

1-11-2013

# Enrollment Decisions of the Underrepresented: Recruiting and College Choice at Military Institutions

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Enrollment Decisions of the Underrepresented:  
Recruiting and College Choice at Military Institutions

Daniel C. Rose, Ed.D.

University of Connecticut – 2013

This phenomenological study examined the college enrollment decisions of 20 high school students who participated in the Genesis Invitational program at the United States Coast Guard Academy. The Genesis program was designed to generate interest in postsecondary education among first generation and underrepresented minority students. I used college choice theory as a theoretical framework to analyze and understand the enrollment decisions of Genesis participants considering selective institutions of higher education. Specifically, I conducted semi-structured phone interviews during the mid-choice and post-choice phases of high school seniors' college choice processes and examined application materials they had submitted to both the Genesis program and the Coast Guard Academy. Interview questions were mapped to four broad concepts: institutional attributes; individual attributes; obstacles and supports; and cultural capital and habitus. Following the analysis phase, I organized participants into three sub-groups according to the number of college options they had available to them—Limited Options (LO), Average Options (AO) and Robust Options (RO). I found that as enrollment options increased, so did the complexity of the enrollment decision. Family influence, academic preparation and financial considerations were compelling factors for all subjects during the choice process; however the presence of these factors varied. As

students neared the end of the college search, financial need among Robust Option students was somewhat neutralized, giving way to the pursuit of enjoyment in the college experience. This finding supports the theory that psychosocial factors influence final enrollment decisions. I conclude this study with recommendations and participant feedback to better inform Genesis program managers and educational leaders at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

Enrollment Decisions of the Underrepresented:  
Recruiting and College Choice at Military Institutions

Daniel C. Rose

B.S., Springfield College, 1993

M.Ed., Springfield College, 1995

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

at

The University of Connecticut

2013

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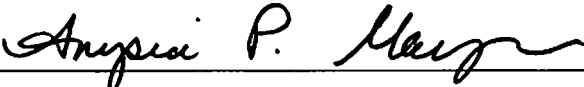
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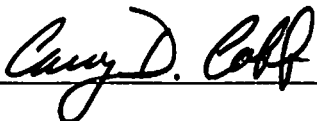
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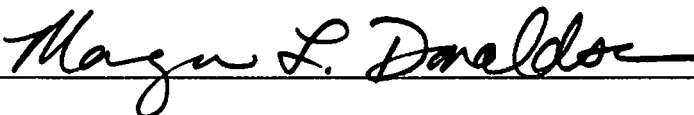
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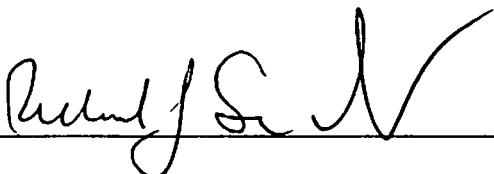
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## CHAPTER I

### Problem Statement

“If you don’t go after the whole nation, then you are going to war without the strength of the nation”

-Marine Maj. Gen. Ronald Bailey, commanding general of Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, Western Recruiting Region and Marine Corps Recruiting Command

Diversity in our nation’s military is not only a matter of social justice, but also a matter of national security. The absence of diversity in the military is evidence of deficiency—a deficiency of knowledge, skills and cultural sensitivity. For our military forces to be effective, they must draw from every ethnic and cultural population. With diverse membership comes diverse thought that is capable of adapting to a changing world. The various missions of our military, both international and domestic, require keen communication and problem solving skills. While the military enlisted ranks closely resemble the American people, diversity at the senior leadership level is quite a different story. In 2008, white military members accounted for 77% of the United States officer ranks compared to 8% who were African Americans and 5% who were Hispanic Americans (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011, p. 41).

The largest accession program for officers in the United States Coast Guard occurs at the United States Coast Guard Academy. The Coast Guard Academy, like all federal service academies, struggles to graduate commissioned officers who are racially representative of the American people. The Academy’s Department of Admissions is tasked with achieving diversity without compromising its high academic and physical standards. Understanding how admission intervention programs affect the makeup of the annual freshman class is critical to achieving and sustaining a diverse student body. The

purpose of this study is to utilize a “reverse lens” to enable the Academy to view enrollment decisions from the perspective of the underrepresented students it attempts to recruit. This investigation centers on in-depth interviews with underrepresented students participating in the Academy’s on-campus visitation initiative, the Genesis Invitational program.

The U.S. Coast Guard Academy is one of five federally funded military institutions of higher education. Graduates earn bachelor of science degrees in eight academic majors: civil engineering; electrical engineering; mechanical engineering; naval architecture and marine engineering; government; management; marine and environmental science; and operations research and computer analysis. In addition to their academic degrees, upon graduation these students, referred to as “cadets,” are commissioned as officers in the U.S. Coast Guard. This four-year program is funded with tax dollars, and each graduate is required to serve a five-year military commitment.

The Academy student body consists of approximately 970 enrolled cadets, collectively known as the corps of cadets. Each year, an average of 300 appointments are awarded from a pool of 2,000 completed applications. Within the class of 2016,<sup>1</sup> 83% of the students were ranked in the top 25% of their high school classes. Over 50% of Academy students participate in one of 20 Division III NCAA sport teams. Most of the students in the class of 2016 (87%) earned a varsity letter in a high school sport; 69% were named team captains of their respective sport teams. In this same class, 79% of incoming students declared an intent to enroll in a technical academic major. The Coast Guard Academy Scholars program annually places a small number of high school

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<sup>1</sup> Class of 2016 student profile according to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy Department of Admissions website ([www.cga.edu](http://www.cga.edu)).

graduates considered to be in need of further academic development in one of two military preparatory schools. The two prep schools currently utilized in the Scholars program are Georgia Military College and Marion Military Institute in Alabama. Approximately 20% of the class of 2016 enrolled via the Scholars Program.

The Genesis Invitational is a two-day recruitment program coordinated by the U.S. Coast Guard Academy Department of Admissions. This overnight program immerses students in the daily military routine, including attendance in academic classes and introduction to faculty, as well as meetings with intercollegiate coaches and student-athletes. Parents and guardians are also housed overnight in a local hotel and attend informational sessions designed to educate them about the mission of the Academy as well as the service. Genesis is the highest yielding recruitment program for underrepresented minority students at the Academy. Each year there are four predetermined visitations dates in which approximately 100 students participate.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

Selective institutions of higher education have always sought to admit the best and brightest students the United States has to offer. During the past fifty years, many scholars have attempted to decipher the complex phenomena that inform student college choice. Early discussions were bifurcated into two main areas of focus: the choice of attending college versus joining the workforce (Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982) or the choice of one higher educational institution over another (Chapman, 1981). The understanding of college enrollment decisions evolved into a broad, three-phased approach consisting of *predisposition*, *search* and *choice* (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). *Predisposition* describes a student's desire to attend or not attend an institution of higher education. During the *search* phase, a student identifies college attributes that are consistent with his or her own values. Finally, the *choice* phase is the decision about which school to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The focus of this literature review is on research that informs our understanding of how individuals decide between one higher educational institution and another. The choice aspect of college enrollment is explored in order to better understand the decisions of underrepresented students weighing the costs and benefits of competing educational options.

#### College Choice Models

Scholars have utilized various theoretical frameworks in their efforts to understand the factors that students consider when choosing colleges. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) categorized these frameworks into three models: econometric, sociological, and combined. In each college choice model, consideration is given to

variables of risk versus reward or the weight of cost versus perceived benefits (Fuller et al., 1982; Hossler et al., 1989; Young & Reyes, 1987). These models indicate a comprehensive range of factors, institutional or student-based, that influence the college choice process.

Econometric models examine the various monetary costs associated with attending higher education as well as the potential benefits that such an education will yield (Fuller et al., 1982). The actual tuition dollar amount weighed against potential career earnings is a prime example. Sociological models describe student aspirations as they relate to status attainment (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997), which, in turn, is associated with prestige. A combined model integrates the key characteristics of both econometric and sociological perspectives (Hossler et al., 1989) to address the consumer (student) aspect of college choice as well as the marketing strategies applied by highly competitive institutions (Kotler & Fox, 1985; Young & Reyes, 1987). Within all three of these models, college intervention programs have the capacity to affect enrollment decisions by showcasing institutional attributes desired by prospective students.

### **Institutional Attributes**

Institutional attributes are factors believed to affect student enrollment decisions. These factors include academic programs, tuition costs, financial aid availability, academic reputation, location, size, and social atmosphere (Chapman, 1981; Hayes, 1989; Hossler et al., 1989; Litten, 1982; Nora, 2004). Colleges communicate desirable institutional attributes via mailings, Internet web sites, admissions open houses, campus tours, and contact with faculty (Hodges & Barbuto, 2002; Sevier, 1987). In 1987, Robert Sevier studied more than 400 freshmen attending selective liberal arts colleges and



learned that academic reputation, student-faculty ratios, access to faculty, and visits to colleges, respectively, were the four highest rated institutional factors in students' decision processes. McDonough and Antonio (1996) corroborated the premium placed on reputation, finding it was the most important consideration among students. More recently, the emergence of college rankings illustrates how institutional factors, as reported by the media, can appeal to prospective students. Bowman and Bastedo (2009) determined that institutions moving up in the *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings noticed an increase in the quantity and quality of applications the following year.

### **Individual Attributes**

Individual attributes are the personal factors shown to affect student enrollment decisions. These attributes encompass a student's socioeconomic status, academic preparation, parents' levels of education, peer support, and ethnicity (Hayes, 1989; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Litten, 1982; Nora, 2004). Although individual attributes exist outside the control of colleges and universities, understanding this information may prove useful in formulating effective admission intervention strategies.

A student's academic preparation is often quantified via standardized test scores and a grade point average (GPA). Some researchers theorize that these scores may affect the degree to which a student expects to be admitted to a certain college (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Chapman, 1981; Weiler, 1994). Since both GPA and SAT scores are powerful predictors of admissions outcomes, it is possible that the average scores of previously admitted students may influence where prospective students decide to apply. Bowman and Bastedo (2009) warned, "If a student's SAT score is below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile for the college of his choice, he might infer that his acceptance is unlikely and

decide not to apply” (p. 418). Chapman (1981) addressed this same concern and noted that where a student decides to apply is actually a reflection of who they believe that particular school will accept. Given the overlap within the predisposition, search and choice phases of choosing a college, a student’s academic preparation may ultimately influence their final decision.

### **Obstacles and Supports for Underrepresented College Students**

Considering that selective institutions emphasize academic preparation, it is logical to assume that a strong mathematics background is desirable. Yet according to a 32-year longitudinal study from the Institute of Education Sciences, “In 2004, 42 percent of Asian seniors enrolled in advanced [secondary level] mathematics, versus 15 percent of Blacks, 15 percent of Hispanics, and 28 percent of Whites” (Ingels, Dalton, LoGerfo, & National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008, p. 8). Based on these statistics, it appears that the attribute of academic preparation (in this case, mathematics) may vary among ethnic groups. Considering the fact that six of the eight academic majors at the Coast Guard Academy are considered “technical,” mathematic preparation may be a factor in why African American and Hispanic students are two of the least represented student groups at the school.

Related to academic preparation, low socioeconomic status (SES) is also a potential obstacle to diversity in higher education. In 2004, 39.6% of seniors in the highest SES quartile were enrolled in advanced math courses, while only 13.8% of students in the lowest quartile were enrolled in this level of math (Ingels et al., 2008). Considering that many students who are ethnic or racial minorities are also likely to come from low SES backgrounds, lack of affluence is another individual factor affecting

college access for underrepresented students. In fact, low SES appears to influence enrollment decisions in the application process as well. A working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) examined how students react to increased competition for college acceptance. The authors note a national trend with regard to the increased number of colleges to which students apply, as well as more frequent reporting of standardized test scores (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009). Understanding the costs associated with application, test preparation and reporting, they caution, “. . . the increased resources parents and students are able to use to improve their odds of admission at top colleges put low-income students at a disadvantage” (p. 25).

Family, friend, and parental involvement have also been considered powerful influences on matriculation decisions. In their 2006 study, Person and Rosenbaum found that Latino students were more likely to enroll at schools if family and friends of the same ethnic group had gone there. Similarly, family influence has been identified as a factor in high-achieving African American students' enrollment decisions. In his phenomenological case study of two academically gifted students, Bonner (2001) documented both obstacles and supports presented by strong family ties. Deeming this high level of family involvement as mostly positive, Bonner recommended, “Orientation officials at the university-wide and departmental level should promote initiatives that include family members and parents in the admissions and retention process” (p. 15).

**The effect of first generation status on enrollment decisions.** First generation college students are often among those classified as underrepresented on college campuses. Based on their 2001 statistical analysis of beginning postsecondary students, Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, and the National Center for Education Statistics found that

first generation students were less likely to take the SAT/ACT, on average performed lower, and were the most likely to score in the bottom 25% when compared to their non-first generation peers (Warburton et al., 2001). In her essay titled “Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College,” Susan Choy (2001) describes first generation students as having “a disadvantage that persists even after controlling for other important factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools ... and family income” (p. xviii). One possible explanation for this disadvantage may be a lack of understanding about the college application and financial aid process—important components of what is often referred to as “college knowledge” (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002).

**Cultural capital and habitus.** The concepts of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) are central to the discussion of how family and friends affect enrollment decisions. Cultural capital refers to values that privileged families pass on to their children, thereby perpetuating their membership in the dominant class. In this case, the value of higher education is the transmitted value. Habitus consists of the subjective views held by members of a particular social class that affect their aspirations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004). Both cultural capital and habitus are believed to influence the predisposition, search, and choice phases of college enrollment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004).

In his 2004 study, Nora referenced cultural capital and habitus as two broad “precollege psychosocial factors” (p. 182). Further examination by the author “identified eight habitus factors (personal acceptance, personal and social fit, academic interests,

early influences, approval by others, family encouragement, intuition, and family expectation) and four cultural capital factors (academic self-esteem, leadership experiences, extrafamilial encouragement, and institutional support)” (Nora, 2004, pp. 186–191). Ultimately, Nora’s study suggested that as a student progresses through the college search process, his/her emphasis may shift from individual and/or institutional factors to psychosocial factors.

**Understanding enrollment decisions at military institutions.** Few college choice studies involving military institutions have been conducted. Stevenson (2011) examined the college choice process of students matriculating to military junior colleges and found that parental influence, peer influence, and financial concerns were common considerations. Utilizing a feminist perspective to study the first women to successfully gender-integrate American military academies, Jacob (2006) affirmed that the cost of education and parental influence (mostly from fathers) were factors in enrollment decisions. And in a 2001 study of student-athletes at the U.S. Military Academy, Fielitz also noted the presence of parental influence as a factor but rated teaching excellence as the most important in the college choice process.

### **Summary**

Despite a growing body of research, much is still unknown about the college choice process. Even less is understood regarding the choices of students considering attendance at military institutions of higher education. While it is generally accepted that there are three phases in the choice process (predisposition, search, and choice), the interrelation of individual, institutional and psychosocial attributes is complex. It is logical to expect that certain attributes will increase and decrease in importance

depending on the given phase, yet this process is far from formulaic. Further examination of admissions department policies and intervention strategies is needed in order to understand enrollment decisions of students who are deciding between equally selective institutions.

## CHAPTER III

### Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

This study utilized a “reverse lens” to enable the U.S. Coast Guard Academy to view enrollment decisions from the perspective of the underrepresented students it attempts to recruit. High school seniors participating in the Genesis Invitational outreach program at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy were the subjects of the research.

The theoretical framework used for this study is college choice theory (Jacob, 2006; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004). This framework considers the interrelation between individual and institutional factors in students’ enrollment decisions as well as the psychosocial factors of underrepresented versus adequately represented students (Nora, 2004). Psychosocial factors refer to issues of cultural capital and habitus. According to Nora (2004), psychosocial factors have been proven to “influence student’s college choices whether they chose to attend the most selective or less selective institutions for both minority (Latino and African American) and nonminority students” (p. 198).

The inquiry was guided by the overarching question of what factors influence underrepresented student enrollment decisions when they are choosing between the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and other colleges or universities. More specifically, the study explored the following research questions:

1. Do psychosocial factors influence an underrepresented or first generation student’s college selection process? If so, which factors and how?
2. Which institutional attributes, if any, influence underrepresented or first generation student enrollment decisions?

3. Which individual attributes, if any, influence underrepresented or first generation student enrollment decisions?

Psychosocial factors (Nora, 2004) include cultural capital (academic self-esteem, leadership experiences, extrafamilial encouragement and institutional support) and habitus (personal acceptance, personal and social fit, academic interests, early influences, approval by others, family encouragement, intuition, and family expectation).

Institutional attributes of interest include academic programs, tuition costs, financial aid, academic reputation, admission department outreach programs, institutional location and size, and social atmosphere. Individual attributes include socioeconomic status, academic preparation, parents' levels of education, peer support, and ethnicity.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Methodology**

I used a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007) to describe the college-choice process for participants in the Genesis Invitational program, an outreach program of the Coast Guard Academy designed to improve enrollment rates of first generation and underrepresented students. I coupled an in-depth interviewing process (Seidman, 2006) with a thorough review of application documents. This approach was appropriate, given my intent to uncover commonalities, if any, of underrepresented and first generation students and their college enrollment decisions. Ultimately, the intention of the study is to provide recommendations for change in the Coast Guard Academy's recruitment and admissions policies.

### **Setting**

Many colleges and universities boast that they are selective institutions, yet it can be difficult to draw meaning from such a common declaration within higher education. What makes a school selective when compared to the more than 2,700 other four-year degree granting institutions located in the United States? The National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) defines "selectivity" with the basic equation of  $“(acceptances \div applications) \times 100”$  (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011, p. 13). According to the 2011 NACAC annual report, “the average acceptance rate across all four-year institutions in the U.S. is approximately two-thirds (65.5 percent)” (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011, p. 13). When comparing selectivity among the nation's colleges, the NACAC authors (2011) reserve the title “most selective” for schools that granted acceptance to fewer than half of all students that applied (p. 13).

Using the Coast Guard Academy class of 2016 in the established selectivity formula (315 acceptances/1,982 completed applications), the Academy is accepting a miniscule 15.89% of its annual applicants. Within this same group, the average GPA was 3.79 and 112 of the accepted students (45%) were ranked in the top 10% of their high school class.

Beyond the typical academic standards, federal service academies have additional criteria that must be satisfied. A 2008 Coast Guard Academy report on prospective students theorized that, “only 42% of the [nation’s] high school graduates are eligible for military service” (Stein, 2008, p. 6). According to Stein:

The general admissions requirements of the USCGA include the following criteria: (1) a high school grade point average of 3.0 or greater, (2) a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT; [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)) or ACT equivalent combined mathematics and verbal score of 1100 or greater, and (3) a high school class rank in the top 20% of their graduating class. Demographically, the prospect must be an American citizen, unmarried, have no dependents and be 17–22 years of age.

The moral criteria were no financial debt or criminal record (p. 2).

Military academies combine rigorous academic and moral standards with equally lofty physical fitness requirements. In 2009 the nonprofit organization *Mission: Readiness* addressed concern over the fact that 75% of young men and women are ineligible to join the armed forces: “Although there may be multiple reasons why an individual is ineligible to serve in the military, the three biggest problems are that too many young Americans are poorly educated, involved in crime, or physically unfit” (p. 1).

Given the academic, physical, and moral standards of our nation’s military academies, just how selective is the U.S. Coast Guard Academy? The short answer:

*extremely*. Therefore, when we examine the enrollment decisions of the Genesis Invitational participants, it is important to remember that this is an elite group of prospective students.

The stated purpose of the Genesis program is to increase the number of first generation and underrepresented<sup>2</sup> students at the Coast Guard Academy, and the admissions department has identified it as its highest yielding diversity outreach effort. Applications for the program are accepted on a rolling basis, and yield approximately 100 participants annually. Each participant is permitted to bring one accompanying parent or guardian. Invited students may fill out a Scholarship Request Form, which, if approved, makes them eligible to receive funding to attend the event; funding is limited, however, and some students must pay their own transportation costs. If a prospective student is considered to have “legitimate financial need,” that individual may receive full funding from the Academy to attend, including funding for their accompanying parent/guardian. All Genesis participants have completed the preliminary application for the Coast Guard Academy, though they are at varying stages of the application process. While some students may have completed their full applications, others are still in process or are still considering whether or not to complete the application process.

The Genesis Invitational, held four times annually, is a two-day program providing an immersion experience that exposes prospective students to the daily military routine, including attendance in academic classes and introduction to faculty, as well as

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<sup>2</sup> The term “underrepresented” is used throughout this paper interchangeably with “ethnic minority,” “non-white,” “students of color,” and occasionally with specific groups, such as Black, Latino, Native American, or Mexican-American (the largest and most educationally disadvantaged of the Latino subgroups).

meetings with intercollegiate coaches and student-athletes. Student participants spend the night in the Academy dorm (known as the barracks) and eat in the dining hall (the ward room). Parents and guardians are housed overnight in a local hotel and attend several programmed activities geared towards educating them about the Coast Guard Academy.

### **Participants**

The original study design called for twenty subjects to be purposefully chosen from all four Genesis visitation dates during the 2011–2012 academic year according to four criteria: 1) equal representation of male and female subjects, 2) a minimum of ten first generation students, 3) ethnic diversity (33% African American, 33% Hispanic, and 33% White), and 4) a reasonable chance of being offered an appointment (SAT critical reading + math minimum score of 1000 or ACT Composite score of 21). I modified the method for recruiting subjects, at the behest of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), to ensure that no one was excluded from the study and also to guarantee that prospective subjects had the opportunity to ask questions in person, prior to signing consent documents. Since IRB approval occurred after the first three Genesis sessions had already been conducted, the potential pool of participants was limited to 46 prospective students, rather than the four-session combined total of 96.

All Session IV Genesis participants were invited to participate in this study. From this pool of 46 students, a convenience sample of 29 subjects completed the requisite consent documentation. Consent forms from a parent or legal guardian were collected for subjects under the age of 18. Participants were contacted weekly via email to schedule interviews. A total of 21 subjects participated in the first interview, while 20 completed

the second, final interview protocol. In an effort to incentivize study completion, subjects received a \$25.00 gift card to Amazon.com following the second interview.

Despite the modification to how subjects were solicited, I was able to recruit the target number of 20 participants. Among the 21 original subjects interviewed, 15 were male (71.4%) and 6 were female (28.6%). Subjects reported racial/ethnic identity among seven categories: Hispanic/Latino (33.3%), Asian American (19%), Black/African American (19%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (4.8%), White (4.8%), Native American (9.5%), and two or more races (9.5%) (See Appendix A). One male subject of Hispanic/Latino identity did not complete the second interview protocol and was declared withdrawn from the study.

The 20 Genesis Invitational participants who completed the full study were similar to currently enrolled cadets on key measures, including whether they listed the Coast Guard Academy as a first choice for college, parents' marital status, and whether they had parents with prior military service. On average, 87% of incoming freshman declared the Coast Guard Academy as their number one college choice.<sup>3</sup> Comparatively, of the 20 participants in this study, 60% (12/20) stated that the Academy was their first choice, while 80% (16/20) listed one of the military academies (including the Coast Guard Academy) as their first preference. The six-year mean of freshman students whose parents were married was 84%; 80% of research participants reported the same.<sup>4</sup> Slightly more than one third (35%) of the cadets in the class of 2016 had at least one parent with

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<sup>3</sup> Information is based on the *2011 Survey Data Book of the United States Coast Guard Academy* and represents responses from the class of 2011 through 2015 (Excluding 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Information is taken from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, located within the 2011 Survey Data Book, administered to cadets in the summer of their freshman year and representing six (6) years of data (2010–2015).

prior military service records, whereas 50% of the Genesis participants indicated the same.<sup>5</sup>

Out of 20 study completers, 80% (16) declared their parents to be married while the remaining 20% (4) said their parents were divorced (See Table 1). Parent education levels ranged from no education (1) all the way to terminal graduate degrees (3) (See Appendices B & C). The majority of study participants (65%) were considered in need of financial assistance and had received at least partial funding from the Coast Guard Academy to attend the program. Study participants achieved an average SAT score of 607 on the math component and 599 for the verbal portion. The average number of postsecondary institutions that participants ultimately applied to was 6.4 (See Table 2).

Table 1

Study Participant Demographics						
Student	Race/Ethnic Identification	Gender	SAT Math	SAT Verbal	Parents	Received Scholarship
Adia	Black/African American	Female	600	730	Married	Yes
Chantelle	Black/African American	Female	610	680	Married	Yes
Cha'risa	Native American/Alaskan Native	Female	610	560	Divorced	Yes
Demario	Hispanic/Latino	Male	620	600	Married	No
Elan	Native American/Alaskan Native	Male	740	660	Divorced	Yes
Ernesto	Hispanic/Latino	Male	780	590	Married	Yes
Jayden	Asian American	Male	660	580	Married	Yes
Jeffrey	Asian American	Male	580	460	Married	No
Kellen	Two or More Races	Male	670	610	Married	No
Manuel	Hispanic/Latino	Male	560	560	Divorced	Yes
Martina	Hispanic/Latino	Female	520	540	Married	Yes
Maurice	Black/African American	Male	650	740	Married	Yes
Morisa	Hispanic/Latino	Female	630	650	Married	Yes
Nicholas	White	Male	570	630	Married	No
Palani	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	Male	690	600	Married	No
Pat	Black/African American	Male	560	490	Married	Yes
Roger	Two or More Races	Male	490	460	Divorced	No
Rosa	Hispanic/Latino	Female	440	600	Married	Yes
Sage	Asian American	Male	630	680	Married	Yes
Sam	Asian American	Male	520	560	Married	No

<sup>5</sup> Information is from the *United States Coast Guard Academy Admissions Statistics for the Class of 2016*.

Table 2

Enrollment Choices of Study Participants					
Student	No. Schools		Accepted to		Enrollment Decision (Final Interview)
	Applied	College Choice (First Interview)	Accepted	CGA	
Adia	8	Georgetown University	6/8	Yes	Georgetown University
Chantelle	6	U. S. Naval Academy	6/6	Yes	U. S. Naval Academy
Cha'risa	12	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	2/12	No	Purdue University
Demario	7	U. S. Military Academy	3/7	No	North Georgia College and State University
Elan	6	Virginia Tech	4/6	Yes	Old Dominion University
Ernesto <sup>a</sup>	7	Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Un.	6/6	*	Barrett The Honors College (@ Ariz. St. Un.)
Jayden	4	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	2/4	No	Enlisting in the U. S. Navy
Jeffrey	8	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	6/8	No	Western New England University
Kellen	9	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	5/9	Yes	U. S. Coast Guard Academy
Manuel	7	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	6/7	No	University of St. Thomas (Houston, TX)
Martina	6	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	6/6	Yes	Community College <sup>b</sup>
Maurice	10	Washington University	6/10	Yes	U. S. Coast Guard Academy
Morisa <sup>c</sup>	6	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	2/6	**	Too young, will reapply to CGA next year
Nicholas	3	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	1/3	No	Community College <sup>b</sup>
Palani	4	U. S. Merchant Marine Academy	4/4	Yes	U. S. Coast Guard Academy
Pat	3	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	1/3	No	Tuskegee University
Roger	5	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	2/5	No	Community College <sup>b</sup>
Rosa	3	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	1/3	No	Enlisting in U. S. Coast Guard
Sage	8	U. S. Air Force Academy	7/8	Yes	U. S. Coast Guard Academy
Sam	6	U. S. Coast Guard Academy	4/6	No	Christopher Newport University
	Avg. No. Schools	No. of Military Academies Ranked as First Choice	Avg. No. Acceptances	Accepted to CGA	No. of Military Academies Chosen as Final Enrollment Decision
	6.4	16/20	4	8	5/20

Note. <sup>a</sup>Subject did not complete application to Coast Guard Academy. <sup>b</sup>Community College names concealed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>c</sup>Subject did not meet the minimum age requirement for admission to Coast Guard Academy

## Data Collection

I employed a qualitative methodological approach that sought to characterize student enrollment decisions through data collection at two key junctures in the college selection process: mid-choice, in January, before the final application deadline of February 1, 2012, and post-choice, in May. (The Coast Guard Academy admissions office concluded application reviews and sent appointment/rejection letters by April 15, 2012; the deadline for students to accept or reject their appointments was May 1, 2012.) I conducted two in-depth phone interviews with each participant, each lasting approximately 90 minutes.<sup>6</sup> The first interview protocol contained 16 semi-structured

<sup>6</sup> Although interview protocols were designed for this particular setting, the questions were influenced by a prior qualitative college choice study by Miguel Ceja (2001).

questions designed to explore four categories: individual attributes; institutional attributes; obstacles and supports; and cultural capital and habitus in the enrollment decision process (Appendix D).

The second interview protocol contained 13 additional questions that probed for evidence of key factors/influencers in the final enrollment choice (Appendix E). The queries, although different from the initial interview protocol, addressed the same three key research questions. The follow-up interview questions were unique in that they were posed in the post-enrollment decision time frame and informed how institutional attributes, individual attributes, obstacles and supports, and cultural capital and habitus affected, if at all, the final enrollment decision. All questions from both interview protocols were linked to the key elements of the literature review (Appendix F).<sup>7</sup>

**Supplemental data.** In order to understand the individual and institutional attributes that may predispose enrollment decisions, I reviewed each subject's application packet. This examination yielded the number of family members, parents' marital status, parents' education level and financial status (i.e., whether or not a student was given a scholarship to attend the Genesis program) for each subject. I compiled this data into a demographic table (Creswell, 2008) within the qualitative analysis software Dedoose, and linked it with each participant's corresponding transcribed interviews for inclusion in the coding process.

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<sup>7</sup> Originally, additional interviews were planned for faculty members/admissions department representatives who recommended each Genesis participant; however, this aspect was removed in order to focus on the student perspective on enrollment decisions.



## **Data Analysis**

Immediately following each interview and prior to coding, I created a handwritten contact summary sheet (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once completed, this form (Appendix G) served as a brief, one-page summary of the interview in its entirety and it accompanies the final transcribed interview notes. The contact summary provided a synopsis of the interview and guidance for follow-up interviews, as well as assistance during the final writing process.

In order to protect confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to each study participant. Following the “Visual Model of the Coding Process in Qualitative Research” (Creswell, 2008), I then used a six-step process for coding data. Once interviews were transcribed by an external service, I reviewed the text while listening to the recorded audio to ensure no data were omitted. I then read each case at least three times for accuracy. Throughout each reading, I created margin notes as themes emerged. With the aid of the contact summary sheet, I recorded a brief summary sentence, with a box drawn around it, in the margin of each transcript. Through the use of Dedoose qualitative analysis software, I divided the data into “text segments” (Creswell, 2008, p. 251) and assigned each a code word describing its meaning. After all text from each interview transcript was coded, a master list of 239 codes was generated. I reviewed the list of codes for overlap or redundancy and reduced it to a more manageable number of root codes (21), which I then categorized into approximately five themes. I used the final list of codes and themes as a template to revisit the transcripts, which were linked within Dedoose to the descriptive characteristics of the study participants. The linked nature of the database made supporting quotations readily available.

Utilizing the theoretical framework of the literature review, four of the five codes were predetermined: individual attributes, institutional attributes, obstacles and supports, and cultural capital and habitus. One additional theme—“college info sources”—emerged from the data analysis process. I entered descriptive data taken from the admissions applications into the Dedoose database, providing a quantitative component that was linked to coded transcripts.

Following the organization of data, I conducted analyses through several qualitative and mixed-method charts featured in the Dedoose software. First, I conducted a cross-case analysis using the code co-occurrence feature of Dedoose in place of “meta-matrices” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 178). This produced a graphic illustration of the frequency for each code and instances in which a text segment was indicative of more than one code label. I employed the code application chart feature of Dedoose in place of “case-ordered descriptive meta-matrices” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 192) to illustrate a case-by-case comparison of each subject with all relevant coded data. The code weight statistics chart summarized responses to questions that had a quantitative element such as “the number of schools applied to” and the “number of peers considering military academies.” The descriptor ratios feature of Dedoose allowed me to link qualitative text segments with descriptive data obtained from each Genesis application. Finally, I used the code cloud feature of Dedoose to create a visual representation of the frequency with which certain codes occurred compared to others. The combination of these analyses ultimately led to the conceptual flowchart of the college selection process.

Following data analysis, I created a description of the enrollment experiences of Genesis participants, referred to as the “textural description” (Creswell, 2007). A

“structural description” accompanies this textural description to detail the context in which the phenomenon of college enrollment occurred (Creswell, 2007). Finally, I combined the textural and structural writings to communicate the “essence” (Cresswell, 2007) of the college selection experience, and that description is contained in this dissertation.

**Validity and Limitations.** Several sample characteristics limit the validity of this study. First, unlike other admissions visitation programs, Genesis students are invited based on recommendations. Given the recruited aspect of their participation, it is plausible that these students were less internally motivated to attend the Academy compared to other non-recruited applicants. While there was no way to completely mitigate this limitation, it is important to note that only students who completed the initial on-line application were considered for the Genesis program.

A second projected limitation was the possibility that subjects would drop out of the study prior to the second interview. I theorized that as students were denied acceptance to the Academy or accepted to other schools, they might lose interest in completing this research. Only one participant who began the study did not complete the second interview. It appears as if awarding gift cards to subjects who persisted to the final interview protocol was a successful method of addressing this concern.

A third limitation was the challenge of ensuring that the pool of subjects represented a group of students faced with a *choice* between two or more institutions of higher education. In order to minimize this possibility, performance standards for standardized test results were established (a combined minimum score of 1000 on the SAT critical reading and math sections, or an ACT composite score of 21). In spite of

the Institutional Review Board's request for an open solicitation of subjects, the academic caliber of participants remained high—all had applied to at least two schools and the average combined SAT score was 1200 points.

I used four research design strategies to maximize validity and minimize researcher bias threats. In an attempt to bracket researcher bias, I acknowledge my “past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208), both prior to data collection and throughout the study. I have provided an initial statement of bias to expose my personal values to potential study reviewers (Appendix H). During this research, I frequently wrote reflection memos in order to identify instances in which my personal assumptions may have interfered with my objectivity. Second, an external reviewer checked for bias and provided written feedback on this project. Third, I incorporated a thick description of the setting (Creswell, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), which enables readers to determine the level of transferability of this information to other selective college environments. Finally, information obtained via financial aid forms, initial admissions applications, and interviews provided multiple data sources used to triangulate evidence (Creswell, 2007).

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Findings**

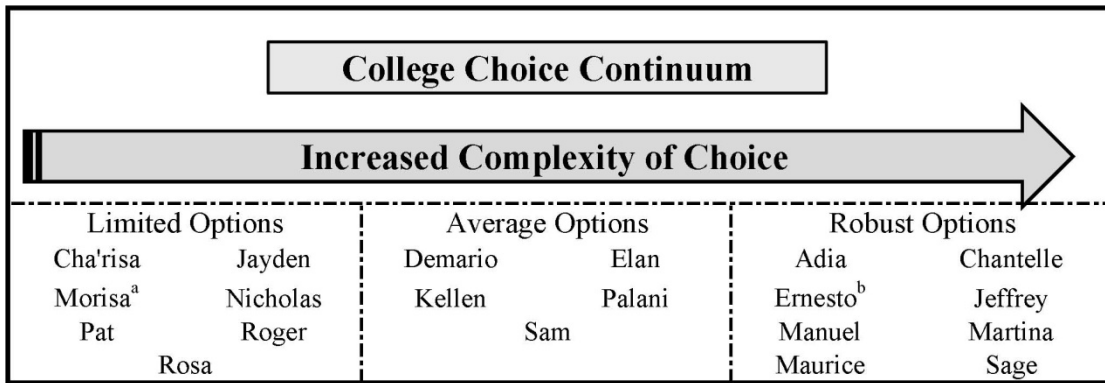
The Coast Guard Academy has previously considered Genesis participants to be homogenous, linked solely by their underrepresented status. Due to the large number of participants (20) in my study, I created composite profiles to characterize different perspectives in the college-choice process. The profiles are based on information from three critical data points: Interview One, Interview Two and the descriptive data found in each student's Coast Guard Academy and Genesis applications. The first phase of my analysis was an in-depth examination of how each student's individual, institutional, and psychosocial attributes interrelate when making enrollment decisions. As a result of this analysis, I discovered variations within this population. During the second phase of my analysis I identified that as the options increased, so did the complexity of the enrollment decision. I designed the Limited Options (LO), Average Options (AO), and Robust Options (RO) categories to represent the differing complexities in enrollment decisions. The three categories are represented in the "College Choice Continuum" (See Figure 1). By distinguishing study participants within the three option groups I highlight differences that were previously imperceptible.

A secondary finding that resulted from my analyses was that the number of schools for which a student completes an application appears to be connected with low socioeconomic status. Restricted financial resources may limit the number of schools to which a student applies because of the costs associated with application fees and submission of standardized test scores (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009). Due to this reason, findings within the Limited Options group are less informative regarding the

college choice line of questioning. I found their socioeconomic status does not permit them the same opportunity to exercise choice.

In the current section, findings for each of the three groups are provided. Profile descriptions along with tables reporting demographic data, initial college preferences, and final enrollment decisions are listed. Following this section are in-depth descriptions of each group together with supporting interview data.

Figure 1



Note. <sup>a</sup>Subject did not meet minimum age requirement of Coast Guard Academy. <sup>b</sup>Subject did not complete application to Coast Guard Academy.

Students with “limited options” (LO) were accepted to two or fewer institutions and therefore demonstrated little or no need to employ a decision-making model of any kind. Students within the Limited Option population appeared more likely to make enrollment decisions out of financial necessity than according to preference. These students embodied the choice between attending college or joining the workforce, or the choice between going to college or enlisting in the military. On average, the limited-option students scored more than 100 points lower on their math/verbal SAT than other study participants. While the LO students reportedly understood and respected the concept of service to country, the search for a tuition-free education was more of a dominant factor than the “calling to serve.” Limited-option students appeared to be less

knowledgeable about the college search process than their AO and RO peers. In particular, LO subjects seemed less cognizant of gender, race, and geographic diversity as compared to other participants in this study. Finally, LO students rarely reported considering their parents' wishes when making enrollment choices. This information contrasts with average and robust-option students who expressed a desire to make their parents proud or to minimize parent debt.

Table 3

Limited Options (LO) Group Enrollment Choices						
Student	Gender	No. Schools		College Choice (First Interview)	Accepted to CGA	Enrollment Decision (Second Interview)
		Applied	Accepted			
Cha'risa	Female	12	2/12	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Purdue University
Jayden	Male	4	2/4	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Enlisting in the U.S. Navy
Morisa <sup>a</sup>	Female	6	2/6	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Too young, will reapply to CGA next year
Nicholas	Male	3	1/3	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Community College <sup>b</sup>
Pat	Male	3	1/3	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Tuskegee University
Roger	Male	5	2/5	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Community College <sup>b</sup>
Rosa	Female	3	1/3	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Enlisting in U.S. Coast Guard
		Avg. 5.14	Avg. 1.57			

Note. <sup>a</sup>Subject did not meet minimum age requirement of Coast Guard Academy. <sup>b</sup>Community College names concealed to protect identity

Table 4

Limited Options (LO) Group Demographics										
Student	Gender	Race/Ethnic Identification	SAT	SAT	Mothers	Fathers	Parents	People in	Siblings in	Received
			Math	Verbal	Education	Education		Household	College	Scholarship <sup>a</sup>
Cha'risa	Female	Native American/Alaskan Native	610	560	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Divorced	4	0	Yes
Jayden	Male	Asian American	660	580	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Married	8	0	Yes
Morisa	Female	Hispanic/Latino	630	650	High School	High School	Married	5	0	Yes
Nicholas	Male	White	570	630	High School	High School	Married	N/A	N/A	No
Pat	Male	Black/African American	560	490	PhD	High School	Married	5	2	No
Roger	Male	Two or More Races	490	460	Associate's	Bachelor's	Divorced	2	0	Yes
Rosa	Female	Hispanic/Latino	440	600	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Married	4	1	Yes
			Avg. 566	Avg. 567						
			Total Avg. 1133							

<sup>a</sup>Scholarship refers to financial assistance for visit to Genesis Invitational program.

Students with “average options” (AO) had between three and five college acceptances from which to choose and therefore had a more complex enrollment decision to make. AO students scored an average of 1254 on their math/verbal SAT and applied to an average of more than six schools. Average-option students expressed a stronger interest in *enjoying* their college experience than their limited-option peers and the potential to continue playing organized sports was listed as a compelling factor. The

most significant difference between average- and limited-option students was a deeper awareness of how the college application process worked. Referred to in the literature review as “college knowledge” (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002) AO group members were reportedly more familiar with what colleges look for in a student as well as how to successfully navigate the predisposition, search, and choice phases of enrollment. Average-option students appeared to be more cognizant of the role that socioeconomic status played in their academic preparation and were more likely to discuss the level of prestige within their college consideration set.

Table 5

Average Options (AO) Group Enrollment Choices						
Student	Gender	No. Schools Applied	No. Schools Accepted	College Choice (First Interview)	Accepted to CGA	Enrollment Decision (Second Interview)
Demario	Male	7	3/7	U.S. Military Academy	No	North Georgia College and State University
Elan	Male	6	4/6	Virginia Tech	Yes	Old Dominion University
Kellen	Male	9	5/9	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	Yes	U.S. Coast Guard Academy
Palani	Male	4	4/4	U.S. Merchant Marine Academy	Yes	U.S. Coast Guard Academy
Sam	Male	6	4/6	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Christopher Newport University
		Avg. 6.40	Avg. 4			

Table 6

Average Options (AO) Group Demographics										
Student	Gender	Race/Ethnic Identification	SAT Math	SAT Verbal	Mothers Education	Fathers Education	Parents	People in Household	Siblings in College	Received Scholarship <sup>a</sup>
Demario	Male	Hispanic/Latino	620	600	Associate's	Bachelor's	Married	N/A	N/A	No
Elan	Male	Native American/Alaskan Native	740	660	Associate's	Master's	Divorced	2	0	Yes
Kellen	Male	Two or More Races	670	610	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Married	N/A	N/A	No
Palani	Male	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	690	600	Bachelor's	High School	Married	N/A	N/A	No
Sam	Male	Asian American	520	560	Bachelor's	Master's	Married	N/A	N/A	No
			Avg. 648	Avg. 606						
			Total Avg. 1254							

<sup>a</sup>Scholarship refers to financial assistance for visit to Genesis Invitational program.

Students with “robust options” (RO) seemed to be in the most enviable position and in turn reported the most complex decision making models to determine their college destinations. Although their math/verbal SAT scores were slightly lower than the AO performers, robust-option students were accepted to an average of six colleges. Subjects with robust options declared a higher occurrence of military experience within their immediate families and were extremely expressive regarding their level of respect for



their parents. In addition to their vocal admiration of their parents, RO students appeared more receptive to mentoring from teachers, sports coaches, and guidance counselors. Although significant weight was placed on financial considerations in their college choice processes, they also discussed individual attributes such as projected happiness and career satisfaction.

Table 7

Robust Options (RO) Group Enrollment Choices						
Student	Gender	No. Schools		College Choice (First Interview)	Accepted to CGA	Enrollment Decision (Second Interview)
		Applied	Accepted			
Adia	Female	8	6/8	Georgetown University	Yes	Georgetown University
Chantelle	Female	6	6/6	U.S. Naval Academy	Yes	U.S. Naval Academy
Ernesto <sup>a</sup>	Male	7	6/6	Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Univ.	No	Barrett The Honors College (@ Ariz. St. Un.)
Jeffrey	Male	8	6/8	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	Western New England University
Manuel	Male	7	6/7	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	No	University of St. Thomas (Houston, TX)
Martina	Female	6	6/6	U.S. Coast Guard Academy	Yes	Community College <sup>b</sup>
Maurice	Male	10	6/10	Washington University	Yes	U.S. Coast Guard Academy
Sage	Male	8	7/8	U.S. Air Force Academy	Yes	U.S. Coast Guard Academy
		Avg. 7.50	Avg. 6.13			

Note. <sup>a</sup>Subject did not complete application to Coast Guard Academy. <sup>b</sup>Community College name concealed to protect identity

Table 8

Robust Options (RO) Group Demographics										
Student	Gender	Race/Ethnic Identification	SAT Math	SAT Verbal	Mothers Education	Fathers Education	Parents	People in Household	Siblings in College	Received Scholarship <sup>a</sup>
Adia	Female	Black/African American	600	730	Bachelor's	Master's	Married	4	0	Yes
Chantelle	Female	Black/African American	610	680	High School	Associate's	Married	5	1	Yes
Ernesto	Male	Hispanic/Latino	780	590	High School	None	Married	N/A	N/A	Yes
Jeffrey	Male	Asian American	580	460	Associate's	High School	Married	N/A	N/A	No
Manuel	Male	Hispanic/Latino	560	560	Bachelor's	Master's	Divorced	5	0	Yes
Martina	Female	Hispanic/Latino	520	540	Associate's	Associate's	Married	4	2	Yes
Maurice	Male	Black/African American	650	740	Master's	Bachelor's	Married	4	0	Yes
Sage	Male	Asian American	630	680	PhD	PhD	Married	5	0	Yes
			Avg. 614	Avg. 614						
			Total Avg. 1228							

<sup>a</sup>Scholarship refers to financial assistance for visit to Genesis Invitational program.

The following three sections provide an in depth description of each composite profile: Limited Options (LO), Average Options (AO) and Robust Options (RO). Supporting interview data enables a rich description of these students and their thoughts pertaining to their enrollment decisions. Using the theoretical framework of “College Choice Theory,” these data are organized to illustrate the presence and interrelation of individual attributes, institutional attributes, and psychosocial factors during Genesis

participants' college decisions. While examining research data, the following attributes and factors were considered:

1. Institutional Attributes: academic programs, tuition costs, available financial aid, academic reputation, location, size, and social atmosphere.
2. Individual Attributes: student socioeconomic status, academic preparation, parent educational background, peer support, and ethnicity.
3. Psychosocial Factors: cultural capital (academic self-esteem, leadership experiences, extrafamilial encouragement and institutional support) and habitus (personal acceptance, personal and social fit, academic interests, early influences, approval by others, family encouragement, intuition, and family expectation)

### **Students with Limited Options (LO)**

In this study, the individual attribute of financial consideration (socioeconomic status) appeared to be a concern for all research participants. Between the two interview sessions for all 20 subjects, there were 159 excerpts referencing financial concerns.

Although 65% of study participants qualified for financial assistance, the six students<sup>8</sup> in the Limited Options group seemed more apt to make the Coast Guard Academy their top enrollment choice out of financial necessity than because of a "career calling." This sentiment was certainly true for Jayden: "You know, I think giving back to my country is important but I think what made me choose the military is that you don't have to pay for it, so financial was my number one concern" (Jayden/Second Interview/June 27, 2012).

Jayden's perspective appeared grounded in his concern for socioeconomic stability rather

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<sup>8</sup> The LO group consisted of seven students, though one female (Morisa) was denied acceptance due to the fact that she was too young to be admitted according to Coast Guard Academy regulations. Therefore, this analysis references only six members of the LO group.

than the alignment between his personal values (habitus: personal and social fit) and potential academic learning environments (institutional attribute).

Data reported from students within the LO group often attributed restricted educational mobility to low socioeconomic status. In discussing her college options, Rosa shared:

I'm not able to pay for college on my own anymore, nor are my parents. I have no other choice besides working at a job, so I can go to school again or join the military and/or the Academy where I'll get the education I need and the military regiment that I need to keep my body fit as well as my mind sharp, without having to pay loans until I die. (Rosa/First Interview/March 18, 2012)

Low socioeconomic status also appeared to limit a student's reported ability to properly conduct the search phase of the college enrollment decision. This concept was highlighted by Cha'risa, who noted, "I have visited CGA, Stanford, USC, and UCLA." When she was asked whether she intended to visit other schools, she responded, "I do, but money is an issue, so only the ones I get into" (Cha'risa/First Interview/February 20, 2012). While it is logical to expect that limited resources would influence a student's ability to visit college campuses, this also highlights the potential advantage that a visitation scholarship, such as those provided through the Genesis program, could give to an institution that provides it.

Similar to AO and RO students, Limited Options group members reported a great deal of encouragement from their parents, though at times this encouragement was financially driven. This finding supports the interrelation between the individual attribute

of personal finances with the psychosocial dimension of family encouragement, which has been known to influence aspirations. Roger elaborated on this point:

Well, my dad wants to see me get an education and go and get a good job. When he was a kid, he dropped out of high school and just went into the military, and he works in “employment,” so he knows how bad jobs are out there today. And he wants to see me get an education so I can have a good job in the future.

(Roger/Second Interview/June 28, 2012)

While Roger conveyed a significant amount of encouragement from his father, the support seemed to center around potential career earnings (individual attribute) rather than career satisfaction (habitus: personal and social fit, academic interests).

Another common thread expressed among students in the LO group was a lack of confidence that they would be accepted to their schools of choice. Academic self-esteem (part of a student’s habitus) appeared to produce a “gut feeling”—one that was accurate, considering that none of these students were accepted to CGA. It seemed that along with a lack of confidence reported by the LO group, there also came an increased focus on character traits versus academic preparation (individual attributes). When asked if he was confident about getting accepted to the Coast Guard Academy, Pat answered, “It depends, some days I do, some days I don’t. I feel my application was sincere and straight from the heart. I hope they can see that” (Pat/First Interview/February 18, 2012).

In other instances, LO students’ lack of confidence was linked to weakness on standardized tests, which highlights a potential interrelation between the individual attribute of low academic preparation and the cultural capital attribute of low academic self-esteem. Rosa alluded to this by stating:

I've seen the caliber of work these students go through and the grades they've gotten. I can be the best student there is, but I'm a horrible test taker and my grades will not ever reflect that. You can look at my SAT scores and you would be like really? Because I know my numbers aren't as good as the next person, I have doubt. (Rosa/First Interview/March 18, 2012)

Another shared characteristic of LO group members was limited college knowledge (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Normally, this could be interpreted as a lack of higher education experience transmitted from parent to child. While lack of college understanding is a possibility, only two subjects within the LO group were first generation students. This poses a potential challenge to the idea that parents did not possess the resource of "college enrollment understanding" needed to transmit to their children. Irrespective of parent educational level (individual attribute: parent educational background), LO students did not appear to have received mentoring (cultural capital: extrafamilial encouragement or institutional support) with regards to the nuances of college admission programs. For instance, when he was asked if he believed a person's racial or ethnic background was a factor in the college search process, Roger answered, "It just seems like something that colleges wouldn't really put into much consideration, if you know what I mean" (Roger/First Interview/April 13, 2012).

Unlike students from the other two groupings, those within the LO group more frequently expressed a desire to be independent from their parents. While subjects from the AO and RO groups expressed more of a team approach with their parents, those with limited options were less inclined to express this sentiment. When Cha'risa was asked

about her parents' influence, it appeared to be financially motivated: "Not much. I feel I made this decision on my own. I look for my parents' [input], just making sure that we can pay for the school" (Cha'risa/Second Interview/June 11, 2012). Although the LO subjects cared a great deal about their families, these students seem more inclined to strike out on their own. This independence is contrary to the habitus factor of "approval by others," a psychosocial reward attributed to those who value pleasing others (Nora, 2004). Rosa conveyed this independent spirit found among LO students by sharing:

[I: You mentioned that you didn't want to be too close to your parents? Have those factors changed?] No. I still don't want to be close to them. I love them to death, but I can't be around them for my whole life, I can't do it. They are good to come over for the holidays and what not, but any more than that, no. They still see me as younger than I am. They will try and baby me. I don't want to move back because it would halt my progress. (Rosa/Second Interview/May 21, 2012)

This desire for independence from parents was reported exclusively by LO group members. In contrast, as described in the following sections, AO and RO students described closer bonds between themselves and their parents and mentors in the enrollment decision process.

### **Students with Average Options**

Students with average options had between three and five colleges from which to choose. Subjects within this population were more confident when listing their college prospects (cultural capital: academic self-esteem), expressed an attraction to leadership opportunities (a cultural capital psychosocial dimension) and exhibited more interest in attending institutions considered "prestigious" (institutional attribute). Students among

the AO group referenced a value for structure and discipline (habitus: personal and social fit), were more inclined to seek challenges, and were quick to verbalize a healthy respect for their parents (habitus: family expectation). Participants with average options appeared to be team-oriented, which was manifest in their desire to continue playing sports. Although none of the AO members reported athletic scholarship offers, sport opportunities (institutional attribute) were described as a powerful plus factor. Unlike in the Limited Option group, projected enjoyment of a school (habitus: personal and social fit) was mentioned as an important factor in the AO members' decision making processes. Interview discussions with Kellen supported this concept:

I like the small environment and the fact that I could play baseball there. It seemed like people enjoyed themselves as opposed to West Point and Navy. They seemed like they were just trying to get through. They say the best part [about the other service academies] is graduating, while I would actually like to enjoy my time at the Academy. (Kellen/First Interview/February 26, 2012)

Beyond enjoyment, several AO group members acknowledged the value sport participation had on their overall development. One participant credited his background in sport for imbuing life lessons such as responsibility, punctuality, and leadership (habitus: personal and social fit). Sam elaborated:

It actually feels unnatural not to play a sport and be active and involved. [I: Is it safe to say you will play soccer no matter where you go to school?] Yeah, no matter where I go, I want to stay active in anything I could, clubs or intramurals, it helps me stay on task. (Sam/First Interview/February 23, 2012)

Similar to sport participation, non-academic activities, often referred to as extracurricular activities, were also valued by AO members. Demario praised his involvement in Boy Scouts as a character development opportunity and compared the scouts to military service:

In Boy Scouts, we go over being a model citizen, being courteous and overall a great person . . . a less intense version of the military kind of . . . learning about leadership, interaction with others, people and civic duty and all that. Obviously, it's the same. (Demario/First Interview/March 18, 2012)

Demario's ability to articulate the benefits of involvement with Boy Scouts echoes the presence of habitus (personal and social fit) and how a student uses it to align his/her values with prospective educational paths.

Applicants in the AO group differed from the LO participants in the amount of college knowledge they exhibited. In particular, these students were much more in tune with diversity recruiting initiatives employed by college admissions departments. This elevated level of knowledge reported by AO students suggests the presence of cultural capital (extrafamilial encouragement or institutional support) in the decision making process. Compared to the LO group, AO members were well versed regarding the demographic makeup of colleges in their consideration set. Kellen explained:

. . . for example USC, their demographic for Asians is like 25%. Saying on the application that I'm Asian would not help me very much since they [USC] have such a high [Asian] population already. However, at somewhere like Coast Guard, I think when I checked it, [Coast Guard Academy] was like 4% [Asian]. It would help me a lot more because I know that schools try to represent their



demographics so their school looks more diverse, so I feel like it does help me for somewhere like a service academy where minorities aren't as abundant as other schools. (Kellen/First Interview/February 26, 2012)

Beyond a working knowledge of college demographics, AO students verbalized an understanding of how diversity can influence an admissions department in their review of applications. Palani demonstrated this understanding when he noted:

You can't have just one [ethnicity], all Caucasian students, go there. They have to have some diversity. I think that has become a bigger part of colleges and universities. I definitely was happy to fill that bubble out because I think it gave me an advantage. It put my application in a smaller pile to compete with. (Palani, First Interview/March 16, 2012)

One participant also articulated an awareness of how academic preparation (individual attribute) can differ by the affluence of the region in which a student grows up. In fact, Sam pointed out that his success may have been partly attributable to the socioeconomic wealth within his school district:

Actually I get a lot of jokes that say, "You're a typical Asian. You're gonna go and get an education." No, I have never been discouraged because of the area that I'm in. It is such an affluent area and everyone gets a good education. For a public school, I think we are 128th in the country. We are ranked like second in the state. We are a very competitive high school and everyone is striving to be successful. No one slacks off. (Sam/First Interview/February 23, 2012)

Another defining comment among the AO group members referenced the attention to institutional prestige (institutional attribute). While these subjects expressed

confidence that they would be accepted to at least one college on their wish list (academic self-esteem), the ability to attend a prestigious institution seemed appealing. Kellen supported this concept when he explained, “I got accepted to both [Virginia Tech and Coast Guard]. I kind of chose Coast Guard over Virginia Tech, one, for baseball and two, because it’s a service academy. I feel it is more prestigious” (Kellen/First Interview/February 26, 2012).

Attentiveness to institutional prestige was also vocalized by RO members. The following section highlights the similarities and differences of study participants identified as having robust college options.

### **Students with Robust Options**

Students in the Robust Options (RO) category were accepted to at least six colleges, arguably causing them to make use of a more complex decision-making model than students in the other two groups. Numerous members of the RO group reported immediate family members with prior military experience (habitus: early influences, family encouragement, family expectation) and seemed far more socialized into the military lifestyle (personal and social fit). These students espoused a great deal of respect for their parents and referenced a desire for mentoring from guardians and role models (cultural capital: extrafamilial encouragement). Students with robust options set high standards for themselves and sought prestige in addition to financial/career security. Although only one student within the RO group was contemplating an athletic scholarship offer, most RO individuals cited the potential to continue their sport involvement (habitus: personal and social fit) as a compelling interest.

Multiple participants within the RO group indicated evidence of prior military experience within their families (habitus: personal and social fit, early influences, family encouragement, family expectation). During her first interview, Martina explained:

My sister goes to the Air Force Academy and she introduced me to all of the academies, but the only one that I was interested in submitting paperwork for was the CGA. [I: Anyone else?] My dad and brother are both in the Army.

(Martina/First Interview/February 18, 2012)

In discussions with members of the RO group, it became apparent that subjects with prior military service in their immediate family benefitted from an “insider’s” perspective. Similar to the concept of cultural capital in education, dependents of military service members appear to have a heightened understanding of the military lifestyle, enabling them to see beyond the short-term rigor of basic training. As Chantelle noted:

My entire family is military so [I have] always been in the military setting until my dad retired from the Navy and I got a glimpse of the civilian setting. I just like the military life better. I like the water; the Coast Guard fit into that. My dad was Navy, and [I have] other family members in [the] Navy, Army, and Air Force.

(Chantelle/First Interview/February 17, 2012)

Students raised in military families appear to have a level of flexibility with regards to the geographic location of a college (institutional attribute). Students from military families reported being accustomed to frequent re-location, were experienced at transitioning to new school environments (institutional attribute), and described less anxiety about making new friends (individual attribute: peer support). In fact, these

individuals seemed to view routine change as exciting. When asked about the periodic transitions associated with growing up in the military, Chantelle explained:

For the longest time when I was growing up I didn't even know that anybody lived any different than that. Because I thought that everybody did it. Then we moved to Maryland in sixth grade. Then after sixth grade, I saw the same people with no new people in my class because I went to a small catholic school. And I was just shocked because I found out they had lived there all their lives.

(Chantelle/Second Interview/June 4, 2012)

Similar to the AO group, subjects with a robust slate of options were quick to articulate significant respect for their parents. What distinguished members of the RO group from their AO peers were their descriptions of their eagerness to receive mentoring. Robust-option students seemed more interested in feedback originating from adults and they described their interactions with mentors as partnerships rather than more typical student-teacher relationships. This dynamic between RO students and parents/mentors suggests the presence of habitus dimensions of early influences, approval by others, and family encouragement, as well as the cultural capital factor of extrafamilial encouragement.

The habitus factor "approval by others" varied in intensity among RO students. For example, when asked if he intended to play baseball in college, Maurice expressed a strong desire to please his parents by responding, "My parents and I are still talking extensively about that" (Maurice/Second Interview/June 21, 2012). Students with robust options appear open to mentoring from various sources, even those outside the immediate

family (cultural capital: extrafamilial encouragement). When asked if there were any high school teachers who had influenced his enrollment decisions, Ernesto shared:

Several, but if I had to pick one it would be my math teacher, Mr. Geometry, because I have had him for three years now and it no longer is the teacher-student relationship, it's more like a coach-athlete relationship where we are going towards the same goal instead of just teaching me. (Ernesto/First Interview/March 24, 2012)

Like all students in this study, RO members expressed a great deal of concern over financial issues (individual attributes), but their focus was somewhat different. RO students did not appear to be as constricted by these issues as, for example, those in the LO group did, but they often expressed concern for their parents' financial security. In particular, RO students were fearful of the financial impact their college enrollment decisions might have on their parents' quality of life. When asked about paying for college, Adia alluded to the fact that her parents were close to retirement. Despite her appreciation for their financial support, she explained:

I am glad that my parents are willing to pay for my college education. I have peers who aren't as fortunate as that. But twenty years from now, I don't want them to have to work longer just because they are trying to support me at an expensive college when I can get a great education in-state. (Adia/Second Interview/March 18, 2012)

By definition, students within the RO group had more choices than their LO and AO peers, and as a result, employed a greater degree of reflection when weighing their

schooling options. When contemplating the factors that narrowed his six college options, Maurice stated:

On top of the people, the cost of education, the fact that I'm going free, and I see most of my peers at school, struggling to pay for college, I really don't want to put my parents in such a bad situation, for lack of a better word, by putting a hole in their pocket, having to pay for a college experience when I could actually go free, instead of putting them in a bad position. (Maurice/Second Interview/June 21, 2012)

Much like the AO group, the potential to play their sport of choice (institutional attribute) was a factor in the RO participants' decisions. While very few participants in the study expressed a belief that sport would pay for their education, it was clear that the absence of their chosen sport would have been a detractor in forming their college consideration set (habitus: Personal and Social Fit). When prioritizing her college choice, Martina noted, "Most important would be job security, degrees, and volleyball. Volleyball goes hand in hand with degrees. I've been playing volleyball since I was seven. And I'm not willing to give that up just yet" (Martina/First Interview/February 18, 2012).

Even students who did not proclaim to be student-athletes had athletics programs on their minds; RO students referred to sports as symbolic of a quality institution (institutional attribute: social atmosphere). When asked about her visit to the Coast Guard Academy, Chantelle recommended that the institution spend some time describing its various sport rivalries, "because, I knew about the rivalries at Navy, the Army-Navy rivalry. Football is something that I like" (Chantelle/Second Interview/June 4, 2012).

The importance of sport among RO students may, at least in part, stem from the value these students appeared to place on competition. Participants from the Robust Options group consistently articulated the benefits of a competitive environment and conveyed a level of self-awareness not expressed by the other two groups. For example, when describing the attributes he looked for in a college, Jeffrey explained:

I was looking for competitiveness, so if there were kids who were like around—I have a 3.67 GPA, but if they had a 3.8, or a minimum of 3.0, but a lot were around a 3.5, at least I could compete with them. [I: Do you like competition?] Yes. It's like, if I can't compete, I don't really try as hard as I want to or I know I could. I know I could try much harder if I know I have someone to compete with. (Jeffrey/Second Interview/June 20, 2012)

Even among prospective students in the RO group who did not participate in sport, competition was a prevailing sentiment. When describing his motivation for success in high school, Ernesto elaborated:

Obviously you need to have good ACT scores to get into college, [a] good GPA, and together, when you are competing with other students, they are obviously your friends, we are pushing each other to get the same "A" in the class or continue that project and do your best on it. And those kind of things add up. In order for us to get the scholarship, secretly in the back of our minds, we know we have to beat them to get it. So if we push each other, maybe one of us gets it in the school. (Ernesto/First Interview/March 24, 2012)

RO students were similar to AO students in their levels of college knowledge related to admissions procedures. Interviews from the Robust Options group highlighted

an understanding that went beyond statistical reporting of demographics and touched upon national trends in education, bilingual talents, and affirmative action. Furthermore, discussions revolved around a more selective college consideration set. For example, when asked if his racial identity influenced his college options, Maurice commented:

For the most part it has not been a factor, in terms of pursuing the college education. But I have been approached by my friends, telling me I'd do better at Vanderbilt or MIT, based solely on my ethnicity because there is a shortage of African Americans who are doing well in high school. Increased my chance to be accepted, maybe with Vanderbilt, MIT, or Wash U. based on color because they have a real shortage of African Americans, color. (Maurice/First Interview/March 25, 2012)

In response to the same question, Martina stated, "Opened doors. Being bilingual, not everyone has that, and being fluent in writing and speaking it too is a good thing. I speak Spanish and English" (Martina/First Interview/February 18, 2012). Although Sage's Asian American identity did not prevent him from being accepted to college, it did influence which colleges he targeted in the search process:

I've been encouraged to pursue a college education. As for college choices, I've been discouraged from going anywhere on the West Coast like LA, UCLA because of the [large] Asian population. My headmaster said that a lot of colleges are looking for diversity. (Sage/First Interview/February 18, 2012)

### **Summary of Findings**

The twenty subjects in this study, regardless of whether they were in the LO, AO, or RO group, shared several traits. Most indicated a federal service academy as their first



school of choice, the majority reported their parents were married, and a significant number indicated that at least one parent had previous military experience. All but three subjects had at least one parent with a college degree (5/7 LO Group, 5/5 AO Group, and 7/8 RO Group). In spite of these commonalities, a review of their interview/application data reveals several distinctions between the three groups.

Students within the Limited Options group appear disadvantaged based on the individual attribute of academic preparation (measured by high school coursework, GPA, standardized test scores). Although LO members met the general criteria for admission to the Academy (minimum SAT score of 1100, American citizenship, unmarried, and no dependents), when compared to the general applicant pool it was evident these students lacked the academic preparation required of a selective STEM institution. This low academic preparation coupled with limited financial options generally left LO students without much of a decision to make. As a result, their postsecondary plans were based on financial necessity (joining the workforce or enlisting in the military) rather than options. Rosa captured this sentiment in her final interview: “Basically, it was what I could afford; money, unfortunately, was the biggest factor” (Rosa/Second Interview/May 21, 2012). None of the students within the Limited Options group was accepted to the Coast Guard Academy, despite the fact that they all listed CGA as their first choice.

A comparison of SAT scores of AO students (1254 average math/verbal) with those of LO students (1133 average math/verbal) highlights subtle differences in academic preparation between members of these two groups. On average, the five AO students were accepted to four colleges, versus 1.5 schools for members of the Limited Options group. However, the most telling discovery may be the absence of financial data

for members of the Average Options group. In order for Genesis participants to receive a scholarship they were required to submit documentation of family income and household demographics (number of family members living at home, number of siblings in college, adjusted gross income, etc.). Although not a perfect measure, it is reasonable to assume that families that did not submit documentation did not need assistance, and may therefore have been from higher SES backgrounds. Once study participants were sorted into the three groups, it became apparent that the highest incident of unreported financial data came from the Average Options group. While seven of eight (88%) limited-option students provided financial information, only one out of five (20%) AO group members reported this data. Again, while this finding is not definitive, it is an important reminder of the connections between socioeconomic status and college access.

When we examine the Robust Options group with a similar lens, it is evident that RO students have both the required academic preparation necessary for a STEM institution *and* financial need. RO students possessed an average combined SAT of 1228 (math/verbal), which was slightly lower than the AO students' average (1254), yet still nearly 100 points higher than LO members' scores (1133). From a financial need perspective, seven of eight (88%) Robust Option students received a scholarship to attend the Genesis invitational.

Based on the categorical data, the key discovery from the study of Genesis Invitational participants is that students with robust college options seem to capitalize on high levels of academic preparation but they must also take financial issues into consideration. Once robust options are realized, however, financial need is somewhat

neutralized in the decision process, giving way to the pursuit of enjoyment in the overall college experience. Ernesto summarized this concept by stating:

You need to be happy with your decision because in the end, it's going to be you going to the university, not your parents, not your family members. [I: Was that hard for you to do yourself? Make that decision?] It really wasn't that hard for me. I've always been, I don't want to say self-centered, that's a horrible way to use it. I'm in it for myself when it comes to my own education. I'm not going to go get my education for someone else. I mean, my father came to the country with the hopes that I can get my education and that's something I don't take for granted. But, in the end, it is my education. It's something that is going to pertain to me. So, I am going to make myself happy. Especially myself when it comes to what degree program, what school I want to go to, not anybody else.

(Ernesto/Second Interview/June 8, 2012)

While no student is targeting an unenjoyable college experience, few students are willing to accept the rigorous structure and discipline of a military academy when compared to equally lucrative financial aid packages offered at comparably selective institutions. Of the five RO students appointed to the Coast Guard Academy, only two chose to accept their appointments. Once financial need is mitigated, factors such as prestige, participation in sport, and personal acceptance appear to take on increased significance in students' final enrollment decisions.

### **Primary Finding**

Consistent with prior research on college choice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004), cultural capital and habitus were quite influential in

students' final decisions about where to attend college. A comparison of the influence of cultural capital and habitus on students at varying points along the college choice continuum reveals that as their options increased so too did the level at which they considered psychosocial factors. Although these findings indicate that this relationship exists, it is far from causal. Genesis participants were not granted college acceptance simply because they considered dimensions of academic self-esteem or because they sought a personal and social fit. Instead, robust-option students appear to have been more reflective regarding their enrollment decisions because they could afford to be selective. In fact, it appears that when they had a choice between multiple prestigious higher education options, they may also have had a greater *need* to rely on psychosocial factors. Amaury Nora (2004) captured this sentiment best by stating, "Choosing a college appears to move from the head to the heart as students realize that the college they choose will become a major part of their personal and social lives" (p. 202).

### **Secondary Findings**

While this study provides insight regarding how Genesis participants arrived at their postsecondary enrollment decisions, it also illuminates the plight of students without options. More precisely, for students with limited choices about where to go to college, there appears to be a link between limited college access and low socioeconomic status. At all points in the college choice process—predisposition, search, and choice—low SES presents a barrier to common college search practices, including visiting campuses, paying for multiple college application fees, taking standardized tests multiple times, and reporting test scores to multiple institutions. Considering the disadvantage experienced

by low SES students, it becomes apparent that the Genesis Invitational program, although a tremendous opportunity, may come too late in the college search process for some.

***Timeliness of recruiting.*** Although it was made clear to all participants that being accepted to the Genesis program did not guarantee acceptance to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, a significant byproduct of this program was the feeling of being wanted. The fact that Coast Guard extended invitations and scholarship opportunities for the Genesis program was a compelling factor. Ernesto offered this advice:

If I would have known since my freshman year in high school—are you allowed to talk to students that are freshman? If I would have known what the CGA was freshman year, that might have got me enrolling into JROTC, which ultimately would have got me going into the military, which might have gotten me better adapted into going into the Academy. I honestly didn't even know there was a CGA, I didn't know what the CGA had to offer, until the counselor mentioned at the beginning of this year, my senior year. (Ernesto/Second Interview/June 8, 2012)

***Determining Genesis participants.*** Study participants also noted the buildup of expectations associated with visiting the Coast Guard Academy. Although interview data indicated that many LO students were doubtful regarding their chances for admission, this knowledge did little to lessen their disappointment once they received their rejection letters. In her final interview, Cha'risa elaborated on this point:

Have a prospective student tour, and then have an admitted student tour, but don't put them together. [I: Why?] Because I think it just gets your chances, it gets your hopes up too much just to get crushed and I definitely feel that's what

happened to me. (Cha'risa/Limited Option Group/Second Interview/June 11, 2012)

Despite the fact that only one of the twenty study participants was considering athletic scholarship offers, almost all still mentioned sport offerings as a significant institutional attribute. Given that more than half of the corps of cadets participate in NCAA varsity programs,<sup>9</sup> it is logical to theorize that desirable students seek excellence in all facets of their lives, both physical and intellectual. Martina articulated this when discussing her final decision:

When I look back on it, I don't even know if, like, I made the completely right decision in turning it down, but I'm just going to have to see what happens at [Junior College] to be able to tell. [I: They offered you a prep-school appointment? If the CGA had given you a direct appointment, would your decision have been the same?] Probably not, I probably would have gone [to CGA]. Because with the prep school, I wasn't going to be able to play [because the prep school did not have a volleyball program]. I would have had a year off from volleyball. [I: Would you have considered a prep school if you could play volleyball?] Yeah, definitely. (Martina/Second Interview/May 27, 2012)

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<sup>9</sup> Based on the annual activities survey (2008–2011) administered by the Coast Guard Academy Institutional Research Department

## CHAPTER VI

### Significance of Study

While this study adds to the growing body of general research on college enrollment decisions, it also fills a particular void with respect to our understanding of the enrollment decisions of elite students. Elite, for the purposes of this discussion, is defined as students eligible for acceptance to selective institutions that accept fewer than 50% of students who apply. This investigation also offers much needed depth regarding the thought processes of underrepresented students willing to consider attending federal service academies. This population may very well qualify as being *super elite* when we factor in the added physical and moral criteria that need to be met prior to admission.

These findings may also begin to challenge the notion that military academies, in their present form, are attractive options for competitive students with financial need. While federal service academies offer a first rate education without requiring students to incur debt, they are far from a “free ride.” Following a rigorous high school career, some prospective students may balk at accepting an appointment to a federal service academy because of the pressures—including physical demands and the rigors of the military—that this type of institution places on students, especially when compared to other college options. This concept is supported by the following excerpt from an African American female who turned down an appointment to CGA to attend Georgetown University:

[I’m] not so much worried about the academic level of stress because I feel I’ve been prepared for that. But adding the physical component and staying in shape and learning what I need to learn about the Coast Guard itself on top of whatever academic challenges I have, I feel like that’s not something I necessarily want to

handle. I've sacrificed a lot socially and emotionally trying to be the best I can be academically for as long as I can remember. I've sacrificed going out with my friends, birthday parties or stuff like that, because I always had something else to do. (Adia/Second Interview/March 18, 2012)

Despite the many selective colleges and universities in the United States, very few institutions have academic, physical, and moral expectations comparable to those of the federal service academies. Nonetheless, this study offers a profile of prospective students within the Genesis Invitational who appear to be eligible for admission and eager to attend. If the nation truly desires a military that is representative of the American people, it is imperative that efforts to cultivate a diverse student body at the Coast Guard Academy continue. With that in mind, the following recommendations are intended to guide policy makers in their efforts to achieve this diversity by recruiting underrepresented students through the Genesis Invitational program.

### **Earlier Intervention**

The Genesis Invitational program is an outstanding opportunity for low socioeconomic status students and, if utilized correctly, a powerful recruiting advantage over other selective institutions. With nearly unanimous agreement, all research participants found the Genesis program to be a positive experience. However, several candidates may have lacked adequate time to pursue the combined academic, physical, and moral requirements necessary for an appointment. In order to yield a more viable pool of prospective candidates, the Coast Guard Academy must begin identifying Genesis participants earlier. In order to accomplish this objective, the Academy should consider



the feasibility of implementing the Genesis program to prospective high school juniors (or perhaps even younger students) rather than seniors.

### **Exit Interviews**

Genesis applications are due earlier than regular admissions paperwork, so there is often a lack of data (e.g., transcripts of academic coursework, standardized test results, essays) available for evaluation. This lack of information may limit the ability of the Department of Admissions to identify viable candidates early in the process. Moreover, this lack of supporting documentation regarding academic preparation could be more pronounced if the Genesis program were to occur in a prospects' junior year of high school, as recommended. In order for the admissions department to cultivate a diverse pool of candidates, the Academy should consider conducting a brief exit interview with each Genesis participant. Exit interviews could highlight individual strengths, identify weaknesses, and set goals for progress while there is still time for students to seek improvement. This practice may enhance the partnership between admissions officers and prospective students, improving credentials and, in turn, their chances for receiving an appointment.

### **Athletic Partnership**

The Genesis participants who took part in this study demonstrated an affinity for both sport and the pursuit of competitive environments. This tendency is substantiated in the 2011 Survey Data Book at the Coast Guard Academy. In order to capitalize on the physical aspect of prospective cadets, it is recommended that the Academy's admissions department combine efforts with the athletic department to recruit and screen Genesis candidates. This joint recruiting effort is already occurring with regular admission

students and would appear to be a logical extension of this relationship. Coaches, as career civilians, possess years of experience in sport, physical fitness, and recruiting. Through a combined approach to recruiting, coaches can offer their expertise while benefitting from the military knowledge of the officers within the admissions department. Many athletic coaches are long tenured faculty members, whereas admissions officers typically have relatively shorter tenure, since many rotate to new job assignments within the operational Coast Guard every three or four years. Athletic coaches may also be more experienced in describing the psychosocial aspects of cadet life, such as the role sport can have on social atmosphere (institutional attribute), peer support (individual attribute) and personal and social fit (habitus).

### **Ongoing Research**

Additional studies of our nation's military academies are needed to provide a greater understanding of the thinking of those who are considering attendance at these selective institutions. Since this study is limited in its focus on the application and choice process, many other questions remain surrounding the predisposition and search phases, as well around enrollment and persistence. For example, understanding that the Coast Guard Academy draws its annual freshman class from the K-12 pipeline, these future cadets come from schools that have recently implemented new standards of teacher and principal assessment. Comparisons of Academy instructional methods to the feeder programs used in the K-12 pipeline could prove valuable in retention efforts.

Despite tremendous influence from the admissions department, the admission process is still only one aspect of a multi-factorial progression. The making of an officer begins at the inception of recruitment (or earlier) but continues through graduation four

years later. In order to fully understand the best approach to diversifying the corps of cadets, a longitudinal research approach at the institutional level needs to be implemented. A study that follows the Genesis participants from first contact with the Academy to graduation would yield valuable data. Genesis participants should have “check-ins” each semester they are enrolled, and information gathered should include evaluation of military, academic, and athletic support programs.

Following the review of the Genesis program, the retention aspect of the Academy’s diversity efforts must be addressed. While there is a great deal of effort expended on the recruitment side of the diversity puzzle, little is known about student supports and teacher effectiveness associated with retention at the Coast Guard Academy. Despite a national trend toward teacher and principal effectiveness at the K–12 level, this form of assessment is almost non-existent in higher education. Likewise, a similar assessment of instructional effectiveness needs to occur at the prep schools utilized by the Coast Guard Academy to assist students deemed weak in academic preparation.

## **Conclusion**

From the outset of the study, I utilized a social justice lens that depicted an all-expenses-paid education as a tremendous opportunity for underrepresented students who otherwise might not be able to afford college. After a careful investigation of one cohort of Genesis students, it became evident that, despite their racial diversity, students with average and robust postsecondary options have more in common with the current student body than was initially understood (e.g., parents in military, strong academic preparation, civic minded, challenge oriented, and relatively affluent). According to CIRP data from freshmen within the graduating classes of 2010-2015, 52% of Coast Guard Academy

freshmen had estimated parental incomes greater than \$100,000. Thus, when it comes to elite students considering the Coast Guard Academy, it is important to distinguish *underrepresented* students from *underprivileged* students. In other words, the recruitment of students from all socioeconomic statuses highlights yet another challenge in attracting a truly diverse student body.

If the nation's military forces are most effective when drawing from every ethnic and cultural population, it is critical for the service academies to become desirable to students from two key demographic subgroups: those without prior military experience in the family and those whose household incomes are less than \$100,000. If earlier intervention efforts are successful, a higher concentration of average-option and robust-option students might be achieved, ultimately providing the Academy with a stronger, more diverse pool of applicants.

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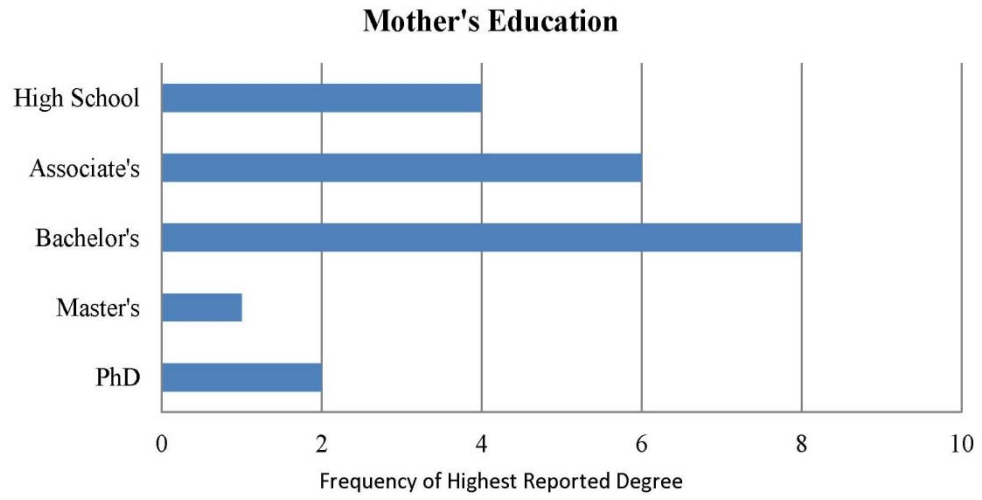
## APPENDIX A

### SUBJECT RACE/ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION



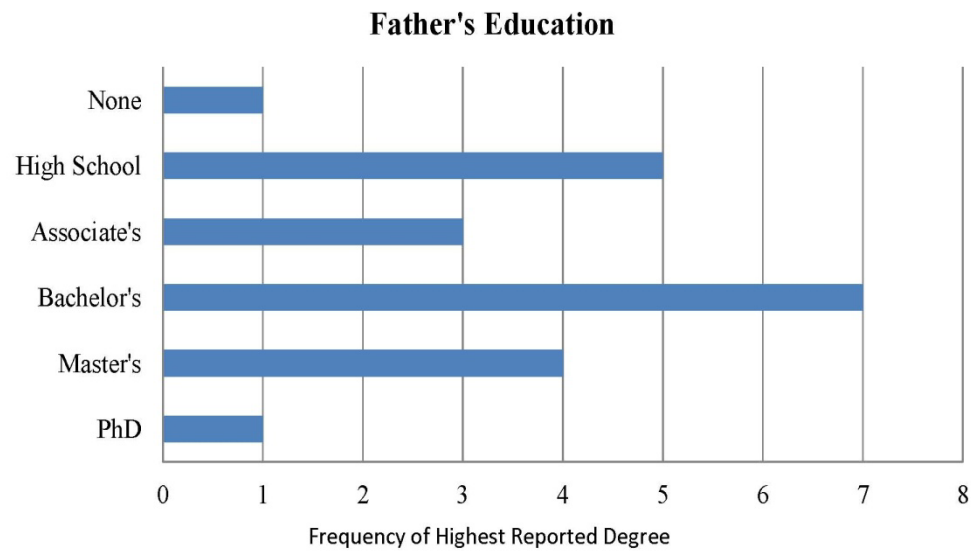
## APPENDIX B

### MOTHER'S EDUCATION



## APPENDIX C

### FATHER'S EDUCATION



## APPENDIX D

### INITIAL GENESIS PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1) How did you first learn about the U.S. Coast Guard Academy? (Background question probing for initial exposure to CGA. Was it institutional or individually driven?)
- 2) What are some of your personal reasons for considering the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in your list of potential colleges?
- 3) Is there anyone who has had a significant influence, either positive or negative, on your educational aspirations? Is there anyone else? (Probe for parents, siblings, teachers, etc.)
- 4) Is there anyone who has had a significant influence, either positive or negative, on your desire to serve in the United States military? Is there anyone else?
- 5) What has been your parents' level of involvement in your college choice process?
- 6) How have your friends influenced your decision to pursue a college education?
- 7) Where has the majority of your information about college come from? (Probe for individual or institutionally influenced sources.)
- 8) How many colleges/military academies have you completed applications for?  
(Ask student to list these schools.)
- 9) Please rank these schools in order of your current interest level. (Probe as to why schools are ranked as they are; inquire whether they have participated in other admission intervention programs at these other schools.)

- 10) What factors, if any, do you consider when prioritizing your wish list of colleges?  
(Probe for individual or institutional attributes. If more than one factor, ask them to rank their importance.)
- 11) Have you personally visited each school you have applied to? Why or why not?  
Do you intend to visit them? Why or why not?
- 12) Are you confident you will be accepted to at least one of your top three choices?  
(Probe to see if they have a “backup” school; What attributes do they base their confidence or lack of confidence on?)
- 13) Do you think others have always expected you to go or not to go to college?  
(Probe for parents, teachers, counselors, peers.)
- 14) Do you think others have always expected you to serve or not to serve in the military? (Probe for parents, teachers, counselors, peers.)
- 15) Have you been encouraged or discouraged by others to pursue or not pursue a college education because of your racial/ethnic background?
- 16) Are there any expectations of you by your parents or other people because of your gender? What kind of influences have these expectations had on your decision to attend college?

## APPENDIX E

### SECOND GENESIS PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1) Have you arrived at a final college choice? If so, what college have you decided on?
- 2) What are some of the factors that have influenced your college choice?
- 3) What do you feel has had the biggest influence on your final college choice?
- 4) In making your final choice, who are some of the people that you have talked to about college (parents vs. teachers/peers/counselors, etc.)? What kind of influence have these people had on your final college choice?
- 5) Please rank the schools that you completed applications for in order of your interest level, one being your top choice. (Compare to previous interview; if different, ask why.)
- 6) Are there some factors that were not as important when you were first thinking of applying to college that have become more important now that you are making your final choice (e.g., financial aid, proximity, etc.)?
- 7) What have been some of the difficulties that you have encountered as you've navigated through the college choice process?
- 8) What role have your parents/peers/teachers/counselors/significant others played in shaping your final choice?
- 9) What role, if any, did the Genesis Invitational program have in your college choice decision?

- 10) Were there programs similar to the Genesis Invitational program at other schools in your consideration set that you participated in? (Probe to determine if these programs served to attract or diminish student interest.)
- 11) How satisfied do you feel with the colleges you applied to? Are there any other colleges you wished you would have applied to?
- 12) Can you foresee any factors that may prevent you from attending the school of your choice?
- 13) How confident are you that you will enroll at the institution of your choice?

## APPENDIX F

### INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/LITERATURE REVIEW MAP

#### INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/LIT REVIEW MAP

LIT REVIEW TOPIC	INTERVIEW QUESTION
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	1) How did you first learn about the U. S. Coast Guard Academy? (Background question probing for initial exposure to CGA. Was it institutional or individually driven?)
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	2) What are some of your personal reasons for considering the U. S. Coast Guard Academy in your college consideration set?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	3) Is there anyone who has had a significant influence, either positive or negative, on your educational aspirations? (Probe for parents, siblings, teachers, etc.)
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	4) Is there anyone who has had a significant influence, either positive or negative, on your desire to serve in the United States military?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	5) What has been your parents' level of involvement in your college choice process?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	6) How have your friends influenced your decision to pursue a college education?
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	7) Where has the majority of your information about college come from? (probe for individual or institutionally influenced sources)
CapHab & ObSup	8) How many colleges/military academies have you completed applications for? (ask student to list these schools)
CapHab & ObSup	9) Please rank these schools in order of your current interest level, one being your top choice. (probe as to why schools are ranked as they are; inquire whether they have participated in other admission intervention programs at these other schools)
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	10) What factors, if any, do you consider when prioritizing your wish list of colleges? (Probe for individual or institutional attributes. If more than one factor, ask them to rank their importance.)
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	11) Have you personally visited each school you have applied to, why or why not? Do you intend to visit them, why or why not?
CapHab & ObSup	12) Are you confident you will be accepted to at least one of your top three choices? (probe to see if they have a "backup" school, what attributes do they base their confidence or lack of confidence on?)
CapHab	13) Do you think others have always expected you to go or not to go to college? (probe for parents, teachers, counselors, peers)
CapHab	14) Do you think others have always expected you to serve or not to serve in the military? (probe for parents, teachers, counselors, peers)
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	15) Have you been encouraged or discouraged by others to pursue or not pursue a college education because of your racial/ethnic background?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	16) Are there any expectations of you by your parents or other people because of your gender? What kind of influences have these expectations had on your decision to attend college?

#### SECOND GENESIS PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

LIT REVIEW TOPIC	INTERVIEW QUESTION
Overarching Question	1) Have you arrived at a final college choice? If so, what college have you decided on?
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	2) What are some of the factors that have influenced your college choice?
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	3) What do you feel has had the biggest influence on your final college choice?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	4) In making your final choice, who are some of the people that you have talked to about college (parents vs. teachers/peers/counselors, etc.)? What kind of influence have these people had on your final college choice?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	5) Please rank the schools that you completed application for in order of your interest level, one being your top choice. (compare to previous interview, if different, ask why)
Inst. & Ind.	6) Are there some factors that were not as important when you were first thinking of applying to college that have become more important now that you are making your final choice (i.e. financial aid, proximity, etc.)?
ObSup	7) What have been some of the difficulties that you have encountered as you've navigated through the college choice process?
Ind., CapHab, & ObSup	8) What role have your parents/peers/teachers/counselors/significant others, played in shaping your final choice?
Inst.	9) What role, if any, did the Genesis Invitational Program have on your college choice decision? (Created by DR)
Inst.	10) Were there programs, similar to the Genesis Invitational Program, at other schools in your consideration set that you participated in? (probe to determine if these programs served to attract or diminish student interest) (Created by DR)

#### GENESIS PROGRAM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

LIT REVIEW TOPIC	INTERVIEW QUESTION
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	1) How do prospective cadets learn about the U. S. Coast Guard Academy?
Inst.	2) What individuals or group of individuals, if any, influence a minority candidate's decision to attend college?
Ind., CapHab, ObSup	3) What institutional characteristics, if any, influence a minority student's enrollment decisions? (without listing them, probe for institutional attributes such as academic programs, tuition costs, academic reputation, admission department outreach programs, location, size and social atmosphere)
Inst., Ind., CapHab, ObSup	4) What individual characteristics, if any, influence a minority student's enrollment decisions? (without listing them, probe for individual characteristics such as socioeconomic status, academic preparation, parent's level of education, peer support and ethnicity)
Inst. & ObSup	5) In your opinion, what factors, if any, are considered by prospective minority students when prioritizing their college wish list? (if more than one factor is listed, have them rank in order of importance)
Inst. & ObSup	6) To what extent, if any, does the Genesis Invitational Program affect a prospective student's decision to accept or reject appointment to the U. S. Coast Guard Academy?

Topic Codes

Inst.=Institutional Attributes

Ind.=Individual Attributes

ObSup=Obstacles & Supports

CapHab=Cultural Capital and/or Habitus



**APPENDIX G**

**CONTACT SUMMARY SHEET**

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_ Site: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Visit: \_\_\_\_\_ Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Written by: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) in each of the target questions you had for this contact.

Question:

Information:

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important in this contact?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What new (or remaining) target questions do you have in considering the next contact with this site?

## **APPENDIX H**

### **INITIAL STATEMENT OF BIAS**

This statement is written to provide a description of myself as a researcher and the relevant life experiences that may impact this inquiry project. This statement seeks to provide insight regarding my thought processes in an effort to minimize threats to validity in this research. My inquiry project is centered on the enrollment decisions of underrepresented and first generation students at the United States Coast Guard Academy. This topic is especially motivating to me as a faculty member at the Academy. In the last five years I have noticed that the Academy has experienced unprecedented attention regarding its lack of underrepresented students. My enthusiasm for this research is based on the hope that the spotlight directed from Congress and other politicians has fostered an environment ripe for discovery. While the goal of this inquiry is to understand why underrepresented and first generation students choose to attend the Coast Guard Academy over other college options, there is undeniable pride in the potential knowledge gained regarding the Academy's current practice of recruiting and retaining underrepresented and first generation students. As a teacher and coach I have had numerous life experiences which have shaped my view of diversity in selective educational institutions. In order to yield an honest and meaningful research project, these experiences need to be identified and bracketed.

I was raised in a White, middle-class family in which neither parent was educated beyond the high school level. However, from a very young age, education and a commitment to lifelong learning were fostered. I was educated in a public school system until eighth grade, in a predominantly white suburb of Connecticut. I enrolled at a

private catholic high school at a significant expense to my parents who worked multiple jobs to cover the cost of tuition. The motivation for attending this parochial school was not the Catholic faith, but rather the high acceptance rate to four-year colleges as well as broader athletic opportunities. This school was significantly more diverse (25% students of color) than my previous experience, yet there was a noticeably higher socioeconomic status among its students. High school was the first time I noted the connection between affluence and educational opportunity. From there, I attended college in Massachusetts, where I studied Physical Education as an undergraduate student before pursuing my Master's in Education. Although I completed several student-teaching assignments in diverse urban schools, I have never attended or worked in a school system with a high number of underrepresented and first generation students or teachers.

I began working at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in the summer of 1996. I was hired as a physical education instructor and head coach of the men's and women's track and field program. Having been an intercollegiate sport coach for 15 years (I retired from coaching in 2011 when I became an administrator), part of my pay, promotion and tenure was based on the successful recruitment of student-athletes. Working with the Department of Admissions each year to recruit student-athletes has been enlightening. I have witnessed a dilemma between what the Academy "should do" versus what it "can do."

As a federal academy, Coast Guard carefully negotiates the legality of giving consideration to race or ethnicity in the admissions process. I have noticed a high priority for students with strong math and science backgrounds who can fill the Coast Guard's need for 70% Science and Technical Majors (STEM), and I have often wondered if this

has had some effect on the pursuit of a racially representative student body. STEM majors often earn acceptance based on transcripts laden with AP courses or high performance on standardized test scores. In my opinion, those particular academic preparation attributes seem to be closely related to higher levels of socioeconomic status, which in turn favors predominately white students.

**APPENDIX I**  
**STUDY TIMELINE**

**Time Schedule**

December 2011:	Dissertation Proposal Defense IRB approval Researcher Bias Statement drafted
January 2012:	Presentation to Genesis participants Participants requested/consent forms completed Commence first in-depth phone interviews
February 2012:	Continue first round interviews Begin transcription, early coding and themes identified
March 2012:	Begin review of Genesis applications and admissions applications Demographic data of participants gathered, follow up phone interviews conducted
April 2012:	Continue data analysis, prepare second interview notes
May 2012:	Conduct second in-depth phone interviews
June 2012:	Follow-up phone interviews, coding and transcription Final listing of college choice decisions drafted Actual college decisions listed
July-August 2012:	Begin coding for second interviews
Sept-Oct 2012:	Dissertation writing process
Nov-Dec 2012:	Committee review and editing process
January 2013:	Oral defense of dissertation