support from their high schools, these interviewees reported feeling as though they did not make educated decisions about college. Their frustrations reinforce the importance of mentorship as a path to collegiate success for first generation students.

The third research statement that this study sought to understand is the role that an individual's high school coursework played in their preparation for college. Interviewees who enrolled in Advanced Placement and Honors classes reported feeling academically prepared for college because these classes challenged them to work at a college level while in high school. Interviewees reported feeling confident in their ability to succeed academically in college as a result of their course work in high school. Gullatt and Jan (2003) note the importance of first generation students being able to envision themselves succeeding in college. Interviewees who reported taking college level classes while in high school felt empowered to succeed academically in college as well. The first generation students in this study who enrolled in Advanced Placement and Honors classes while in high school reported that these classes helped them to prepare for college as it showed them what college courses would be like and helped them to develop the skills that they would need to succeed.

Some interviewees regretted not investing in their high school academics when they struggled to transition into more challenging college academics. Some students reported that going into college they lacked the study skills that they needed to succeed academically. Conley

(2008) argues that study based skills and academic behaviors are an integral part of academic success in college. Therefore, it is important that students recognize the importance of high school academics and learn important study based skills while in high school so that they are prepared to succeed academically at the college level.

Finally, this study sought to understand the role that college preparation organizations played in helping first generation and low income students transition to college. Previous research has shown that college preparation organizations are particularly beneficial for first generation students as they provide them with the academic, social, and financial advice that they need to succeed in college (Glennie *et al.* 2015; Gullatt and Jan 2003). First generation students cannot utilize their family members as college resources, so these college preparation organizations provide students access to important information and aid. In this study, interviewees who were involved in college preparation organizations noted the significant impact that it had on their preparation for college. Students reported that they received academic assistance, support through the college research and application process, and opportunities to visit college campuses and converse with college students. Interviewees reported that all of these opportunities made college more attainable for them, and they felt the transition from high school to college was smoothly because of the supports that were available to them in these college preparation organizations.

The data collected in this study shows that college preparedness is a multifaceted concept that includes an individual's academic and social preparedness as well as their overall knowledge about the college application process and college culture. Furthermore, the data collected in these interviews supports all of the research statements in this study and reinforces the important role that high schools play in preparing students for college. Previous research has argued that high

schools are responsible for providing students and their families with the educational resources that they need to develop educational and career plans (Wimberly and Noeth 2004), and the data collected in these interviews shows that students recognize the importance of college readiness resources in high school and rely on them as supports as they prepare to transition to college. Many interviewees also noted the integral role that high school mentors played in assisting them in their preparation for college. Mentors provided students with knowledge about college, advice in the application process, as well as academic and social skills which facilitated their success in college.

Participants who did not feel adequately prepared for college as a result of their high school experience, often referenced specific individuals who failed to support them, or opportunities that they were unable to take advantage of. Those who did not get involved did not have the opportunity to develop one on one relationships with faculty and staff who could have provided them information and advice about college. Other students felt that their guidance counselor did not provide them the information or support that they needed to fully understand the college application process and the opportunities that were available to them. Interviewees who did not invest in high school academic work also faced additional challenges as they transitioned into more demanding collegiate academics. Although these interviewees did not feel adequately prepared for college by their high school experience, their testimonies still evidence the important role that high schools can play. All of the interviewees who felt underprepared noted a lack of support somewhere in their high school experience as a reason they were ill-equipped for college.

Therefore, the data collected from these interviews suggest that there should be additional investment in high schools' college preparation efforts. Because so many participants in this

study were first generation college students, they were particularly reliant on their high schools to provide them information and access to college resources. High schools in urban areas with a high proportion of first generation students should invest in providing their students programs to educate them about college options and the college application process. High school staff and faculty should be knowledgeable about college and equipped to assist their students as they prepare to transition into college. All students should be knowledgeable about how to matriculate and succeed in college and what steps need to be taken in high school to ensure that collegiate success is attainable.

Future Research

This study has demonstrated the significant role that high schools can play in helping low income and first generation students prepare for college. Future research should continue to examine college preparedness so that we can better understand what supports students need in order to successfully transition to college. Potential future research could examine the college preparation services offered by high schools in areas beyond urban southeastern Massachusetts. Specifically, it would be interesting to contrast the experiences of students in urban high schools to those in suburban or rural schools. Furthermore, it would be interesting to also consider the experiences of those who attended community college before enrolling in a 4 year college or university. Exploring how college preparation is different for students who did not enroll directly in a 4 year college or university would expand our understanding of college readiness as a concept as well as our understanding of what support systems students rely on to prepare for college.

It would also be important to further analyze how school funding impacts the resources that are offered to students. Many students in this study referenced their experience with a college preparation organization as an integral component of their college preparedness. Therefore, further research could investigate the impact that these programs specifically have on the students who are involved with them. It would be interesting to further examine how these organizations are funded and how students gain access to them. Additionally, high school funding could be analyzed more broadly. Gaining an understanding of how school and district budgets can promote or limit the college readiness resources offered to students would add important information to the growing conversation surrounding college preparedness. Overall, college preparedness is certainly a topic which should be researched furthered so that we can understand how to provide students with the experiences, skills, and supports that they need to enroll and succeed in college.

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APPENDIX

1. Interview Guide

Interview Guide:

Demographics:

Are you (based on credits) a freshman, a sophomore, a junior, or a senior?

How many semesters have you attended Bridgewater State University?

Have all of those semesters been as a full time student?

If no, how many semesters did you attend part time?

What is your current major?

Is this the same major as when you first enrolled?

If no, what was your original major?

Do you live on campus?

If yes, how many semesters have you lived on campus?

If no, do you live with your parents/guardians, siblings, family; do you live with friends; do you live with a significant other; do you live alone?

If you commute, how long is your commute to campus?

Do you take daytime classes?

Do you take evening classes?

Have you taken any online classes?

What high school did you attend?

What town is it in?

Was it a public or private school?

Did you attend that high school for 4 years?

If no, what other high schools did you attend?

Background/ Family:

What race or ethnicity best identifies you?

Did your parents or guardians graduate high school in the United States?

If no, were your parents educated outside of the United States?

What is the highest level of education that your parents have received?

Did your parents or guardians attend college?

Did your parents or guardians graduate from college?

Do either of your parents or guardians hold an advanced degree such as a Masters or a PhD?

If yes, what degree?

Do you have other family members that have attended college with whom you have contact?

If yes, whom?

Do you have other family members that have graduated college?

If yes, whom?

Do you have younger siblings?

If yes, do you believe that they will go to college?

Why or why not?

Extracurriculars/ Employment in High School:

Did you participate in extracurriculars at your high school?

If yes, what activities or teams, or clubs did you participate in, and in what years?

If you participated in activities, why did you choose them?

What did you learn from your experiences in those organizations?

Is there anything that you learned from those organizations which helped you in college?

Did your high school offer any clubs that focused on preparing students for college?

Did you join?

Why or why not?

When you were in high school did you work at a paid job?

If yes, did you work during the school year?

If yes, how many hours per week?

If yes, did you work during the summer?

If yes, how many hours per week?

Did you have family care responsibilities during the school year? (babysitting, elder care, family meal prep etc.)

If yes, approximately how many hours per week?

Childhood Enrichment Experiences:

Did you ever attend a summer camp as a child?

If yes, at what ages/ grades?

Did your family take summer vacations?

If yes, at what ages?

Did you visit museums, the library, the zoo, cultural centers, and/ or theater performances etc. during school summer vacations?

In elementary school? How often?

In middle school? How often?

In high school? How often?

Did you feel that there were a lot of books in your home as a child?

Did you have parents/ guardians/ other family member help with homework?

In elementary school?

In middle school?

In high school?

If yes, who used to help you?

Did you feel that you had enough time to complete your homework/ schoolwork in high school?

How did your schedule outside of school affect your performance in school, if at all?

College Application Process:

Did any family members assist you with your college application process?

If yes, how so?

Did you attend any college fairs when deciding where to apply?

Did you attend any college information sessions, or go on a college tour at any institution?

Did your high school offer any programs or informational sessions that discussed college information and options with you and your peers?

Why did you choose to apply to Bridgewater State University?

Why did you choose to attend Bridgewater State University?

What other schools did you apply to?

What other schools were you accepted into?

What worried you most during your college application process?

College Expectations and Concerns:

If your parents or family members have attended college, what did they tell you about their experience, if anything?

Did you always plan on attending/ always expect to attend college?

Did your parents or family members expect you to go to college?

Did your parents or family members have any concerns about you going to college?

If yes, what concerns did they have?

How do you pay for your college education? (Loans, other financial aid, parents, a full or part time job, scholarships etc.)

Do you have any scholarships that require you to maintain a certain GPA?

If yes, does that concern you?

College Employment:

Do you work any on campus jobs, work-study jobs, and/ or jobs off campus?

Do you work a paid job while taking classes?

If yes, how many hours per week?

Do you work a paid job during school breaks?

If yes, how many hours per week?

Does your work schedule ever interfere with your school work?

Have you ever skipped class to go to work?

Have you every skipped work because of a school assignment or exam?

High School Curricula:

Did your high school offer advanced placement classes?

Did you take any of them?

If yes, what courses did you take? In what year?

Did your high school offer honors level classes?

Did you take any of them?

If yes, what courses did you take? In what year?

If yes, did you feel prepared for the advanced classwork in honors and AP classes?

If yes, did these classes help you to foster skills that you needed for college? What skills?

If you did not take honors or AP classes, did your classes help you to foster any skills that you needed for college?

What skills?

College Academic Experience:

Looking back, do you feel as though your high school courses helped you develop the skills you needed for college level work (such as time management and critical thinking skills)?

Why or why not?

Did you receive all passing grades in your first semester of classes at Bridgewater State University?

If no, what prevented you from receiving passing grades?

Do you believe that you will retake any failed courses?

Why or why not?

If yes, looking back, what was the most important thing that you needed to do in order to pass your classes?

Where did you learn that skill?

Have you used any academic assistance programs at Bridgewater State University such as tutoring, disability services, writing lab, math lab, departmental programs etc.?

If yes, what services did you access?

Were they helpful? How so (how not)?

If you did not access services, do you believe you will in the future?

Why or why not?

Have you ever felt like one of the smartest or most prepared people in one of your college classes?

If yes, what class and why?

Have you ever felt like one of the least prepared persons in one of your college classes?

If yes what class, and why?

Are you satisfied with the grades that you earned during your first semester at Bridgewater State University?

Why or why not?

Are you satisfied with your current GPA?

Why or why not?

What determines whether or not you are satisfied with your grades?

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview about how your high school experience impacted your preparedness for college?