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Networking in the Dark: Social Capital and Online Networks for Less Privileged College Applicants

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Abstract

This project analyzes the different ways less privileged students apply to college, the tools they use to prepare for admissions, and the information they receive from their networks about higher education. Building from Bourdieu's theories on capital and field, this study highlights how students from non-dominant backgrounds have to adapt and overcome to succeed in an admissions system designed to reward the cultural capital available to students from educated families. I conducted 18 in depth, semi structured interviews with high school students and recent graduates to uncover the motivations and behaviors in their college choice process. Information in their immediate networks and affiliation with college-access programs were able to "intervene" and introduce students to the preparation behaviors necessary for elite college admission. Students with college access program (CAP) affiliations were able to prepare for college admissions in a collaborative way, with the help of newfound social connections facilitated by their CAPs. Students without program assistance were less likely to reach to their networks and engaged with the college application process in a more independent manner.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Just a few months ago, in March 2019, over a couple dozen celebrities and wealthy, elite individuals rigged college admissions processes to benefit their children (New York Times 2019). The "college admissions scandal," as every major news network has referred to it, has put the notion of a meritocratic higher education system to question. It has led authors, scholars, and countless social media users to wonder: who does the college admissions process actually work for, and how are wealthy people able to cheat their way into spots at elite colleges when thousands of other hard-working students are denied access every year? In light of this, it comes as no surprise that there are wide-ranging socioeconomic inequalities in the U.S. system of higher education, nor that being a "top student" in high school does little to eliminate these inequalities (Radford 2013). American institutions of higher education are more "socioeconomically stratified today than at any time during the past three decades," primarily due to the fact that those with more wealth and academic qualifications are able to adapt to changing admissions processes, and practically guarantee that *their* offspring have a spot in the most sought-after institutions (Astin and Oseguera 2004: 338; McDonough 1997; Alon 2009).

In light of these inequalities, some have argued that online resources can bridge the information gap between more and less privileged students (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018). However, the usage of technology varies depending on one's background. For example, less privileged students use the internet in passive, independent, and more limited ways than their more privileged peers. College access programs (CAPs) have also attempted to close educational access gaps, but their effectiveness varies depending on their social context and structure. In this study, I analyzed how effective online resources and CAPs actually are at closing these access gaps and argue that less privileged students need access points to actually come across the

information they need to succeed in the competitive pools of college applicants. This project uncovers larger themes relating to one's immediate, offline social network, and how it continues to determine the college application information available to students even with the presence of online college admissions forums and CAPs.

1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have used Bourdieu's theories surrounding cultural capital, social capital, and field to learn about the socioeconomic divide in higher education and how it persists in the face of changing college admissions. The forms of capital an individual possess have different value meanings depending on the specific social field they are in (Bourdieu and Passerson 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Within the field of higher education, specific forms of cultural capital (one's lifestyle, tastes, preferences, and skills), can help maintain one's position of power within a given field, or be used to gain access to the field. Social capital (the diversity, breadth, and size of one's social network) communicates the norms needed to succeed in the field (Coleman 1988). These symbolic forms of capital are utilized by the dominant class to maintain their dominant position and establish the rules of the game which reward the types of capital their culture values (Bourdieu 1986).

Fields determine who is actually able to successfully activate capital; some forms of cultural capital become legitimate when there is a state of competition, as some cultural aspects are valued over others (Bourdieu and Passerson 1990: 8). Generally, the dominant, wealthy classes have more status and power – their culture is set as the baseline and shapes the entry requirements to fields they dominate. The set expectations for the fields "guide" the strategies that people use to gain access to them, but the strategies individuals engage in rely on their

current social position and their own repositories of cultural, social, and economic capital

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In the field of American higher education, the notion of fields

helps to explain why *some behaviors* result in a positive, profit-bearing result (acceptance to elite

colleges), and others do not. Lareau, Evans, and Yee (2016) elaborate on this, highlighting that

although lower- and working-class parents care deeply about their children's education, their

children are not able to garner the desired outcomes (school acceptances) because "educators and

policy makers see middle-class actions as inherently valuable," and, in that, sees theirs as less

valuable (2016: 295).

The rules of the game in education fields can also be "complex, hard to learn about, and

implemented inconsistently" (Lareau et al. 2016: 280). Students have to showcase their merit in

ways that abide by the standards of the field, but merit has different meanings depending on what

is useful in that specific context (Espenshade and Radford 2009). Parents need to activate their

social capital to learn the most effective ways to showcase merit and give their children the

knowledge they need to be able to abide by those rules. They do this when they talk with peers

about where their kids should go to school, for example, and discussing different strategies to

better their children's chances of acceptance. If their network is educated, white, and relatively

wealthy, those parents come across information about college admissions that is highly valued

and strategic at maintaining spots within the field. Parents have to understand the field, *and what

the field rewards*, well enough to "deploy their capital effectively" (Lareau, Evans, and Yee

2016: 292).

The social mechanisms behind the rewarding process of the field lie in Weber and

Bourdieu's theories of social closure. Social closure is based in the monopolization of resources.

As the rules for entry to a field change over time, individuals must adapt their strategies for

entrance. We see high-SES and continuing-generation college students (CGCS) do this when they adapt to changing admissions requirements - the exclusionary measures at play within the field (Weber 1978; Bourdieu 1986; Alon 2009). Alon (2009) highlights how social closure has worked in American higher education – when applicant pools become more competitive, socioeconomic inequalities in academic institutions rise. Competitiveness results in an inflated use of academic qualifications, like an increased emphasis on standardized testing. When the number of applicants rise each year, colleges are tasked with new ways to rank students, and therefore justify denying access to a majority of applicants.

Alon (2009) argues that there are two mechanisms that reinforce the class hierarchy in higher education: exclusion and adaptation. To Alon, the reason class inequality keeps expanding in higher education is because the privileged are better equipped to *adapt* to exclusionary boundaries. Parents use capital to compete in school admissions, and use their capital "to transmit advantages to their children" (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016: 292). Parents that understand the college admissions process are thus able to change their parenting behaviors to prepare their children for college years in advance, whereas first-generation college students (FGCS) have to stumble upon similar college knowledge from other sources. Adaptation is key to overcoming social closure – the inability of smart, high-achieving lower-socioeconomic status (SES) students to keep pace with the changing admissions trends and behaviors of educated, high-SES students limited their own college possibilities (Alon 2009: 748).

Bridging Capital and Weak Ties

Social capital can be activated to gain *new* forms of capital, although scholars debate where social capital originates. Coleman argues that the resources within the family unit shape the social capital an individual has, although Lin argues that other networks, namely those within the school system and community do this, too (Lin 2001a, Coleman 1988). Closed social networks and strong ties preserve embedded resources (like wealth, status, and powerful social connections), but weak ties across social groups allow people to gain access to new and different resources. Weak ties bridge networks that contain different pools of information, and can alert individuals to behaviors, customs, and tastes different than those in their immediate social network (Lin 2001a). Sometimes people seek out connections with people of a better social status to gain access to their resources, something Lin (2001a) refers to as the heterophilous principle. Schools provide a space for students to form weak ties, and socioeconomically diverse high schools can bridge networks in a heterophilous manner.

Weak ties, the social relationships we might commonly think of having with acquaintances, create bridging capital – "capital that is either unfamiliar or novel, or perhaps temporarily incomprehensible." Bridging capital is of utmost importance for lower-, working-class and first-generation college students. FGCS are less likely to ask their peers or professors for help, so weak ties make them aware of new opportunities, resources, classes, skills, events, etc. that they otherwise would not have looked for (Rowan-Kenyon, Alemán, & Savitz-Romer 2018). Students learn what their schools and networks tell them about college, so students in college-going environments "keep up with college-going activities" in a way that students without a strong college-going peer network do (Cox 2016: 17).

First-generation college students' higher-income friends with educated families can be an indispensable weak tie for stumbling across college admissions information. Kim and Schneider (2005) expand upon this, finding that horizon-expanding diverse networks have positive relationships to academic success. Further, "high-income families have more options to diversify their social capital through contacts outside the family; low-income families do not have the same types or quantity of resources in their social networks" (2005: 1184). Weak ties with educated networks can provide students with bridging capital, which can be activated to transfer other academic and cultural capital and gain success in the field.

Students that have access to strong college-going networks are less likely to undermatch in the college search process, in that they are less likely to enroll in a school below their academic ability (Belasco and Trivette 2015). Students who complete multiple college applications, complete and submit the FAFSA, and attend high schools with strong college-going cultures were more likely to attend match colleges, i.e. enroll in colleges that are appropriate for their academic statistics/intellectual rigor (Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). Cipollone and Stich (2017), however, analyzed the *utility* of weak ties and studied the transfer of cultural capital in high schools. Their idea of shadow capital highlights *how* less privileged students learn of the behaviors that are rewarded in the field of higher education. The idea is that certain individuals can gain a type of cultural capital that *mimics* the dominant capital, but since it is not actually the desired capital, it does not present the same returns (2017: 346-351). Only some elements of the college-going cultural capital were successfully transferred over to less privileged students, in that they could only *actually* participate in a few of the behaviors they learned from their peers (2017: 351).

Admissions Preparation Behaviors

Middle- and upper-class families have the most valuable forms of cultural capital and engage in the behaviors and lifestyles college admissions officers reward. They usually have the education necessary to understand how selective college admissions works and have the resources to actually engage in the behaviors that enhance the chances of acceptance. High-SES families activate their cultural capital in the admissions process by engaging in behaviors "to guard against losing ground in the status and economic security game" (McDonough 1997: 119). To do so, they guide their children throughout their academic pursuits, encouraging them to take challenging classes, supplemental standardized tests, and go on college tours. They are equipped with the cultural capital necessary to navigate academic assistance (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). They are able to communicate directly with teachers, counselors, and admissions officers, review applications, edit essays, fill out paperwork, and maintain and organize a schedule to keep track of admissions deadlines for their children (McDonough 1997). Such parenting behavior is referred to by scholars as "concerted cultivation," the parenting style typical of educated, higher-SES individuals that allows them to intervene and guide their children's schooling (Lareau 2000, 2011).

Studies have analyzed the college search and application process and have found that these "concerted cultivation" parenting styles actually have a heavy impact on students' opportunities, shaping the types of schools they apply to, and how successful they are at gaining acceptance to them. Nearly 90% of the upper-class participants in Radford's 2013 study said their parents were the *most* influential person during their college search process – a privilege that many lower- and working-class students do not have (2013: 137). Hamilton, Roska, and Nielsen (2018) also found that nearly 90% of the upper-class families in their sample directly

assisted their children in searching for and applying to college, which they refer to as a "college concierge" approach to parenting (2018: 116).

Parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, view education as an investment, but only some parents have information flowing through their networks that allows them to successfully invest in it. Their conversation with peers directs them to specific academic tools, behaviors, and successful admission strategies. Educated and wealthy parents sign their children up for academic programming not only because they have the resources to do so, but also because *they know that they should*. Parents communicate with other parents to gather information on what they need to assist their children with. If their networks are comprised of a lot of educated individuals, they come across very strategic and specific information. Thus, affluent parents are able to access knowledge about college that unequally benefits their children. They are able to secure educational and occupational benefits for their children in ways that less affluent parents cannot (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018: 112).

Some studies have even found that educated parents have gone so far as to ask college admissions officers what elementary schools, test prep programs, and activities are the most effective at securing college acceptance letters (Toor 2000; Zernike 2000). They also know to send their children to college admissions prep camps to give them an advantage while crafting college lists and drafting personal essays (Tonn 2005; Espenshade and Radford 2009). All in all, higher-income parents are able to equip their children with a level of preparation and *comfort* necessary to succeed in competitive college applicant pools (Lareau 2000; Lareau and Hovart 1999).

The specificity here on *competitive* college applicant pools, is absolutely necessary to understand the behaviors rewarded by *elite* college admissions teams. Students with elite college

aspirations prepare for their college applications differently than students aspiring to attend less selective colleges (Radford 2013: 48). Elite college aspirations, however, are heavily interconnected with class status, since high school guidance counselors are unable to adequately inform their students of their full college options, especially at lower-income schools (Radford 2013; Avery 2010; Perna et al. 2008; McDonough 1997). This puts a much greater emphasis on the family unit for obtaining and distributing college knowledge, but only more affluent and educated families are well-informed on current college admissions requirements.

Students from higher income families are more likely to attend a college that is academically matched to them (Lee et al. 2017: 546). These students' families are more likely to emphasize academic reputation and place a higher value on enrolling in prestigious institutions (Radford 2013). For lower- and working-class students, prestige is not an immediate concern – it is a privilege "to imagine a future that puts self-confidence, happiness, and passion ahead of the necessity of earning a living." (Nelson 2010: 175). Thus, students from different class backgrounds approach the college search process in different ways, as their backgrounds determine their college search criteria, shape the number of applications they submit, and *where* they submit applications.

Elite college attendance usually secures students a spot in the professional class, and, at the least, secures a higher wage premium – the financial pay-off and high economic returns increases with college selectivity. Further, elite college enrollment increases the likelihood of graduating and increases access to graduate school programs (Carnevale and Rose 2003; Espenshade and Radford 2009; Hoxby 2001). For these reasons, lower-income families view college as a vehicle for upward mobility and financial security, and thus lower-income students often form elite college aspirations out of economic anxiety.

In the field of elite college admissions, only some behaviors are rewarded with an acceptance, and those rewarded behaviors are routinely found to be correlated with class status. Espenshade and Radford (2009) found that lower- and working-class students are admitted to selective colleges at a 26% rate, whereas upper- and upper-middle-class students are admitted at a 37% rate. Further, relative to first-generation college students, students with highly educated parents are 500% more likely to gain acceptance to highly selective colleges and universities (Astin and Oseguera 2004).

The Rules of the Game: Elite Admissions

Acquiring an acceptance letter from an elite college is difficult and requires years' worth of intentional effort. Admissions officers reward investment, a focus on long-term goals, and "merit," comprised of high school grades, test scores, leadership positions, teacher recommendations, and other achievements (Carnevale and Rose 2003: 21). As selective colleges' applicant pools increase in number, behaviors like long-term extracurricular involvement and leadership positions become more important in the admissions decision process (Soares 2007; Espenshade and Radford 2009). Participation in these behaviors, however, is not enough – even having a few leadership positions "places an applicant in the middle of the elite college applicant pool" (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 29). In order to *really* impress admissions officers at selective colleges, a student needs to be "swimming at the Olympics, [or] playing the violin at Carnegie Hall" (Hernández 1997: 116).

Admissions officers are also impressed by involvement with academic summer programs, specifically ones sponsored by colleges and universities (Cohen 2002; Hernández 1997). They reward college visits and interviews, marking it as demonstrated interest, and give those students

a preference in applicant pools (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 54). SAT and SAT subject test scores are understood by admissions officers to measure achievement in certain academic subjects. Applicants with four years of foreign language courses, AP classes, calculus, biology, physics, and chemistry also display more merit, as do students with GPAs in the top 10% of their graduating class (Steinberg 2002: 95).

Higher-income students, continuing-generation college students, and white students are more likely to engage in all of the behaviors listed above, which provides some explanation as to why they are admitted to selective institutions at higher rates. Upper- and middle-class students participate in more extracurricular activities like performing arts and community service, while over two-fifths of lower-class applicants *do not participate in a single extracurricular activity* (Espenshade and Radford 2009). Upper- and upper-middle-class students are also more likely to enroll in college-sponsored academic programming, exactly the types of summer programs that admissions officers reward. Upper-class applicants are also the most likely group of elite college applicants to tour six *or more* colleges, whereas lower-class applicants are the most likely to *not tour a single one* (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 54).

Early application plans and legacy admissions also reward students with educated families, by giving them extra preferences for submitting application materials on an earlier timeline and having parents that attended college (Steinberg 2002; Golden 2010). Although more affluent students gain access to elite, selective institutions at higher rates than their less affluent peers, Espenshade and Radford (2009) found that the affluent applicants actually had the *weakest* in-school performances. They argued that upper-class applicants were accepted at high rates, regardless of their qualifications, because "they are more likely to be of potential development

value and/or children of alumni, statuses that typically provide an admissions advantage" (2009: 137).

There are so many different bureaucratic procedures, application requirements, timelines, and deadlines to abide by. There is no single source of information that includes all of these rewarded application preparation behaviors. This information can be obtained through one's social network, school system, and the internet, but it is on the students (or their parents) to do the research and collect this information from various sources. Especially since admissions requirements vary by school, the rules of the game are hard to follow and require wide-reaching research.

Barriers to Lower-Income and First-Generation College Students

The choices students make in the college search process have been well-documented to vary depending on their background – lower- and working-class students face unique barriers in the college application process that more privileged students do not face (Reay et al. 2001; Radford 2013; Espenshade and Radford 2009; Cabera and La Nasa 2001; Buchmann et al. 2006). For one, financial and travel restrictions hinder students' abilities to visit college campuses and make financial aid plans work. Immediate concerns are more pressing for underrepresented students, like the need to work, which influences the amount of attention and time they can give their academic work, and consequently influences their college choice and application process (2001: 862).

Beyond time and resource barriers, students from different backgrounds have been shown to prioritize different things during the college search process. More affluent students have self-reported placing a higher importance on college setting and environment, for example, whereas

less affluent students have a weaker interest in campus environment and culture – these students are simply looking for different things (Radford 2013). They have anxieties about fitting in with other college students, experiencing a "process of psychological self-exclusion," that eliminates some institutions from their college lists in the first place (Reay et al. 2001: 863). These "college-related dispositions," as Belasco and Trivette (2015) phrase it, shape students' search process, and only certain dispositions, namely those held by more privileged applicants, result college enrollment at an appropriately-challenging institution. For these reasons, first-generation college students and lower-socioeconomic status students are regularly disadvantaged from competing for admission to elite institutions, even when controlling for GPA and test scores (Walpole et al. 2005; Astin and Oseguera 2004).

Less privileged students are also more likely to lack information about the college application process, since their parents lack college degrees. The most influential and most important predictor of college undermatch is related to a lack of college-related information; those in networks without a lot of college knowledge often end up attending institutions that are below their academic qualifications (Dillon and Smith 2013). Lower-socioeconomic status students learn of academic opportunities through their schools, not their parents – their parents, unlike college-educated parents, do not access information about college acceptance strategies from conversations with peers. Less affluent parents feel inadequately prepared to offer academic support to their children, using an "outsider parenting style" (in contrast to Lareau's "concerted cultivation") to emphasize an independent approach to education and college applications (Hamilton, Roska, and Nielsen 2018: 121).

Scholars have written about the approaches and strategies first-generation college students employ in the college search process. Less privileged parents have been found to

provide support for their children in ways that emphasize autonomy (Mitchall 2018). The norms that their families communicate about college emphasize independence, and FGCS interpret it as their responsibility to succeed on their own and feel as though they cannot "take full credit for their success if they received help" (Yee 2016: 845, 848). Thus, lower- and working-class college applicants approach the process on their own, without the guidance of college-educated adults in their family units (and/or immediate social networks) they are not likely to engage in activities that admissions committees reward. These less privileged applicants have a harder time succeeding in applicant pools (Stevens 2007: 21).

Students use "class-based cultural resources" to navigate schools, and as such, FGCS use have been found to use more independent strategies – however, the education system "value[s] their resources unequally," putting those with independent mentalities at a disadvantage (Yee 2016: 834). For example, admissions officers, instructors, and researchers alike suggest that lower-class students are less engaged with their schoolwork, in the sense that they study less, participate in fewer campus groups/extracurriculars, and do not attend additional academic programming (2016). However, engagement is more complex than that - Yee (2016) shows that these disengaged students still engage in school but do so in ways that are not recognized or rewarded by the field. They are unlikely to proactively reach out for help, often only doing so when it is too late. In a field where "confident, interactive educational engagement strategies are rewarded," these behaviors can have a negative impact on their access to college guidance (Calarco 2014). Perna et al. (2008) found that students who do not actively seek out relationships with counselors and those who attend schools without strong college-going cultures are "less likely to receive sufficient college counseling" (2008: 154).

The social networks of students are complex. Those who live in socioeconomically diverse areas and have access to higher-income friends are able to gain access to academic knowledge and diversify their social capital (Kim and Schneider 2005). As such, there has been found to be a strong correlation between educational attainment and "access to the time and financial assistance of high-income friends" (Hofferth, Boisioly and Duncan 1998: 263). The structure of their friend groups impact college plans; the odds of enrolling in a four-year college increases when a students' peer network consists of other students who are interested in, and pursuing, enrollment in two- or four- year colleges too (Perna and Titus 2005). College counselors have not been able to adequately fill knowledge gaps for less privileged students; college counseling seems to hardly equip students with college knowledge unless it is private and/or individualized, which excludes lower-income students (Perna et al. 2008; McDonough 1997; Avery 2010). Thus, the transfer of knowledge is left to the students' communities and families - first-generation college students rely on their peer groups, close friends, friends' family members, and older siblings for information surrounding college planning (McDonough 1997; González 2003).

These structural and cultural forces work together to further burden and limit the opportunities of students of color. African American and Hispanic students are "disadvantaged in the college enrollment process not only because of their own low levels of the types of economic, human, and cultural capital that are valued in the college enrollment process but also because of the low levels of resources that are available to promote college enrollment through the social networks at the schools they attend," (Perna and Titus 2005: 511). Espenshade and Radford (2009) expanded upon this, showing that black students were less likely to receive academic awards that admissions officers find important or distinctive, likely because they were

less likely to be seen as successful, and have access to different opportunities in their networks (2009: 34).

Online Networks

Academics have explored the relationship between new technology and achievement gaps in education, often finding that online networks have the ability to transfer information and academic capital to those who otherwise would not have access to it (Valenzuela et al. 2009). Online networks and social media, in particular, have been found to inform FGCS of information they would not know to ask for, like open meetings for on-campus organizations and academic strategies (Rowan-Kenyon et al 2018). In this way, online networks act as a course of bridging capital to underserved students, as they can be activated to fill knowledge gaps *without* needing to actively reach out to peers, advisors, or instructors with specific questions. Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2018) argue that this phenomenon can be a great equalizer in higher education, but online communities, just like offline ones, have various hierarchies and different pockets of information with various entrance requirements.

Social connections impact an individual's access to and ability to use technology, and there is a difference between what is "technologically possible" and actually "socially probable" (Zhao and Elesh 2015: 174). One's immediate social network determines who they can communicate with online, and how they diversify their social capital. Thus, there are two types of online inequalities: in access to information, and in access to various social networks in the online sphere. Luo (2010) found that students use online networks and social media to communicate with peers *already* in their social network, and that time barriers often prevented students from forming new relationships with online peers (2010: 91).

Students from lower-class backgrounds utilize the internet and online resources in different ways, namely because the ways they initially learn to use technology differently than higher-SES students. They access technological resources less frequently, have less tech-related support staff in their schools, and access online resources in inconsistent locations (Warschauer et al. 2010). Previous experiences with internet-based resources can help students navigate online college application and financial aid processes, but when they lack consistent and supportive environments with specific information that aides in online research practices, these students are at a loss (Venegas 2006: 1661, 1666). More privileged students engage in specific, "interest-driven practices" online, whereas students from a lower class background engaged with the internet in ways that were less specific and limited to "consumption, not creation" (Warschuaer et al. 2010: 194; Attewell and Winston 2003). Even when students do learn how to utilize technology effectively, those without college knowledge in their network are not equipped with specific questions to research, and do not necessarily understand what websites and resources would best answer their questions. They need guidance and direction to actually utilize online academic tools. They *can* come across helpful websites to gain academic capital and support their studies, although not independently (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018: 120).

Many have argued that online networks have the potential to foster knowledge collaboration different from traditional organized structures of education (Faraj et al. 2011). Online networks contain a characteristic of fluidity that blurs the boundary lines of who is excluded and who is included – the traditional hierarchies present in offline networks are dynamic and can change shape in online spheres (2011). For example, anyone can gain access to College Confidential, an online forum intended to provide insight into the actual rules of college admission. The site is useful in communicating college preparation norms through online

engagement, but the only people who create content and disseminate information on the site are from more privileged backgrounds (Hoover 2013). These students are already conducting specific, intense research on college applications. As such, the content on the website focuses on elite colleges, with an "overwhelming fascination" with Ivy League institutions (Hoover 2013: 2). Due to the nature of *who* is creating content online, the passive observers and consumers of the information on this site find that it amplifies college anxieties more than it provides guidance in the application process. At its core, technology is socially constructed, and still serves social institutions (Warschauer 2003), disseminating information in ways that are preserve the goals of the field.

This process is evident when researchers analyze class-based differences in online usage and web research patterns – lower-income and FGCS passively engage with academic materials both online and off, and this independent, passive mentality limits the amount of college knowledge they have access to. Schools with higher-income students, for example, undertake web research with the goals of "deeper knowledge, understanding, or analysis through critical inquiry," whereas lower-income students engage in both individual and collaborative online work with "very limited goals" (Warschauer et al. 2010: 199). Differences in online media usage directly impact educational outcomes – computer access and usage has been found to increase test scores and high school graduation rates (2010). Further, the interest-driven practices employed by students in higher-income environments provide them with bridging capital and a more diverse social network (2010).

Scholars have identified two stages of interest-driven participation: "messing around" and "geeking out," (Ito et al. 2008). The early exploratory phase of online usage, "messing around," is quite common among students from all backgrounds, but only a small minority of young

people reach the "geeking out" stage of internet usage. Students have to be comfortable with "navigat[ing] esoteric domains of knowledge," to *actually* participate in online communities (2008: 28). Only those with the social resources are able to participate in the production of knowledge and content, and thus are able to "move on to these more sophisticated forms of media participation" (Warschauer et al. 2010: 193).

This research suggests that the passive, independent engagement strategies employed by lower-income and FGCS are prevalent both online and off and put them at a disadvantage. Less privileged students are reactive to college admissions standards, they are not familiar with college options, and while their parents are very supportive, they are not usually deeply involved in their children's college application process in ways that would bring information about specific, rewarded college application behaviors to the forefront of their planning (McDonough 1997). Therefore, they engage with and have access to different online communities, and still receive different information about college.

Interventions: what we know

Researchers in the field of higher education have analyzed the effectiveness of college counseling and outreach efforts in mitigating disparities in access. Students that received recruitment mailings that target lower-income students and provide them with relevant information (fee waivers, application-related info, etc.) are 20% more likely to apply and enroll in selective colleges (Hoxby and Turner 2013). Teachers and instructors can also intervene on high-achieving students to inform them about the admissions process, introduce them to selective colleges, encourage them to apply to elite schools, etc. (McDonough 1997).

College access programs (CAPs) can also provide an intervention and introduce students to new college knowledge. Mentorship and program affiliations that work with students early on, even in middle school, have been found to be critical in supporting students and families that otherwise would not view college as an attainable option (Hooker and Brand 2010: 84). Programs like College Possible, a non-profit program that operates within lower-income high schools, have "significantly increased both applications and enrollment to both four-year colleges and selective four-year colleges" (Avery 2013). Programs that focus on the specific "nuts and bolts" of college admissions achieve a "greater rate of college match" (Belasco and Trivette 2015).

However, within CAPs, there are still gaps in access. Program interventions do not work on their own; around 70% of the students with program assistance in one study enrolled in less selective institutions or never enrolled in college at all (Arnold et al. 2009). Further, upper- and upper-middle- class students are more likely to enroll in college-sponsored programs, the types of programs admissions officers put more value in (Espenshade and Radford 2009). Middle-class students enroll in CAPs less frequently than any other class group, which Espenshade and Radford (2009) argued was the result of different exclusionary barriers working together: "[their income] may be too low for them to comfortably afford the rather costly college programs in which upper-middle and upper-class students participate. Yet, at the same time, it could be too high for them to be eligible for the college programs established specifically for lower- and working-class students" (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 47). Additionally, middle-class FCGS still lack the social resources that allow them "to evaluate which privileges might be the most effective" in achieving college admission, which means they may not even learn of CAPs or how useful they are in the first place (Nelson 2010: 175). We know that this phenomenon continues to

limit students' opportunities once they reach college – elite colleges usually have programs designed for low income students, but only one-fifth to one-third are actually enrolled in said programs because they *did not know that they even qualified for them* (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielson 2018: 123).

College access programs have also been criticized for focusing solely on the student, instead of empowering entire networks of students. Programs should include a cohort approach, one that provides college enrollment resources to a whole network of students, since correlations between peer network college plans and one's own college plans is so strong (Perna and Titus 2005).

1.2 FINAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Considering what we know about the college admissions process and the barriers lower-income, working-class, and first-generation college students face in it, I have looked to identify how online networks and offline networks shape their decision-making processes. How do non-elite high school students gain access to the knowledge they needed to be competitive applicants at elite colleges? Under what circumstances do introductions to college knowledge actually lead students to *utilize* online resources? Can the internet and online college application resources actually mitigate the lack of college knowledge in their immediate social networks, as some have argued?

1.3 METHODS

To obtain rich qualitative data on the college choice processes of lower-income and first-generation college students, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 students - 3 current

high school students, and 15 recent high school graduates from across the United States. The 15

college-bound participants graduated high school in 2018. Ten were interviewed in the months

before their first semester of college, and five were interviewed within their first month of

college classes. Interviews were conducted in various ways. Some were conducted in person at

public libraries and university common spaces, others as online video calls, and the remaining

were via phone call. The interviews ranged from 30 to 100 minutes, and depending on

participants' scheduling needs, were administered in either one or two sessions. Participants were

assured of their agency over the interview process before our conversation, were required to

complete consent forms, and were guaranteed confidentiality – all the names and schools

referred to in this thesis are pseudonyms or obscured titles. Before each interview, my

participants completed an online pre-interview survey to provide me with specific demographic

information. After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed. The transcripts were

first qualitatively coded using ATLAS.ti, and then thematically organized.

The interviews were designed to get the students thinking about 1) why they wanted to go

to college, 2) how their network, background, and status impacted their college dreams, 3) how

they planned and then prepared for college admissions, 4) how they communicated with others

about college admissions, and 5) their timeline from college dreams, college research, and

college applications. When asking about their preparation behaviors, I prodded them to provide

information on how they actually used the internet, and how they to communicated with others

via online channels. These questions prompted students to share not only the nuances of their

college choice process, but also the unique barriers they encountered along the way. Building

from Weber's exclusionary theories, students from non-dominant backgrounds (like students I

interviewed) had to not only be introduced to the proper "steps" for college admissions, but also

had to adapt and overcome their own class, racial, geographical, and/or educational backgrounds to achieve the desired outcome – college admission. The students' experiences formed themes that emerged through qualitative analysis, as their voices allowed me to analyze the college choice process for lower socioeconomic status and first-generation college students with a focus on the specific barriers and opportunities presented to them.

I specifically recruited high school students and recent high school graduates to gain a better understanding of how they used online tools to prepare for college admissions. Due to the rapidly changing nature of social media and technology as a whole, it was important to learn from students who are either currently going through the college search process or have recently (within the last year) applied to college. I found my participants using targeted recruitment posting and snowball sampling. I intentionally sought out students involved with Questbridge, a college access organization that connects low-income students with elite college and universities, allows them to apply under a different application plan, and covers tuition costs. Recruitment flyers were posted in a Questbridge Facebook page, a forum on social media for Questbridge scholars who graduated high school in Spring 2018. Flyers were also physically shared with high school students from lower Delaware County, Pennsylvania, a set of working and middle-class boroughs around Philadelphia. In the fall of 2018, I also engaged in direct email recruitment with a first-generation college student network at an elite college. I recruited six people through the Questbridge Facebook group, four people via snowball sampling from the Questbridge participants, three people from flyers, and five people through email recruitment.

After the initial targeted recruitment, some respondents connected me with friends and peers who may be interested in participating in the study. This snowball sampling method allowed me to understand more of the information that was flowing around some of my

respondents' immediate networks. A deeper understanding of how information flows throughout peer, school, and online networks allows for a richer analysis of my respondents' college application journey. My recruitment strategy relied heavily on the internet, so students who did not use the internet to communicate about college admissions are disproportionately underrepresented. Further, since snowball sampling relies on respondents' peer networks, and since I never randomly selected high school students, my data does not represent the full range of experiences of students from different racial and class backgrounds.

Eighteen students in total were interviewed, fifteen of which recently graduated high school (83%). Fifteen of the respondents identified as a woman (83%), and three as a man (16%). 38% of the students were white, 33% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 22% were Hispanic, 5% were Native American, and zero were African-American. Thirteen students (72%) were first-generation college students, defined as students whose parents have not completed a four-year degree. Students whose parents completed degrees outside of the U.S. were included in this sample of first-generation college students, as their immediate family network lacked experience with the intricacies of higher education admissions in the United States. Three out of the thirteen first-generation college students in this sample had parents with degrees from institutions outside of the U.S., and like the other first-generation college students in this sample, never mentioned using their parents as a resource.

To determine each participant's class status, I gathered three sets of demographics on the pre-interview survey: geographical location, an income estimate, and home ownership. This provides a more nuanced understanding of "class," as income levels vary greatly depending on not only where the respondent lives, but also available wealth. I categorized each participant as lower-, working-, or middle-class, using a tool from the Pew Research Center that considers

Metropolitan area, household size, and income level.[1] The tool does not differentiate between working and middle-class, so I was able to use household ownership status, family's educational attainment, and median incomes for the area to categorize working-class status. Eight students (44.44%) were lower-class status, seven (38.89%) were working-class status, and three (16.67%) were middle-class status.

Twelve participants experienced some form of network intervention, and 11 were, at some point, affiliated with a college access program (see Table 1). For the purposes of thesis, I define the timing of interventions as such: "early" interventions occur during or before the sophomore year, "middle" interventions occur during junior year, and "late" occur during senior year.

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[1] http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/interactives/middle-class-calculator/

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intervention Type of the College-Bound Students

Name	CAP Affiliation	Class Status	First-Gen Status
Analisa	Non-Quest	Working	Yes
Arissa	None	Working	Yes
Aviva	None	Working	Yes
Cassie	Questbridge	Lower	No
Emma	Questbridge	Lower	Yes
Kathleen	None	Working	Yes
Kelsey	None	Working	Yes
Maxine	Questbridge	Working	No
Melissa	Non-Quest	Lower	Yes
Miranda	Questbridge	Lower	Yes
Noelle	Questbridge	Working	Yes
Pablo	Questbridge	Lower	Yes
Stanley	Questbridge	Lower	Yes
Zaire	Non-Quest	Lower	Yes
Zaneerah	Questbridge	Lower	Yes

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the High School Students

Name	Class Status	First-Gen Status
Augusta	Middle	No
Jason	Middle	No
Lacey	Middle	Yes

1.4 OVERVIEW OF ARGUMENT AND CHAPTER STRUCTURE

I found that while this sample of less privileged students did use online resources to prepare for college admission, they used them in ways that were dependent on their personal networks. None of the participants came to use the internet and access application information on their own - their internet preparation behaviors were dependent on their physical environment and were usually prompted by their school network and college access programs. Scholars have shown that online sources can fill gaps in information but have not uncovered how individuals actually *learn* to use the internet to fill these gaps. People rarely learn that they lack information from the internet; they learn that they need to access more information after being made aware of their knowledge gaps from offline networks. Thus, the internet alone cannot be an access point to college information by itself - there must be something in the student's network, or luck, that introduces them to the world of helpful online college application resources.

The main trend that arose from the qualitative data concerned the moment of introduction to college admissions preparation behaviors, and, consequently, the timeline of respondents'

college choice process. In this thesis, I term such moments as "interventions:" an interaction, moment, or relationship that prompted the student to undertake specific, individual research on college admissions. For example, receiving a pamphlet at school *could* be an intervention, but it does not *necessarily* lead to one. If the pamphlet introduces the student to a new "requirement" of admissions and/or results in the student doing independent research, then it would be an intervention. If the pamphlet was perceived as a scam or offered no new information, and the student tossed it aside, the pamphlet would not count as an intervention.

"Network-interventions," are also a more specific example of the types of interventions experienced by my respondents. For example, a teacher or a peer emphasizing the necessity of a certain college admissions prep behavior, like preparing for SAT Subject Tests (formerly known as SAT II), can provide students with new information that allows them to adapt to college admissions requirements. Students cannot study for SAT Subject Tests if they are unaware that they exist, but early network interventions can provide students with the information they need to adapt and fulfill admissions requirements.

I broke the intervention stages into four categories: early interventions, middle interventions, late interventions, and no interventions. The form of the interventions is also broken up into four categories: program-only interventions, network-only interventions, both network- and program-interventions, and no interventions. The timing and form of these interventions are correlated with the number of online preparatory tools used by each participant. For example, for all intervention stages, those who received the intervention in the form of their immediate network (*not* a program) used more online resources to prepare for college admissions.

Table 3

Intervention Types, Intervention Timing, and Amount of Online Resources Used

Intervention Type	Early Intervention Timing	Middle Intervention Timing	None
Network	Aviva (7), Kelsey (5)	Arissa (5), Kathleen (8)	
Program		Cassie (5), Maxine (6), Stanley (5)	
Both	Analisa (4), Emma (6), Melissa (3), Noelle (4), Pablo (6), Zaire (4), Zaneerah (4)	Miranda (7)	
None			Augusta (0), Jason (4), Lacey (1)

In chapter two, I outline the participants' college dreams, the set of pre-dispositions that shape their college search process. Less privileged and academically successful students view college as an expectation, as something they owe their families for upward mobility. To them, the whole purpose of a college education is for financial success. However, their initial impressions of college are hazy and lack specificity, which puts them as a disadvantage when preparing for college admissions requirements. They engaged in their academic pursuits without the help of guidance of their parents, and hardly reached out to mentors, teachers, or instructors with questions about college.

Chapter three explains why interventions were necessary for these college-bound students to successfully navigate the college application process. The students in this study often learned of college admissions requirements and strategies for admission through their peers or others in

their social network. Their networks were usually socioeconomically diverse, or at the least, had a small group of students with elite college aspirations. Some of their networks communicated external anxieties and stress that led them to frantically engage in college research, usually on the basis of race and/or citizenship status. If they received information about CAPs, they were able to apply and sometimes gain admission to structured programming designed to guide them through the college application process. However, they learned about these programs through their network, suggesting that they already needed to have access to college knowledge before joining programs that would equip them with more. Students with both network and program interventions were able to utilize different access points to college information, had a more diverse and wide-reaching understanding of college admissions requirements, and thus had an easier time turning their college dreams into college plans.

The fourth chapter analyzes the benefits of CAPs, and how the students actually utilized them while preparing for college applications. The college access program Questbridge is used as a case study to highlight the main benefit of CAP enrollment - communication and collaboration with other college-bound members. The Questbridge scholars gained access to new online social circles and a wider range of college application information. Further, the nature of the Questbridge Facebook pages allowed the students to engage with application preparation strategies on a frequent basis and in ways that were approachable to the students. They did not feel scared to reach out with questions since it was a space run by young students. Even if they never asked a single question, they were still able to read comment threads and learn strategies just by scrolling down their social media timelines. The college-bound students with access to Questbridge said that the Facebook group was the most valuable resource for them throughout the college admissions process.

However, CAPs still engage in exclusionary social processes that deny other less privileged college-bound students access. Those who lacked access to CAPs, the network-only intervention participants, expressed anger and regret for missing out on the opportunities and guidance a CAP would have offered them. Middle-class students, too, often do not meet the entry requirements to CAPs, even when their social networks also lack college specific information. Chapter five takes a look at the students who lacked access to CAPs and highlights the differences in how they used online resources while applying to college. They focused on their quantitative stats when preparing for applications, even though admissions committees place a high importance on non-quantitative factors like leadership positions and demonstrated interest. All they knew about college applications was that they needed to have high scores and GPAs, and their online research patterns reflected that. Chapter six discusses how the students without network interventions navigated the application process. Those with program-only interventions often learned of the CAPs that would come to guide them through their college application process through luck. Since they had access to CAPs, though, they were still able to reap the network-expanding and mentoring aspects of the programs and exhibited similar online resource patterns as those with both program and network interventions. The unlucky students, the three current high school students with no interventions, used barely any online resources (if at all), and had a very limited idea of what their college options were.

Chapter 2
College Dreams

The personal motivations behind each participant's college dreams shape their pre-college disposition and come to impact the way they researched and applied to colleges. Each participant's understanding of the meaning and purpose of higher education was shaped through their social network, adults in their life, the media, and society at large. They formed distant college dreams based on what (little) their network knew about higher education, ones that lacked the specificity and planning required of competitive college applicants. The notion that college was a natural progression for high-achieving students like themselves was common among all participants. For lower-income and working-class students, college was viewed as an expectation from their families and communities, usually for upward mobility and entry into the professional class. Further, the ways their families and other immediate networks talked about education set up the students with an independent mindset, one which impacted the ways they engaged with their schoolwork, and ultimately put them at a disadvantage in the college admissions process.

I refer to the participants' initial impressions of college, and their initial hopes for their college careers as their "college dreams." For less privileged students, college can be a distant social fact, and their access to college-related knowledge is limited. Thus, their initial understandings of college entrance requirements are often very different than the reality and complexity of college admissions. College dreams turn into more concrete college *plans* after they receive an intervention. Therefore, before examining the interventions, it is important to understand why the students needed them in the first place, by uncovering why their college dreams formed the way they did.

The participants thought their college dreams stemmed from a desire to enter the professional class. This desire was reinforced by their networks in ways specific to their background – college was always viewed as an expectation, a chance to live a better life, and a way to help their families. The pressures they received to enroll in college carried a theme of class insecurity and a strong belief in a meritocratic education system.

The students spoke about their college dreams as though it was their only option, and in some cases, an obligation. The students recalled their family's past and their own upbringing to emphasize the gravity of their college choices and the unique pressures surrounding their college enrollment. Arissa's original college dreams highlight this inter-generational pressure:

> I feel like for a lot of people [going to college] is a decision that you make, but for me it wasn't. It's a little bit different as a first-generation college student because my mother did not go to college, my father did not… My mom is very intelligent, so is my father, so they kinda said, 'We didn't get an education, both of our children need to.' So like, 'We didn't do this so you've gotta.'

Here, Arissa expressed a pressure to attend college because it was an opportunity that was not afforded to her parents. Kathleen felt a similar pressure as the most "academically successful" person in her working-class, non-degree holding family:

> I didn't really comprehend when I was younger that there was any other option but college. Even though that wasn't really the situation around me, but I just thought you graduate high school and you go to college and you get a job. I don't know. I didn't necessarily understand that my parents didn't go to college when I was younger. I always thought it was the norm. *Not boasting, but I was the most*

academically successful at that point in my family. So I felt like it was the next

logical thing (emphasis added).

The respondents never questioned whether or not college was the right path for them, they viewed it as their obligation and responsibility as high-achieving students.

The stories of my participants carry themes of the American dream, as they view college as a means to upward mobility and also something that *owe* their family. Some students recognized the way their class status influenced their college dreams, and directly associated upward mobility to the ideas of American identity. For example, Analisa acutely connected her college dreams with proper American citizenship: "I knew I was gonna go to college because it was just something my parents were like, 'You're gonna do this.' Because they didn't. *It was part of being American and stuff*" (emphasis added). It is part of "being American" to independently work hard for financial success. To these students, the purpose of college is for high-paying employment prospects. They seek a better life than their parents and understand that they must pursue it on their own. Below, I analyze these themes to understand why, exactly, the students associated higher education with employment, upward mobility, money, and prestige before highlighting how these associations came to shape their future college plans and interrupt their original college dreams.

2.1 HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

All of the students seemed to believe that the purpose of higher education was to prepare them for professional jobs. Teachers and parents stressed this as the main function of education, and it shaped the way the students viewed college. Their dreams of being a doctor, lawyer, or engineer formed from their networks' expectations of what a college degree is used for.

Miranda's family pushed education on her, emphasizing that she continues until she "become a doctor or something." Noelle's elementary school teachers conflated intelligence with an entry to the professional class: "They were always like, 'You want to go to college because it's gonna make you smarter. You're gonna become a doctor or a fashion designer or something.'" The students then equated college degrees with "top jobs" and success.

Jason received pressure from his family to go to school for top jobs. They even questioned his potential major choices and pushed him to follow an academic course that could result in a high-paid position in the professional class: "Yeah. Even if I said I wanted to go into business, that kind of stuff too. My mom's like, 'Are you sure you don't want to be an engineer?' Just always like why don't you go do whatever is considered the top jobs. She would always try to push me to that, which is good." Jason wrapped up this statement by stating that the pressures to be better-off financially were good, as though his academic and intellectual pursuits must be backed up by a potential professional career over five years in the future. He followed up on this, clarifying that it was good because parents just want the best for their children, and that success means a career with a high salary: "I just feel like parents want to see their kids succeed as much as possible... they just want to see me succeed and make as *much money as I can*" (emphasis added).

For my participants, the pressure to make a lot of money and join the professional class dominated their initial perceptions of college. They are carrying their family's dreams in their own college dreams. College credentials were important to their families because they have the ability to turn into wealth through top jobs. The use of a college degree goes beyond their parents' wishes of a high salary – to them, a college education represents the privilege to live a different life and presents the opportunity of upward mobility to their family. Kathleen was

acutely aware of this expectation, and explained why her class status, specifically, set this expectation:

> I just knew college was the next step. I think my mom kind of brought it up a bit. She always said she knew I was smart when I was young. You know moms! (laughing) She brought it up occasionally. I think she wanted me to go to college to have a kid to go to college almost. She hates her job, so she wanted me to have a better job than she ended up in and have more opportunity with that. I don't know exactly when, but early in elementary school.

Her mother's wish to "have a kid to go to college," made her realize that college enrollment was expected of her and was the only logical next step. It was an expectation because her mom hated her own job; her mother wanted her to have a "better job than [the one] she ended up in." Many of the participants echoed this pressure, feeling as though they *owed* it to their families to go to college because of their own parent's missed opportunities. For some, their impending college enrollment and future success was the entire reason their family moved to the United States. Others felt anxieties unique to their racial and cultural background, amplifying the same class-based pressures the other participants felt. For example, Miranda spoke about how her racial identity played a role in establishing her college dreams: "college in general has always been [an expectation]… just an Asian family and it's expected that you have to get your education until you become a doctor or something."

2.2 EDUCATION AND INDEPENDENT ENGAGEMENT

The students' networks originally talked about education and college broadly, hardly ever mentioning specific institutions, let alone guiding the participants to be competitive college applicants. The parents of my participants wanted the best for their children, equated that with (any) college enrollment, and guided them in the only way they knew how – by emphasizing the importance of education and expecting their children to treat it as their job. Their children, my study participants, were left to *independently* live out their parents' expectations originally without exposure to tutors, college mentors, or even distantly-connected college educated people in their social network.

Keeping in line with prior research, the students in this study were taught to work diligently and independently, while seizing every opportunity for advancement. For one of my participants, Zaneerah, her college dreams stemmed from the pressure of her family's immigration status. She said it was "…because my family and I moved here, the main reason was for a better education. It was always the plan that I was gonna go to college, so I just had to work my best to get there." She just had to work through the U.S. education system to get into college because it is the whole reason her family moved here. The language she used suggests that she had to get there on her own – "*I* just had to work *my best* to get there," as though just working hard through school would be enough to present her the same types of educational opportunities afforded to those of more privileged backgrounds (emphasis added). Another student, Zaire, viewed education as a vessel to achieve upward mobility, and similarly to Zaneerah, had to achieve it independent of her family's guidance:

> My parents have always been really supportive of my education. They've always
>
> encouraged me since I was young, especially my mom. My dad was kinda weird.

But my mom works two jobs and then my dad worked one job but it was early

morning and then afternoonish. So I grew up not really seeing my parents that much

because they had to work. Then I became more independent that way… So they

always encouraged me to pursue education and I feel like that was really good

because my mom and dad would both say, 'Do what you have to do as long as it's

for your school.'

Both Zaire and Zaneerah's parents, like the parents of many other participants, never really

learned of supplemental educational programming that would better equip their students for

competitive college admissions. They understood the importance of higher education, but they

viewed it as a process their children would, and should, experience on their own. They were not

aware that activities like tutoring courses, summer camps, and volunteer programs existed, let

alone how beneficial they could be for helping their children secure a spot in college. The

students themselves had to learn about programming like that, usually through a mentor, and

sometimes through luck. Due to the independent nature of their college dreams, these students

have unclear perceptions of what college is, and have a hazy understanding of how to actually

gain access to institutions of higher education.

2.3 MONEY AND PRESTIGE

Societal, cultural, and familial pressures reinforced the idea that wealth and success is

only possible through higher education; college is equated with money. They believe that the

path that leads to professional salaries lies in college degrees, hopefully a degree with a "good

name." The participants in this study were focused on getting into a "good" college, because of

its ability to get them "good" jobs in the future. Jason first started his college search process by

internet searching colleges and universities with good programs in certain fields/majors: "I want to major in business and eventually go to law school after and do either real estate law or corporate law. So I looked at schools that are good at those. To me, it doesn't really matter where it is necessarily… But the main factors are always is it a good school and cost too." Jason knew he needs to go somewhere with a good academic program to be taken seriously by future employers in his desired field. This narrative was shared across most of the participants - they acknowledged college as a necessity for financial success, and that the better the college was, the higher and more secure their future salaries would be.

Thus, prestige played a factor in the participants' college search process in ways in different ways than their more privileged counterparts. Whereas more privileged applicants seek elite institutions to secure their social position, for my participants, prestige consisted of finding a college associated with high graduation rates, adequate financial aid, *and* a good name to ensure post-graduate employment. In the stories my participants shared with me, prestige represented more opportunity or a way to get out of their current economic situation. For both dominant and non-dominant college applicants, applying to elite schools was viewed as a good investment for their future, but they approached the process with a different mindset (Radford 2013).

While being aware of the opportunities available at elite schools, they also acknowledged that the colleges with the biggest names would not usually accept students like them. Jason expanded upon this and spoke about how his test scores set him back and limited the types of schools he searched for: "[prestige] definitely plays a role actually. I haven't looked at any Ivies. I think [most-selective, private elite university] needs a 1510 or something crazy like that, so I haven't looked into that."

Jason's SAT scores fall outside of private, elite schools' range, and so he just cuts them out of his college search process completely. He latched on to the average SAT scores of just one ivy league institution and decided he would not look into schools like that. Just before this excerpt, he acknowledged that going to a prestigious school would be good for him and his future but followed up by saying that these schools are out of his reach. Elite schools have "crazy" application requirements, ones he knows he cannot not meet. As a senior in high school, Jason now has little time, if he has any at all, to drastically change his SAT scores and apply to schools at the Ivy League level. This self-selecting mentality sets the stage for undermatching, wherein less privileged students tend to apply to schools that do not meet their academic qualifications (Belasco and Trivette 2015; Dillon and Smith 2013). Such a mentality, formed from these students' hazy college dreams, is one of the reasons why the less privileged students in this study required an intervention to apply to academically rigorous, elite schools.

2.4 CLASS INSECURITIES AND 'BAD' COLLEGES

The students all bought into the exclusive notion that only the best students get into the best colleges, and the best colleges prepare their students for the best jobs. But what is "better" in this context? For these students, it means future financial stability and upward mobility. It means an entry into the professional class, even though there aren't enough spots for everyone in the professional class. They grew anxious and sought out ways to basically guarantee them a spot in the class and thought their only path to that goal would be through college. As we have seen, they believed the more prestigious a college is, the more opportunities it opens for them to ease into the professional class.

The very notion of climbing the socioeconomic ladder is grounded in the American Dream ideology and requires the people at the "bottom" to not only acknowledge their position, but also accept the fact that they are not the "best," or even worse, "bad." The lower and working-class students referred to the lifestyles of their laborer family members and peers as bad, a lifestyle they actively try to remove themselves from. They internalized their class standing and made the conscious effort to do better. When asked about why college and prestige was important, Analisa shared this story about her family:

> Because you see everyone around you and you can see they're just working at McDonalds. All the uncles and stuff like that, they still don't have jobs and they're in their 40s. And they're selling stuff on eBay. It was more just seeing people who didn't go to college and I don't want to end up like that. And it was not the things that they said, but the things that they did. Like noticing how they'd be really tired after working. And hearing them talk about money and finances.

Analisa did not want to end up like her low-income family members, who have a hard time finding stable work, are really tired after draining shifts, and often stress over money and finances. To mitigate this, she dreamed of elite college acceptance and attendance, and hope that college degrees really can pave the way to a better life. Noelle's college dreams also illustrated the desire to distance herself from her family - she said she always knew she wanted to get out, and attend schools with a top-notch education on the other side of the country. Noelle thought the way to have a successful future lay in an elite education, but distinctively, one that was better and away from everyone in her hometown.

Even lower-income students within a more educated, wealthy area internalized these class insecurities. Emma, for example, saw how other students viewed community colleges and

state schools as "negative option[s]," and how it was natural to be competitive with her friends to gain acceptance into schools that would be a better choice.

2.5 COMPLICATED DREAMS

The students' wishes of attending a prestigious institution are important in understanding why, and how, their college dreams were interrupted. Gaining an acceptance letter from a private, more selective university with good financial aid packages and more opportunities requires a different level of college application preparation than applying to local, less selective schools. For example, a student with a 4.0 GPA but no leadership experience or demonstrated interest on their record will have a harder time gaining admission than an equally as academically talented 4.0 GPA student with years' worth of extracurricular involvement and a volunteer or internship position or two. Beyond this, those with the cultural and social capital that guide them to those activities in the first place are more likely to be applicants with a legacy, big donor, or athletic preference, which provides an admissions advantage that lower-income and working-class applicants could only dream of (Steinberg 2003, Golden 2007).

Thus, the dream for prestige can be harder to turn into a concrete plan for lower, working, and middle-class students. More often than not, they are not doing any activities that coincide with instrumental college preparation behaviors from a young age. They are aware that they should try and get into more elite, prestigious colleges, but are not aware of what steps they need to take to be actually be a competitive applicant at those schools. For example, had Jason been aware of the "crazy" high SAT score requirements for admission into elite colleges earlier in his high school career, he may have been able to dedicate more time and energy into SAT prep. However, he did not receive an intervention, and may be more likely to undermatch.

Even though not everyone can get into the best colleges, these participants were told from a young age they must try their hardest to get into them, as it is their only hope for upward mobility. The college admission process was painted as objective and equitable, something that could be accomplished through hard work alone, by the best people, regardless of their background – a distinctly American ideology. They justified the existence of better schools because they thought only outstanding students gain access to them, and aspired to be one of those students, until they hit a roadblock and understood that they were at a disadvantage, usually because of their socioeconomic status. Given Bourdieu's notion of field, this sudden realization of a disadvantage makes sense - they had to, at some point, become aware of behaviors the field rewards, and understand that those behaviors differed from the ones they are or plan to engage in.

Students were stressed about different aspects of the college application process, and thus had different ideas of what they should be doing to best prepare for application season. For example, many participants expressed anxiety about test scores, which have routinely been shown to negatively correlate with class status, and initially focused on improving them, instead of building up a resume with leadership positions. Additionally, they were stressed about the bureaucratic and administrative processes involved with applying to college and financial aid. These stressors that are unlikely to be impacting the college choice process of more privileged students because of the different ways their networks instilled a sense of familiarity and comfort in navigating bureaucratic procedures. The processes and behaviors the dominant class engage in are rewarded and set up as an expectation, which creates unique barriers for students like the participants in this study.

By the time we spoke, Pablo had realized that the types of behaviors college admissions officers reward were different than the ones he originally thought to engage in. Thus, he learned that the people who attend the schools he dreamed of attending were different and ahead of him. He spoke about this when addressing the financial anxieties surrounding his ability to engage in proper elite admissions behaviors:

> I don't perceive myself as someone who is qualified enough to be admitted to these schools… I don't know. I think it's a perception I have that the people who attend these schools are people who are in the forefront of whatever field they're in. And I think a lot of times you need to have a good economic standing to be at the forefront of those fields. I'm not going to be able to build a bridge in Ghana with the amount of money I make.

The fact that Pablo still feels this way after enrolling in a highly selective, elite institution speaks volumes. He knew it was going to be harder for him to be accepted to an elite school because of his background and socioeconomic status. Noelle reiterated this, and voiced a frustration with those who suggest progressive policies like affirmative action were enough to offset the barriers that first-generation college students face in the admissions process:

> The thing that would really bother me, and this is off topic, but like whenever people say that first gen, low income kids are super lucky and they get the easy way out just because they're poor. They're just going to college for their family. It's not any easier than it is for everyone else to get in. If anything, it's harder. We have to work harder to even get seen.

Noelle illuminates the main argument of this thesis, that these students "have to work harder to even get seen." They are not graced with admission simply because they are lucky, smart

students who have an edge. They have to be lucky much, much earlier in their academic careers to be lucky in college admissions - they have to receive an intervention, somehow, that guides them to resources to help them prepare for college admissions in ways similar to their more privileged peers.

2.6 FINAL THOUGHTS

In closing, I argue that my participants needed to work *harder* and overcome socio-cultural barriers to gain acceptance into elite schools. Familial and societal expectations pushed them to reach for nothing but the best. These students were expected to work independently, intentionally, and diligently to gain access to something that is more easily accessible to students from more privileged backgrounds. The college admissions systems and its requirements reward the lifestyles and guidance afforded to financially-secure, educated people, and creates barriers for lower-income students, upholding the social reproduction of class.

The way the families, teachers, and networks painted higher education as the great equalizer gave these students heightened anxieties. When they realized their behavior was not rewarded, they went through extra trouble to *earn a spot* at these institutions, whereas others earned a spot simply through years of engaged education guidance and exposure to more educated people and family members. They *work harder* to be accepted at elite institutions and are accepted at lower rates than their higher-income, less motivated counterparts (Alon 2009). Both types of students got to the same elite colleges, and both types of students feel like they earned it. However, my participants had to not only be determined, intrinsically motivated, and supported through their barriers, but also had to be lucky enough to run into someone or something that provided them with new information about college application preparation

behaviors. Only a few, though, of all the hardworking, motivated, and intelligent lower-income students will surpass all the barriers to college acceptance, since the barriers eliminate those who aren't as lucky, those who have not received this type of intervention. These themes of college being a "great equalizer" and as a main path for achieving the college dream showcase how deeply ingrained class and financial insecurity was in these students' original college dreams, and highlights how their original perceptions of college, in turn, put them at a disadvantage while preparing for college applications. The great equalizer mentality that gave these students hope also clouds the complexities that students like them face when gaining access to college; elite college admissions are exclusive by nature, and they needed to be equipped with the proper cultural capital and college knowledge to be successful in their pursuits.

Chapter 3
Why Social Capital Matters: Access Points for New Information

In the face of an intense, competitive applicant pool, lower-income and working-class students with impeccable GPAs and a few extracurricular positions can hardly stand a chance against students with the same statistics *and* the added benefits of summer programs, high SAT subject test scores, interviews, and college visits under their belts. The fifteen participants that recently graduated high school and enrolled in college all realized that they lacked the proper information about what colleges really required of applicants as high school students. These moments, which I term an "intervention," provided the students with an access point to new college knowledge. They were then able to start their own college research equipped with specific questions they did not know that they needed to ask before. These tipping points made their dreams of elite, prestigious college enrollment possible. Without these interventions, they likely would have never learned of college application recommendations, like SAT subject tests and admissions interviews. The students in this study without an intervention, the three high school students, never mentioned engaging in these admissions preparation behaviors, or even knew that they existed, because they lacked an access point to the information that makes a successful college applicant.

I argue that these interventions were a necessary step in the college application process for first generation college students and low- and working-class students to be successful in large, competitive pools of applicants. These students need interventions to access the knowledge surrounding elite college admissions. Students can only engage with the behaviors rewarded by college admissions committees once they have access to that knowledge - they view education as an investment in similar ways that wealthy, educated families do, they just use *different* strategies to obtain it. Since their college dreams are broad and based in networks that lack

specific information about college admissions, the college-bound participants experienced a tipping point, that gave them access to that information. Less privileged students do not naturally come across college application information, and do not know to ask for it. First-generation college students have been shown to withhold asking for help, and if they do, often ask for guidance far too late (Yee 2016). Thus, they have to rely on their networks, or luck, to introduce them; their interventions are necessary to keep them on track with the college preparation behaviors rewarded by college admissions committees. The ways students find new information about college shape their college application process, correlate with the ways they use online resources, and can sometimes remove barriers that they usually face in the college application process. The students accessed new college info through two means: a network intervention, or luck.

3.1 NETWORKS AND LUCK

The majority of the interventions my participants received were dependent on their personal network. Most of the participants in this study had a major network intervention that introduced them to elite colleges or introduced them to college access programs. Previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of teachers and/or counselors "intervening" on lower-income students, to inform them about the application process, introduce them to selective colleges, and encourage them to apply to elite schools (McDonough 1997). However, they have never fully explored how these interactions take place, how the students interpreted these interventions, and how they actually used this new information to prepare for college applications. My analysis shines light on *how* these interventions work, *why* they work, and what social mechanisms brought them to the students.

Although most of the literature focuses on the intervening ability of instructors, the students in this study were more likely to engage in specific college research after learning of college information from their friends or peers. Peer interventions were the most common forms of network interventions for the participants, highlighting the power of socioeconomically diverse high schools in helping lower-income and first-generation college students stumble upon college knowledge. Twelve out of the fifteen college-bound students (80%) experienced some sort of network intervention.

Many of the students described their high schools as one of the "best" in the area, and a handful even directly connected their "better" schools with wealthy peers. This is not surprising, given the fact that the participants in this study were lower- and working-class students who already gained admission to top colleges, and not lower- and working-class students as a whole. Of the lower-income elite college applicants I could recruit online, a lot of them had that one thing in common: a good high school. This speaks volumes - the students who did not come from a good high school had luck stories, or simply never found out about college access programs at all. This is in line with other research and what we know about how beneficial socioeconomically diverse communities can be for students. However, what does it say that a lot of the students in this study just so happened to be one of the poorer students in a richer neighborhood? If they had lived somewhere else, even the next town over, would they have learned all that they learned about college admissions? The students without a college-going network in their high school are at a loss here, as the students in this study needed an intervention to pick up on the necessary cultural capital for elite college admissions.

Other students gained access to college knowledge through their friends' families. Some of the participants had friends with educated parents, and they could tap into what their friends'

families knew about college applications. Kelsey, a network-only intervention participant, was friends with students who knew of helpful college application preparation behaviors from their families. She mimicked the behaviors of her friends with college-educated parents; her friends' parents "were pressuring them to go visit colleges," so she realized she should probably visit colleges too. She picked up on things when she spent time with her friends that she did not even know she should be doing:

> Freshman year, I think, one of my friends said, 'I'm gonna start volunteering to get hours and look good for colleges.' At that point, I was like, 'Oh, that's a good idea. I should start volunteering too.' So we both started participating in stuff. I guess that kinda pushed me to start volunteering more, which I guess in turn helped with college apps.

Granted, not everyone at Kelsey's school had elite college aspirations, but those who did were able to clue her in to things like college visits and volunteer positions, two things that other participants did not know mattered. Kelsey learned from her friends' families in these indirect ways. For example, she said that when asked about her main resource and the person she relied on the most during her college application process was her best friend, because she had a college-educated mom:

> I think my closest friend at school was the person I'd go to talk about these things. Her mom was very, 'Make sure you get this done on time.' So I'd go to her because… her mom was really into it and she was into it… I could go to her and be like, 'I'm thinking of applying to here,' and she would say, 'Oh, you don't want to apply there. It's very elitist.' She would give me that kind of feedback. So she was basically my main source.

Kelsey's friend supplied her with knowledge she did not think to search for on the internet. Further, when she needed feedback on a school choice, she could reach out to someone that she trusted, someone that knew her personally, to get an idea of whether or not the school would be a good fit. However, Kelsey was never involved with any college access programs, and thus could not reach out to any academic advisors or mentors with these types of questions.

Sometimes the network interventions did not originate from their peer network – instead, they grew out of their families' anxieties about class status, racial background, and/or citizenship status. These interventions, while still in the form of a network intervention, were formed from their families' wishes and worries. They only came to the point of being an intervention when the students felt especially discouraged, like they were letting their family down, or realized they were far behind the normal preparation timeline. Pablo's intervention story stemmed from familial interventions like this - while watching his older sister apply to college, he recognized the barriers that limited her college search process as an undocumented student. Pablo's older sister was struggling to make college a reality, and as a young person with bold college dreams in an academically challenging peer network, he realized he was at a disadvantage. He told me that he felt "discouraged," and *turned to internet research* to find anything that would improve his chances of college enrollment. He was then motivated to apply to Deferred Action:

> I was really discouraged because I saw that my sister wasn't really able to pursue the higher education that she necessarily wanted. So it was halfway until high school when I was like, 'Oh wait! I might actually be able to go to college. I might actually be able to fulfill the dream I had in middle school.' That's when I turned the age when I was able to apply for Deferred Action and I was admitted to Deferred Action.

The Deferred Action program was a the turning point for Pablo. Pablo felt behind in his college application process because of his citizenship status and socioeconomic class, and as a low-income student in a school with a college-going network, he needed Deferred Action so he could legally access to the same opportunities as his classmates:

> I think Deferred Action turned my life completely around. *And I actually saw that I can pursue a lot of the things that my classmates are pursuing*, and I don't have to worry about getting deported or not having a job in that field or not being able to afford college at all. (emphasis added).

Pablo's network, both peer and familial, alerted him to "typical" college application requirements, and when he realized he could not fulfill them, he returned to online research. He had to feel discouraged and stressed to initiate any internet research on college applications – as a student in a "good" school district, nobody in his network was there to tell him about the existence of programs like Questbridge, but their collective anxiety led him to start "looking up online ways that I could pay for college being undocumented." When he first searched for this on Google, "one of the first things that came up was Questbridge." Although Pablo had college knowledge flowing in his network, he needed specific, individualized support and resources that a program like Questbridge offered him. He needed to come into contact with other students like him, both in the sense that they were reaching for the same end goal (elite college acceptance) and in the sense that they were overcoming the same barriers to get there (by being lower-income, undocumented, and first-generation college students).

3.2 PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS AS ACCESS POINTS

The structure and information that college access programs (CAPs) provided acted as an access point to new information for many of the college-bound students in this study. Many of the college-bound participants participated in a college access program like Questbridge or College Point (73.33%), and every single one of the lower-class students were, at some point, affiliated with a CAP. These moments, referred to as "program interventions" were usually introduced through a conversation the student(s) had with peers, teachers, and/or community members in their social network. Those who did not learn about them through their network became aware of them through luck.

Program interventions allowed the participants to build close relationships with college counselors, mentors, advisors, and students experiencing similar obstacles in the college application process. Eleven out of fifteen college-bound participants (73.33%) were involved with a college access program at some point in their college search process, and most were involved with the program Questbridge. Overall, 53% of the college-bound students were Questbridge Scholars. The Questbridge Scholars often took on additional program affiliations with various other CAPs. Regardless of the program, they provided specific resources, information, mentorship, access to new networks, and application preparation tips.

Some respondents also participated in academic enrichment programs that never directly advertised to help with college applications, but provided them with similar benefits as their CAPs. Ironically, they often learned about such programs from their CAP affiliations. One of the college prep programs Zaire was involved in, for example, did not have meetings over the summer specifically to encourage the students to apply to academic enrichment summer programs, and even directed them to specific scholarships and opportunities that would fill their

break from school with academically focused, resume-building activities. Academic enrichment programs introduced the students to wealthier applicants from educated families, as their families understand the importance they hold in college applications, and have the time, money, and resources to funnel money into extra academic programming (Cohen 2002; Hernández 1997; Espenshade and Radford 2013). The enrichment programs, usually in the form of summer camps, provided an immense benefit to the participants who attended, by connecting them with others applying to elite schools, getting them familiar with college classrooms, and preparing them for writing college-level essays. College admissions officers widely favor these enrichment programs, specifically ones hosted by colleges or universities (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Cohen 2002; Hernández 1997).

Noelle, who experienced both network and program interventions, attended a school district with academically challenging classes and was in an academically intense peer network, even though most students at her school were not elite-college-going. She first realized she wanted to go to college as a twelve-year-old, simply because an older girl in her network was bragging about how she was the best and was going to attend a college better than anyone else - Noelle set out to prove her wrong. This network-driven motivation to go to a good school led her to do internet research on college applications before high school even started, and through this research, she learned about Questbridge. Questbridge ended up being the "biggest resource" for her, even though she routinely encountered peer network interventions throughout her high school career. She learned about the PSAT for the first time because her friends were talking about it, and she learned from an elite-college-going upperclassman that self-studying for AP exams would be helpful:

My friend had [self-studied for AP exams] and he told me about it, going into junior

year. He was gonna be a senior and he was applying to a bunch of schools. He

ended up getting in Yale. That's why I was like, 'If he did it, I can do it.' He had a

self-study for government.

Noelle saw possibility in this classmate, a lower-income, elite-college-going student, and

followed his college application behavior. She activated her social capital, and engaged in a

studying tactic that would end up making her look more impressive on her college applications,

simply because she went to the same school as him. She was the *only* one of the participants who

knew self-studying for AP exams was a behavior that other elite college applicants engaged in,

let alone one that would make them a more competitive college applicant. While Noelle was

involved with other college access programs as a high school student, it was the network

interventions like these that made her college dreams a bit more achievable.

Pablo was also able to use his network and program affiliations as an access point. He

graduated from a socioeconomically diverse high school, and was the only Questbridge scholar

in his school - most of his friend group came from "the richer socioeconomic side" of the school

district. He was able to pinpoint how his peers and community set him up for success in college

applications:

I had to rely on my peers to give me the information I needed to actually apply to

colleges… because the only way for you to really have an education where you're

prepared to apply to college and enter college is if you're in honors and AP classes,

because of the community surrounding you.

This was true for Pablo and nearly every other student in this study – they described themselves

as hardworking students and intellectuals and surrounded themselves with like-minded people.

Pablo's academically-oriented friend group kept him on an appropriate timeline for elite college admissions and brought things like SAT subject tests to his attention. Melissa's competitive, "number one public school" setting invoked thoughts of college essays, which were "in the back of [her] head since freshman and sophomore year." She and her peers would talk about college applications every single day, because "a lot of people were generally anxious." Such a level of frequent network interventions and information-heavy conversations about college admissions can only occur in networks with previous college knowledge and a strong college-going peer network.

Zaire, a student who experienced both program and network interventions, found her high school counselor to be "superficial." However, the counselor was able to act as a network access point, and introduced Zaire to nonprofit organizations and external college access programs. Although the counselor did not provide Zaire with any helpful guidance, she was able to provide Zaire with new connections that would change the trajectory of her college application process. In this way, Zaire activated her bridging capital to familiarize herself with the college admissions field. She got involved with these programs early in her high school career, during her Freshman and Sophomore years, and stayed involved with them up until high school graduation.

My participants always stressed that there was some information or preparation behavior they did not know about, even the students with access to college-going environments. Regardless of their existing social and cultural capital, these students needed to be given an access point to the college application information taken for granted in more educated families. Luckily, for many of these students, their networks were able to clue them in to knowledge that

their families could not and introduce them to college access programs that can support them throughout the application process.

Chapter 4
Building New Social Capital through CAPs: Online and Offline Networks

As previously explained, the students' relationships and social connections were the driving force behind their enrollment in college access programs. Their initial program affiliations were thus dependent on the social capital of their existing network – they needed someone to direct them to programs that could help them in the college application process. As we saw with Zaire, some high school guidance counselors can act as an access point to CAPs. On the other hand, if they went to a socioeconomically diverse high school with a breadth of resources, it was easier for them to learn of external programs through their peers.

4.1 COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAMS AS NEW SOCIAL CAPITAL

The participants with access to college access programs (CAPs) were able to learn of college application preparation behaviors, but more importantly, gained access to new networks of elite-college-going students. CAPs are often designed to catch students at an early point in the typical college search process can give them years' worth of guidance, mentorship, organization, structure, and advocacy. Seven out of the 11 students affiliated with CAPs experienced an early-stage intervention, in that they were introduced to college application techniques before or during their sophomore year of high school. The elite college application process rewards students who have been preparing for years, and allows them to apply for different opportunities, like Early Decision plans (Steinberg 2002: 89). First-generation college students "are less likely to have planned for college early or to have adequate access to comprehensive information, and are more likely to have limited support in the college choice process" (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2018: 51; Institute for Higher Education Policy 2011). Thus, interventions that occurred before or during the sophomore year of high school can mitigate some of these barriers, often by making them

aware of new sources of college knowledge, and also connecting them to structured support systems.

Early program interventions allowed students to build longer-lasting relationships with adults who served as a source of college information. These relationships allowed the students to gain a greater understanding of "what was out there," college-wise. Mentor, advisor, and advocate relationships were the most useful to students in the early intervention stage, as they were able to spend the time and energy necessary to build an open, trusting relationship with someone who could provide them with college knowledge. Keeping in line with previous research on the questionable utility of in-school guidance counselors, the students in this study, regardless of intervention status, felt uneasy approaching their guidance counselors because they felt as though the counselors did not have a personal investment in them, did not know who they were, and were overworked (Perna, et al. 2008; McDonough 1997; McDonough and Calderone 2006; Avery 2010). Zaire called her high school guidance counselor "superficial," and said that she did not know any counselors "on a personal level," where they could actually help her through the college search process, provide recommendations, and tell her, "'Oh my gosh, this is the best choice for you.'"

Students who received earlier interventions had opportunities to build relationships with mentors and counselors through college access programs. The guidance that these mentors gave them was always specific and individualized. The mentors communicated with the students frequently, checked in about deadlines, and clued them in to what behaviors college admissions officers were more likely to reward. Zaire described how her college access program communicates the expectations of college admissions committees' years before her college applications were due:

We had workshops monthly. In the summers we didn't meet because they encouraged us to do summer programs to make it look good on our college application process. Which I oddly didn't put anything I did on [my college applications]! … They were giving us the formula to getting into one of these top tier schools. It's like your academics have to be near straight A as possible. Then they emphasized extracurricular activities, but showing persistence in your extracurriculars. So you can't just keep joining different clubs every year. They stressed longevity.

Zaire's program was able to hold monthly meetings early enough to stress things like the importance of longevity and recommend summer programs for the following year or two. The counselors also regularly checked in with the students to make sure they were not only preparing for applications far in advance, but also made sure they did not miss any deadlines: "They would constantly remind us, 'Okay, remember to do this. Remember that you have to write your essays and you have to turn them in. Start them now. Don't B.S. it the weekend before.' They helped a lot with reminding."

The counselors had enough time to form close relationships with students and could become advocates for them, understand their barriers, and communicate these concerns to higher education institutions. The counselors can take on the burden of communication and act as a liaison, which eases some of the pressures that scare lower-income and first-generation college students, who are likely unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes and may not know how to fill out paperwork, like a financial aid reevaluation request (Caberna and La Nasa 2001; Stevens 2007). Further, they do not know what questions they can, or should, ask college admissions officers and administrators. One of Analisa's mentors took on this role - the mentor was associated with a

leadership institute for Hispanic students, a program Analisa learned about through a separate college access program. The leadership institute met once or twice a month and take trips to visit local colleges (state and community colleges), and had counselors specifically for financial aid concerns, which she utilized her senior year of high school.

Analisa did not know that appealing was an option until one of her mentors informed her. Upon receiving her acceptance letter to an elite, private liberal arts college and looking at the financial aid package, she realized that her expected family contribution was much higher than what they could afford. After she shared this concern with her counselor, she learned of more financial aid resources, like the option to appeal a financial aid award. Analisa called the financial aid office to express the worries she had with her financial aid package. The office did not listen to her and did not give her any solid advice. She left the phone call thinking that she was going to have to have a hard conversation with her grandparents later and concluded that she was not going to be able to enroll there. Her counselor heard of this and scheduled a meeting with Analisa and her grandmother to call the financial aid office together. In the meeting, the counselor was able to clearly articulate Analisa's situation, background, and worries, and asked for specific, immediate actions to take place. The college ended up readjusting Analisa's financial aid package, and she now is enrolled there. This type of intervention was only possible because Analisa had already built a relationship with a mentor and felt comfortable enough sharing regular, frank updates about her college application process.

Programs were beneficial to the students in this study because they expanded the students' views on the college search process, made them aware of other college search criteria, and allowed them to learn of schools they never heard of before. Cassie's involvement with Questbridge made her realize she was "not limited to [her] town or [her] city or the next city

over" and explained why the program was the tipping point in her college application journey: "There are endless possibilities and I think Questbridge helped me open my eyes to that… because the only ones that we know are probably the ones close to our homes and the prestigious universities."

Here, Cassie refers back to her college dreams while stressing the importance of her program intervention. Recall that lower-SES and first-generation college students form broad college dreams based off of their immediate network and local schools, but when Cassie gained access to new information about college through Questbridge, she found "endless possibilities." The most important benefit of college access and academic programs is that they provided students with new networks, which leads to more network interventions, and gives the students access to new information.

4.2 QUESTBRIDGE AND ONLINE COLLABORATION

The students in this study, regardless of program affiliation, were always more likely to reach out to their peers with questions about college than any adult. When their high school had a strong college-going culture or even a small fraction of students applying to elite and prestigious universities, they learned of new requirements and gauged their own college application timeline off of what their peers were doing. Likewise, these students benefited from the networks in college access programs because they could interact with students who experienced similar *struggles* in the college application process. For example, Miranda knew that the Questbridge group "was a comfortable space to ask questions or be confused together… someone in that 3,000-person group would know someone who had the answer," to any question she had to ask.

The students could form stronger, more intentional peer networks through college access programs, which allowed them to tackle college admissions with a more collaborative approach. The Questbridge scholars in this study were all members of a *private* Questbridge Facebook page. Through the group, they could connect with not only other students who were interested in similar schools, but students who were overcoming similar barriers and therefore preparing in similar ways. Having connections with these students provided the participants with emotional support as well as the opportunity to learn of valuable, highly individualized information that would help them prepare for college applications. For example, Pablo joined the "sanctuary group chat," within the Questbridge Facebook page, which provided him with information surrounding scholarships and programs, and even just general advice about applying to college as an undocumented student. Here, he was able to ask the questions that he "wasn't necessarily able to ask" elsewhere in his network. He did not have to turn to a lot of online web research when he had a community and network full of information available to him.

The Questbridge Facebook page was the starting point for collaborative approaches – different group chats and messenger groups formed for students who were applying to specific institutions. Within the chats for specific schools, the Questbridge scholars could ask one another questions about testing and GPA statistics specific to that school, brainstorm essay ideas for supplemental essays, discuss admission requirements, and keep one another on track to apply under early application deadlines. For example, Noelle not only learned *when* to start preparing essays but also gained a community that would "discuss and read each other's essays." These groups were also a comfortable space to ask questions without the pressure of looking ill-informed – Miranda described the group as "a comfortable space to ask questions or *be confused together*" (emphasis added). The group(s) also connected the participants to current college

students at schools that were not represented in their immediate network, which allowed them to reach out to students with similar backgrounds and ask them questions, no matter how big or small, about college life and admissions.

Fifty-three percent of the college-bound students in this study were able to utilize the online Questbridge network and activate new social capital to better prepare for college admissions. Cassie knew that her Questbridge connections were particularly useful when searching for free and low-cost college application preparation resources. A lot of college resources and preparatory materials cost money, but students involved with programs designed for lower-income and first-generation college students built relationships with peers that "were probably in the same situation[s], where we had the resources but less expensive ones." Further, being in contact with students in the same situation comforted their anxieties and gave them a sense of security, since they knew they always had a network of information to pull from in a time of confusion. Students without access to a strong college-going peer network in their high schools relied on the connections through program involvement even more. Cassie knew that her Questbridge network was her *only* source for information, too, since no one else in her high school knew of Questbridge's existence or wanted to apply to highly selective colleges:

> I couldn't really ask friends at my own high school [about college applications] because I don't think there was anyone going through Questbridge or going through the same applications to the universities that I wanted to apply to. So people on Questbridge were on my level of where I wanted to go to for what I do.

Similarly, the only way Zaneerah, another Questbridge Scholar, was able to come into contact with students at the colleges she was interested in was through her online Questbridge network. Whereas economically privileged students may have friends, older siblings, or distant

acquaintances that they can reach out with questions about specific elite institutions, students like Cassie and Zaneerah do not, and thus needed to rely on their Questbridge networks.

The stories of how the participants were introduced to Questbridge shed a light on the relationship between social capital and college admissions and serve as an example of how program *and* network interventions interacted to change the course of these students' college application process. The program was fantastic at providing its students with near constant online peer network interventions. Further, the program encouraged online engagement - it provided a safe space to ask questions, as well a way to passively observe what others were doing to prepare for applications, so they could learn the things they should be doing too.

The college access programs the participants utilized were designed to prime students for *elite* college admissions, not less selective college admissions. The students who had access to these programs learned that there was a distinction between preparing for admission at selective, prestigious colleges, and admission at less-selective local schools. Cassie said that her involvement with Questbridge was the first indication she had that prestigious universities required "a lot more stuff" for acceptance, and that they accepted "smarter" people and a higher "level of students." She learned this through passively observing comment threads in the Questbridge Facebook group – the connections she made in Questbridge allowed her to unknowingly stumble upon new information about college admissions that those in her immediate network could not offer her. I argue that the most useful features of the Questbridge program were not necessarily the resources they offered or their college match program, but instead these connection-making, network-expanding aspects provided through the Facebook group.

All of the Questbridge scholars used the Facebook page as a resource, and most said that they relied on that group more than any other connections for obtaining college application information. Once Miranda gained access to the Questbridge network through her year's Facebook page, a regular stream of new college information was accessible to her. She described one to me as picking up on other people's "panic:"

> I think in the Questbridge group, people like to panic a lot. People like to ask, 'Oh my god, what's this? What's that?' And when people panic about stuff like, 'What's this?' That really helped me because I was like, 'Oh! I guess I should be doing that too.'

The students in the Facebook group received near constant interventions in this way. The Facebook group was maintained and used by high school students – all the conversations in the page were initiated and responded to by the students, *not* program administrators or admissions officers. They could "panic" together and participate as much as they wanted to. The students had agency over the space, and found it to be a comforting, safe place to ask the questions they could not ask anyone else.

For some Questbridge scholars, the social connections they gained (and, by consequence, the new information they received) were the only benefits that came from the program. Pablo, for example, was able to reap these benefits of Questbridge, but could not actually participate in the Questbridge college match program. The match program required financial information that he could not provide as an undocumented student: "In order for you to be matched to a school, your expected family contribution has to be zero. And I'm not able to estimate my EFC [expected family contribution] because I can't really fill out the FAFSA form easily."

However, since Pablo was accepted to the Questbridge program and had access to the Facebook page, he was directed to helpful resources for undocumented college applicants. He built connections with students with a similar citizenship status through the program – after posting in the page about his citizenship status, he was added to a subgroup of the Questbridge scholars Facebook page called the "Sanctuary Chat." This group gave him tips on applying to college as an undocumented student and facilitated connections with current undocumented college students. With this exposure he was able to learn about what institutions had strong networks of undocumented peers and had an idea of what colleges were better at supporting their undocumented students. Later down the line, this information *made* his college enrollment decision for him, as he decided to attend his final choice school because he knew they supported students like him the best.

The participants that used the least amount of online resources were those who had access to CAPs through their social network. These students are referred to as having both program and network interventions, could rely on a large pool of information in their online *and* offline networks. All of the students in this intervention group graduated from socioeconomically diverse high schools and had at least a small handful of peers (usually 5-10 others) that were applying to similar, elite colleges. These students did not need to utilize as many online resources over the course of their college application process because they could rely on the structure, resources, and networks through their program affiliations, and lean on their in-school peer networks.

Zaire was able to connect with the "mostly privileged people whose parents had a college degree or plus, and who were more economically privileged," in her school because of their college application process. Only a few other students in her class were applying to elite out-of-

state colleges, and she would communicate with them about applications. She could also turn to her program(s) for logistical questions about the things her peers brought to her attention, like deadlines, extra testing, and campus visits. She did not even have to do online research to learn about her college options – her program(s) had pre-made college lists and resources already put together for her.

4.3 EXCLUSIONARY CAPs: WHO MISSES OUT

While Questbridge was extremely helpful and useful to the students who had access to it, the program was exclusionary by nature. Analisa, who was not a Questbridge scholar, told me of the "insane" application process involved with the program, and how the admissions requirements were unfair to high school students:

> It's insane, the [Questbridge] selection process, because… [in order to get into Questbridge], you have to have something special, *really* special. Or have a way of expressing it that makes it sound like you could save the whole country or something… how can you put that much pressure on someone who is first gen, so they don't really know the process?

Analisa thought it was ridiculous that a program designed for first-generation college students required so much energy and college knowledge from them. She also told me Questbridge was a "gamble" in the first place – Questbridge advertises its College Match program and its benefits (being bound to a school early on and having tuition covered), but that many of the students who get accepted to Questbridge do not actually get matched. Analisa thought it was misleading, saying: "…there's really smart people there who spend all this time in Questbridge and not

getting matched… I guess that uncertainty is something that seems really fucked up to mess with people like that, who are already scared about college."

Other students in the study agreed with this sentiment – quite a few of my participants were those un-matched Questbridge scholars, and a handful of the other participants decided not to participate in the program in the first place because of how much it required of them. For example, Kelsey simply found out about the program too late, and upon realizing how extensive the application was, decided she "couldn't go through with it." She could have benefited greatly from the group, but the only thing stopping her was the strict deadline: "I definitely wish I could have done the Questbridge thing. I wish I knew about that earlier and kind of prepared for that. I think that would have been really helpful for me."

Since the Questbridge application requires students to apply before or during their junior year of high school, and since they have strict deadlines and an intense application, many lower-income, working-class, and first-generation college students can fall through the cracks. The students who were enrolled in Questbridge learned about it through their college-going networks or, for a few of them, luck. Like Kelsey, Kathleen lamented on the fact that Questbridge was an opportunity she missed out on, solely for the fact that nobody in her network knew about its existence:

> [Questbridge] wasn't talked about at all. A lot of kids from my school would have
> qualified for Questbridge but it was never heard of. I remember I went to our career
> counselor and she initially couldn't really recognize the name… it definitely wasn't
> a well-known thing where I was from. The application was pretty intimidating, and
> I heard about it late. So I was scrambling to get my application in.

There are probably so many hard working, high-achieving students who missed out on Questbridge and programs like it simply because they were not present in their network. The students who did not learn about programs through their peers or teachers were at a disadvantage relative to the students who had access to these wide-reaching networks of information, even though they, too, were also high-achieving students.

Questbridge is a fitting example of how college access programs' exclusionary features and barriers work, and how lower- and working-class students engage with college access programs. It also highlights the necessity of network interventions to first inform these students of said programs. The exclusionary aspects present in college access programs' own admissions requirements resemble university admission requirements, and thus still rely on the applicant's social and cultural capital. In turn, Questbridge and programs like it perpetuate the main obstacles in college admissions processes – the students must be "clued in" to admissions preparation behaviors, like joining college access programs, by their network, and will not seek out programs via online research unless they are prompted to do so.

The college access programs my study participants engaged in were all exclusive - they required applications, recommendations, and/or interviews to gain admission. Due to the exclusive nature of these programs, they themselves were also a barrier to students. Some of the participants were not able to gain admission to college access programs because they found out about them too late or had to rush to submit all the required materials. Some were *only* able to gain admission because they had a connection to said program in their network; this only strengthens the argument that college admissions information relies heavily on students' immediate social network. Analisa, for example, got into a separate nonprofit college access program that offered her ACT tutoring, essay writing workshops, and more. Notably, the

counselor at her high school used to work for this program, and even though the program usually requires an application and two interviews, Analisa was able to gain entrance through her counselor's connection alone. The counselor alerted her previous workplace and recommends her current students for admission. As far as Analisa was concerned, the program took whoever the counselor recommended.

Not all of the programs required extensive applications, but all of the program recruiting tactics were exclusionary. The program that helped Zaire the most actually *hand-selected* the top 40 students in the sophomore class and give *just them* a presentation about the college access program and its benefits, as though the students with slightly lower GPAs were not qualified enough to receive this type of mentorship. Zaire described the recruiting process of the program:

> They're already looking for students who are doing well. I don't know if programs even exist where they start from a young age and build them up. This was like, 'OK, we're looking for already straight A or near straight A students who are already academically challenging themselves.' So it's kinda selective because they've been getting more and more applicants every year. The goal of the program is to get students to go to college, but they most[ly] target schools in the top tier that offer the most financial aid…

The program's main goal was to send high-achieving lower-income students to top tier schools, which explained why they had to reach out and recruit students so early, and also justified their arbitrary 40-person cutoff. Regardless, only some students were even considered for admission, and if Zaire had the 41ˢᵗ-highest-GPA in her class, she may not have ever gained access to the program that changed the trajectory of her college application process.

Noelle also shared a bit about the exclusionary aspects of one of her CAP affiliations, even though she benefited from them: "...they were like, 'Hello, this is College Point. I am so and so. What is your average SAT score? What are you part of? Are you low income?' And then they were like, 'We'll see who gets accepted.' Because not everybody got into it." This college access program directly reached out to Noelle and *immediately* started asking her questions about her class status and academic statistics. Once she passed their initial test for approval and a validation of her qualifications, they invited her to apply, but still stressed that she might not get in. This random-seeming cold call ended up providing Noelle with an immense benefit - a personal advisor, who she communicated with every few weeks, who helped her curate a college list. At this point, however, Noelle was already involved with Questbridge, and was in a school with a few other students applying to elite colleges.

There is a disparity in class status and program interventions - *all* of the lower-class students in this study were affiliated with a college access program, whereas only 43% of the working-class students were. Lower-class students also represented two-thirds of the program-only intervention students. These students represent the ideal participants in CAPs, those who would not have had access to specific college knowledge in their network had it not been for college access programs. The CAPs, however, hardly worked on their own - only 20% of the students in this study who ended up with an elite college acceptance had program-only interventions, suggesting that these college access programs were not enough on their own, and thus only *sometimes* mitigated the lack of college knowledge for lower- and working-class students. All in all, lower-class students were more likely to receive the support and guidance offered through college access programs, and working-class students were more likely to receive new academic capital from their network.

Chapter 5
Relying on Existing Social Capital: Navigating the Internet Independently

Those who did not have access to any college access programs either applied to them and got rejected or learned about them too late. The timing of the interventions mattered to the study participants because if they happened to experience their tipping point too late, they were denied access to college access programs, and thus lost the ability to utilize new access points of information or build new networks of social capital. Many of my participants experienced regret and disappointment when they learned about opportunities, scholarships, or programs after application deadlines. CAPs and college application plans require students to act on their college dreams in a specific and timely manner. For example, early-decision plans require students to have recommendation letters, well-written essays, and supplemental material (interviews, portfolios, etc.) submitted by October or November of their senior year. Say a student learned of a new college and recommended application materials like interviews and extra test scores as a senior, they would have one month to take extra standardized tests and schedule an interview. Further, they would have to craft compelling, thoughtful essays and obtain letters of recommendation from multiple teachers and guidance counselors in the same month. Other students spend months, if not a few years, crafting their college essays. A student without access to this knowledge in their social network cannot simply log on to a college's website, apply on a whim, and be a competitive applicant - even if the students are high achieving students, they need to spend a bit of time before application doing the right things.

To shine light on how the strict deadlines act as a barrier and stressor to these less privileged applicants, we can look to students like Kathleen, who had to navigate the college application process without the structure of guidance of a CAP. Kathleen experienced stress and anxiety around deadlines, recalling on how she had to "push it" and "scramble" to get an Early

Decision application in because she finalized her college list a month or two into her senior year.

Further, when she learned of Questbridge for the first time as a senior while filling out the

common application, she was sad and knew that she "missed out" on an amazing opportunity.

Even students with earlier interventions like Kelsey lacked information about CAPs like

Questbridge and learned about them a little too late: "[A friend] told me [about Questbridge] at

the beginning of September I think and I remember I was trying to do all the things and it just got

to be too much. *So I couldn't go through with it*" (emphasis added). These students could not

have applied to a CAP when they learned of the them, even though they were interested in them

and could have benefited from them.

Strict deadlines, therefore, acted as a stressor and a barrier for students. Since deadlines

were such an obstacle for these students, it underlines just how powerful, useful, and even

necessary early-stage structured interventions can be. Kathleen, Kelsey, and other students who

needed a bit more time to catch up were effectively denied access to college access programs

and, in some cases, could not fulfill admissions testing requirements. These students do not have

a lot of college knowledge flowing in their network, and thus were not involved in activities as a

child that could give them exposure to specific college application preparation strategies.

Consequently, application plans and college access programs with early deadlines can only

realistically be successfully utilized by lower- and working-class students if they were preparing

for their college applications early (unless, of course, they have the energy, support, and

willpower to "scramble" to apply, like Kathleen). Some students may not even have even

realized what some of their options were until months after application season –the students in

this study experienced this wish-I-knew reaction with more specific behaviors like interviews

and SAT subject testing, which, they wondered, may have been the reason they got waitlisted and rejected from so many schools.

5.1 NETWORK-ONLY INTERVENTIONS

The network-only intervention students, Arissa, Aviva, Kathleen, and Kelsey, were all from a working-class background. Their interventions were similar in the sense that the students came to the realization that their statistics (test scores, GPA) were sub-par. They were rejected from college access programs like Questbridge or could not apply because they found out about them too late. Without access to a college access program, their interventions led to intense online research – the data illustrates how the nature of their network-only interventions made them more likely to use more online resources than any other intervention group. Arissa explained how her network intervention kickstarted her online research:

> I realized very quickly after looking at the general guidelines of scores for these schools, that I had the grades. They were on line or better than what I needed, but my test scores were so low. So that's really what kickstarted [college application research] and that was the summer before [senior year].

Upon learning of additional admissions requirements and test score requirements, Arissa and the other network-only intervention participants heavily focused on their quantitative statistics and found it useful to compare their stats to those of other college applicants. They believed that quantitative measures were more under their control - they were able to *independently* prepare for college applications by focusing on their test scores and GPA. On the other hand, students in this study with program interventions collaborated with other students and focused more on

behaviors that showcased a well-rounded applicant, like building up resumes with leadership positions and summer programs.

They rarely built new networks or individual connections on their own, even with the presence of social media, online forums, and various online resources. For example, Kelsey's tipping point came from an unexpected email - not necessarily a program intervention, but not necessarily a network intervention. As a senior in high school, she received a random email from one college about an admissions interview. In the email, she learned of the practice of admissions interviewing, and realized that she probably should have tried interviewing at a number of other schools: "[The college] reached out to me with an email and they were like, 'If you're interested in interviewing, I'm your person in your area.' So I was like, 'Do I do this for other colleges too?' So then I looked at all the other ones [and by that point it was too late]." Not every high school student receives messages like these. This unsolicited email could simply be luck, or maybe she was lucky enough to have garnered the attention of an admissions officer that decided to actively recruit her. Kelsey did not know of the person who emailed her and probably would have never casually interacted with her in her community. The college that connected her to an interviewer *before she could request an interview herself* even ended up being her final college destination. Clearly, this intervention mattered a lot and changed the course of her college plans. Only one other school on her list still had an open deadline to request an interview once she realized she should have been requesting them, and the only two colleges she received acceptance letters from were the ones she interviewed at. She believes these interviews directly impacted the competitiveness of her college applications, and ultimately, her college enrollment. Interviewing as a recommended application behavior, and being *comfortable enough to excel at it*, is an example of how cultural capital informs the behaviors expected of college applicants.

5.2 ONLINE RESOURCES WITHOUT STRUCTURE

Network-only intervention participants used a wider range of websites to gather information about colleges. The students with network interventions used on average 6.75 online resources when preparing for college admissions. A majority of the participants in this study, over 83%, received some sort of network intervention, but only those without CAP affiliations engaged with online resources in a more independent, negative, and stats-focused manner.

The students who lacked a program affiliation used websites like Niche and online programs like Naviance to place their scores and GPAs on scatter plots and get a better idea of their chances for college acceptance. The scatterplot features shaped the way they formed their college lists - they would only apply to college that the scatterplots indicated they had a good chance at gaining acceptance at. They were able to filter out schools that were *too* selective, as well as schools that were too far away from home. Kelsey explained how she used Naviance and its college search tools:

> You put in how many students you wanted to be around, liberal arts or whatnot. Stuff like that. I really, really relied on that in applying to colleges… it took into account my GPA, SAT, ACT scores, the field I was interested in, which is sciences. Location, school population and selectivity, like their acceptance rate. *So I basically chose the top ten from that* (emphasis added).

Aviva said she was "just a lone dot," and did not know if she was actually going to get into college – this anxiety manifested into a hyper focus on high scores and high GPAs. Their anxieties surrounding college acceptance, then, influenced the ways these students used online tools. Arissa told me that she "had to rely on numbers," and that her college search process "was

all about scores." She did not spend any time trying to learn about the schools' culture and environment beyond following a few on Instagram, because she did not know it was important.

When they did have a few questions about a campus' culture or environment, they used college admissions forums like College Confidential to find answers for specific questions they could not ask their network. Arissa used it for "the cold, hard facts that [she] needed to know" about different schools. These questions usually had to do with campus culture, environment, and even move-in logistics. The internet gave them the opportunity to learn what the "feel" of the college is without expensive campus visits and, more importantly, without any network connections to the college. Kathleen watched YouTube videos to get the "general sense" of specific schools, and Kelsey was "saving money" by reading online reviews and articles written by current college students to "get the feel for what the college was like."

Online forums and YouTube videos were able to provide these participants with a general sense of what was important in their college applications. They tried to find a formula for college acceptance – only then could they focus on specific preparation behaviors and emphasize aspects of their resumes that would impress admissions officers. Aviva experienced this with YouTube videos to "see if there's a magic formula that can help me make this happen." The students with program interventions had a "formula" for college acceptance already written and given to them, whereas the network-only intervention students like Aviva needed to come across this information on their own.

The nature of these participants' online college application research often took a negative spin – these students wanted to learn what not to do and identify things that would hurt their chances of acceptance. Kathleen would watch YouTube videos called "five college essays that suck," because she "was really fixated on what not to do." Aviva also thought the most valuable

lessons she learned through her online research (College Confidential and YouTube videos, in particular) were what not to do: "I don't want to come across to an admissions counsel as being really full of myself and strutting and I'm definitely gonna get in." Aviva learned that acting "really full" of herself would hurt her chances of admission, and Kathleen learned how to frame her personal trauma in a digestible, approachable way to stay in the good graces of admissions officers. They learned these tactics from reading forums and watching YouTube videos, not from conversations with other students or collaborative programming. They were passive observers to the conversations others were having on the internet, consumed content about college admissions, and never created or shared any information themselves. Thus, they employed independent strategies while utilizing online resources, and since they lacked the proper social resources, they did not participate in the production of knowledge and content on social media (Warschauer et al. 2010: 193).

Without access to encouraging peer networks, the network-only intervention students did not see other students applying to the same level of colleges as them. They lacked that encouragement, and often lacked the space to stumble upon conversations amongst elite-college-going students. Thus, they were quick to cut schools off of their college lists at the first sign of difficulty. Arissa, for example, engaged in this self-sorting behavior upon realizing the intense application requirements of one elite school: "I was gonna apply to [elite, selective college] but they requested nine essays so I was like, 'I'm not gonna do that,' … I would rather put more work into schools I have a better chance of getting into, that require less effort."

The network-only intervention participants also used online tools to study for the SAT and ACT, even though they started to prepare for these standardized tests a bit later. Since these participants lacked the structure and resources of college access programs, they did not spend a

lot of time preparing for standardized tests – they realized at some point that they needed higher test scores but did not have access to any programs that would provide them with various test preparation resources. They had to find test prep resources on their own, and usually began looking for them in their senior year of high school. They turned to online resources when they were preparing, often relying on Khan Academy videos and "question of the day" exercises, instead of tutoring programs, workshops, or practice exams: "The night before [the SAT], I was on Khan Academy doing their study things. I didn't have an SAT prep coach or anything like that. So I went in and I was really surprised at the score I got" (Kelsey).

Unlike the students with earlier program interventions, Kelsey did not know how much she was supposed to prepare for the SAT and was surprised by her score. Her only test preparation behavior was Khan Academy, and if she had not learned about the importance of test scores through her friends, she probably would not have done specific research to find the Khan Academy videos in the first place. Kelsey got lucky here – other students spend years preparing for standardized tests, but since she did not know that she probably should have, too, her scores could have been much, much lower, and could have had a huge impact on her college plans.

5.3 DIFFERENCES IN ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

The type of intervention the students received impacted the course of their college choice and application process. I argue that the nature and frequency of their interventions shaped the information they received about college admissions preparation, and in tandem, altered their reliance on the web for college application information. Recall that each network-only intervention participant used 6.75 resources, more than the students in any other intervention group. Students with both network and program interventions used on average, only 4.8 online

resources when conducting their individual online research. Program-only intervention students utilized, on average, 6 online resources. In this study, the college-bound students with both network and program interventions knew of many different online resources, but actually utilized them the least – the support and structure of college access programming, in addition to their network-expanding affects, allowed students with both types of interventions to rely less on online forums, and more on their peers. The students with network-only interventions learned at some point that they needed to spend more time on college applications and complete specific recommended tasks, but the only places they could find information about a wide array of colleges were online, since they could not go to a mentor or program event for guidance.

When their network did not have information about specific colleges, the students found that College Confidential answered questions that no one could about fit, campus culture, and atmosphere. Melissa, a both program- and network-intervention student, praised this aspect of College Confidential, and used the site to learn "what a day-to-day schedule looks like, and basically overall just how students felt about the university," because she "couldn't really ask anyone else." Similarly, Zaire used College Confidential to get "the general feel of the school," and would often end up on College Confidential after Google searching "something about the atmosphere" of a specific institution. Once again, these students used online tools to help them prepare their applications to colleges already on their list, as opposed to using online tools to help them *make* their list. Students with both program and network interventions often had mentors that made their college lists for them, and so they turned to the internet to learn specifics about the school(s) and the schools' atmosphere. Atmosphere and "fit" did not play such a part in the college search process of the network-only intervention students, being that they were

focused on finding schools they could get into, as opposed to finding schools they could fit in and *thrive* at.

The students didn't make new connections or reach out to people they did not already know over the internet, which further strengthens the influence their immediate peer networks had over their college search and application process. The only time the students were able to reach out to new networks online was when it was facilitated through a program – this was great for these students with program affiliations but left the students with no program affiliations without the connections and conversations that could have altered the course of their college application plans. Students with network interventions could not utilize these online spaces, if they even knew they existed, and therefore students with no interventions could not utilize these spaces either. Thus, the presence of online college application resources did not provide my participants with the necessary bridging capital for college acceptance – the only times the internet was able to equip these students with bridging capital was when they were already being exposed to it through other means. In opposition to my original hypothesis, the internet and social media forums did not act as a great equalizer; instead, they only helped to prepare the students who already had access to college knowledge in their network.

Keeping in line with prior research, the participants in this study were passive users of online tools. Only two participants actually asked questions or posted anything online, and when they did, it was within a closed, comfortable Facebook group. A few others answered questions that other people asked online, but more often than not, the students in this study *read* blog posts and comment threads. The only times they did participate in online content creation was when they had access to exclusive online networks, like the Questbridge Facebook page.

The only time students in CAPs compared statistics was while reading online forums, and they found these posts to be both discouraging and hopeful, as it showcased a wide range of test scores that get accepted to top colleges. Similar to the network-only intervention students, the students with network and program interventions used college admissions forums to gain a better understanding of schools' environments, *but only when their networks lacked that specific information*. For example, Zaneerah was able to ask her peer network about different campus environments, since she made a lot of connections through Questbridge and other summer enrichment programs. Although she communicated with these people online, she did not need to do much of her own online research – the only online tool she used over the course of her college application process was the Questbridge website, which she used to sift through their list of partner colleges.

The students with both program structure and some college knowledge in their network used the internet to learn *how* to get into elite colleges, as opposed to learning of what colleges they *might* be able to get into. Instead of using scatterplots to find out what schools they stand a chance at, these students exclusively relied on online rankings and their college access programs to find the most prestigious colleges and universities. Zaire had no need to do online research to find schools, because her prep program "had a list of colleges," usually private elite schools, that she could work through. Her program also did the heavy work of compiling resources related to summer programs and sponsored campus visits, by creating "a whole Google drive for students to use," with a "whole section for the fly-in program." In this way, the college access programs got the students to utilize online resources and engage in early college research, but it all stemmed from the structure and layout of their program interventions. Noelle's experience further illustrates how college access programs did a lot of the research work for students – the

mentor from one of her programs "would send me schools I should apply to, ask about my scores, classes, AP testing," to compile a reasonable and individualized college list. These participants did not need to use sites like Niche or Naviance to make their college lists – their mentors and programs did that for them. In fact, not a single student with both network and program interventions ever mentioned using sites to compare hard statistics or determine their chances of acceptance.

In closing, I have found that the ways in which less privileged college applicants engage with online college resources depends less on their class or first-generation status and more on the timing and nature of their interventions. Yee (2016) argued that first-generation college students employ independent strategies, while middle class students employ interactive ones. My thesis adds nuance to this; even the middle and working-class students in my study emphasized independence in their academic and college search pursuits, but those who were granted access to CAPs were able to engage in the interactive, collaborative strategies rewards in the higher education system and college admissions process (Calarco 2014). Program-affiliated students often employed the help of counselors, mentors, and their peer groups when seeking information on college applications, whereas students without program structure never reached out for help.

Chapter 6
Lacking Social Capital: The Lucky and The Unlucky

Only 20% of the college-bound participants used college access programs as their *sole* access point to college knowledge. These students did not have had access to this college application knowledge in their network, and their CAP provided their only intervention. These were the students who recalled stories of "luck" in finding said programs in the first place. Cassie, a program-only intervention participant, learned about Questbridge as a sophomore in high school. She received a brochure in the mail about Questbridge and wanted to throw it out, thinking it was just a piece of spam or a random advertisement. Her mom, however, suggested she keep it:

> My Mom was like, 'Oh, do you remember that paper, that junk we got?' I started to look into it and I realized it wasn't a scam, it was an actual thing. So then I went and searched around and did it… before, I literally had no clue of any other colleges… and I realized, 'Wow! There's a lot more schools out there and there's so much to do.'

Cassie, like many of the participants spoke about the "spamming" and "scam" college recruitment mailings, emails, and advertisements. Most viewed them in a critical manner, and often brushed them aside - Cassie could have easily thrown out the Questbridge paper, and never gained access to that program. She actually did some online research on Questbridge, though, and after realizing that it was in fact a *real* program, she decided to apply, and got accepted as a Questbridge scholar her junior year of high school. Her involvement in the program changed the way she approached her college search process and made her realize that "there's a lot more

schools out there and there's so much to do." She learned about the program through luck, and it connected her with new resources and an active college-going peer network.

Those with program affiliations frequently experienced mentoring, regular reminders, and individualized check-ins. Those who learned of CAPs later and through luck, however, lacked the long-term mentoring many of the early intervention students had access to. Stanley, a program-only intervention student, had access to a specific college application mentor, but formed the relationship later in his high school career. His mentor helped him prepare for applications. He recalled that she:

> ...proofread my essays, come up with essay ideas, come up with a list of certain colleges. She really helped my structure of the application process, which was VERY useful to me… imagine doing this without a structured program, it would have been pretty hectic for me.

He only used her guidance to finalize his college list and work on essays in the summer months before his senior year and the following academic semester. He did not receive mentorship that guided him through years' worth of college application behaviors, the ones he should have been prioritizing. Although he appreciated the structure of a program, Stanley never spoke about his *relationship* with the counselor, never suggested that she advocated for him, and never said that she helped him fill out college and/or financial aid documents in the ways that those who had more exposure to programs and network interventions did. Thus, the relationship Stanley had with his mentor is in contrast to the early intervention students' relationships with their mentors. Regardless, the structured aspects of mentorship made a huge impact on him, even if he did not get to utilize this relationship for a longer period of time. In Stanley's case, some of the social-

capital and network-expanding aspects of college access programs were lost because of the later timing of his intervention.

6.1 THE UNLUCKY

The three high school participants, Jason, Lacey, and Augusta have not yet experienced any college-knowledge interventions. They are still high school students, one senior and two juniors, and may have experienced an intervention since the time of our initial interview. However, when we spoke, it was clear that they lacked specific college information, and assumed that they would enroll in the colleges everyone else around them goes to. Their middle-class peers attended college, but only local schools (private or state-run) and community colleges. Thus, the only way they knew how to prepare for college admissions was how their network did, in schools with *less competitive* applicant pools. They focused on hard skills and quantitative resume building, like high GPAs and test scores, but also had no grasp on what a good SAT score meant. Jason associated a good SAT score with what his peers were aiming for and had no idea how important tests like the PSAT were. He told me he was "half asleep" during the PSAT, and he "didn't know that if you did really well on [the PSAT], there's the merit scholarship until afterward." He also realized later on that the test scores he and his friends had been striving for just would not cut it for an acceptance into elite schools.

All three of the high school students were from middle class backgrounds, and one of them was a first-generation college student. These participants did not know of any programs out there designed to help first-generation college students, and frankly, probably would not have met the requirements for admission to many of them. None of these students' families have incomes low enough to qualify for Pell Grants, for example, and would have an expected family

contribution that is higher than the required zero dollars for programs like Questbridge (Espenshade and Radford 2009: 47). Thus, their college access programs options were limited to those that charge fees.

As we know, other more economically privileged students are enrolled in academic programs and workshops by their educated parents all the time (Espenshade and Radford 2009). Lower-income students lucky enough to learn of college access programs could apply for scholarships and learn of academic programs. The middle-class families in this study, those of the current high school students, did not prioritize academic programming outside of school, believing it was the responsibility of the school to prepare their child, and fee-based programming was cost prohibitive without financial assistance. Thus, the middle-class participants only learned of opportunities and resources that their school offered to them and did not have much success with online research. Augusta knew that she needed to take standardized tests to go to college one day, "but school never gives us information about it. I know we're supposed to take it our junior year and that's all I know… I don't know how I'm supposed to prepare, or when to sign up or when we take it." She is currently a junior, and does not know how to register for, let alone study for or take the test. Nobody in her network clued her in the how important high test scores should be, or even set a standard of what "high" or "good" scores mean. When we spoke, she had not engaged in any test prep but told me she is *personally motivated* to become a more competitive college applicant. Her personal motivation, however, is not enough - she said does not know "where to start," probably because nobody in her network ever told her, and college access programs never reached out to her.

The high school students who have yet to receive an intervention never had a point in which they realized that they were behind or relatively unprepared for elite college admissions.

Without experiencing a network intervention or sudden realization of their different timeline, they were not able to conduct online research specific to their background. For example, Lacey was not even aware that she qualified as a first-generation college student (her mom completed a two-year degree, not a bachelor's degree) and therefore was not conducting research on CAPs for first-generation college students. Augusta said she wanted more information on standardized tests, but the "school never gives [the students] information about it." Jason was the only no-intervention student to acknowledge that his test scores did not reach the level required for elite schools, but since he learned this as a senior, he decided *not* to apply to top-tier schools, as he barely had any time to engage in the application behaviors to be a competitive applicant there.

Augusta expressed a personal interest in college application strategies but did not engage in any online research whatsoever. She said it is "interesting to figure out what you need to do and when it needs to be done, and what I can do to get into a better college," but told me that she has not utilized any online college application preparation tools, resources, or social media forums. She does no online research at all. The final no-intervention student, Lacey, is under the assumption that her desired major should dictate her entire college choice process because of her peer network and parents. Thus, she feels stressed to figure out a possible future career path and *only* does online research on majors. However, she hasn't "had much success" in finding out what colleges are "good" in her intended major(s) and does not understand rankings "in terms of academics and stuff like that." Basically, she is only tackling her college search process from one angle and does not know what other things could be included in her college search criteria. She is having a hard time finding appropriate information online because she restricts her online research to the search criteria her network emphasizes as the most important - going to a school that is good at specializing in a specific field of work.

Students in lower-SES schools and environments use the internet and web searching with very limited goals, and do not undertake online research with the goals of "deeper knowledge, understanding, or analysis through critical inquiry," ones usually emphasized in higher-SES schools (Scardamalia and Bereiter 2003). Although these high school students are middle class students, they still lack the knowledge to engage with online college application materials in a way that fosters a deeper understanding. All three of the high school students filtered and based their college choices on their intended major, and never tried to look for college admissions prep strategies as a whole.

Conclusions

Online networks function in ways similar to offline networks and require a point of access in order to utilize them. In this study, 15 college-enrolled students and three college-aspiring high school students were asked about their college preparation behaviors and how they used online resources to help them navigate the college application process. What I found was that the students had two access points: their existing social networks, or luck. These were the access points to college information that introduced them to online resources and college access programs. Their networks and CAP affiliations were able to intervene and provide the participants with strategic application preparation behaviors. All of the college-bound students in this study experienced such an intervention, suggesting that, for these students, it was a necessary step in gaining admission to elite colleges and turning their hazy college dreams into a reality. The high school students in this study who did not have access to these application preparation behaviors used less than two online resources, were not fully aware of their college options, and did not know of any college access programs.

Students learn what their schools and networks tell them about college. They follow the patterns of their peer groups and listen to the recommendations of college-educated adults. Students without specific college application knowledge in their family *need* an intervention to start planning their college application process, looking for relevant college programs, researching application requirements, and even signing up for standardized tests. Further, they need peers who are applying to the *types* of colleges they want to apply to in order to learn competitive application behaviors, and they need people in their network talking about a wide breadth of colleges to inform them about *all* of their options. Therefore, college admissions, specifically the more selective, elite college admissions process my participants engaged in,

relies on social networks to disseminate information about their admissions standards, and thus leaves those without a college-educated network at a disadvantage.

Network interventions led to a wider use of online application resources - but, the students did not decide to start doing this online research on their own. In order to initiate online research, they needed to realize that *there was more they needed to learn,* and that their current bank of information on college admissions was not enough. For example, none of my participants started looking for information on admissions interviews or college visits until after their intervention. While admission strategies like interviews and college visits are posted online and talked about in college forums, students without college knowledge in their network are unlikely to independently stumble upon this information, let alone utilize it to shape their own preparation behaviors. There was always some sort of intervention that led them to actively seek out application tips for top colleges - they needed an intervention to learn of all the things they *were not doing* that others *were*. The three middle-class current high school students had not received any interventions, and, consequently, had not yet started any specific college research.

Program interventions were able to provide students with mentorship and college information, but their most useful contribution was the new peer groups they connected the participants with. Program affiliations were, for the most part, dependent on the makeup of the students' network - they needed to be introduced to CAPs and encouraged to apply before they could ever reap the benefits of them. After gaining access to a CAP, the participants were able to stumble upon college application information without reaching out for help and were surrounded by elite-college-going peers.

Regardless of their program affiliation(s), the participants in this study hardly created any content online and employed independent strategies when using online resources. At the most,

they participated in a few comment threads or smaller break-out conversations within safe, judgement-free, and peer-run online communities. Those without access to these online communities never collaborated with any online connections, and instead conducted online admissions research in a more independent manner. Thus, they used the internet to filter out schools that were too selective, instead of using the internet to find strategies to gain access to those schools or build connections with students who were also preparing to apply to them. Even though information about college admissions and communities of college applicants exists online, only some students are connected to them.

These findings work within previous literature that suggest CAPs do not work on their own - the students must also be within social networks that encourage, discuss, and plan for elite college admissions (Arnold et al. 2009). The programs must focus on the specific details of college applications, yes, but also introduce the students to others who experience similar struggles (Belasco and Trivette 2015).

Although this analysis interrogates the access points to college information and uncovers the effective aspects of college access programs, it is not fully representative of every access point, nor is it representative of every less privileged applicant's experience. Not only was the sample number small, but there were zero Black students in this sample. There was no representation of the struggles, experiences, and barriers that Black applicants might face when applying to college in this thesis. It is impossible to draw a broad conclusion based on this data because of this, as the ways in which Black students shape their college dreams and gain access to college information may be vastly different than the stories recounted here.

In the future, scholars should analyze the ways in which students learn about college applications with a larger and more diverse sample. Fifteen of the participants were also already

committed to attending a selective college or university, meaning that the full range of experiences of those who are denied access to elite colleges is not represented. Further, the online communities these participants engaged with are not representative of every online network.

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Appendix A
Interview Schedule

Physical Environment and Social Networks

1. Tell me a bit about your high school, do you like it?
2. How would you describe your social group and your closest friends? Do you have a best friend?
3. Who do you live with?
4. What's your relationship with your parents?
    a. Did you ever feel pressured by your parents to go to college?
5. What other adults do you go to for guidance, support, and advice?
6. How would you describe yourself as a student?

College Dreams/College Plans

1. When did you first realize you wanted to go to college?
2. When did you start doing your own research about colleges?
3. What kinds of colleges are you planning to apply to?
4. How much of a factor was "prestige" when you were looking at colleges?
5. What college is your "top choice"?
6. When did you start "preparing" for college, like preparing for applications, the SAT/ACT, etc.?

Admissions Prep

1. What steps are you taking to prepare yourself for college applications?
    a. How did you know to do these things?
2. Where did you learn about them?
3. How often do you use them?
4. Who do you talk with about college applications? What people or resources do you rely on the most to help you?
    a. Size of Questbridge page?
5. Have you ever been surprised with new "rules" or things you didn't know about the college application process?
6. How confident did you feel/are you feeling about your college applications?