

HOW HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXTS SHAPE THE COLLEGE CHOICES  
OF HIGH-ACHIEVING, LOW-SES STUDENTS:  
WHY A “COLLEGE-GOING” CULTURE IS NOT ENOUGH

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## **ABSTRACT**

### HOW HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXTS SHAPE THE COLLEGE CHOICES OF HIGH-ACHIEVING, LOW-SES STUDENTS: WHY A “COLLEGE-GOING” CULTURE IS NOT ENOUGH

Shani Adia Evans

Annette Lareau

While many studies of college choice have focused on whether high schools have a general “college-going culture,” this dissertation considers the specific nature of college preparation and support that is conducive to elite college enrollment. This qualitative study examines the college preparation and choice process of high achieving students in two urban, selective admission public high schools where most students were from poor or working class families. Both schools had a college going-culture but neither had developed an elite college-going culture. As a result, some students did not apply to elite colleges when they were qualified. Other students did not have the opportunity to adequately prepare for elite college admissions, despite very high academic achievement.

This study relied on in depth interviews and observations. Interviews with thirty high achieving 12<sup>th</sup> grade students provide a detailed account of their course taking, college application and choice process. Interviews with fifteen teachers shed light on how they advised students about college preparation and choice. In addition, participant

observation in counselors' offices and in college recruitment sessions revealed how students learned about the landscape of higher education.

I identify three aspects of the high school experience that deterred elite college enrollment among high achieving students. First, students were unable to access high-level courses that would facilitate their access to elite colleges. Additionally, students and teachers alike were often unaware of the importance of taking high-level courses, such as calculus, for elite college admission. Second, students at both schools had minimal access to recruiters from elite colleges. Not only were recruiters from non-elite and non-selective colleges more likely to visit, they were more effective in addressing students' concerns about cost, transportation and standard of living in college. Finally, many teachers and students doubted that an elite college education was desirable. Teachers had limited familiarity with elite colleges. Moreover, because of the concerns about student debt, teachers actively deterred students from any private institution. Overall, the study helps to explain the role high schools can play in limiting students' opportunities to enroll in elite colleges and universities.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

On a Wednesday afternoon, a group of ninth grade students filed into a classroom with book bags on their backs and confused looks on their faces. Their health teacher was absent and a sign on his door told them to come to this classroom instead, where they normally had English. Desks were arranged in circle around the room. On one of the desks at the front of the room was a stack of papers, a photocopied article that students were supposed to read in the teacher's absence. The headline read, "Colleges Don't Buy Happiness: Elite Schools Have No Monopoly on Thriving Graduates" (Belkin 2014). The article described findings from a "poll of 30,000" about the life satisfaction of students who attended different types of colleges. As students read, I walked around the classroom. I had been in the room to observe the previous English class, but I elected to stay in the room with the health class when I saw the subject of their reading. I asked students, "What is this article about?" Some students chatted with friends and barely looked at the article. But for those who read it, the message was clear, as one student stated, "Some people think certain colleges are better than others. But, it doesn't really matter where you go."

This perspective on college is strikingly different from one that dominates elite high schools serving students of high socioeconomic status (SES) (Khan 2010; McDonough 1994; Weis, Cipollone, Jackson 2014). In schools that serve high SES students, it is expected that the most academically successful students will pursue enrollment in an elite college or university. Elite colleges are perceived by those in the upper middle class to be the highest quality and most desirable institutions. Magazines such as U.S. News and World Report and independent firms including Barron's affirm

the prestige afforded to elite institutions. Graduates of elite institutions are overrepresented in prestigious and lucrative professions, such as medicine, investment banking, and national politics. These highly selective institutions of higher education admit between 10% and 30% of applicants.

The goal of this dissertation is to identify school-based factors that influence whether high achieving students prepare for, and apply to, elite colleges and universities. Specifically, I examine how the school environment shapes students' college choice sets. The study was conducted in Allegiance and Romano high schools, two academically selective, yet high poverty and under-resourced, schools. Considering the experiences of high achieving students, like those at Allegiance and Romano, with elite college admissions is important for understanding processes of social reproduction. Students who graduate from elite colleges and universities have increased access to high status occupations of power and influence. Thus, studying why non-elites have unequal access to elite colleges contributes to our understanding of how social and cultural elites retain social, cultural, political, and economic power. Although it is not clear whether elite colleges provide better education or occupational preparation than other colleges, they are unique in their provision of access to well-paying and prestigious careers (Dale and Krueger 2011; Eide, Brewer, and Ehrenberg 1998; Fosnacht 2014; Hoxby 2001). Thus, a key focus of this dissertation is explaining the factors that ensure that most low SES students who do well in school are nonetheless unable to access institutions where students are most likely to acquire social status.

Part of the mission of elite secondary schools that serve high SES students is to prepare students for the very competitive elite college admissions process (Persell and Cookson 1985; Khan 2010; Stevens 2009; Weis, Cipollone, and Jackson 2014). On the

other hand, the message in the Wall Street Journal article – that attending elite colleges is not necessarily desirable – undergirds the college preparation and choice process in the two schools that are the subject of this study, which serve predominantly low SES students. I find that this aspect of the schools' culture shaped students' course taking, college research, and college application choices. Both schools had a college going-culture but neither had developed, what I call an *elite college-going culture*.

Elite colleges are particularly apt for putting its graduates on a path toward prestigious careers. Thus on some measures elite colleges have better educational outcomes compared to non-elite colleges (Eide, Brewer, and Ehrenberg 1998; Kingston and Smart 1990; Rivera 2011). This difference is largely due to the selection process – elite colleges enroll academically successful high school students who continue to achieve in college. However, there are some benefits that cannot be explained by selection alone. Students who attend elite colleges graduate at higher rates and go to more prestigious graduate programs, leading to more prestigious jobs. Elite colleges provide students with exposure to elite social networks. Graduating from an elite college especially improves outcomes for low SES and minority students compared to similar students in other types of institutions (Eide, Brewer, and Ehrenberg 1998; Dale and Krueger 2011).

However, the findings detailed above do not imply that elite colleges are, by definition, higher quality institutions of learning than non-elite colleges. Rather, research on elite colleges shows that these institutions provide pathways to legitimate elite status for a select few (Collins, 1971). Graduating from an elite college helps students from high SES families solidify and affirm their elite status. Elite colleges are symbolically valued as a rite of passage for academically successful students from high SES families

(McDonough 1994; Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). As McDonough states, “Many upper-middle-class parents and students are cued in to attending the “right college,” and believe that the best investment in college will come from an acceptance at a well-known, elite institution” (1994: 433). Some high SES parents would feel disappointed if their children attended a college that was not elite (Cooper 2014). In addition to legitimating the status of high SES students, attending an elite college can facilitate social mobility for low SES students.

Studies show that counselors and teachers in elite high schools that serve high SES students perceive elite colleges to be the best and work to ensure that high achieving students are prepared to win a spot at one of these institutions (Khan 2010; Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). However, previous studies have paid inadequate attention to how teachers and counselors at schools serving low-SES students approach supporting high achieving students in the college application and choice process. Little attention has been paid to educators’ perceptions of the desirability of different colleges or how teachers’ actions enhance or limit students’ ability to enroll at elite institutions. The guidance that student receive in school may be an important mechanism of social reproduction. Previous studies suggest that some students in under resourced schools lack access to adults who can help them negotiate the college application process (Roderick et al. 2011). However, these studies do not consider the exact nature of the guidance teachers and counselors provide students. They do not decipher specifically what steps teachers and counselors advise students to take. This study addresses this gap in the sociological literature.

The research presented here provides an in-depth examination of the college choice process among thirty high achieving 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in two selective but

under-resourced urban high schools in a large urban school district. Students enrolled in either school needed to have a strong academic record in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The research participants were from poor, working class and lower middle class families. In addition to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, I conducted interviews with twenty 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. However, the student analysis concentrates on 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were academically successful in high school. Between the two high schools I interviewed a total of fifteen educators. I also conducted participant observation in ninth grade classrooms, in the counselors' offices, and in college recruiter presentations.

### ***Background***

It is well documented that low-SES students are underrepresented in elite colleges. Studies offer insight into the high school factors that determine whether students enroll in college or not (Belasco 2013; Hill 2008; Klugman 2012). Researchers consider how elite high schools facilitate students' enrollment in elite colleges. But, less work has considered how high schools specifically prepare disadvantaged students for admission to elite colleges. This dissertation articulates school-based processes, many of which deterred high achieving students from enrolling in elite colleges. These findings help to explain some of the mechanisms that prevent non-elites from accessing elite institutions of higher education.

Most low-SES students who are eligible to attend elite and highly selective colleges do not apply (Hoxby and Avery 2012). High achieving, low SES students are more likely to attend less-selective and non-selective colleges and universities. Some researchers refer to students who attend colleges where the average achievement is lower than their own as "undermatched." A growing number of studies have enumerated the preponderance of undermatching among students from low-SES

families (Hoxby and Avery 2012, Roderick et al.2011). For example, Hoxby and Avery (2012) showed that for every application that a highly selective college received from a low SES student there are 15 applications from high SES students, while the ratio in the population is only 1:2. Additionally, Hoxby and Avery identified characteristics of the high schools that were more successful at sending low SES to elite colleges (2012). For example, low SES students who attended high schools in cities, rather than rural areas or suburbs, were more likely to apply to elite colleges. Research on undermatching has focused on documenting the extent of undermatching and the college choices that lead to undermatching. However, the contributions of schools, and teacher guidance, have been undeveloped.

Other studies explain how some high school environments facilitate college enrollment. For example, urban high schools with a stronger “college-going culture” produce high rates of 4-year college enrollment among graduates (Roderick et al.2011). Conceptualizations of “college-going culture” are broad in their focus on how high schools advocate enrollment in colleges of any type (Corwin and Tierney 2007). However, it is quite possible to suggest that a high school has a college-going culture without considering the types of colleges that are being promoted in the high school. Researchers seem to presume that elite colleges are included among those advocated by high school educators; however, I show that this is not always the case. Thus, researchers need to look more closely at what is meant by a “college-going culture.”

At both of the schools that are examined in this study there was a college-going culture, but there was not an elite college-going culture. I find three aspects of the school context that were incompatible with an elite college culture. First, many of the teachers were unfamiliar with elite colleges and their admissions processes. Second, at both

schools some teachers were suspicious or unimpressed by elite colleges. Third, the educators did not actively encourage and support students through the arduous process of preparing for or applying to elite colleges. I identify three ways that the absence of an elite college culture limited opportunities for high achieving students to prepare for elite college admission: the non-elite college-going culture in the high school shaped students experiences with course taking, with learning about colleges, and in the process of deciding where to apply.

First, I find that teachers' practices concerning course offerings and access did not facilitate elite college preparation. Elite college admission requires that students engage a rigorous academic curriculum. Yet, many students failed to take important classes such as foreign language, pre-calculus or calculus. Thus, students' academic experiences in high school prepared them for admission to a four-year college, but not for an elite college. Since the schools were not focused on preparing students for elite admission, there was a lack of concern among teachers about limited opportunities to take courses that were preferred for admission to elite colleges. In some cases, teachers deterred students from taking advanced courses. Moreover, severe budget constraints limited teachers' ability to offer the courses that students needed for elite college admission. Thus, compounding teacher practices were resource constraints that limited access to advanced courses. The structure of course opportunities was not conducive to elite college admissions. The course taking practices and procedures did not suggest an elite college-going culture.

Second, I find that students at both schools had limited access to information about elite colleges. Students identified college admissions counselors and recruiters as their main source of information about colleges. The high school context helped



determine students' exposure to college recruiters. The counselors made appointments for dozens of college representatives to visit their school. However, at both schools counselors and students had little contact with recruiters from elite colleges. Instead, students at both schools had frequent contact with less selective and non-selective colleges and universities.

Additionally, few teachers advocated elite college application among students. Drawing on their own experience as first generation college students and those of previous graduates, the teachers encouraged students to choose the college that they assumed would minimize later debt. Many educators advocated public institutions in order to avoid high tuition at private colleges. Some were expressly suspicious of elite institutions. Students who were interested in applying to elite colleges were typically encouraged to do so by family, rather than by adults in school. The high school environments were college-oriented but did not provide opportunities for students to learn about, or develop a favorable view of, the landscape of elite institutions.

Third, the staff at the two high schools provided limited support around the elite college application process. Although educators did what was necessary to ensure that students were admitted to some college, including writing reference letters and sending transcripts to colleges, educators provided minimal assistance with aspects of the admissions process that were specific to elite colleges, including writing essays and taking SAT subject tests. Additionally, educators did not work with students to help them develop their college choice sets. Students made application decisions alone or in consultation with parents. Many students undermatched in their college choices. Without an elite college-going culture that pushed high achieving students to apply to "reach"

schools, most students only applied to institutions where they knew they would be admitted.

It is important to note that this study focuses specifically on high achieving students. I consider how two urban high schools serving poor, working class and lower middle class students, prepare these students for the college selection and application process. My goal is to understand more about undermatching and why capable students from non-elite families so often opt for less selective or non-selective colleges. I endeavor to explain the college preparatory experiences that high achieving students may experience in schools serving low SES students.

To summarize, previous research fails to make an important distinction between college-going culture and elite college-going culture in American high schools. In this study, I consider two research questions. First, what are the school-based factors that determine whether high achieving students prepare for, and apply to, elite colleges and universities? Secondly, what are the mechanisms of social reproduction that prevent students from low SES families from accessing elite institutions of higher education? I find that there was not an elite college-going culture in either of the two schools that are the subject of this study. The absence of an elite college-going culture can be observed in course options and availability, students' limited opportunity to learn about elite colleges, and minimal staff support of the elite college application process.

### ***Outline of Chapters***

In Chapter 2, I describe existing research on the under-representation of low SES students in elite colleges and universities. I begin by discussing social reproduction as a theoretical lens through which to interpret underrepresentation of low SES students in elite colleges in universities. I then summarize disparities in elite college enrollment

between high SES and low SES students. I present research on the benefits of attending elite colleges. Finally, I summarize research on the high school guidance and college choice process, as well as college recruitment strategies. In these studies, the question of how schools that serve low SES students support elite college preparation and choice is under-examined.

In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the research methods used, including interviews and observations in two high schools. I discuss my role in the field. I describe the design of the research project and research sample. I describe the methods by which I collected data and the analytical procedures

In Chapter 4 I describe Allegiance and Romano high schools and Northeastern school district. I show that the two schools that are the subject of the study enrolled higher achieving students in the district and featured a college-going culture. The study took place in a large, under resourced urban school district. Divestment in public education had a significant impact on student experiences at the two schools. The lack of resources in the school district limited students' academic opportunities. Nonetheless, in the context of those limitations, teachers advanced a college-going culture.

In Chapter 5, I show that the staff at both schools was not focused on providing top students with opportunities to take courses that facilitated elite college admission. Instead, they were focused on preparing all students to reach the minimum requirements for graduation. The students who did access high level courses were assertive self-advocates and sometimes went against the advice of their teachers. Although teachers wanted to provide course opportunities to students, they were not specifically oriented towards offering classes that helped with the elite college admissions process

In Chapter 6, I discuss students' college information gathering. For students to apply to elite colleges, they had to know about them and be convinced of their desirability. Previous studies have not sufficiently investigated this crucial point. I find that students had minimal exposure to information that would make elite colleges appear desirable. The majority of recruiters that visited either school came from less selective and non-selective colleges. These recruiters were particularly attuned to students' concerns about college, including cost, staying close to home, and becoming employable.

In this chapter I also describe an exercise in which I asked students to rank colleges according to their reputation for being "good schools." Some students had opinions about which two or three colleges were "best." Beyond that, students were unable to make status distinctions. Moreover, the colleges that students thought were the best were often not at the top of the dominant status hierarchy. These findings suggest that students did not develop an appreciation for the dominant higher education status hierarchy in their respective high schools.

In Chapter 7, I present the college enrollment choices of a subset of students. At both schools, Teachers and some students viewed elite college enrollment as comparable to someone buying an expensive car that one cannot afford. They saw elite colleges as frivolous luxury that only the wealthy could afford.

In Chapter 8, I summarize the research findings and their implications. I find that even in "college bound high schools" elite colleges are not promoted. Most teachers and counselors were unfamiliar or unimpressed by the higher education status hierarchy. Moreover, adults' actions did not guide students toward elite colleges. The results suggest that organizational culture – specifically whether or not an elite college culture is

in effect – plays an important role in students’ college application decisions. I argue that a stronger distinction between less-selective college preparation and choice and elite college preparation is needed would improve research on the effect of high school context on college outcomes.

The findings also suggest that more attention should be paid to how different actors interpret institutional status hierarchies. This study suggests that researchers would be mistaken to presume that every individual is knowledgeable about dominant status hierarchy. Therefore, it would be erroneous assume that everyone sees the status hierarchy as legitimate. My findings show that for some school staff and students, neither was true.

## CHAPTER 2: Review Of Existing Research

In the United States, higher education leads to improved occupational and social outcomes. For example, college graduates experience lower rates of unemployment (Hout et al. 2011). In addition, Torche (2011) finds that occupational options of people with college degrees are not constrained by family background. In contrast, students without degrees who come from low SES families are limited in their options for work. Moreover, researchers contend that the increase in income associated with college graduation more than makes up for the cost of college education. One study estimates that in a forty-year work life, a man with a college degree would earn \$1.1 million more than high school graduates (Hout 2012). In addition, the students that reap the most benefit from a college education are those who are least likely to go to college (Hout 2012). Thus while education policy tends to give the greatest opportunities to the highest achieving students, some research suggests that it is those in the middle, and those who are not expected to go to college get the most return from a college degree (Hout 2012).

Colleges and universities in the United States are organized in a status hierarchy (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008). This hierarchy is legitimated by rankings in the *U.S. News and World Report* and *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*. At the top of the status hierarchy are elite institutions, including the eight Ivy League universities, elite liberal arts colleges and prestigious flagship public universities, such as the University of Michigan. Elite institutions enroll academically successful students, typically admitting less than 20% of applicants. High-achieving high school students are most likely to enroll at elite colleges and universities (Hearn 1991; Karen 2002). However, high

achieving students from low SES families are much less likely to enroll in elite colleges than their high achieving, high SES, peers (Hoxby and Avery 2012). Thus, sociologists of education have endeavored to explain the under-representation of students from low SES families in elite institutions.

As I explain in more detail in this chapter, there is ample evidence that the high school context influences students' college preparation, application and enrollment. For example, studies reveal variation in high school counseling practices and course taking opportunities (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001; Hill 2008; Klugman 2013; Smith 2011). However, previous studies generally fail to consider variation in educators' orientation towards elite colleges. Rather, previous studies take for granted that any school with a "college-going culture" would prepare high achieving students for elite college enrollment. However, this expectation is unsubstantiated. This study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing how the college-going culture at Allegiance and Romano high schools is distinct from an elite college-going culture.

In this chapter, I discuss existing research that concerns the under-representation of low SES students in elite colleges and universities. I begin by discussing social reproduction theory as a lens through which to examine the underrepresentation of low SES students in elite colleges and universities. I then describe the extent of the problem by enumerating disparities in elite college enrollment between high SES and low SES students. There are clear advantages associated attending elite colleges; I discuss these in order to show why the underrepresentation of low SES students in these institutions is important. Next I summarize research on course taking, high school guidance, and the college choice process. In these studies, researchers offer evidence to explain the underrepresentation of low SES students in

elite high colleges. However, the question of how educators vary in their orientation towards elite colleges, and in the specific nature of their college guidance, remains under-examined.

I also discuss college recruitment and admission practices of highly-selective and elite colleges. Elite colleges are different from non-selective and less selective colleges in that they require higher levels of academic achievement and greater academic rigor in high school. The application process to elite colleges also tends to be more complicated, including additional essays and interviews. Thus, by reviewing these characteristics of elite colleges, one can develop a definition of an elite college-going culture.

### ***Bourdieu and Social Reproduction***

Social reproduction theory offers tools with which to analyze the underrepresentation of students from low SES families in elite and highly selective colleges. Social reproduction theory predicts that members of high status groups, such as high SES families would dominate elite social spaces, including top colleges (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). This is because the rules of engagement in schools reflect the social and cultural norms of the dominant social group. Therefore, students from low SES families have fewer opportunities in their home and community life to develop the social and cultural skills that facilitate success in, and access to, educational opportunities (Lareau 2011; Calarco 2011; Jack 2016). These skills are a form of cultural capital, which is defined as “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (Lamont and Lareau 1988: 156).



Moreover, through their life experiences, people develop a habitus, which describes a person's pattern of thought, taste, preferences, and dispositions (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Habitus is a mediating notion that helps us revoke the commonsense duality between the individual and the social by capturing "the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality," that is, the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinate ways, which then guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu (Wacquant 2005).

Students who grow up in an upper middle class family develop a habitus that presumes college enrollment (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Kaufman 2005). Moreover, throughout their lives, upper middle class students in elite schools develop an appreciation and desire for an elite education (Cookson and Persell 1985; Khan 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). Anxiety among upper middle class families about whether or not their children will be admitted to an elite college is well documented (Cooper 2014; Kaminer 2014).

However, students from low SES families do not seem to experience the same anxiety that high SES students do. Mullen supposes that low SES families look at elite colleges and may think, "I'm not good enough to go there" or "I could never afford that great college" (Mullen 2009). However it also plausible that some people from low SES families, as well as teachers and others may not display the same preferences for elite colleges that high SES students, teachers and parents do. Therefore, an examination of the college preparation, guidance and choice processes in schools should consider how various actors perceive the higher education landscape and the desirability of elite and highly selective colleges.

### ***Higher Education Disparities***

Post secondary educational attainment is stratified by social class and by race. For example, among students whose parental income was \$29,000 or less, 16% completed a bachelor's degree in 6 years. The comparable figure for students whose family income was above \$100,000 was 58% (Pell Institute 2011). Inequality in educational attainment can be partially attributed to lower academic achievement among lower income and minority students (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001). However, disparities in higher education enrollment and degree completion persist even among high achieving students (Roderick et al. 2011; Hoxby and Avery 2012).

Students from low SES families experience higher rates of “undermatch” than their peers from higher SES families. Research about college “undermatch” considers the extent to which students enroll in colleges where the average academic achievement is lower than their own (Hoxby and Avery 2012; Smith, Pender, and Howell 2013). Students who undermatch meet the admissions requirements of more selective colleges than the one where they choose to enroll. For example, an analysis of two nationally representative datasets found that 40% of students enrolled in colleges that are less selective than their grades and test scores would predict (Smith et al.2012). Smith and colleagues used Barron's Admissions Competitive Index to categorize colleges into levels: Very Selective, Selective, Somewhat Selective, Nonselective, and Two-Year College<sup>1</sup>. The authors examined grade point average (GPA), SAT or ACT scores, and participation in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate courses to

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<sup>1</sup> Barron's is a test preparation publication company that publishes books on preparing for the SAT and other tests. Barron's also publishes a book, and maintains a website, that categorizes colleges according to their selectivity and the average academic achievement of enrolled students. “Most competitive” is Barron's highest category and it includes colleges that admit less than 30% of applicants. The other categories are highly competitive, very competitive, competitive, and less competitive, which include two year colleges.

assess students' eligibility for admission to colleges at each level. Sixteen percent of the students attended a college that was at least two selectivity levels below their matched level (Smith, Pender and Howell 2012). Using very similar research methods, a study of college enrollment among Chicago public school students came to a similar conclusion: approximately 40% of students undermatched (Roderick et al. 2008).

Students from low SES families are more likely to undermatch than their peers from higher SES families. A national study indicates that 50% of students from low SES families undermatch, compared to 34% for students from higher SES families (Smith, Pender and Howell 2012). Moreover, students from high SES families are overrepresented in elite colleges. Students from the top SES quartile comprise nearly 70% of students in the most selective colleges. In contrast, students from the bottom SES quartile make up less than 5% of enrollment in the most selective colleges (Bastedo and Jaquette 2011). Moreover, parental education is an important predictor of undermatch. Students whose parents completed a high school diploma or less and those whose parents completed some college were more likely to undermatch than students whose parents had completed a college degree (Smith, Pender and Howell 2012).

White students experience higher rates of undermatch than black, Latino, or Asian students (Hoxby and Avery 2012; Smith, Pender and Howell 2012). Asian students who are eligible for elite college admission tend to enroll in elite institutions. In contrast, black and Latino students are less likely to undermatch because fewer of these students meet the criteria for admission to highly selective colleges. This finding suggests that black and Latino students have less opportunity to prepare for the elite college admissions process.

Hoxby and Avery find that most qualified low SES students do not apply to any selective college (2012). This leads researchers to argue that student choices produce undermatching. For example, Dillon and Smith write, “student decisions drive mismatch (i.e. undermatch) in almost all cases” (2013: 4). They make this argument based on evidence showing that students undermatch when they choose not to apply or enroll in an elite college. This is not an inaccurate analysis: students choose where to apply and enroll. However, by emphasizing the choices of students and parents, the undermatch research underemphasizes the potential for teachers and counselors to influence students’ college-relevant choices. Some undermatch research presumes that high achieving students will, by nature of their academic skill, take steps required to become eligible for elite college admission (Dillon and Smith 2013). Other studies suggest that low-SES students apply to lower status institutions because they lack access to the information and support that could help them choose better-matched schools (Roderick et al. 2008). In response, policy research group MDRC created an intervention to reduce undermatching that included information sharing, individualized advising and application support (Sherwin 2012). However, what is absent in these studies is an analysis of educators’ perceptions of the higher education landscape, as well as their efforts to facilitate elite college enrollment for low SES students.

### ***Elite Status in Higher Education***

Elite colleges and universities are highly selective in their admissions process. These colleges admit between 10% than 30% of applicants and typically admit students who are in the top 10-20% of their high school class (Center for Public Education, 2010). Elite institutions of higher education include Ivy League universities, as well as some liberal arts colleges, private universities, and top tier public universities. There is

significant variation among these institutions. Ivy league universities have the most durable status. They have large endowments, ranging from 6 to 30 billion dollars, raised from many decades of wealthy alumni and highly effective investment strategies (Lerner, Schoar, and Wang 2008; NCES 2016). They are widely viewed as the top universities in the country. There are private universities, such as the University of Chicago, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins and Rice, which are similar but lower in status than Ivy League universities. Liberal arts colleges are less known and tend to have more regional status, for example Pomona is known as elite in California and Swarthmore is known as elite on the east coast. Finally, there are prestigious public institutions, such as the University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin Madison, and University of North Carolina, which are productive and influential research institutions that have strong graduate programs that distinguish them from other public universities.

Elite institutions vary in their academic programs; for example larger universities often have professional and occupational majors when liberal arts colleges do not. They have varying amounts of resources, for example, Stanford and the University of California Berkeley are both elite institutions, but Stanford's operating budget is twice that of Berkeley, while serving half the number of students. Elite institutions also vary in their financial aid programs and policies. One factor that unifies elite colleges is that members of high status groups, including the upper-middle and upper class, view these institutions as most desirable.

There is a long history of elite institutions educating upper and upper middle class students. With the exception of top public institutions such as the University of California, elite institutions of higher education were established for the purpose of educating men from elite classes. In addition, because elite colleges and universities

have high status and high earning alumni, they can garner substantial financial contributions, resulting in large endowments (Lerner et al.2008). These endowments allow the institutions to offer more financial aid and more expansive academic and social programs.

Elite college graduates have higher rates on time graduation and higher earnings (Dale and Krueger 2011; Eide et al.1998; Kingston and Smart 1990; Smart 1988). For example, Dale and Krueger (2011) find that attending a selective college has a large positive effect on earnings, even when controlling for high school GPA and SAT scores. Moreover, evidence suggests that graduating from an elite institution can especially improve outcomes for students who have lower social status, including minorities and first generation college students (Dale and Krueger 2011). Still, the research on the benefits of attending an elite college is mixed. For example, Fosnacht finds that high achieving students are more academically challenged in selective colleges, but have more contact with faculty and more collaborative learning experiences at less selective institutions (2014). Dale and Krueger find that students who chose to enroll in a less selective institution, despite having been admitted to an elite college, ultimately earn as much as students who attended the elite college (2002). Moreover, when graduates of elite colleges are found to be more successful, much of that success can be attributed to factors independent of their college, such as their previous achievement and socioeconomic background (Dale and Krueger 2011).

The positive effect of college selectivity on earnings remains particularly large for black and Latino students, as well as students whose parents have no college education, even after controlling for average SAT scores of colleges applied (Dale and Krueger 2011). Dale and Krueger speculate that, “highly selective colleges provide access to

networks for minority students and for students from disadvantaged family backgrounds that are otherwise not available to them” (2011: 5). Other studies consider the effect of elite college attendance on students’ career paths. Eide et al. (1998) find that attending an elite private college increased probability of attending graduate school. Attending an elite private college was also increased the probability of attending graduate school at a major research university (Rivera 2011; Hoxby 2000)

The financial resources that elite colleges possess can offer unique benefits for students from low SES families. Elite colleges often provide more comprehensive financial aid packages than less selective, lower status institutions. For example, the University of Pennsylvania provides a financial aid package to cover tuition and room and board and does not include loans to students from families that earn less than \$100,000. Students from low SES families are more likely to have interrupted college enrollment (Goldrick-Rab 2006). Interruptions often occur when students are challenged by the burden of tuition payments. Students enroll in a college, leave because they cannot afford to continue, and then start again at another college. Interrupted enrollment results in a longer and less effective pathway to degree completion. Thus, it can be especially beneficial for low SES students to attend a college that provides a comprehensive financial aid package that can buffer their path towards graduation (Bowen, Chingos and McPherson 2009).

However, the positive association of college selectivity with resources and graduation rates is not linear. The most elite and selective institutions provide increased resources and increase the likelihood of graduation. But, it is not the case that the more selective a school is, the more resources and better outcomes it will have. Some colleges provide fewer benefits than other institutions that are less selective. For

example, colleges that are somewhat selective can cost tens of thousands more than colleges that are not selective. But the average difference in instructional expenditures between “somewhat selective” and “not selective” is only \$240 per year (Hoxby and Avery 2012). Therefore, the large additional cost required to attend a somewhat selective college may not provide additional benefits to students. This led the researchers to conclude, the impact of moderately selective colleges on student outcomes “is quite muddy” (Bastedo and Flaster 2014: 95). Still, selective and elite colleges tend to have higher graduation rates than nonselective colleges. Therefore, students who attend elite institutions may be at lower risk of dropping out of college with debt, but no degree (see Swidley 2016).

In addition to elite status, there are also important distinctions between 2-year community colleges and 4-year colleges. There are benefits associated with enrollment at a 4-year rather than a 2-year college, particularly for high achieving low SES students. (Brand, Pfeffer, Goldrick-Rab 2014). Students who enroll in a 2-year college rather than a 4-year college are far less likely to complete a 4-year degree (Long and Kurlaender 2009; Reynolds and Desjardins 2009). A National Center for Education Statistics analysis of data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study finds that students who start at a four-year college are more likely to complete a bachelor’s degree (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002). Among students whose goal was to complete a bachelors degree, 23% of those who started in two year colleges eventually earned a bachelors degree, compared to 57% of students who began post-secondary education in a four-year college (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002).

Some undermatch researchers argue that undermatched students experience an education that is less than ideal (Fosnacht 2015; Hoxby and Turner 2013). Specifically,



researchers argue that deserving students are unable to take advantage of the benefits of attending elite colleges and universities (Hoxby and Avery 2012; Roderick et al. 2011). However, Kurlaender and Grodsky argue that inherent in any argument against undermatching is a false presumption that the college admissions should be based on only grades and test scores (2013). Kurlaender and Grodsky assert that elite colleges evaluate students based on a broader set of factors, including extracurricular activities, potential to contribute to the school community, and class diversity. Further, they point out that there are currently “overmatched” low-income students (based on SAT scores) that are enrolled at elite colleges. These students would be displaced if all undermatched low-income students took their “rightful places” in elite institutions (see also Bastedo and Flaster 2014). However, Kurlaender and Grodsky contend these students should not lose the opportunity to attend elite institutions. In particular, they note that perfect matching would result in decreased access to elite colleges by black and Latino students. White students are most likely to undermatch, and increased matching would result in greater proportion of white students in elite colleges.

Other research challenges the notion that first generation college students and students from low SES families would be able to take advantage of high status social capital in elite colleges. Jack finds that low SES black students who attended private preparatory schools and programs were adept to integrating in the dominant the social and cultural life of an elite college, while those who did not participate in such a program had negative social experiences (2014). Moreover, low SES students may not be able to take advantage of educational resources in elite colleges if they lack dominant cultural capital, such as the ability to talk comfortably with authority figures (Jack 2016). While they do not study an elite institution, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) argue that

institutions of higher education structure academic programs and opportunities in ways that meet the objectives of the wealthy, but make social mobility difficult to achieve. Simultaneously, advantaged students structure social life in ways that exclude less advantaged students. Thus, there is some evidence that going to an elite institution is not enough to guarantee that a student from a low SES family will have access to greater educational opportunity, social capital, status and power.

### ***Pathways to College***

#### *Student and Parental Choice*

According to undermatch scholars, knowing to apply to a range of well-matched colleges is an important skill that students need in order to make optimal college choices. This knowledge is a form of cultural capital. In their analysis of college applications among high achieving students (top 10% on college aptitude test and A- or higher GPA), Hoxby and Avery find that most high SES students approach application in the way that a college counselor would recommend. High SES students apply to matched, as well as “reach” and “safety” colleges (2012).

By contrast, the authors explain, students from low SES families more commonly make application choices that “an expert would probably regard as odd” (Hoxby and Avery 2012: 17). For example, the authors find that some low SES students apply to a group of nonselective colleges and just one very selective college, placing all of their bets on being admitted to that single selective institution. Other students apply to private, but non-selective colleges. Some low SES students apply to state institutions that are less selective and less prestigious than the flagship university. Thus, the average low SES student makes choices that are dissimilar from higher SES students and these choices do not lead low SES students to elite college enrollment.

Researchers contend that students make these “odd” choices because they lack crucial information about colleges and college choice (Hearn 1991; De La Rosa and Tierney; 2006; Kim and Schneider 2005; Person and Rosenbaum 2006). Students from low SES are challenged in the college preparation and choice process because they rely on family and friends that have limited college information. On the other hand, most middle class parents attended college and can share their own experiences with preparing for and enrolling in college with their children (McDonough 1997).

In addition to reduced access to college graduates in their social networks, low SES students are also less able to afford resources like independent college counselors, SAT prep courses, and extra curricular programs (McDonough, 1997). Students from low SES families do not have support that extra money can buy, from college counselors and tutors. Thus Kim and Schneider conclude, “For lower income families, the school's capacity for providing support is indispensable because those families have fewer alternatives. (2005:1196).

Students from low SES families lack information about the cost of highly selective institutions. Students and parents tend to overestimate college costs (Horn, Chen, Chapman 2003). Students and parents also underestimate the amount of financial aid that would be available to them (Grotsky and Jones 2006; Perna 2004; Roderick et al. 2008). For students from low SES families, the cost of college is an important factor in determining where to apply. Students from low-SES families know that their parents cannot afford to pay large tuition bills (Bloom 2007). Students anticipate having to work to cover living expenses while attending college. The perceived cost influences students' decisions about if, and where, to apply to college (Goldrick-Rab 2009; Paulsen and St. John, 2002; Perna and Steele 2011). When-low income students are provided with

detailed information about the real cost of attending an elite institution, they were more likely to apply and enroll in that institution (Hoxby and Turner 2014).

### *School Context*

Important characteristics of high school context that influence college choices include college counseling available, the presence of a college-going culture, and course-taking opportunities (Smith 2011; Cabrera and La Nasa 2001), especially Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Klugman 2013). High schools differently connect students with colleges using strategies with varying efficacy (Hill 2008). Elite high schools guide high SES students towards elite colleges throughout their high school careers (Cookson and Persell 1985; Khan 2010; Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014).

Course taking opportunities in high school can determine students' ability to prepare for elite college admission. AP courses are classes for which the curriculum was developed by the College Board. AP courses are designed to provide college level instruction to high school students. As I explain in detail in Chapter 5, taking AP courses is advantageous for students who want to attend elite colleges. Klugman (2013) shows that schools serving high SES students offer more AP courses than schools serving lower SES students. Moreover, it is not enough to have advanced courses in one's school; students must be able to take those courses. Thus, the mechanisms by which students can choose courses determines their access to advanced courses (Gamoran 2009; Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna 2002). Students' access to advanced courses impacts their eligibility for elite college admissions (Geiser and Santelices 2004).

Tracking is the practice of separating students into separate classes based on their perceived academic ability. Tracking reinforces racial hierarchies within schools (Staiger, 2004; Tyson, 2011). In racially diverse schools, white students are

disproportionately assigned to the highest school tracks (Gamoran, 2009; Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011). In her study of a selective magnet program within a majority black high school, Staiger concludes that by disproportionately assigning whites to the highest tracks, through an alleged system of meritocracy, the program helped to define whiteness as giftedness (2004). Thus, in schools with racialized tracking, white students are expected to be high achieving and black students are stereotyped as low achieving. In recent years the tracking process has become less formal. Rather than teachers assigning students to rigid tracks, students choose which classes they want to take (Lucas and Berends 2002). Still teachers continue to play a significant role in the process by recommending students for advanced classes and advising students to take a particular path (Tyson 2011). Moreover, the more informal process has not resulted in racially equitable access to advanced courses. Black students, in particular, continue to be disadvantaged in the course taking process.

The school context, and the college norms and expectations, also impacts the kind of guidance that students receive from teachers. Since their parents have less experience with college applications, first generation college students rely more heavily on school staff to provide information about college preparation and choice (Kim and Schneider 2005; Leslie, Johnson and Carlson 1977; King 1996; Plank and Jordan 2001). Therefore, the information and guidance that high schools provide can significantly influence the post-secondary outcomes of these students.

Some studies have examined variation in how high school counselors assist students with college applications in different school settings (McDonough 1997, Stevens 2009). Many high schools do not have enough counselors or counselors. Nationally, the student to counselor ratio is 323 to 1 (NCES 2012). These ratios are

higher in underfunded schools. Moreover, counselors are engaged with other responsibilities and are unable to fully support students in the application process. Clinedinst and colleagues (2011) found that public high school counselors spent only 23% of their time doing college counseling. The availability of counselors could significantly influence college outcomes. For example, Belasco found that students who met with the counselor were more likely to enroll in college (2013). Moreover, the size of the effect of meeting with a counselor was greater for students from low-income families.

Some researchers argue that high schools need to have a sufficient “college-going culture” if they are to help students pursue their plan to attend college (Mehan et al. 1996; Hoxby and Avery 2012). In schools with a “college-going culture,” counselors express an expectation that students will go to college. These schools include college preparation in their mission. Roderick (2011) and colleagues contend that there has been too much focus on counselors in the research literature and too little attention paid to teachers’ role in establishing a college-going culture. They used data from teacher survey in Chicago public schools to assess the presence of a college-going culture in high schools. The survey included questions such as: Do teachers expect students to go to college? And do teachers feel it is their job to prepare students for college? (Roderick et al. 2011). Roderick and her colleagues call for a broader definition of college-going culture that includes more than just counseling practices.

Nonetheless, a weakness in Roderick et al.’s conception of college-going culture is that it focuses only on whether or not teachers are supporting college enrollment and does not look specifically at what support is being offered. Asking whether teachers expect their students to go to college does not address the variation among colleges. The work does not make the important distinction between fostering a college-going

culture and fostering an elite college-going culture. In a school with a college-going culture, students are encouraged and expected to participate in some form of post-secondary education. Teachers in a school with an elite college-going culture would expect highest achieving students to apply to highly selective colleges and universities. Moreover, the mission of such a school would include preparing students for elite college admission.

In *Class Warfare*, Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins (2014) study college preparation and counseling in three elite high schools. They argue that a primary goal of elite high schools is to get students admitted into the “best colleges” as possible. In each school the authors find that school staff make special efforts to make sure that students are prepared for elite college admission. For example, the high schools partnered with local universities to provide top students with the opportunity to participate with faculty research teams on projects that would enhance their college applications. In addition, all three high schools in the study consciously adjusted their math course sequence so that every student had the opportunity to take high-level math in high school:

In response to an opportunity structure that sets limits on the course availability to students over their high school career, the math department developed a new system whereby all students complete geometry by the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, thereby allowing all students to take a math course beyond pre-calculus in twelfth grade. The Dean of Students [at one of the three schools] stated that the school has always ‘felt badly about kids being placed in Algebra I (in grade 9) due to lack of prior exposure and preparation, and wanted to try to equalize students’ opportunities, especially considering the important role mathematics, and particularly high-level mathematics, plays in college admissions.’ (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014: 35)

This example shows that teachers in these schools knew about elite college admission and chose to adjust their instruction to meet the expectations of elite college admissions committees. Moreover, the staff at the three high schools was motivated to prepare

graduates for elite college admission. As I will show, not all teachers are motivated towards the goal of successful elite college admissions.

Too often, researchers fail to ask whether school staff would promote elite college enrollment if they had adequate opportunity to offer guidance to students. Without paying direct attention to this issue, researchers seem to assume that because teachers have middle class occupations, they must have a view of the higher education status hierarchy that values elite colleges. Teachers and counselors in elite high schools are committed to sending their students to elite colleges (Khan 2010; Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). However, teachers likely vary in their experience with elite colleges and their perceptions of college choice. These issues warrant further attention.

Researchers also argue that low-SES students do not apply to elite colleges because they are relying on misinformed family and friends who have limited information about elite colleges (Roderick et al. 2008). Roderick and coauthors explain, “many urban students focusing their entire college search within traditional feeder patterns, largely public, two-year, or nonselective and somewhat selective colleges” (2011). However, the authors do not adequately consider the role of teachers and school staff in promoting a similar feeder patterns. Hoxby and Avery (2012) write that a counselor would find the choices that some high achieving low-income students make to be “odd.” However, there may be more variation in counselor perspectives than previously understood.

#### *College Recruitment and Admission Policies*

In order to understand the definition of an “elite college-going culture” one must consider how elite colleges evaluate students for admission. It is not possible to assess whether teachers are making an effort to comply with the elite college admissions expectations without knowing what those expectations are. Elite colleges typically



describe students' courses and grades as the most important factor in the admissions process. The admissions requirements are described on individual college websites.

Example course taking requirements for three elite institutions are listed below:

Princeton University	"We don't prescribe a particular high school curriculum, but we do have suggestions for a course of study that will provide solid preparation for a challenging undergraduate program. Students who intend to pursue the Bachelor of Science in Engineering must complete a year of calculus and high school physics prior to enrolling at Princeton. Chemistry is also recommended."
University of Pennsylvania	"We encourage Penn applicants to consistently take classes in the core academic disciplines (English, social studies, mathematics, science, and foreign language) throughout their four years of high school. Nursing - a strong preparation in the sciences, particularly in chemistry. Arts and Sciences - a strong preparation in a balanced and advanced college preparatory curriculum. Engineering - a strong preparation in physics and mathematics, particularly calculus. Wharton - a strong preparation in mathematics, particularly calculus"
Williams College	Applicants to Williams should pursue the strongest program of study offered by their secondary schools. While there are no absolute requirements for admission, competitive candidates typically study English, math, natural science, foreign language and social studies in four-year sequences and present a distinguished record throughout their secondary school career.

Elite and very selective colleges are decidedly imprecise in their admissions requirements. Rather than an easy-to-read bulleted list, most elite colleges offer long explanations of how students should approach course taking if they want to be admitted to their college. While it is not entirely clear why this is the case, it seems likely that colleges want to have the opportunity to look at applicants holistically. Moreover, colleges might not want to deter students from applying because they fail to meet one of the standards established by the school. Colleges also recognize that students have different course offerings in their high schools. For example, the University of Pennsylvania website states, "Performance in high school is the single most important

factor in the student selection process at Penn. However, because grading and ranking policies are different around the country and the globe, it is difficult to pinpoint one metric for a student's success in the classroom.”

Nonetheless, most elite colleges and majors expect students to have taken high-level classes. As a result, low SES students who attend under resourced high schools are less likely to be qualified to enroll in elite colleges. One study of course taking practices found that students in the lowest SES quartile were less likely to take the highest-level math courses than higher SES students (Bastedo and Howard 2013). Moreover, schools with higher SES student populations tend to offer more AP courses than lower SES schools (Klugman 2013).

Colleges also evaluate students’ test scores. Again, selective colleges do not specify minimum test scores. Instead, they provide information that describes the range of test scores among admitted students.

College	Reading	Math	Writing
Princeton	690-790	710-800	710-790
Penn	690-780	710-800	700-790
Williams <sup>2</sup>	760-800 (38% of class) 710-750 (25% of class) 660-700 (18% of class)	760-800 (31% of class) 710-750 (24% of class) 660-700 (21% of class)	760-800 (35% of class) 710-750 (26% of class) 660-700 (19% of class)

Although these colleges do not specify a minimum test score, colleges favor students whose scores are within, or close to, the institutional mean. Therefore, applicants with scores that are much lower than those listed above have reduced access to elite and

<sup>2</sup> Williams does not provide mean scores. Instead, Williams provides the percentage of students in the freshman class whose scores were in each given range.

highly selective colleges.

Colleges influence the makeup of their student body through their concerted efforts to identify students that they want to apply to their college. Colleges buy the names and contact information of students with minimum SAT and ACT scores from the college testing companies and send marketing materials to these students (Bruni 2014). Hill and Winston (2010) estimate that 20%-30% of matriculated students are identified through these search and marketing practices. Using test scores to sort students has the effect of disadvantaging already disadvantaged students (Posselt, Jaquette, and Bastedo 2012). Moreover, some studies indicate that GPA is a better predictor of college performance than test scores (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009).

Colleges also influence the choice process by visiting high schools throughout the country to recruit prospective students. Elite college recruiters visit high schools where there is a concentration of students with high test scores (Hoxby and Avery 2012; Stevens 2009). Elite college recruiters also seek high schools that enroll wealthy students because enrolling students from these secondary schools helps to maintain the status of elite selective colleges (Stevens 2009).

Elite colleges also influence enrollment through their tuition and financial aid policies. College applicants can apply for need-based financial aid to help pay for tuition and other expenses. Colleges and universities assess students' ability to pay in order to determine their eligibility for aid. Financial aid can include state and federal loans or grants, as well as institutional loans or grants. Elite colleges with large endowments are able to draw on endowment income to provide more grants, rather than loans, to students with financial need. Non-elite colleges also offer merit-based grants for students who meet certain academic criteria, but these are typically available to a small number of

students. Students are less likely to apply for a college if they do not think they will be able to pay for it. In recent years, approximately sixty elite colleges have implemented a no-loan or low-loan policy for students with low earning parents (Block 2015).

Finally, colleges impact their student body through their application procedures. Some students may be deterred from applying to colleges that have a particularly involved application. Colleges that use a unique application, rather than the Common App can pose challenges to students. Students may be deterred by an application that includes multiple admissions essays (Bruni 2014). Some colleges require students to take SAT subject tests while others do not. The fee that colleges charge to applicants can be a barrier to application. Colleges can make their application more accessible to a wider group of applicants by offering application fee waivers. Thus, when thinking about the factors that contribute to students' enrollment in elite colleges, the practices of the colleges themselves are part of that conversation.

### ***An Elite College-Going Culture***

An elite college-going culture encompasses a set of practices that facilitate high achieving students' preparation for the elite college application process. Educators in a school with an elite college-going culture would advocate elite colleges to high achieving 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. A school with an elite college-going culture would provide opportunities for students to learn about and interact with representatives from elite colleges and universities. An elite college-going culture would reflect the admissions priorities of elite institutions. Therefore, in a school with an elite college-going culture, we would expect to see educators working to help high achieving students take courses that are valued by elite colleges, such as four years of math, four years of foreign language, and the maximum number of AP courses available in the school. Educators in a school

with an elite college-going culture would promote SAT preparation and would encourage students to take both the standard SAT and SAT subject tests. Teachers and staff at schools with an elite college-going culture would assist students with process of applying to elite colleges, including writing multiple essays, which is typically more complicated than applying to less and non-selective colleges. Teachers and counselors in schools with an elite college-going culture would be knowledgeable about the availability of financial aid for socioeconomically disadvantaged students in elite colleges.

The specifics nature of a high school's college-going culture can have an important impact on students' college preparation and choice experience. High schools determine what courses students can take. It is in the high school context that students receive guidance in the process of preparing for college. The high school context also helps to determine students' exposure to different types of colleges and college recruiters. In addition to the issues described above, as we try to understand why low SES students are less likely to attend elite colleges, the presence of an elite college-going culture is also germane. However, this question has received little attention in existing research.

### **CHAPTER 3: Data, Sample and Methods**

To examine how the school context, including teachers and counselors, shapes the college preparation and choice process among high achieving low-SES students, I conducted a two-year qualitative study in two selective public high schools. I studied high achieving students' experiences with course taking, learning about colleges, and making college choices. I focus specifically on how the high school context shaped their experience at each stage of the college preparation and choice process. Data collection methods included interviews, observation, and document analysis. Qualitative methods are suitable to the study of college preparation and choice because they allow me to observe how the process unfolds in the context of the school. Moreover, through qualitative methods, I can develop a narrative that reflects the varied experiences of individual students. Thus, I was able to identify commonalities in students' complex experiences in a way that would not be possible with a predetermined set of variables.

Before beginning the research at both high schools, I met with the school principals to explain the study and the research activities. After receiving the principals' permission, I contacted the school district research office and completed an arduous research approval process. For example, I submitted an application to the district that described the study and the specific types of data I would be collecting. I also had to complete a child abuse and criminal record check. After receiving school district approval, I sought and attained research approval from the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board. The IRB approval required that I receive parental consent before I could interview students under the age of 18.

All of the names of students, educators, schools, and school districts are pseudonyms. I chose to use the real names of colleges, rather than comparable colleges, in order to maintain the nuance of the status hierarchy. I asked teachers about their parents' education because I was interested in how teachers' family background might shape their approach to college guidance. To protect confidentiality, I changed the colleges that teachers and their parents attended. I also changed the some specific information about students and their parents if I thought it was necessary to protect confidentiality.

I chose to study these two schools because I thought that they, more than other public high schools, would be likely to prepare students for admission to selective colleges. Because both schools had selective admissions criteria they tended to enroll academically successful students who also had good behavior records. I conducted an earlier study of the admissions process at Allegiance High School. I saw that all of the students who were admitted had been very successful in middle school. Thus, the number of academically struggling students at these two schools was small compared to the average high school (Neild and Balfanz 2006). While many urban teachers become fatigued while assisting students below grade level, most students at Allegiance and Romano could do high school level work. In addition, the school staffs were permitted to send poorly behaved students back to their neighborhood school at any point in the school year. As a result, the teachers experienced fewer classroom distractions. Moreover, both schools lacked formal academic tracking that is found in many American high schools. Often tracking is racialized, but the diverse student body seemed to be represented in all classes at Romano and Allegiance. While some racialized tracking may have occurred at Romano and Allegiance, it was not visually apparent. Moreover,

both schools had small white populations that did not dominate the academic terrain in the same way that they have in some other schools (Staiger 2004; Kelly 2009).

Given the advantages at Allegiance and Romano, compared to other urban public high schools, I was surprised to see that students at both schools mostly applied to non-selective colleges. The teachers at both schools thought of their students as smart and capable and they expected them all to go to college. I wanted to understand the factors that prevented high achieving students in public high schools that had a tradition of academic success from enrolling in elite colleges.

The principals at both schools were welcoming to me throughout the research process. As I explain below, the two schools Romano and Allegiance (pseudonyms) are both selective urban public high schools. They had an active “college-going culture” and they were seen by many to be as highly desirable high schools (but not the most desirable high schools in the district). At both schools, the principal introduced me, and the study, to the staff at a staff meeting in August, just before the beginning of the school year. As such, school staff members remembered me (some more vaguely than others) when I began fieldwork later in the fall. Throughout the study, the school principals were open to my presence in the school. Both principals frequently offered encouragement when I saw them in the hallway and mentioned their own experiences completing educational leadership doctorates.

As an adult in the high schools, I did not play a disciplinary role. I did not reprimand students on any occasion. I never observed an incident where adult intervention was needed. Generally, I talked with students in a friendly and informal tone. At Romano, I conducted some interviews in a room that was close to an area where



students congregated during free periods. On occasion, I asked these students to be quieter and I sometimes did this with authority.

I conducted the study as a black woman in my mid-thirties from middle class background. I was close in age to most of the teachers at Allegiance and Romano, which may have helped facilitate my work with students and teachers. It is unclear how my race or gender affected the research process. However, it is certainly possible that participants would have interacted differently with a researcher of a different race or gender.

### **Data Collection**

#### *Interviews*

At each school, I interviewed 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, as well as teachers and counselors. Table 1 lists the number of interviews completed in each school and in each category of participant. I completed 67 in depth interviews in total. I conducted 35 interviews at Allegiance High and 32 total interviews at Romano High School.

**Table 1: Summary of Interviews**

<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Allegiance High</b>	<b>Romano High</b>	<b>Total</b>
12 <sup>th</sup> grade students	17	15	32
9 <sup>th</sup> grade students	10	10	20
Teachers	6	6	12
Counselor	2	1	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>67</b>

At Allegiance, I interviewed seventeen 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, ten 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, and eight members of staff. At Romano, I interviewed fifteen 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, ten 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, and seven staff members. All of the students received \$15 for their participation. Staff received a sweet snack, such as cookies from a bakery.

The student interviews took place in an empty classroom or office in the respective schools. At Romano, the larger school, I typically used a classroom that was mostly used as a storage room. The room was similar to other large classrooms in the school. One long wall featured a row of large, but dingy, windows. The wall facing the windows was covered with a chalkboard. The floor was tan tile. A collection of unused desks and chairs were pushed to the back of the room. Tables were arranged in an oval in the front part of the room. There was also a group of tall metal filing cabinets in the corner of the room. At Allegiance, I conducted interviews in the social worker's office, which was adjacent to the counselor's office. The social worker only worked at Allegiance on Wednesday afternoon so her office was empty at all other times. The office was small and contained a wooden desk with a desk chair, a small round table, and two metal chairs with upholstered seats. There was one window in the office that faced the windows of an adjacent building.

In 12<sup>th</sup> grade student interviews, I asked students to talk about the colleges that they knew about and where they applied. I asked students to explain whom they talked to about colleges and universities. I also asked about the factors that influenced where they applied and how they would decide where to enroll. I asked them to tell me which colleges were widely viewed as "good." I also asked 12<sup>th</sup> grade students about their high school experiences and their course taking decisions.

I asked 9<sup>th</sup> grade students to tell me what students need to do in high school to prepare for applying to college. I asked them to name all of the colleges that they knew. I asked 9<sup>th</sup> grade students to tell me what they knew about the application process, and what would determine which college they would choose to go to. I asked 9<sup>th</sup> grade students about the courses they were planning to take in high school.

In interviewing teachers, I endeavored to learn about their perspectives on the college preparation and choice process at their school as well as their perception of the higher education status hierarchy. I asked teachers about their relationships with students. I also asked them to tell me how they advised students about college preparation and choice. Moreover, I asked teachers about their own academic background and experiences with college preparation and choice. Interviews were transcribed by a transcription service.

I chose not to interview parents. This is in part due to difficulty accessing parents. The students at Allegiance and Romano were highly independent and often did not see their parents until late in the day. Since 9<sup>th</sup> grade, most students traveled to and from school on public transportation. Parents exclusively used cell phones, and in a pilot study in the same community, I found it nearly impossible to contact parents by phone. Parents did not answer calls from unfamiliar numbers. Moreover, when approaching students about participating in the study, many said their parents would not let them participate if participation required parent interviews.

### *Observations*

At both schools, I observed activities related to college preparation and choice. I visited each school at least twice per week. I spent time in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English classes. Initially, I began observations in the classrooms to see if and how teachers were talking to new students about college and college preparation in the classroom. However, college preparatory talk was minimal in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes. I subsequently spent more time in the counselors' offices. During each visit, I spent 30 to 90 minutes in the counselors' offices. The counselors at both schools had large offices that served as an informal student lounge for some 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. I was usually in the counselor's

office to try to get in touch with a student who I wanted to interview. I also observed the conversations between students and between the students and counselor. At Romano, when students left the room, the counselor would tell me stories about students, college recruiters, or the politics of the school. At Allegiance, the counselor would often share her experiences with the different colleges where her students applied.

I also observed college recruitment visits at both schools. Recruiters visited the school and met with students. The group of students at these events ranged from 3 students to 25 students. In total, I observed eight recruiter visits at the two schools. I also attended occasional meetings and events that were related to college preparation and choice. I wrote detailed notes during these observation sessions.

#### *Sample*

The sample of students is racially and ethnically diverse. Both schools are diverse (especially Romano) and the sample reflects the racial diversity of the schools. One third of the sample had immigrant parents. Some students said that they occasionally returned to their home country, but had always been schooled in the United States. I chose not to limit the sample to one racial or ethnic group because I did not want to study the experiences of just one group. And the size of the sample is too small to carry out a comparison of school experience by race. Moreover, previous research suggests that social class may be a more salient lens through which to examine the college choice process. However, this choice should not be interpreted as statement of the insignificance of race and ethnicity in students' school experiences. On the contrary, research in the sociology of education would suggest that students from disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups would have reduced access to the resources that facilitate elite college enrollment (Kelly 2009; Solórzano and Ornelas 2004; Taliaferro and Decuir-

Gunby 2008). I do not focus on these differences in my analysis (Hearn 1984). Rather, I examine general patterns in each school.

**Table 2: Twelfth Grade Sample by Race**

<b>School</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latino</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Other</b>
Allegiance	4	5	3	4	1 (Uganda)
Romano	5	6	1	2	1 (Lebanon)

Similarly, the analysis does not closely examine gender differences. The sample includes boys and girls. However, I do not systematically compare students by gender. At both schools, girls were more likely to be performing well academically. As a result, the boys in the sample tend to have lower GPAs than the girls in the sample. However, my emphasis is on the broader patterns in the schools. However, I do discuss the potential implications of race and gender for my findings in Chapter 7.

The majority of students in the study have parents who did not go to college. Among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, twenty had parents who had not completed a college degree, six had some degree from a 2- or 4- year college, and 4 were in the process of completing their degree. Among the parents who did go to college, most dropped out and returned much later, or began later in life, after their children were born. Most of the parents worked jobs in service, retail, industry, or as office assistants. My analysis reveals that students whose parents had a college degree were advantaged in some ways. But, the overall argument applies to these students as well. Detailed background information about twelfth grade interviewees, including parental education, can be found in Tables 3 and 4. I interviewed fifteen 12<sup>th</sup> grade students at Romano and Allegiance. I also interviewed ten 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at each school because I wanted to learn about

how students understood college preparation as they began to make college preparatory choices, including course selections, in high school.

**Table 3: Parental Information for Allegiance Twelfth Grade Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Mom education</b>	<b>Dad education</b>	<b>Mom Occupation</b>	<b>Dad Occupation</b>
Beth	Some college	AA	Does not work, drug abuse	Theatre technical manager
Bridget	Technical certificate	HS diploma	Hospital assistant	Building manager
Caleb	BA (recent)	HS diploma	Administrator	Mechanic
Chris	BA	BA	Rehab Social Worker	Security guard
Halima	HS diploma	HS diploma	House cleaner/ factory	Nursing home dining services
Kyle	Technical certificate	BA	Unemployed	Software engineer
Lara	HS diploma	Some college	Disabled	Disabled (former mechanic)
Lindsey	BA	BA	Former school administrator	Real estate appraiser <sup>3</sup>
Nathan	BA	BA	Secretary	Unknown
Rosa	Some college	Unknown	Factory/secretary	Mechanic
Samuel	Some HS	HS diploma	Retail distribution	Restaurant equipment install
Tanika	No college	No college	Does not work	Unknown
Tanya	BA (recent)	No high school	Hospital secretary	Deceased
Tim	Art school	AA	Restaurant staff	Disabled
Travis	Some college	HS diploma	Caseworker	Milk delivery

<sup>3</sup> Lindsay's parents were divorced. Her father lived in a different city. Her stepfather completed undergraduate and graduate degrees at elite colleges and taught at a local college

**Table 4: Parental Information for Romano Twelfth Grade Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Mom Education</b>	<b>Dad Education</b>	<b>Mom Occupation</b>	<b>Dad Occupation</b>
Adriano	HS diploma	HS diploma	Waitress at the mall	Mechanic
Britney	HS diploma	HS diploma	Owens seafood company	owns parking lots
Dalia	HS diploma	HS diploma	Personal trainer	Postal Worker
Dana	Cosmetology school	Some HS	Hairdresser	Restaurant staff
David	BA	BA	Office manager	Laid off/Insurance
Eddie	BA (recent)	HS diploma	Teacher	Post Office
Jasir	BA - Lebanon	Some HS	Stay at home	Custodian
Karen	AA (recent)	Some college	Administrative Assistant	Unemployed
Linda	No HS Diploma	No HS diploma	Nail Technician	Doesn't work
MaryAnne	GED	GED	Salvation Army retail	bus driver
Nicole	Some college	Some high school	Hair stylist	Casino dealer, construction
Olivia	BA	BA	Hospital quality assurance	Dad - counselor in correctional facility
Patrick	HS diploma	HS diploma	Disability - Was a medical assistant	Disability - was a mechanic
Vicky	Some college	Unknown	Social work	Unknown

The 12th grade students are the primary focus of the study. I interviewed 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in order to learn about high achieving students' experiences with preparing for and applying to college. Given the focus of my research question, I needed to target students who had earned a high GPA in high school. To identify successful students, I acquired GPA and SAT scores from the counselors at each school. I visited the counselors at the beginning of the study and explained the focus of the research. Both counselors gave me a list of students that ranked the students by GPA. The counselor at Allegiance had written the students' SAT scores in the margin of her class list, of which she made a copy of for me. The counselor at Romano gave me a print out of SAT scores from the College Board that was separate from her class rankings list. I used these sources of information to create a list of students that I wanted to interview.

**Table 5: GPA and SAT Scores for Allegiance Twelfth Grade Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>SAT</b>
Lara	F	Black	3.9	1570
Kyle	M	White	3.5	1600
Nathan	M	Black	3.8	1910
Caleb	M	Puerto Rico	3.8	1350
Samuel	M	Chinese American	3.9	1510
Beth	F	White	3.7	1760
Bridget	F	White	3.88	1470
Halima	F	Uganda	3.00 <sup>4</sup>	1600
Rosa	F	Latina	3.7	980
Lindsey	F	El Salvador/Germany	3.6	1410
Travis	M	Black	3.79	1420
Tanya	F	Cambodian	3.76	980
Tanika	F	Black	3.73	1440
Tabitha	F	Indian	3.88	990
Mita	F	Bangladeshi	3.94	1230
Chris	M	Black	3.6	1200

In selecting 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, my goal was to have a sample of students in the top 15% of their class. However, I also wanted to have a sample that was diverse by gender and by race. There were fewer high achieving boys than high achieving girls. White students and Asian students were overrepresented in the top 15% of the schools. Therefore, when necessary to achieve my diversity goals, I included a few students who were below the top 15% of the class. However, to ensure that students were academically high achieving, I required all research participants to have GPA of 3.5 or higher. It was a surprise to find that there was not a consistently positive relationship between grades and SAT scores. Students who ranked at the top of their class did not necessarily have high SAT scores. For example, at Allegiance, the student with the highest SAT scores had the second to lowest GPA in his class and the valedictorian had

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<sup>4</sup> Halima earned all As in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.



very low SAT scores. In choosing the 12<sup>th</sup> grade sample, I relied on students' GPA, rather than their SAT scores<sup>5</sup>. The grade point average and SAT scores of students in the 12th grade sample are provided in Tables 5 and 6.

**Table 6: GPA and SAT Scores for Romano Twelfth Grade Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>SAT</b>
Adriano	M	Puerto Rico	3.79	1360
Britney	F	Chinese/Vietnamese	4.05	1610
Dalia	F	White	4.08	2030
Dana	F	Vietnam	4.07	1710
David	M	White	4.0	1830
Eddie	M	Black	4	1610
Jasir	M	Lebanon	4.05	1770
Karen	F	Black	4.01	1600
Linda	F	Vietnam	4.08	1650
MaryAnne	F	Haitian	4.03	1660
Nicole	F	Vietnam	4.05	1640
Olivia	F	Black	4	1610
Patrick	M	Black	3.79	1660
Vicky	F	Black	3.97	1790

I used a convenience sampling method for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade sample. It was particularly challenging to recruit 9<sup>th</sup> grade students to the study. I chose not to use GPA to select 9<sup>th</sup> grade students for participation. Because both schools had selective admission, it is most likely that 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in the sample had performed very well in school in the previous school years. Unlike the 12<sup>th</sup> grade sample, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade sample includes no Asian students. The 9<sup>th</sup> grade sample at Allegiance included only black and Latino students. A summary of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade sample is provided in Table 7.

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<sup>5</sup> Some students took the ACT in addition to the SAT, however the counselors did not keep track of students ACT scores. Students were aware of the ACT but did not discuss ACT scores in interviews, thus I focus on SAT here.

**Table 7: Ninth Grade Sample by Race and Sex**

	Asian		Black		Latino		White	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Allegiance	0	0	3	6	0	1	0	0
Romano	0	0	4	3	0	1	1	1

I interviewed teachers that were mentioned to me by 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. I asked 12<sup>th</sup> grade students to tell me if there were any teachers that they talked to about college, or about anything other than the academic subject of their class. Most of the teachers mentioned taught 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. All but one of the teachers taught an AP class. Among teachers and counselors at Allegiance High School, I interviewed 1 black woman, 4 white women, 2 white men, and one man who identified as white and Latino. At Romano, I interviewed 2 black women, 2 white women, 2 white men and 1 Asian woman.

**Table 8: Courses Taught by Interviewed Teachers**

<b>Allegiance</b>	<b>Romano</b>
English	English
Math (2)	Math
Social Studies (2)	History
Spanish	Chinese
	Psychology
	Physics

## *Recruitment*

After I identified students that I wanted to participate, I used a variety of approaches to contact 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. I sent emails. I found students as they were leaving class. I asked the counselors to remind students about the study if they saw them at school. On a few occasions, the counselor called classroom phones and asked students to come to the counselor's office to meet me. I collected phone numbers of students when I distributed consent forms, and I sent reminder text messages in the evenings.

While the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students were the primary focus, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviews were a secondary, but important, aspect of the data collection. The 9<sup>th</sup> grade interviews were designed to provide insight into the ways that students at Allegiance and Romano were thinking about course taking and college choice when they began high school. Recruiting ninth grade students for the study proved to be more of a challenge than recruiting 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Ninth grade students all needed to have consent forms signed by parents, in contrast, many of the 12<sup>th</sup> graders were 18 and could independently offer consent. Moreover, 9<sup>th</sup> grade students more frequently forgot to return consent forms. As I discuss in Chapter 5, 12<sup>th</sup> grade students had large gaps in their schedule and were more easily found "hanging out" around the school, while 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were in class all day. Finally, most 9<sup>th</sup> grade students did not have cell phones, while almost all 12<sup>th</sup> grade students did. As a result it was much easier to contact 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in the evening to remind them to bring their consent forms or meet me for their interview the following day.

As a result of these challenges in recruitment, and the secondary nature of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade data, I used a convenience sampling method to recruit 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. I

visited 9<sup>th</sup> grade English classes at both schools (one at Allegiance and two at Romano) and introduced the study to the entire class. I distributed consent forms to any student in the class who was interested in participating in the study. After the initial presentation to the class, I visited the 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes several times a week for a month and reminded 9<sup>th</sup> grade students to bring consent forms to school. I also distributed second, and sometimes third, copies of the consent form to students. The teachers kept large envelopes in their classroom where students could deposit their consent forms. With the consent form, I included a sheet that listed possible interview times. I asked students to note which times they were available for the interview. After students submitted consent forms, I would text message (sometimes to their parents phone) to schedule the interview for sometime in the following week. Or I would leave a note for them with their English teacher. Most students seemed willing to participate, but some feared that their parents would not let them. However, most interested students were able to participate in the study. The greatest challenge was getting students to return their consent form.

### *Documents*

Throughout the study, I collected documents that were distributed to students. Counselors handed out booklets about applying to college. College recruiters distributed materials to students that met with them. I also reviewed documents that the high schools produced and shared with students. I studied the fliers and posters that were hung on the wall of the counselors' offices. In addition, the counselor at Allegiance sent me the emails that she sent to seniors throughout the academic year. I used these documents to learn about the information that the school provided to students.

***Analysis***

My analysis began while I was collecting data and I trying to develop an argument based on what I observed and learned from interviews. Throughout this process, my ideas changed as I learned more about the schools and about student and teacher perspectives. After completing data collection, reading interviews and reviewing materials. By reading and re-reading interview transcripts and field notes I developed analytical themes. I then used Atlas.ti, qualitative analytical software, to code all of the interview transcripts. I also coded a select group of field notes. I used the coded sections of data to organize and categorize the concepts that emerged from the data. I then examined at these categories of ideas to see how they might fit together in a larger argument. The argument has developed further through the writing process. In the analytic process, I also looked for evidence that disconfirmed my argument.

#### **CHAPTER 4: College-Going Culture In An Under Resourced District**

I conducted the research in Allegiance and Romano high schools, which were located in a large urban school district that I call “Northeastern.” At the time of the study, the district had been in perpetual financial distress for more than a decade. The *New York Times* called the school district budget “draconian.” The state where Northeastern district is located had particularly high levels of between-district funding inequality. At the beginning of the 2013 academic year, state funding to the district was reduced by more than 200 million dollars, creating a shortfall of more than 250 million dollars (citation withheld to protect confidentiality). The superintendent also attributed the budget crisis to rising pension costs, high debt payments from previous budget shortfalls, and students’ flight to charter schools. At the beginning of the 2013-14 school year, nearly 20% of school-based staff was laid off. Across the district, all of the school counselors were laid off in the summer before the study began. A smaller number of counselors were rehired in the late fall.

Allegiance and Romano high schools had a selective admissions policy. In order to enroll at either school, students had to apply and be admitted. Both schools evaluated applicants’ 7<sup>th</sup> grade transcripts. The district’s high school handbook stated that criteria for admission to either school included having earned A's and B's in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. In addition, students needed to have missed less than 10 days of school in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and have no negative behavioral reports from middle school. In addition, the criteria for Romano included scoring “proficient” or “advanced” on the state proficiency exam<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the official admissions criteria, Allegiance did not evaluate students’ test scores. However, in practice test scores were used in the admissions process.

Compared to the average high school in the city, both high schools enrolled a group of select high performing students in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. However, neither Allegiance nor Romano was considered by city residents to be one of the two “top” public high schools. There were two higher status selective high schools in the district – Dominion and Gifted Academy – that attracted middle class city students. At both Allegiance and Romano, about 75% of the students were categorized as “economically disadvantaged” in 2013. Both schools were racially diverse, with black students comprising the largest portion of the student body.

The selective admission process at Allegiance and Romano ensured that the students who enrolled at both schools had a history of academic success. Moreover, all of the ninth grade students that I interviewed anticipated going to college immediately after graduation. The school staff at both schools also expected students to enroll in higher education after graduation. The counselors interacted with students with the expectation that students would go to college. The teachers wrote recommendation letters for students. Counselors at both schools facilitated the process of submitting transcripts to college admissions offices. The counselors also invited college recruiters to come to the schools and give presentations to students. Thus, while the schools in Northeastern had limited resources, both Allegiance and Romano high schools had a college-going culture.

Although both schools enrolled high achieving students, and teachers were committed to sending their students to college, few students enrolled in elite colleges and universities. Thus, the two schools were a prime location for studying the school-based processes that may contribute to the underrepresentation of academically successful low SES students in elite colleges.

## ***An Introduction to Allegiance High School***

### *School Environment and History*

Allegiance High School is located in the downtown area of Northeastern city. It is a small school that enrolls between 350 and 400 students in ninth through twelfth grade. In 2013, 1250 students applied and 170 were offered admission to ninth grade at Allegiance. A superintendent who advocated small schools and school choice established the school in 2006. At that time, the 6-year graduation rate in the Northeastern district was only 60% (citation withheld). During his tenure, this superintendent established several new schools to help address the dropout problem in the city. The school's founding principal was Dr. Edwards, a white man in his fifties with 30 years of school experience. Dr. Edwards helped to design the school's theme and organizational structure.

The blocks surrounding the school were comprised of office buildings and tourist attractions. Many of the nearby buildings housed restaurants on the first floor that serve workday lunch. There was a constant stream of people, mostly white and wearing business attire, passing on the sidewalk in front of the school. However, there were people from different race and class groups shopping and conducting business in the blocks around the school. It was a decidedly diverse environment. The street in front of the school is a continuous stream of cars. Parking spots were hard to find. There is also a busy subway station just one block away from the school, from which students arrived each morning.

The school was intentionally located downtown, despite high rent, so that students could take advantage of the surrounding resources. In addition, Allegiance established mentorship and apprenticeship programs with professional firms in the



neighborhood. Students frequently went on fieldtrips in the neighborhood to cultural sites and historical landmarks. Since its founding, Allegiance had a partnership with a nearby museum. The museum education staff led workshops with students. A small number of students had internships in the museum archives. Allegiance also used the museum auditorium for school events.

From the outside Allegiance did not look like most of the other schools in the city. While most high schools were located in neoclassical buildings that were constructed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Allegiance was located in a bright, contemporary building that was fully renovated to create the school in 2006. The principal, teachers, and students valued the school location as an important aspect of the school environment. Ms. Noel, a social studies teacher, explained:

I love the diversity of the school. I love that it's a small school. I love the location. I mean it's just pretty awesome teaching two blocks from [historic site]. I mean it's just really – we can do some fun things because of our location.

The inside of the building was bright with pale yellow walls, white tile floors, bright lighting, and large windows. The ceilings were low. The building had a more intimate feeling than older high schools in the city. The floor plan of the school was not straightforward. After many months in the school, I still got confused about where I was when I stepped out of a stairwell or elevator. Each floor had a different configuration of classrooms. When I asked students for directions in the building, they often had to think for a moment to remember how to direct me.

The front door of the school was always locked, but it was large and glass, so that someone in the school could always see me approaching and would buzz me in before I needed to ring the doorbell. The front door entered a large space where students sometimes ate lunch. To the right, was an L shaped waist-high counter. Either

the school building manager or a building security guard sat behind the counter. To the right of the open space where students ate lunch was a large open staircase that turned up to the second floor or down to the basement cafeteria. To the right of the staircase was the metal detector that was used to scan students in in the morning. The metal detector was used when students arrived at school at 7:50 am. Shortly thereafter, the metal detector would be pushed to the side of the room, against the wall. Students who arrived late to school were not subject to screening. Instead, they simply swiped their own school IDs at a kiosk located near the door. Also, students left the building for lunch and were not screened upon return to the building. Thus, using the metal detector in the morning seemed to be a symbolic acknowledgement of district rules rather than a statement about concerns for school safety. No one talked about the impact of the metal detector for school culture or school safety.

The school office was located on the second floor of the school building. The main office, the principal's office, and the mailroom were grouped together in a set of connected rooms. At the entrance, two administrative staff members sat at desks behind a long counter. Because of budget cuts, the longstanding school secretary was laid off in the middle of the study. A secretary with less seniority and an assistant were hired to replace her. Sometimes I would find teachers behind the counter looking for office supplies or working on paperwork. Students came into the office and would lean over the counter to ask the person behind the counter for help. These interactions were almost always cordial. Students sometimes made their requests with impatient urgency, but they were polite with the staff. Seniors were allowed to use the office printers to print materials related to college and scholarship applications at no cost. They would occasionally come into the office and ask for a paper that they had just printed to the

office printer from a laptop in the library. Other students requested weekly public transit passes, after losing the one that they received at the beginning of the week.

Across from the counter, there was a row of maroon upholstered chairs with wooden armrests. Sometimes students sat in chairs and waited to see the principal or for a parent to come pick them up. Immediately after school, teachers occasionally sat in the chairs and did paperwork or chatted with students who had stayed in the building after school. Teachers also came in to use the bathroom in the office. When I was in the office by myself, students would ask me for help or if I had seen the principal.

### *Mission*

Allegiance High School had a humanities focus. Mr. Edwards, teachers, and the school brochure described the Allegiance as college preparatory. At open houses, the principal told prospective students that they would get all of the courses they needed to go to college. However, during an open house for prospective students, he told a group of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students that college immediately after high school wasn't the best choice for everyone. He said that some people, including his own father, choose to go into the military. Or, he explained, some people might have to work immediately after high school for financial reasons. But, he assured students that they would have the skill that they needed to succeed in college whenever they decided to go.

One of Allegiance's "points of pride" that was listed in the citywide high school guide was that they have high college acceptance rate. At open houses, I observed Dr. Edwards boasting to prospective students and parents that the school "has a 100% college acceptance rate." In presentations with prospective students and their parents Mr. Edwards listed the courses that students took. He told students that students at

Allegiance were especially prepared for college because they take AP classes. He assured parents that the curriculum at Allegiance would prepare students for college.

### *Personnel*

Dr. Edwards spoke about his school with pride. His office walls were covered with framed photographs of different school events, certificates, and plaques. Describing the school Dr. Edwards said, "We're unique. Kids are given lots of freedom and responsibility here." He was proud of his school's partnerships with organizations and corporations that provided mentors to some students. He was excited about the school football team, which had been very successful in recent years. He pointed out photos of a championship team on the wall, saying he had achieved his dream of seeing the school win a football championship. Dr. Edwards was boisterous, even when addressing serious issues with students. When he spoke, everyone in the room could hear him.

Like most high schools in Northeastern district, teachers were hired through site selection. This means that rather than being assigned to the school by the district, interested teachers applied directly to Dr. Edwards. Thus, hiring did not follow the rules of union seniority. Ms. Harris, a white history teacher at Allegiance first became excited about the school as she walked by the building under construction.

[I used to go to lectures on Saturday at a museum] that was across the street from where Allegiance is. And I kept seeing this sign like in window, "Allegiance coming." I'm like, "Oh. What is that? I wanna work there." And every Saturday, I'd be like, "Wow, this place looks really cool.

Out of the fifteen teachers employed at Allegiance during the study, six had been at the school since its founding in 2006. Four of the teachers that I interviewed had been there since the beginning of the school.

Many of the teachers were in their early thirties and had begun their teaching career at the school. Only two teachers were over 50 years old. The majority of the teachers were white. There were four non-white school staff members. There was one black American teacher. The dean who was most responsible for handling disciplinary problems and other student issues was from the Caribbean. There was one female teacher from India and a male teacher whose mother was Venezuelan and whose father was white.

The teachers that I interviewed had varied family backgrounds. Many were first-generation college graduates, but some were children of college graduates. None of the teachers that I interviewed at Allegiance attended elite colleges. Table 9 provides information about the teachers that I interviewed at Allegiance, including race, the subject taught, college attended and their parents' education.

**Table 9: Allegiance Teachers**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>College Attended</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>
Mr. Drew	White	Math	Millersville	None	None
Ms. Harris	White	Social Studies	Montclair State	No College	No College
Ms. Nichols	White	Counselor	Elizabethtown	BA	BA
Ms. Noel	Black	Social Studies	Rutgers	BA	BA
Ms. Piper	White	Math	Lafayette	No College	No College
Mr. Roberts	White	English	Penn State	No College	No College
Mr. Victor	White/ Venezuela	Spanish	Rutgers	College in Venezuela	BA

Two teachers were former rock musicians who came to teaching after failing to find success in the music industry. One teacher had a corporate job before deciding to teach. Two teachers did education work in a museum before deciding to pursue education full time. None of the teachers fit the stereotype of the “burnt out” urban

teacher (Abel and Sewell 1999). They were mostly positive about teaching. As the study progressed, teachers made more comments about the financial strain on the school. For example, Ms. Noel said she felt stressed and fatigued:

[Class size] went from 24 to 33 for me, and that made a huge difference. Because the class size was so condensed it was an issue of crowd control and most teachers felt like that, if the kids had been separated into smaller groups, the personality conflicts wouldn't have happened. And the ability to cover content was compromised. Everything was really different. The kids felt just stressed out being on top of everyone. In some rooms it was like there weren't chairs and we were constantly borrowing chairs and desks

Thus, although most teachers were happy to teach at Allegiance, there were serious challenges that resulted from the budget crisis in the school district.

### *Students*

Unlike most American high schools, Allegiance did not simply enroll students who lived in the surrounding neighborhood. Rather, as a selective admission school students had to apply to Allegiance. The school staff reviewed applications and interviewed applicants before deciding who would be invited to enroll at the school. In this process, the school staff evaluated grades, test scores, behavior, and attendance. Admitted students had A's and B's, and received "proficient" scores on the state exams. They also needed to have positive behavioral reports and good attendance from their 8<sup>th</sup> grade school.

As a result of the admissions procedures, when students arrived at Allegiance, they had better academic and social records than the average student in the city. For example, only 43% and 36% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the school district were proficient in reading in math, respectively in 2012. In comparison, 74% and 58% of students at Allegiance were deemed proficient in reading and mathematics, respectively, in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. There was not a concentration of academically underachieving students in the

school, like one would likely find in a neighborhood school in Northeastern district. However, there was a group of students, approximately 5-10 per year that was admitted outside of the formal admissions process. These students were mostly football players that Dr. Edwards invited to the school to fulfill his goal of achieving a football championship.

Alliance high school was racially diverse, but the majority of students were black. The racial demographics of the school during the study were 70% black, 13% Latino, 10% White, and 7% Asian. Approximately 75% of students in the school were economically disadvantaged. Students travelled from all parts of the city to get to the school. Most students traveled by subway or bus, but others were driven by their parents. For the most part, students said they were happy to travel to Alliance because they thought it was a school that would prepare them for college.

#### *Climate*

From my observations, the school climate at Alliance seemed positive. When I observed classrooms, the students stayed on task. I never observed any kind of safety incident or fight in the school. Teachers' trust of students is evidenced by the fact that those in 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade were permitted to leave school for lunch. Students and teachers alike appreciated the autonomy that was afforded them in the school. However, there was some evidence that some students and teachers disliked the principal.

Students had quite a lot of freedom at Alliance. Travis, a senior, explained, "Yeah. I mean, it's kinda like college experience already because we get a lotta freedom that you would have in college." There were always students in the hallway walking, seemingly, from one room to another. It did not seem that people were truant, but it

seemed that they had a lot of freedom to be where they wanted to be. Also, some teachers and students had close and informal relationships. One senior made this observation: “We're not like a real school. You can just leave your class and go hang out. I don't have a last period. We'd always hang out after school with [two female teachers].” By not a real school, she explained that it wasn't a place where strict rules were enforced.

Between classes, the hallways were full of students, but not overly crowded. Students would yell and joke loudly in the hallway. I heard students cursing and teasing each other but I never observed any altercation of any kind. Students seemed respectful of teachers and adults in the hall. On one unusual occasion, I was riding the elevator with the librarian. A student wanted to get on the elevator. The librarian told the student “No!” I could not see the student and he could not see me because of where I was standing on the elevator. As the door started to close, it stopped and opened again. This happened two more times before the librarian said in a both stern and whiny voice, “stop playing with the elevator. There is someone else on here. Stop!” When the elevator door closed for the last time, she turned to me and said “Assholes, Assholes, assholes!” I was so surprised by her response that I said nothing and tried to show empathy on my face. This was the only time that I observed a teacher become upset with a student. Even as this altercation occurred, it seemed like students were accustomed to joking with the teachers, but that this particular student had inadvertently crossed a boundary, perhaps by “playing” when an outside adult was present.

The school had a football team and a volleyball team. There was no gym in the building, so practices were conducted at a different school. The extracurricular activities at Allegiance were limited; they included chess club, debate, student government,



Spanish club, and yearbook. Given that there was no funding to provide for teachers who stayed after school, the availability of extracurricular activities depended on teachers' interest and availability. For example, Mr. Victor, the Spanish teacher said he once led a DJing group, but he stopped because as he got older he liked the students' music less. Mr. Drew was the advisor for the chess group because the students signed him up for it without his knowledge. Mr. Roberts, the English teacher said "I somewhat sponsor this poetry club. I say 'somewhat' because they meet in a different room, but I'm still their sponsor." Thus, the teachers that I spoke with were less than enthusiastic about leading extracurricular programming.

Teachers at Allegiance commonly complained about the perceived negative effect of football recruiting on the school. Some teachers felt that football recruits changed culture of the school and reduced the academic focus of the classroom. For example, Mr. Roberts, the English teacher, said the school was "plagued" by football players who disrupted the academic culture of the school. This teacher was identified as the favorite teacher of every senior that I interviewed. He said that the academic students felt pressure to be more like the "cool" football players:

[There are] all of those boys that came here for the academic reasons, and then there's these other, cool boys, that are here for football reasons...It's a huge posse and a huge problem, I think, for our school. I think football has helped some of those boys, being here in maybe a little more of a rigorous environment has helped them, but it's also negatively affected the rest of the classes.

Mr. Roberts viewed Allegiance as a school for academically inclined students. Therefore, he saw the football players as a potential distraction for male students who went to the school for the "right" reasons.

Students were often rowdy, but not out of control, in the hallways. However, Dr. Edwards would sometimes come out in the hallway to be a disciplinarian. Travis, a high

achieving black male student described such an altercation with Dr. Edwards. On this day, Dr. Edwards did not want Travis to bring a drink to the second floor of the school where food and drink were not permitted. The two had a brief altercation:

Travis: I mean, he do too much, and it's just kinda annoying. Just, like, with the no eating and drinking upstairs. I was coming up the steps one day. He told me to go back down to finish drinking my orange juice. I was like, "By the time I make it upstairs to you, my orange juice is gonna be done." So I stopped and drank it and hand him the empty bottle. So he was like, "Well, go back downstairs." "But what? I drank it. "

The fact that Travis, a student that teachers praised and the counselor called "amazing", had a hostile relationship with the principal suggests the possibility of a larger issue with Dr. Edwards. In fact, when teachers or students talked about the principal, it was typically in a negative tone.

Dr. Edwards seemed to let teachers be responsible for what happened in their classrooms. When he was at the school, Dr. Edwards was almost always in, or just outside, of his office. I never saw him visit a class while it was in session. The teachers seemed empowered and invested in their teaching. At the same time, none of the teachers praised Dr. Edwards in their interviews. Several students mentioned dislike for Dr. Edwards. For example, Chris, who was a senior, said that he felt that the principal did not care about students like him:

Chris: The principal's kind of bad. He just seems careless and he doesn't care about anybody except himself. Just honest opinion. Himself and the football team.

Shani: what makes you say that?

Chris: 'Cause he just gives everybody that impression. He gave me that impression; he gave my dad that impression. He gives everybody that impression. The teachers don't even like him...just knowing what they're saying and how they look at him and all that. I just know that teachers don't like him. No one likes him, really.

Beth, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student had a similar view of the Allegiance principal as someone who did not show care and concern for students:

Beth: I think there's a real disconnect with the principal and with the teachers because our principal's kind of a jackass.

Shani: In what way?

Beth: He has no sense of what's going on, and he is just rude to some teachers and favors other teachers. It's very obvious that he recruited football players. You don't feel like he's on your side.

Nonetheless, Allegiance was a school where teachers seemed happy to teach. They appreciated its diversity, size, and the students. Students' perspectives on the school were more mixed, but overall, students seemed engaged in learning and respectful of school rules and the school environment.

### *Counseling*

The counseling program at Allegiance changed greatly during the three years that I conducted research in the school (the first year was a pilot study not reported here). In the first year, there were two counselors – one that oversaw admissions and one that oversaw college counseling. In the second year, all counselors were laid off by the school district and the school had no counselor. In late fall, Dr. Edwards was able to hire a counselor. However, he was not able to choose the counselor he wanted and he was assigned a petite black woman who was approximately seventy years old. This counselor helped me with contacting students, but was generally quiet and had little to say in response to my questions. She started her position two months into the school year and was focused on making certain that students were applying to college and for scholarships. She helped students get recommendation letters and send transcripts to colleges. She also helped students apply for external scholarships. During advisory she went to the third floor, where the seniors were and talked with them one-on-one. She asked seniors about missing recommendation letters or told them about scholarships

that were applicable to them.

Dr. Edwards subsequently fired the older woman and hired another counselor, a white woman in her 40s, Ms. Nichols, in the summer between the two years of the study. Ms. Nichols was warm, but serious. She was generous with her time and resources with students and with me. Students and staff praised the new counselor. She maintained a college counseling website that she created with her best friend, a counselor at another school. The website contained links to college guidance websites, to financial aid websites, to information about the SAT and ACT. Ms. Nichols also maintained an email list for Allegiance seniors. She emailed seniors over 100 times during one academic year.<sup>7</sup> Almost all of these emails contained information about scholarships or college visits. Ms. Nichols sent dozens of emails with attached information about scholarships. This email referred to a \$1,000 scholarship from a local professional organization:

GOOD MORNING SENIORS! See attached Scholarship. This looks like a really good scholarship that is definitely achievable! Any amount of money will help you!!!!

Ms. Nichols also sent students emails about scams that preyed on college applicants:

Hi Seniors....Don't forget to go to the REAL FAFSA at FAFSA.GOV. I am hearing that some students are getting emails that are bringing them to the website I told you about that makes you pay[to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid].....DON'T DO IT! GO TO [www.fafsa.gov](http://www.fafsa.gov)

Ms. Nichols had an expectation that everyone would go to college. On the first floor of the building, a large billboard listed all of the students' college applications. Later the board was changed to show many of the students' college admissions, and then college decisions. All of the students' headshots were on the billboard with a paper flag sign next to their head. For students who had not chosen a college, the flag read "Coming Soon."

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<sup>7</sup> I was on the mailing list and received the emails throughout the year.

The billboard was never completely updated. Some information was always missing, but many of the students' college destination were publicized on the board. As the school year came closer to its end, the counselor became concerned about students who had not made a decision. She wanted to make sure that everyone who had not accepted a spot at a four-year college was planning to enroll in community college in the fall. In May, Ms. Nichols sent this email to the senior class:

Hello Soon to be GRADUATES OF ALLEIGANCE HIGH SCHOOL!  
See Below an email from Community College of Northeastern City  
Every year around this time, there a few seniors who finally get it--SCHOOL IS ENDING SHORTLY..... If you do not have solid plans for when you graduate, it is NOT too late. ONE LAST DITCH OPPORTUNITY is still available. COME explore the possibility for you to earn your Associates degree in 2 years... Tomorrow from 4:30 -6:00 is your chance to visit, apply, take placement test, finish FAFSA, attend scholarship presentation and even schedule classes. Let me know if you're going!

As this email shows, Ms. Nichols saw college as the next step for Allegiance graduates. She describes students who had not yet made postsecondary plans "not getting it." An important part of her job was to help all of the graduates find a postsecondary opportunity that worked for them.

Approximately 70% of students matriculated in some type of postsecondary institution in the year following graduation. Although a significant of Allegiance graduates did not go on to college immediately after graduation, there was, nonetheless, a college-going culture present at the school. Teachers expected students to go to college. Ninth grade and twelfth grade students anticipated that they would enroll in college immediately after high school. In addition, Mr. Edwards and other school staff considered college preparation to be part of the mission for the school.

## ***An Introduction to Romano High School***

### *School Environment and History*

Romano High School is located in a residential neighborhood that is a short distance from downtown. The school is in an art deco building that was constructed in the 1930s. The exterior, which is a drab beige color features huge windows and elaborate ornamentation. The building, which previously functioned as a junior high school, is registered in the National Registry of Historic Places. It is six stories tall and takes up an entire block. Two story brick row homes surround the school. The streets around the school are fairly quiet and few people walk or drive by. It is easy to find a free parking spot adjacent to the school. The neighborhood has been a working class, primarily white, community for decades. However, it has been gentrifying in recent years. There are condominiums under construction and row homes in the process of renovation.

Like Allegiance, Romano was founded in 2006. The founding principal had previously been an assistant principal at one of the city's oldest and most highly regarded selective public high schools, Dominion. According to school district documents, Romano was intentionally established in the image of Dominion. While Dominion was located in the East, Romano was established to serve high achieving students who lived in the West of the city. The principal referred to Dominion as Romano's sister school. In interviews with students, it was apparent that this comparison is one of the reasons they wanted to go to Romano. They thought of their school as spinoff of the older elite school. Romano staff touted the relationship between Romano and Dominion. On Romano's website, the story of the school's founding includes the following passage:

The idea for Romano came from a former superintendent, who wanted a school in the west of the city that upheld a similar mission and vision as Dominion School. The superintendent put the principal of Dominion in charge of the team to create this new school

Some students came to Romano after failing to gain admission to Dominion.

Britney: Dominion was my first choice, but since Romano is really close to it, and Romano is only blocks away from my house

Shani: You said this is it's close to Dominion. What do you mean by that?

Britney: 'Cause I believe Romano built their school based on Dominion and it's kinda Romano's the baby of Dominion.

Jasir, a senior at Romano and one of the top students in his class, saw Romano as just behind Dominion and one other elite school in status. A math teacher posted details about the U.S. News rankings on the school website. Jasir seemed proud as he described the status of the school in the district.

Jasir: it's not old at all, 2006 is when we opened. We're already third in the city, 19th in the state. So we were pretty much on par with Dominion and Gifted Academy and schools like that. Which is insane because these schools have so much history and so much culture behind them. We don't have that.

Romano school had a positive reputation as a result of its association with Dominion.

However, among research participants, Romano was seen as less prestigious than Dominion.

To enter the school building, a visitor must ring the buzzer that is on the wall next to a set of metal doors with only a narrow glass rectangle window. The door is brownish gray. Someone always buzzed the door open after ringing the bell. Just inside the door was a wide stairway going up to the six floors above. One must continue straight ahead and through another set of doors to enter the school hallway. Just inside the second door, to the left, there was a table where one or two adults sat with a visitors' sign in book and a stack of visitor nametags. Like Allegiance, there was a metal detector

machine that was only used when students arrived in the morning and then was pushed off to the side during the rest of the day.

The hallway floors were made of cement that looked polished and shiny. The walls were dingy gray. While the Allegiance building feels like new and unusual high school, the Romano building feels like it could be any urban high school in any city. The classrooms have old flooring and large old windows that are protected with a wire fence on the outside.

### *Mission*

At its founding, Romano was called a “liberal arts high school.” The vision of founding principal, Dr. Drake, was for the school to mimic a liberal arts education in its focus on providing a holistic exposure to the arts, sciences, math and humanities. Olivia, a Romano senior who developed a preference for liberal arts colleges said she knew that Romano was a liberal arts high school, but did not really understand what that meant until she started learning about colleges.

I knew that Romano was different, but I didn't really pay attention to the fact that... part of it, Dr. Drake, she founded this school and everything. Part of it, the liberal arts college, she wanted that. She wanted the small classes, and the teachers being involved, and student run clubs.

Dr. Drake retired during the study a new principal, Ms. Davis changed the language used to describe Romano. The references to liberal arts colleges disappeared. However, the mission maintained a focus on college and college preparation. For example, the mission statement included this passage “As an academic magnet school, the primary mission of Romano is to provide our students with a comprehensive academic preparation for the rigors of higher learning. Further, in the principal's note on the school website, Ms. Davis wrote:



My vision for us is one of greatness, one where the public immediately knows who we are, one where colleges are fighting for our students...We must all work to graduate students who are prepared for college and life in the real world.

Ms. Emerson, the Romano counselor, said that part of this preparation involved holding students accountable for handing in quality work on time, because that is what would be expected of them in college. For this reason, Ms. Emerson was unhappy that some students were able to pass classes, even if they had not participated, by doing a small amount of makeup work at the end of the year.

You know I think as a college prep it's not just about preparing kids in a classroom - did you learn all of your math and your reading, writing, arithmetic? You know I think there are some other elements of preparing you for college, and deadlines are some of them. [Students are] like oh I think it's too hard. I'm like seriously?

In this respect, Ms. Emerson thought that Dr. Drake was sometimes not strict enough.

Ms. Emerson thought that giving students “a break” was out of line with college preparatory mission of the school. Mr. Young contrasted his experience at Romano with teaching at a neighborhood school where students were behind grade level and he was expected to pass everyone, saying “I don't feel like Romano puts a lot of pressure on me to pass students through.” The mission at Romano was to provide students with the academic preparation that would help them get into and succeed in college.

### *Students*

Like Allegiance, students at Romano applied and were admitted to the school.

The official admissions requirements for Romano were stricter than those for Allegiance.

The admissions requirements for Romano said that students needed to be proficient in reading and math on the state exam. The principal at Romano reviewed admissions applications independently without consulting other school staff. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether there was close adherence to the admissions requirements. With

some frustration, the Romano counselor, Ms. Emerson, explained that she wanted to be involved with the admissions process but the principal, Dr. Drake, was unwilling to let others help:

Ms. Emerson: The principal makes all the decisions of who gets in here – every one of ‘em.

Shani: Does she have anybody else helping her with that process?

Ms. Emerson: In the past, quite honestly, I fought to get a committee of people. I said to the principal, “This is ridiculous that you’re doing all of this. So how about we help you?” [She let us help one year]. And there were four or five of us who took some applications and reviewed them. I spent a lot of time going through applications and making decisions. [But after I made some decisions] the principal said, “Yeah. I reviewed them. I changed a bunch of ‘em.” So I was done at that point.

There was no record maintained of in the school office of the number of applications received and the number of students admitted. Therefore, it is not possible to report on the admissions rate at Romano. Although it is not clear exactly how selective the admissions process was, it is apparent that students at Romano performed much better on the state exam than the average Northeastern district student. Also, compared to Allegiance, students at Romano were more likely to be proficient. In 2012, only 43% and 36% of students in the district were proficient in reading and math, respectively. At Romano, 80% of students were proficient in reading and 80% were proficient in mathematics.

The student body at Romano was one of the most diverse in the district. The racial makeup was as follows: 45% black, 25% Asian, 10% Latino, 15% white. Approximately 75% of students came from economically disadvantaged families. Student came from all over the school district, but many of the students lived in the neighborhoods surrounding the school.

## *Personnel*

When I began the study, the founding principal was leading the school. Dr. Drake had been at the school since 2006. She was a 60-year-old black woman who had a long history in the school district, including as assistant principal at Dominion. The counselor was bothered by Dr. Drake's handling of the admissions process; however, she and other staff were overwhelmingly positive about the Dr. Drake. For example, Mr. Young, a Romano math teacher said:

Dr. Drake was wonderful and the only principal of this school for the eight years it's been in existence and it's the 19th best school in the entire state at this point, of eight years. That's great. And it's a statistics game that they're playing, but she's playing it great.

Mr. Laird, a physics teacher at Romano, said that he felt supported as a teacher by the Romano administration.

The administration in the past and continuing now has always had a lot of trust and faith in what we do as teachers once we prove ourselves as competent, so we have a lot of curricular freedom, I guess, would be the way to say it. Pretty much anything you want to do, as long as it is not going to get someone killed, is okay, so it's great, really, really great.

Teachers' one criticism was that Dr. Drake gave students too many second chances.

Some teachers and the Ms. Emerson<sup>8</sup> felt that Romano was not a school for failing kids and that Dr. Drake should send failing students back to their neighborhood school. Mr.

Young, a white math teacher made this complaint about Dr. Drake:

She wouldn't kick kids out. I don't believe in necessarily magnet schools, but we need to kick kids out. Because there are kids that are messing it up for other kids. There was a girl, Laura. She wanted to transfer to Romano so bad. I rescued her – her words – I rescued her from the neighborhood high school. I was teaching summer school. I met her. I brought her out of the neighborhood school to Tech High, which she was so thankful for. Then I was trying to get her to come to Romano. Straight A student, she would have loved Romano. Principal's on board. Everyone's on board, we didn't take her because we didn't

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<sup>8</sup> See example above.

have enough English IV openings. Now there are kids that were sitting in those seats that were cutting up, not coming to class. Not doing their work. They need to be moved out so Laura's that really want the education can be moved in.

As Mr. Young's comments show, as a selective admission school, some teachers thought that Romano should be reserved for students who took school seriously.

Dr. Drake was often in the school hallways. When I saw her she interacted with students like a grandmother or close family friend. She stood close to students and spoke in a warm and familiar tone. Students would call out "Hi Dr. Drake!!" in the hallway. Before she retired, the teachers at the school participated in the hiring process of the new principal. They chose Ms. Davis who had been assistant principal at the school for several years. Ms. Davis, an unassuming and petite black woman in her 40s, was hired as the new principal. Her close relationship with Dr. Drake and familiarity with the school helped facilitate the transition. Ms. Davis was the principal for the latter half of the study.

**Table 10: Romano Teachers**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>College Attended</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Father</b>
Dr. Carter	Black	English	Morgan State	No college	No college
Ms. Emerson	White	Counselor	LaSalle University	No College	No College
Mr. Laird	White	Physics	New Jersey Institute of Technology	No college	Unknown
Ms. Ma	Chinese	Chinese	Rutgers	No College	No college
Ms. Neale	White	History	Smith College	No College	Graduate Degree
Ms. Usher	Black	Psychology	Rutgers	No college	No college
Mr. Young	White	Math	Worcester Polytechnic Institute	No college	B.A.

Like most other high schools in Northeastern district, Romano was a site selection school. This means that the principal selected the teachers that would teach at her school. This is different from some public schools where teachers are assigned

according to seniority. Many of the teachers that I interviewed were first in their family to go to college. Table 10 provides background information on the Romano teachers I interviewed, including race, the subject taught, college attended and their parents' education. The majority of the teachers at Romano were white, but there were also black, Asian, and Latino. I interviewed three white teachers, two black teachers, and one Asian teacher. The teachers that I interviewed came to Romano through various paths. The two black female teachers learned about positions from a career fair and the district hiring website. In contrast, the white teachers learned about open positions at Romano from friends who taught there. For example, Ms. Neale, a white history teacher said:

A friend of mine that I had gone to grad school with was leaving Romano, She was a history teacher at the time. She said "there are a lot of open positions at Romano, so you should just apply

Regardless of how they learned about the school, teachers said they came to Romano by choice because they liked something about the school. For example, Ms. Neale said that she wanted to leave her previous school because it had been deemed a "failing school" and the school district was implementing changes:

I was thinking that I wanted to make a change because it was a neighborhood school and it can be rough. And I just was not interested in the stipulations [implemented by the district], which included longer school days, teaching on Saturdays, teaching in July, and teachers having to wear uniforms. It just was too much.

Ms. Neale wanted to avoid strict oversight and additional responsibilities at a neighborhood school. Teachers felt fortunate to teach at Romano. They said that they appreciated the students and their colleagues. Ms. Usher, a black psychology teacher, appreciated the diversity of the student body:

Ms. Usher: Romano's awesome.

Shani: What's awesome about it?

Ms. Usher: What I really love about Romano is that it's diverse. All of the kids are

happy to be there, which is fantastic. And we have a lot of Asian students, we have a lot of African-Americans, we have a lot of Hispanic students. We have everybody. And they all mix well, and they enjoy their time together, which is great.

Mr. Laird, a white physics teachers also appreciated the diversity, as well as having a supportive group of colleagues:

I think this school is awesome. I absolutely love it. I know it's not actually, like, in ranking not the best school in the district, but I think it is pretty much the best school in the world. One of the things I really like about it is we have a really diverse population of kids so it's not all, like, one race, one gender, one sexuality or anything like that. Our kids are really bright. They come from a lot of different backgrounds. We have a lot of really awesome teachers who are young and creative and doing interesting things, and we also have a core of veteran teachers who are also awesome. They are solid mentors. They really – they're still very involved in what they do, so it's a good mix of young and older.

The teachers at Romano seemed happy to teach there. They viewed the school as a place that celebrated academic achievement and diversity.

### *Climate*

At most times, the hallways in Romano high school were calm. During class periods, there were often a few students chatting in the hallway. Unlike Allegiance, the hallways at Romano were wide and the ceilings were high. I observe much less playful roughhousing at Romano. Some students would sit on steps and work on schoolwork. Despite their presence, the hallways remained quiet. While a major concern at some high schools is fighting, I never witnessed any kind of altercation between students or between students and faculty during my time at the school.

In the hallways between classes, Romano's diverse student body intermingled. There was some friend grouping by race. At the same time, there were interracial friendships and interactions. A neighborhood school located close to Romano had recently been in the newspaper because of fighting between Asian and black students.

These conflicts did not seem to occur at Romano, at least not in such public way, and no one mentioned it as a problem. Rather, students said that racial and ethnic diversity was one of the most valued aspects of their school. Olivia, a senior at Romano described her first visit to the school as a prospective student as an introduction to a more racially diverse social world:

I went to the office and I waited for my shadow. And I met my shadow and this was the first time I met an Asian American. Like 14 years of my life and this was the first time I met an Asian American. And she's my friend to this day. And I thought wow this is a very diverse school.

Jasir, a Lebanese American student, was somewhat unusual in his concern about the status of his high school. Jasir was proud that Romano was ranked as 3<sup>rd</sup> in a magazine ranking. However, Jasir was like his classmates in his view that Romano's diversity made it a special place to go to high school

We just have this really cool blend of people that are here that's going to prepare us for the real world. Because this isn't a school where everybody looks the same or is the same economically. It's so different. So diverse. I think that diversity really pushes us forward.

Overall, students thought they went to a good school. The school made a positive first impression on Dana Lam and she continued to be pleased with her experience:

I came to orientation or like one of those freshman days and I was impressed by like the teachers and I liked how it was like – it wasn't that big and there's like a sense of community here. And then I just chose it and I liked it a lot more than I thought I would. Everyone says they hate high school and everything - that generic thing - but I really don't hate high school. I thought it was okay.

Britney Dou had hoped to go to Dominion, widely considered one of the two best schools in the district. However she was persuaded by her positive experiences at Romano.

Freshman year I came in 'cause I wanted to go with Dominion, so I didn't really like it. So at the end of freshman year, I liked it. And then towards sophomore year I made more friends - And all the teachers I became friends with I really liked. And I told myself that I actually don't regret going to Romano and if I had to choose now, I'd rather go to Romano over Dominion.

Students expressed appreciation for the size of the school, but expressed concern about the growing population, such as Karen Harris, a Romano senior:

This one just kind of felt like the right fit for me. And, that's pretty much how it went, it was kind of fate, I don't know. [Laughs]. It was just the fact that it's small. I mean, it was smaller when I started too, so I think the student body was only around 600 students when I started, and now it's around 800. But I also came from a small middle school too. So, to have a small school but still have it big enough where you get to know a lot of people, is nice. And then, also the fact that the teachers are very approachable; they're not very standoffish and they really wanna help you. And, just how the student body actually likes the school

Some students said that the school was not as good as it had been when it was smaller. But they were still overwhelmingly positive about the school. The high achieving students that participated in the study felt affirmed at Romano. It was a school where academic achievement was respected.

### *Counseling*

Ms. Emerson, the counselor at Romano was involved with many aspects of the school. Ms. Emerson was a white woman in her 40s with short dark brown hair who always wore athletic apparel and sneakers. The number of counselors in the school decreased from three to one in the year before the study. In fact, there was still an old sign on the wall that directed students to three different counselor offices, depending on the first letter of their last name. Ms. Neale, a Romano history teacher was adamant that the school needed more counselors.

Shani: Do kids get the kind of guidance or support they need at Romano?

Ms. Neale: No, I mean I think that we need more than one counselor, period.

Because of the drastic reduction in counselors, Ms. Emerson had fewer opportunities to meet one on one with students. She had many other responsibilities in addition to offering college guidance.



Shani: What are your responsibilities as counselor at Romano?

My job as the counselor or my job as Ms. Emerson at Romano? I am the basketball coach. I run graduation, essentially. That really doesn't start until May, but it's a little crazy. But I also assist as the senior class sponsor. I collect all the money [to pay for senior events]. I was the badminton coach, as well, but I gave that up this year, although I loved it. But just from a time standpoint, it was one thing when there were three of us [counselors] here. Now it's another thing. What do I – counselor-wise, here – academic advising for all grades, college counseling, which includes scholarships. Right now, it's report cards and I got a slew of kids who failed. Mental health counseling – any kid that's in crisis, they come to me.

Ms. Emerson was also committed to creating school spirit among the students. She created a school logo and painted it in the library and in the hallway. She designed and sold Romano apparel to students. Ms. Emerson filled many roles in the school.

There was a small store in Ms. Emerson's office. The counselor sold juice, water, candy, chips, and prepackaged pasties that she bought at Costco. Often a student would sit at the table with the items and be the store cashier. Other times the counselor or other school staff would sell things. Sometimes the counselor trusted students to put their money in the cash box and take out their change. I also overheard the counselor and her interns say "you owe me a quarter, but I trust you. Bring it tomorrow." Students came to the office every day between classes to buy snacks. The counselor said, "Oddly enough, as my little store in my office grows, so does my ability to meet more kids." Other students just hung out in the office where there were many couches and chairs.

Ms. Emerson used the money from store sales to pay for events and materials that the school would not be able to afford otherwise. For example, she used the money to order school logo athletic wear for students and team bags for the basketball team she coached:

Whether it's the sweats that we bought that cost us \$85.00 a piece. The kids had to pay 25; I paid the rest. That's why I have that crazy store in my room; I paid the rest of it with that. And they love them, absolutely positively. I got them bags. They wanna walk into a gym and they wanna look like a team... And our kids are proud of the school, and they'd like to be able to wear things that say it. We have some sweatshirts now, I did another sweatshirt last year with a new logo on it.

Ms. Emerson also worked with Dr. Drake to fund an award for a graduating senior:

We called it the Legacy Award and it goes to somebody [to whom we can say that] we are a better school for knowing you. So one of the things I wanted to do was this award and I told [Dr.] Drake this, I'm like okay... we're gonna do it. I said, "If you don't have it, I'll give you the money from the store to make a plaque."

Mr. Emerson said she used money raised in the store to do things that "make kids want to come to school."

The counselor's office was hub for activity. Ms. Emerson had several interns helping her throughout the school year. They were masters and bachelors' students from Villanova and the University of Pennsylvania completing their practicum at the school. The counselor relied on some of the interns to be hands-on counselors with students, especially during the application process. Often, students would come to the counselor's office and get help with their application from an intern. Ms. Emerson used online software to manage students' college applications process. Students would submit letters, essays, and other information to the online system. Some of the interns had access to the program and could help students who came to the office by telling them if they had uploaded all of the necessary materials. Interns were also able to see if transcripts had been sent to colleges. Typically, when I saw students talking to her about college, it was towards the end of the process. They would come in and say "the application is due today and I got a message that they didn't get my transcript do you know what's wrong." In most cases, I observed interns, rather than Ms. Emerson,

completing these tasks. I also never saw students asking any of the counseling staff for help with application essays.

Generally, I did not observe students asking Ms. Emerson or the interns for advice on where to apply to college. Only on one occasion did I observe Ms. Emerson meeting with a student one on one to give guidance about where to apply to college. In that single meeting, Ms. Emerson met with an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student and her mother and told them that it did not really matter where she went to college. She told the student she would have a lot of options because she had very good grades. But, she said, “Really, community college is equivalent to any four-year institution, they have honors classes at community, and it’s the same as any other college” (*Field Notes*). Ms. Emerson promoted college, but her comments to the student suggest that she did not make distinctions between the kinds of colleges where students could apply and enroll.

Rather than trying to meet with every student Ms. Emerson told students about applying to college during a school wide assembly

We do a big assembly to go over it for them. Ms. Davis runs that whole thing – to go over them. I usually do a blurb in there about – particularly for the juniors. But in terms of – “If you have an idea of where you wanna go, look at the school.” I show ‘em how to do that.

Ms. Emerson preferred for her office to be the students’ source of information on college and the application process. She said that she felt frustrated when teachers talked to students because she felt that they often did not know enough on the subject.

Shani: Do teachers help or do they advocate for certain colleges?

Ms. Emerson: There are times – and I get a little frustrated – when a kid comes in and they say something to me. And in my brain, I think to myself, “I’m not gonna go into a classroom and try and teach algebra, ‘cause I’m not an algebra teacher.” Because wrong information is given out sometimes. And literally, the kid comes in and says, “Well, yeah, such and such said – ” I’m like, “Yeah, that’s not true.”

Shani: For example?

Ms. Emerson: Just last week a teacher told students not to take the SAT more than once because 'it looks bad.' Now, that's an opinion, but I'm like, "I don't agree with that"

Ms. Emerson encouraged students to go to college fairs, attend recruitment meetings and go on tours of local colleges. For example, when schools were closed for teacher professional development, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students were required by Ms. Emerson to go a college tour and get a form signed by an admissions officer. Students had to drop off the signed form with the office when they returned to school the next day. Ms. Emerson scheduled the college recruiter visits at Romano. College representatives would call or email her to schedule the meeting. When she received the email or finished the phone call, she would write the appointment on a calendar next to her desk. Later, she would write the college's name and the time of the visit on a large (5' x 5') calendar that was hung on the wall near the front door of the school (behind the sign-in desk). Both Allegiance and Romano High Schools featured a college-going culture. Teachers and counselors expected that the graduates of both schools would go to college. Teachers were disappointed by the fact that some students did not go straight to college after high school. Students and teachers appreciated the high school as a rigorous and engaged learning environment. At both schools, students had a history of academic achievement, and teachers described students as bright. The education provided at both schools was constrained by the limited financial resources available in the district. Nonetheless, the school staff used what resources they had to help students prepare to enroll in college after graduation.

## CHAPTER 5: Constrained Opportunity In Course Taking

Allegiance and Romano high schools featured a college-going culture. Yet, they did not have an *elite college-going* culture. This aspect of the school environments limited students' opportunity to prepare for elite colleges and universities. Students subsequently had reduced access to elite colleges and universities. A most important aspect of elite college preparation is course taking. The course taking procedures at Romano, and especially Allegiance, made it difficult for students to prepare for elite college admission. While educators at many elite high schools work to ensure that high achieving students are prepared to successfully apply to elite colleges and universities, I find that teachers and counselors were not engaged in this work at Allegiance and Romano. Instead, teachers and other school staff were focused on students' meeting the minimum qualifications to graduate.

Some research suggests that high school students make their own course-taking decisions (Lucas 1999). Rather than being simply assigned to a track, students increasingly have a choice about which courses they will take in high school. Still, there are potential constraints on this process. Students often have to be recommended by teachers in order to take AP courses (Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby 2008). Moreover, as a result of budget reductions and financial constraints, high schools in Northeastern school district had limited resources with which to provide courses. The number of teachers at Allegiance and Romano did not allow the school to offer as many courses as the staff would have liked.

Teachers wanted to prepare students for college. But, in the process of allocating limited academic resources, they seemed unconcerned with helping students prepare to apply to elite institutions. In addition, while some teachers seemed unfamiliar with elite college admissions requirements, others held views about course taking that directly contradicted the preferences of elite college admissions officers. In either case, educators did not promote advanced classes for high achieving students. Thus, as a result of limited resources and teacher priorities, many students did not have the opportunity to take four years of math, science, or foreign language, all of which are important for elite college admissions.

### ***Course Taking at Romano and Allegiance High Schools***

I begin this section on course taking with a brief summary of course taking procedures at the two schools. In Northeastern school district, high school principals select one of the teachers to serve as “roster chair.” It is the roster chair’s job to make the course schedules for students. The roster chair ensures that students take the courses that are required before graduation. The roster chair received 10 days of compensation for working on course schedules during the summer. In the spring, students at both schools received a paper form from the roster chair that listed the courses that would be available to them in the following year. Students were asked to fill out the form and submit it to the roster chair before the end of the school year. In practice, the roster process varied between the two schools because there were many more options at Romano. These specific differences are discussed below.

The schools shared similar approaches in key areas. A major concern at both schools was that there were not enough teachers to teach some high-level courses. Both

schools had experienced teacher and staff cuts in the years before the study. Because of a shortage of teachers, some students could only take the minimum number of courses required to graduate. Thus, students who did well academically were nonetheless unable to take advanced courses. There were not enough available classes to fill a school day, so nearly all of the seniors at both schools left the school building by noon every day. Students who stayed on campus did so to participate in activities like yearbook. The roster chairs at both schools, as well as teachers, said that there had once been more available classes, but with the onset of budget cuts, many of those courses had to be eliminated. Ms. Noel, a social studies teacher at Allegiance described the changing situation in her school:

[in the past] We had a range of electives that students at the end of the year could then choose, "I'd like to take this class next year." They'd say "I'd like to take..." and then depending on like rostering issues kids had a choice beyond just the – now they have to take a sequence. They have to just take our graduation requirements...so everything became just really basic scale.

The roster chair at Romano told a similar story, but she also mentioned outside pressures on the school. She suggests that the reason that they no longer had electives is that people outside of the school thought that there were too many resources available at Romano, compared to other schools. As a result, Dr. Carter explained, the school district increased the enrollment at the school, without increasing the number of teachers. The school served about 600 students at its founding in 2006, and was serving close to 800 at the time of the study.

Dr. Carter: Initially when we first started this school, our first senior class, they didn't go home [at noon]. They had seven classes, whether they needed it or not. But we were a little bit freer in our master schedule. We had kind of like an overabundance, as some people put it outside of our school. We had more teachers, so we were able to have more electives. And we still have those electives, but now that we have more kids, those electives have become classes that are needed... So we really wish – I wish that we could have a little bit more.

In the quote above, Dr. Carter refers to any course that is not required for graduation as an 'elective.' The graduation requirements in Northeastern School District are that students earn 23.5 credits, including:

- 4 in English
- 3 in Mathematics
- 3 in Science
- 3 in Social Studies
- 2 in World Language
- 2 in Arts and Humanities
- 1 in Physical Education
- .5 in Health
- 4 in electives

Many elite colleges request that applicants take four years of English, math, science, and foreign language. Therefore, students who only take the minimum required for graduation from a Northeastern district are at a disadvantage in the elite college application process.

If a student has taken three math classes in high school, the fourth math class is treated as an elective because it is not needed for graduation. Students who had already met their graduation requirements had lower priority compared to students who needed a course to graduate. Mr. Young, a math teacher at Romano said that when students complained to him about not being able to enroll in their desired courses, he encouraged them to go to the school district and request more teachers:

Complain to everyone. The main thing that I try to let the kids know — I'm pretty sure that they're not getting me in trouble. They're not getting our principal in trouble because we're telling them straight —We don't have enough teachers to give you this subject. Keep yelling. Keep complaining, because eventually somebody's gonna hear it and then they're gonna say well why aren't they teaching classes kids want? Well because every classroom has 30 students in it or 34 students in it or 38 students in it, and there's no more room. Give us more teachers please.

However, I did not see evidence that students were protesting their limited course



options. Students made similar observations about decreasing numbers of teachers in the school. For example, Olivia a senior at Romano talked about how her school changed over the four years that she attended, but she was committed to remain positive about her high school experience.

Shani: How has it been over the four years that you've been here?

Olivia: Junior year, I think that was the beginning of budget cuts. But I had a good experience throughout all through my four years. But after the budget cuts I saw like teachers leaving, and more students coming into the schools. So it was like the classrooms were a little bit more crowded, and -- but it was still -- for me it was still a good experience, but I just saw a difference in the school. It was just like less teachers and everything. The academics at Romano was still good.

Highly selective colleges typically enroll students who have taken the highest-level courses available. But in the two schools where the research was conducted, accessing high-level courses was a challenge. As I will show below, high-level courses simply were not available at Allegiance and they had only limited accessibility at Romano.

An important area of course taking in college preparation is mathematics (Choy et al. 2000). There is great variation in the level of mathematics that students take in high school. Nationally, 35% of high school graduates had taken pre calculus in the class of 2009. Only 16% of students studied calculus. Just 11% of students took AP calculus in high school (Aud et al. 2014). Students who had the opportunity to take these high level math classes were in an academically advantaged minority. However, these courses are expected among admissions committees at elite colleges (based on my review of elite college admissions websites).

In addition to being excluded from high-level classes, some students decided not to take the highest possible courses or to take a less advantageous sequence of courses. In both schools, there was minimal advising about course selection. Helping students choose courses was not part of the job description for counselors. Instead,

students made decisions on their own, sometimes asking teachers and parents to help. Students did not understand the potential consequences of their choices in the college admissions process. For example, later in the chapter, I discuss Romano valedictorian Dalia's decision not to take calculus. She made this choice without understanding the impact it could have on her application to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

### *Advanced Placement Courses*

At Allegiance and Romano, teachers insisted that there was no formal tracking. Teachers and administrators alike said that most classes were mixed, in terms of students' ability. Advanced Placement (AP) courses were the only courses that were specified as "advanced."

Advanced Placement courses utilize a standardized curriculum that is offered by the College Board. These classes are described as college level. AP level courses are designed to be more rigorous than regular high school classes. Teachers who teach AP courses, like Mr. Victor, receive special training in the course curriculum:

Shani: Did you need some extra training to teach AP Spanish?

Mr. Victor: I did. I did a weeklong training program. They do it throughout the country. The one I did was in Connecticut. It was a weeklong AP Summer Institute.

Each course subject has an accompanying test that students can take at the end of the school year. In Northeast School District, students in AP courses are required to take the accompanying test. The exam is scored on a one to five scale, five being the highest possible score. Scores of three and above are considered passing. In 2009-2010, 1.8 million high school students took at least one AP exams. Nationally 58% of AP tests were scored 3 or higher in 2009. (Aud et al. 2011).

Students who pass the test may have their AP courses count for college credit, making it possible to graduate early. Some elite colleges do not accept AP courses for credit. However, taking AP courses helps students in the college application process. For example, the following advice is offered on Princeton University admissions frequently asked questions page (Princeton University 2016):

Is there an advantage to taking honors, advanced, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses — even if it might be tougher to earn high grades?  
Yes. We consider it a promising sign when students challenge themselves with advanced courses in high school.

Some teachers acknowledged the benefit of taking AP courses for college applications. For example, Ms. Noel, a social studies teacher at Allegiance said she explained to her students:

The whole thing with AP is like open doors for yourselves and that when you're an AP student you set yourself apart because there's a standard that means something, you know, it's nationally recognized and so when applications come in the expectation is almost like how many AP test classes are you taking?

Thus, Ms. Noel is one teacher who understood that taking AP classes can signal to colleges that a student is ready to do college level work. However, it is not clear whether Ms. Noel was aware of the particular focus placed on advanced course taking in elite colleges.

Students described many of their high school classes as “easy” compared to their AP courses. Jasir, an optimistic Romano student who was proud of his high school's U.S. News ranking said that he easily got A's in his classes in middle and high school, until he started taking AP courses. “In tenth grade I started taking AP classes, started taking classes that were more rigorous. I realized I really have to apply myself to do well.”

Once they began taking AP classes, many students said they felt that they were really getting the education they needed to excel in college. Chris Nelson, an Allegiance senior, felt that his two AP courses were more challenging than his other classes. He appreciated the assignments in his AP English class because he thought they would prepare him to do college work.

In 11th grade, I took AP United States History. It was hard. It was a challenge, which is good, 'cause you can't go to a school that doesn't challenge you, but yeah, it was a challenging class. AP English, same way. It's challenging. It's the hardest class I've had since I been to school. He gives out a lot of work, makes you read a lot, write essays, and it's preparing me for college, 'cause that's how it's gonna be in college. So I actually – I dislike the class, but I really, really like it though 'cause it's helping me be prepared for college, and I'm gonna need it.

David, a senior at Romano also viewed AP courses as preparation for college:

I mean the AP classes kind of are much more – feel much more college preparatory than other classes to me. I have to do more work for them and more time management and stuff like that.

At both schools, students said that AP classes were more rigorous, challenging and fulfilling. Tanya, an Allegiance senior said:

Last year I took one AP class. I didn't know how to manage it because it was the first AP class I had taken. This year I'm taking AP English. It's really hard. It's more work than any other class I've been in.

Linda, a Romano senior, made a similar distinction between AP courses and her other courses when I asked her to describe her high school experience.

Yeah, [high school has] just been good overall. I feel like it was a little bit more difficult once I got into AP classes, but everything else is okay.

Dana, a Romano senior, described her appreciation for the teacher of her AP European History course, Ms. Neale:

One of my favorite teachers here is Ms. Neale She taught AP European History. And she made me like completely fall in love with the class and made me really motivated to learn about it.

Students frequently spoke of their AP course instructors with admiration. They thought they were good teachers who made learning fun. For example, Caleb, an Allegiance 12<sup>th</sup> grade student, grinned when he mentioned Mr. Roberts:

Roberts, he's funny, he makes me laugh all the time. Even though his class I had is AP English, and even though he gives us a ton of work, he made it fun.

They appreciated the challenge of their AP classes compared to their other classes.

Eddie Lane, a Romano student who hoped to be a writer unabashedly smiled as he talked about his AP literature course:

Those classes? I love all my classes. AP Lit, Dr. Carter (the English teacher), she's really intelligent and just being in her class—you can just feel all of her intelligence. And it's just—she's very professional. And I like that about her.

Tim, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student at Allegiance was one of the lowest ranked students in the class. He also had the highest SAT score in the class. He was beaming with excitement when he recalled taking an AP course he took in his junior year: “It was C's and then I took an AP class, which I just love, this AP History class, and I had straight A's in that.”

Although students appreciated the challenge of AP courses, few students did well on the AP exam. Only two students out of the sample of 30 interviewees said that they had received a three on an AP exam, the minimum passing score. Most students said they scored one or two, or they had not looked at their score. For example, Tanya chose to not look at her score:

Tanya: AP World History was hard because she would give us key words in order to look up in the book. It's not straightforward. We had to do a lot of reading and take lots of notes. It was really hard because we had to know everything by heart in order to take the AP exam. It was really stressful.

Shani: So, you took the exam. How'd you do?

Tanya: I didn't have a chance to look at my score. They sent me a link for it, but I never had a chance to use it.

Shani: Are you avoiding it or you just haven't had a chance to look?

Tanya: I'm stressed about looking at it, but then again, I'm not. I didn't know from the beginning that taking a test gets involved with the credits in college.

Eddie, a senior at Romano did not look at the test because he felt certain he had done poorly:

Shani and do you know how you did on the AP test?

Eddie: No, I actually never looked.

Shani: You never looked?

Interviewee: Nope.

Shani: Okay. How would you—do you know how you check it?

Eddie: They gave us a code to a website or something. I didn't.

Shani: Why didn't you look?

Eddie : Well, I thought I did badly on it. And I said, "I'm pretty sure I didn't get a high grade." I think I got a one or something. I pretty much was positive that I didn't do well. I think I got a one, I'm pretty sure I did.

Thus, some students doubted that they were prepared to pass their AP exams.

Other students who did well in their AP classes nonetheless earned low scores on the AP exams. Some students' comments suggested that there was a misalignment between the AP course they took and the AP exam. Britney, a Romano senior who earned A's in all of her classes said that the science AP exams were "nothing like" the AP courses she took at Romano. Her grades in the class were not reflected in her test score:

Britney" Yeah, I took AP sciences for three years. I took AP Chem, which was horrible 'cause I didn't understand anything. I understood just a little, but most of the time I didn't understand it. I got an A - 'Cause his work was doable, but it was nothing like the AP test.

Shani: How'd you do on the AP test -

Britney: One. And AP physics, which I understood half-half, I got a two on that. And then, there's AP bio this year. You think it's easy, but when you actually go and take the test, it was horrible too.

Thus, there is evidence that the classes did not prepare some students to pass the exam. Nonetheless, students felt that they were challenged in positive ways. While it would be preferable to pass AP exam, earning a high grade in an AP course could make

an applicant more attractive to a highly selective college. But they first need to have access to the AP classes.

*Differences Between Two Schools*

There were significant differences between the two schools in the availability of high-level, especially AP courses. Romano high school is a bigger school, serving 800 students, compared to 400 students at Allegiance High School. Size is likely one of the reasons that Romano offers many more AP courses than Allegiance. However, the difference in size does not fully explain the greater availability of AP courses at Romano. Nationally, schools that have an AP program offer an average of ten AP course subjects (Aud et al. 2011). As Table 11 shows, Romano offered 14 AP courses, compared to only 4 at Allegiance. Romano offered students much greater opportunity to enroll in AP courses. In addition to having fewer AP courses, Allegiance had fewer science and math classes. For example, there were no physics, calculus, or statistics courses of any kind available at Allegiance.

**Table 11: AP Courses Taught at Allegiance and Romano**

<b>AP Course</b>	<b>Allegiance</b>	<b>Romano</b>
Art		X
Biology		X
Calculus		X
Chemistry		X
Chinese		X
Computer Science		X
European History		X
Government	X	X
Literature	X	X
Physics		X
Psychology		X
Spanish	X	X
Statistics		X
US History	X	X

### ***Romano: Many Options, but Limited Access***

Many AP courses were offered at Romano High School, compared to other high schools in Northeastern School District, including Allegiance High School. In fact, the number of AP courses at Romano was comparable to the number available at nearby wealthy suburbs. Moreover, one of the AP courses available at Romano was calculus, which is required in order to gain admission to science and math-based majors at some elite colleges. Calculus is a preferred class for students applying to any elite college. However, not all high achieving students at Romano had access to high-level classes, such as calculus.

#### *Looking Forward: Ninth Grade Perceptions of Course Availability at Romano*

Students in ninth grade at Romano High School knew that they had the option to take advanced courses, including AP classes. However, they varied in their specific plans. Octavia was a freshman at Romano who, at the time of her interview, was considering the courses she would take in her sophomore year. Octavia sought guidance in the process from the roster chair. Octavia was told to take no more than two AP courses in a year.

Octavia: We're picking for our class next year so in tenth grade that's when AP classes start. So this is about I guess a month ago I asked [the roster chair] 'cause I don't really know much about AP classes and I asked them what suggestions on how I should balance out because I know the work load is actually greater with AP classes. I think there's AP Chem, AP European history and another AP class. So I was asking how many should I take? They said I should take two of the three so that I can have a chance. They was telling me about the college credits and how that works like if you pass the AP test that can count towards college credits.

Shani: What was their reason for not taking all three?

Octavia: Stress and maintaining getting everything done. I don't want to overwhelm myself.

Students made assessments of their own ability and proclivity for each class. There was



not a systemic process by which Romano students were advised about their course taking decisions. Kisha was a ninth grade Romano student who had previously attended two charter schools. Kisha looked forward to taking AP Chemistry in her sophomore year.

Kisha: I think next year I want to also take AP Chemistry. I like chemistry, and I took it last year, in eighth grade.

Shani: Do you have to talk to the chemistry teacher about whether they think AP Chemistry would make sense, or do you just put it?

Kisha: I took it, so I didn't think it would be a problem. But it's like, my Bio grade, it was a C, but I brought it up to a B. And then this last semester, it was a B again. So I think I had to average like, an A to get into any AP classes. But I really hope I get into AP Chemistry.

Kisha's previous school experience helped her to feel ready to take AP chemistry at Romano. Because she went to a charter school that offered chemistry, she felt prepared to take high school chemistry. A student who went to their neighborhood elementary school that did not provide chemistry would likely approach this choice differently.

Other ninth grade students were hesitant to enroll in AP courses in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. They thought the classes might be too hard or that they were not ready to do the work. When I asked Shawn, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade Romano boy, what courses he planned to take in sophomore year, he did not name any AP courses.

Shawn: I'm taking geometry next year... it was either geometry or algebra II, English II, chemistry. I'll be taking Spanish II and I think it's... African American History next year... and... then I'm taking fitness next year.

Shani: Fitness, okay. Are you thinking about any AP classes?

Shawn: No, I'd like to take some junior year.

Shani: Why not in tenth grade?

Shawn: AP Classes? When I came to this school it was real different from my old school so I had to think harder than I did in eighth grade so I don't know if I'm ready for any AP classes yet.

However, some 9<sup>th</sup> grade students planned to take as many AP courses as possible.

Charles was a Romano ninth grade student whose father loaded boxes onto food

distribution trucks and whose mother had mental illnesses and stayed home. Charles' 18-year-old sister worked at Chuckie Cheese's and was expecting her first child. His brother went to Kutztown, a local nonselective college, but left after one semester because he missed home-cooked meals. Charles said that he thought a lot about which AP courses to take in his 10<sup>th</sup> grade year and he decided to challenge himself and take two.

Charles: I'm planning on taking AP Chemistry, and there's another AP class we can take, which I'm also planning on taking... European History.

Shani: what made you decide to take the AP Chemistry, as opposed to regular — Interviewee: At first I was debating. I was debating a lot to myself. If I wanted to push myself that much or not, because if I could take the class and I can pass it and do good, that would help me a lot. But if I take it and I do really, really bad, then that's not going to look good. But I think I'm going to pass it, and I have lots of people who could give me advice, like my teachers, and they said I should definitely take it.

Charles talked to his social studies teacher, Ms Neale. She affirmed his ability to take AP classes and do well.

When I was choosing my classes, I asked Ms. Neale her opinion about what I should do. She told me that if I'm good at math and science, I should definitely take AP Chem, because she's also my World History teacher, and she's also the European History teacher. So she said she would like me in her AP class next year. So I took her advice on that.

Ms. Neale was a Romano teacher who had graduated from an elite college. Several students mentioned her as the teacher that advised students about the benefit of taking AP courses for college admissions. As these quotes show, there was variation in how much ninth grade students were interested in and committed to AP classes. But, all of ninth grade students at Romano believed that they had some options.

Ms. Emerson, the Romano counselor, said most seniors did not need to take a

full roster of courses in order to graduate on time. Students only needed to take a few classes in their senior year in order to graduate on time. The school did not have enough teachers to teach students beyond the minimum graduation requirements:

We are limited by the number of teachers we have in terms of electives. I mean, the kids always have enough to graduate. In fact, our kids usually have more than they need because we take seven classes a year instead of six, like most schools... So by senior year, as long as they didn't fail anything, they already have 17 credits, at least. To graduate, you need 23 and a half. You need 17 to be a junior. Our – most of our kids have 21 by senior year.

Because there were too few elective courses available, many Romano seniors left school at around noon each day. Ms. Usher described running into the students around the city after school:

They hang out at Romano [recreation center]. If you ever need to find kids, Romano Rec, Barnes and Noble. If you hang out at Downtown Square, they're always in that area.

Other students had jobs. Students mentioned jobs in retail and grocery stores.

Ms. Emerson offered a contradicting explanation of the seniors' short school day, saying that students who wanted to could take a full roster. However, the only courses that were available were AP courses such as calculus, statistics, Spanish, and Chinese, which some students avoided.

They could take a full roster, if they were so inclined. The system we have here I suggested it a couple years ago. Two years ago it was God-awful because the seniors needed hardly any credits 'cause again, you're coming in with 21. And they all had a full roster and we don't have enough teachers to have a lot of extra electives. So the electives that we have are AP Calc and AP Stat and AP Chinese and AP Spanish. And so there were kids taking these courses that didn't want them. And in senior year that year, in third quarter, there were 65 seniors failing multiple subjects. I said, "Is there any way that we can allow these kids to get out early?"

Ms. Emerson further explained that the change in the schedule was designed to improve the classroom experiences for teachers and for students who wanted to learn in AP courses.

It made it difficult for teachers, too. Imagine you're a teacher and you have – half the kids want the class. The other half are in there 'cause you put 'em in there. So literally, teachers were dividing the class up into, "Okay. If you don't care, sit in the back. If you wanna learn, sit in the front." Now if they want to leave early, their parents sign for them to have a work roster that allows them – and many of our seniors work – that allows them to go get a job.

Ms. Emerson suggested that students who left school at noon did so by choice, because they did not want to take AP courses. However, as I show later in this chapter, students offered a different explanation for their course taking decisions. Specifically, they said that they were not able to access the courses that they wanted. Only a couple of students took AP courses in the afternoon, and these students did so against the advice of their teachers.

In order to take an AP course, students needed to be recommended by a teacher. Patrick Jones, a Romano senior, offered a straightforward explanation:

Shani: What determined that you could take the AP Government class?  
Patrick: Your US history teacher usually recommends you for it 'cause you do well in their class and you're a good student, and they feel like you're ready for the AP-level class next year.

Dr. Carter, an AP English teacher and the Romano roster chair described consultation between teachers that occurred in the process of assigning students to classes.

Shani: What do students have to do to get into AP classes?  
Dr. Carter: We leave that up to the teachers who want to teach the AP class along with myself, sometimes they give me a list of who it is they want to be in the class. And so the teacher will say [to the teacher from the previous year], "Who do you think of your students that you had this year will fit into AP?" And they will provide a list.  
Interviewer: So, what happens when a student is not on the list? Can he ask for a class if he's not on the list?  
Interviewee: You just ask the teacher and see if it's okay if they take the class, if

the teacher is available. Sometimes when you're making the list, a lot of times what was – I was fortunate last year 'cause [the previous roster chair] knew a lot of the students, and she was like, " No, don't put him in there because he doesn't even like art." You know what I mean? That kind of thing.

This quote indicates that teachers and the roster chair made course decisions based on students' requests as well as own assessment of students' abilities and interests.

Students at Romano understood this process, and knew that their actions in one year could affect their ability to take classes in future years. Some students chose not to request an AP course, because they anticipated that the teacher would not recommend them. For example, Patrick Jones, who excelled in math and science, but struggled with reading and writing said he did not consider taking AP English.

Shani: Did you consider taking AP literature with Dr. Carter? (Patrick shakes head) No?

Patrick: Yeah, I looked through my grades and I knew she was going to look at my grades. And I'm not a reader, so I knew AP literature wasn't going to be my way to go.

Other students chose not to request AP courses because they did not feel that that the course was consistent with their interests. For example, Eddie, planned to be a writer, and elected to not take AP Physics.

Shani: Some people take AP Physics. Why you didn't take that course?

Eddie: I didn't request AP Physics. I'm not really a science guy. I'm really—I'd rather write and read and—

Shani: But you do well in your science classes, correct?

Eddie: Yeah.

Thus, some students opted out of courses that they interpreted to be a poor fit with their interests.

Another factor that influenced course taking was that the roster chair's first priority was to ensure that all of the students took the minimum courses they needed to graduate. As a result, in the process of assigning students to courses, those who

already met all of their graduation requirements were often a lower priority than those who still needed classes to graduate. Students sometimes lost their spot in a class because another student needed the class in order to graduate.

For example, Patrick was a senior at Romano High School whose favorite subject was math. He planned to study regional planning or engineering in college. When I interviewed Patrick at the beginning of his senior year, he said that he could think of nothing negative to say about his school. He said that he loved his school because it prepared him for college.

I love it. The environment. Not too much trouble. And the teachers are nice. The classes they offer, the way the classes are run. I like the fact that we're on the advanced. All of our classes are advanced. And they have a lot of AP classes to offer that'll prepare me for college.

Patrick said that anything negative that he might say would be “nitpicking,” rather than something substantial. The AP physics teacher praised Patrick:

Shani: Who are some of the top seniors this year?

Mr. Laird: Patrick Jones is awesome. He is like a really super hard working, super-nice, just really cool kid.

Patrick was happy with his school and teachers liked him. However, later in the interview he became visibly upset when he explained that, despite his love of math, he was not enrolled in a math class. Patrick was agitated and confused by his predicament. Patrick did not require a math class to graduate from high school. He had already fulfilled his math requirements, which were to take three years of math including Algebra, geometry, and Algebra 2. Following the sequence of math classes at Romano, Patrick was on track to enroll in pre-calculus in his senior year. However he had lower priority in the course assignment process than students who needed pre-calculus to graduate. Knowing that he excelled in math, Patrick’s teachers and the roster chair assigned him

to calculus, where a spot was available. When he received his schedule at the beginning of his senior year, he saw that he was enrolled in AP Calculus. Patrick did not think it would be beneficial for him to take AP Calculus when he had not yet taken pre-calculus.

I'm not the person to jump right into an AP class before I have a basic background. And those were my options with this year was either AP calculus or nothing. And I'm like, "I never took pre-calc." And then I'm like, "How am I supposed to with having no prior knowledge to any calculus in my life, it woulda been really stressful. So if they woulda let me take pre-calc this year, it woulda been better prepared me for college next year.

Thus, as he began 12<sup>th</sup> grade, Patrick was concerned about how not taking math in his senior year would affect his academic success when he began his freshman year in college. He feared that his professors may expect him to have mathematical skills that he has not learned. However, Patrick did not mention concerns about how not taking pre-calculus or calculus might impact his college admissions outcomes, particularly for elite and highly selective colleges.

I asked Patrick if he sought guidance about his situation from his teachers or Ms. Emerson, the Romano counselor. He did ask the calculus teacher for his opinion, but that teacher did not know Patrick personally and could not make an accurate assessment. However, what he did offer was not encouraging:

[The calculus teacher] said, "Well, yeah if you're willing to put in the work." He says like, "Yeah, if you're willing to put in 15 hours outside of school work per week into AP calculus." And he said, "Usually I don't recommend students take more than two AP classes a year." I already signed up for two AP classes when he said that. So I took his advice 'cause I had a feeling that especially if I was gonna be doing football, I was gonna be working, I didn't want to add a third AP class onto my schedule. And I also thought that I was gonna get into pre-calc but it ended up backfiring.

Following the teacher's advice, Patrick decided not to take AP Calculus. He considered transferring into an AP statistics course, but he felt certain that, given his record his math, the roster chair would find a spot for him in pre-calculus. By the time he realized

that this would not happen, it was too late to begin statistics.

Patrick: I was going with the idea of taking pre-calculus this year, but the classes ended up being so overflowed that they didn't let me in because I technically already took my three math classes that I needed, so, therefore, the people that needed it, they gave it to first instead of me. So now I'm probably gonna take pre-calc classes at community college so when I go to college, I'm not completely lost on math altogether.

As Patrick spoke, he seemed exasperated. He was breathing more heavily than before. I asked him, "Is this frustrating to you?" and he replied "yes." Thus, Patrick's opportunity to pursue mathematics education in high school was curtailed as a result of limited resources in the school and the prioritization of students who needed to meet their basic graduation requirements.

There were several other examples of students not getting a spot in the class of their choice, especially AP classes. For example, Adriano Olivares, a Romano senior was not able to take as many AP classes as he wanted:

Shani: How many AP classes did you take?

Adriano: Yeah, I took I think four.

Shani: What did you take?

Adriano: I take AP literature now, I take AP studio art, I think... no, (in a lower tone) I took two.

Shani: What else?

Adriano: The other two I tried to get in, I was in it, but someone else really needed it, so I had to get out.

Shani: Okay. What were the ones that you tried to take?

Adriano: I tried to take AP Government this year and last year I tried to take AP psych.

In this case, it is not as clear whether the students to whom he lost his spot needed the course to graduate. It is possible the students convinced Adriano, teachers, or the roster chair that they would benefit more from taking AP courses than Adriano would. What is apparent is that Adriano wanted to take AP courses and he was unable to do so, despite the fact that he generally did well in his humanities classes. The other impact of not



taking AP courses, for Adriano and others at Romano, is that their grade point average, which is weighted according to course level, was reduced. The maximum possible grade point average for students who took AP courses was higher than for those who did not take AP classes.

Eddie was another student that was not able to take as many AP classes as he wanted. Eddie was a Romano senior who planned to be a writer. He liked to write young adult novels in his spare time. Eddie preferred humanities classes and he had hoped to take an AP history class.

Shani: You're taking AP Lit now. Are you taking an AP class in the spring?

Eddie: No.

Shani: Okay. So how many other AP classes have you taken so far?

Eddie: The only other AP class I actually took was AP Chemistry. Yeah, that's the only one. That was sophomore year.

Shani: Two years ago. Did you think about taking any other AP classes?

Eddie: Yeah, in tenth grade, I wanted to take, I forget what AP class it was. It was a history course though. And I kind of like history, but I didn't get chosen for that class. So... I didn't take it.

Shani: How does that work that you didn't get chosen?

Eddie: They just didn't put it on my roster. I could have filed a roster report and they might have had me pushed into that class. But I said, "I'm just gonna focus on chemistry."

Like Patrick, Eddie also was unable to access pre-calculus in his senior year in high school. Although he planned to major in writing in college and math and science were not his favorite subjects, Eddie was disappointed that he could not take pre-calculus:

Shani: What's your highest math you've taken?

Eddie: The highest math that I've taken here? I've taken—well; the highest one would probably be Algebra Two. That's it.

Shani: Okay some people take pre-calc here?

Eddie: Well, there's so many—this school's growing and everything. And the pre-calc class actually got full, so I wasn't able to take it even though I requested it. There was other people before me that got the class.

Shani: So, when you say before you, do you mean—what do you mean by that? "Before you."

Eddie: I'm not sure how they do the roster thing, but I guess they put other people in the class before they got to my name.

Fortunately, Eddie was able to enroll in a statistics course in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Still, calculus or pre-calculus would have better prepared Eddie for applying to selective colleges.

**Table 12 AP Courses Taken by Romano Twelfth Grade Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>AP Courses</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Adriano	2	M	Puerto Rico
Britney	6	F	Vietnam
Dalia	6	F	White
Dana	5	F	Vietnam
David	7	M	White
Eddie	2	M	Black
Jasir	9	M	Lebanon
Karen	8	F	Black
Linda	8	F	Vietnam
MaryAnne	5	F	Black
Nicole	5	F	Vietnam
Olivia	5	F	Black
Patrick	4	M	Black
Takia	2	F	Black
Vicky	7	F	Black

As Table 12 shows, there was considerable variation in the number of AP courses that high achieving students took. In contrast to Eddie and Patrick, some students at Romano were able to take as many as nine AP classes. Students who ranked in the top ten of the class took more AP classes. However, some lower ranked students also took many more AP classes than Patrick and Eddie. For example, David was a student who many teachers told me was a top student in the school. I was surprised to find that he was ranked 35 in the class. David said he did poorly in his first two years and became more focused on academics in his junior year. He started focusing on school to get his parents to stop bothering him about his school work:

When I was a sophomore, or a junior, I made a deal with my parents that if they left me alone with my schoolwork I would do it on my own and then that's when my grades went up. I was just annoyed from them micromanaging me, so then I made a deal with them to stop micromanaging me. I would do it myself.

Both of David's parents studied art at an Ivy League college. His parents lived in a

wealthy area of the city. His mother was an administrative assistant and his father had been laid off from his administrative position. At Romano, David was an active member of the robotics club. David took seven AP courses. He described camaraderie and friendly competition with other seniors who were enrolled in AP courses

David: Yeah, I mean there's a friendly rivalry between the senior AP classes, where all the teachers are always like we're going to beat you guys, we're going to beat you guys, we're going to do better this year. Stuff like that...

Shani: Are those three AP classes the same subject?

David: Three different subjects.

Shani: So what classes have you taken AP?

David: I've taken Chemistry, Physics, and Psychology, and U.S. History. I'm in Literature and Composition, Government and Politics and Calculus now.

Shani: Okay, so all together how many is that? Is that seven or six?

David: Total all over the high school, seven.

David requested more AP classes than his classmates, Eddie and Patrick. And he did not have difficulty accessing them. Jasir was another student who succeeded in taking many AP classes. As I show in subsequent chapters, Jasir was highly motivated to do anything that he needed to do to go to the University of Pennsylvania. He set out to take as many AP courses as possible, to show Penn that driven to achieve his goal:

Jasir: Well, I realized right away that I started taking as many AP classes as the school would let me. Because I knew that even though odds are I was not going to get to a five and every one of those classes, but I knew that taking them would at least show the colleges, when it was time to apply, that I took all those challenges on to myself, and did whatever was the toughest thing the school offered. I did it just to show them that I had that initiative. I think that paid off at the end. Because I don't do extremely well in AP science classes. Well, I do well on the classes. Not very well on the AP tests. I mean they're tough, but it shows I tried, and I think that schools do want to see that.

Jasir was unique in this motivation to take many AP classes. Other students did not associate this decision with admission to an elite college. David and Jasir were both matter of fact about their course taking. Neither of them thought it was unusual that they took as many as they did. Jasir described it as the normal progression of coursework

from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Jasir: AP European history. Those were the two I took tenth grade. Then last year I ended up taking three AP classes. AP physics, AP psych, and what was the last one? AP US. This year it's four. See now, moving up every year.

Shani: This year's calculus, and what are the other three?

Jasir: Calculus, biology, government, and literature.

Shani: Okay. So in those classes they divided by grade? Or are there 10<sup>th</sup> graders?

Jasir: Not exactly. It's pretty much they're divided by grade. So chemistry is mostly a tenth grade class. You have either chemistry or AP chemistry.

Shani: So you had nine AP courses altogether?

Interviewee: Yeah.

There are a number of factors that may explain why Jasir and David had more access to high -level classes than David and Patrick. Patrick was trying to get a spot in pre calculus, which was a class that more students took and had thus had fewer open spots. Jasir and Nicole were at the very top of their class rankings, while Patrick was only in the top 25%. Being at the very top of class ranking may have given students more priority in rostering. David, was not at the very top, his ranking was similar to Patrick, but he was widely talked about as being at the top. When I asked teachers who were the best students at the school, David was always on the list.

It is not entirely clear why some students had more access to AP courses than others. What is clear is that some highly motivated students were not given access to classes that would prepare them for college admission. Moreover, the roster chair and counselor at Romano were not concentrated on making sure that high achieving students had access to classes that would help them participate in the admissions process at highly selective colleges.

#### *Course taking at Romano: Going it Alone*

At Romano High School, there was no formal process by which students were advised on course taking decisions. The counselor was minimally involved in the

process. Students received the form that they needed to submit to the roster chair. It was up to the students to seek guidance from teachers or parents, or to act independently. Ninth grade students received the form in the mail, while older grades got the form from school. Ms. Emerson, the school counselor, said that she talked to students about choosing courses for college in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade assembly in the schools large auditorium:

We do a big assembly to go over it for them. Dr. Carter, the roster chair runs that whole thing. I usually do a blurb in there about – particularly for the juniors – “If you have an idea of where you wanna go, look at the school.” I show ‘em how to do that. “Look and see what their requirements are. Because if they need you to have four years of math and you wanna apply in senior year and you don’t have four years of math, you’re not gonna get in there. So we need to look at that stuff.”

Ms. Emerson’s comments show that she was aware that some students want to go to colleges that may require more courses than is required for graduation in Northeastern district. However, she tells students about these course requirements late in their high school career. She left it to students to make sure they took the right classes, but by this time it would be too late.

Some students independently made course decisions that may have inadvertently lowered their standing in the elite college admissions process. Typically, students only take the subject of an AP course one time. For example, some students in a school might take chemistry, while another group of students takes AP chemistry. Most students at Romano progressed through AP courses in this way, but some chose the alternative path of taking both classes. Romano senior, Jasir, described this group of students who took basic science classes, followed by AP course in the same subject.

Jasir: So chemistry is mostly a tenth grade class. You have chemistry or AP chemistry. But there are, for the first time this year, some seniors who are going back and taking AP chemistry because they had that chemistry base. So they

will, I'm sure when the results come back, have done better than their peers because they learned regular chemistry and then went back and took the AP version of it.

Jasir sees these students as being at some advantage because they have prolonged exposure to the material. But, for college admissions, these students were at a disadvantage because they reduced the number of total subjects, and AP courses, they were able to take. Therefore, these students had fewer opportunities to take the breadth of classes that was appreciated by selective college admissions committees.

You will remember that Patrick Jones was enrolled in AP calculus when he had not taken yet taken pre-calculus. This would have been a challenging proposal for any student, but it was especially offensive to Patrick because he did not think it was appropriate to take any AP course without taking the regular course first. Thus, while other students took AP Chemistry, then AP Biology, and then AP Physics, Patrick took chemistry, then AP Chemistry and physics followed by AP Physics.

Shani: You took physics and then you took AP physics?

Patrick: I chose to do that 'cause I don't agree with that system because –

Shani: What system is that?

Patrick: You can take either physics or AP physics. I'm not the person to jump right into an AP class before I have a basic background. Our class is split. There's a majority of 11th graders that have never taken any kind of physics. And then there's like 12 seniors that had taken physics last year that are taking it this year. And the same happened in AP chemistry last year when I took it. I took chemistry first in tenth grade. Then I took AP chemistry last year.

Mr. Laird, the AP physics teacher at Romano, described the practice with little interest.

He simply stated that this is what some students did.

Shani: Is AP Physics a class for juniors or seniors?

Mr. Laird: 11th or 12th. You can take it as either. So some kids go straight into it and some kids they take Physics and do well and then take AP Physics afterwards. Like Valerie, she took regular physics last year so she is taking AP this year, same with Lisa, same with a couple other people.

The AP Physics course was designed to be students' first exposure to physics (AP

Central College Board); however, Mr. Laird expressed no surprise that students took basic physics first. It is unclear why Mr. Laird seemed to accept this practice as ordinary. However, it is probable that both Mr. Laird and the students were prioritizing physics learning and earning good grades over concerns about maximizing the number of AP courses on one's transcript. However, taking more AP courses may be more beneficial than good grades in a smaller range of classes in the elite college admissions process.

Another potentially damaging decision that some students made was to drop a class. Most students said they chose to drop a class because it was too difficult or because they did not need the class to graduate. But, two years in a row, the valedictorian at Romano decided to drop AP calculus because they thought that the instructor was a bad teacher. First Britney and then in following year, Dalia began taking AP Calculus and then dropped the class. These high achieving math-oriented students were able to drop out of calculus, even though they wanted to major in a science field without the intervention of the counselor or roster chair.

Shani: you didn't have a math class this year?

Britney: Yeah.

Shani: What math classes have you taken?

Britney: Algebra one, Algebra two, geometry and pre-calc

Shani: Okay, so you never took calculus?

Britney: Yeah, I was in the class in the beginning, but he really can't teach. He can teach one on one, but it's hard for him to teach to a group of students. So I didn't wanna take the class.

Shani: Okay. Is he the only one who teaches calculus here -

Britney: Yes.

Shani: Did you talk to Ms. Ma when you wanted to stop taking calculus -

Britney: I just mentioned but not really a talk.

Shani: What did she say?

Britney: I don't think she really made a comment. But I just said I couldn't take it 'cause he couldn't teach it well enough.

Britney mentioned her decision to drop the class to Ms. Ma, a music and Chinese

language teacher that Britney admired. Ms. Ma did not warn Britney about the potentially

damaging effects of her decision. Mr. Laird, the AP Physics teacher did suggest that Britney should stay in calculus. However, he did not insist that she take the course.

Shani: What reason did he give [for staying in calculus]?

Britney: 'Cause I think for whatever I wanna major in, you have to have a math class - So if you take it now, you get exposed to it at least. So even though if you don't get the credit for it if you don't pass the AP test, you're still getting exposed to it, and you might know a little more in college.

Mr. Laird offered Britney a reason why she might want to stay in AP calculus, but he did not insist. Moreover, his explanation referred to her preparation for college classes and her experience once she arrived at college. He does not advise her to take calculus so that she would be a more qualified applicant to selective colleges.

In the following year, the 2015 valedictorian made the same decision to drop AP calculus with the same teacher. Like Britney, Dalia thought that the calculus teacher was a poor instructor. She talked to two of her other teachers and they encouraged her to write a letter to the calculus teacher. She wrote a letter about the challenges in the class and every student in the class signed it. However, this strategy backfired for her.

Shani: So you're not taking calculus?

Dalia: I was taking the class, but I wasn't finding success in the class. I was fine, but the teacher – it wasn't working out too well. He was not the best of teachers, in my opinion. I feel like he wasn't really teaching the class. Over the summer I studied calculus on my own. So I already had a sort of like a base I was going to build off of. But he wasn't – he wasn't teaching the class. All my classmates were confused and they were coming to me for help, because I had already went over the material. So I could explain it to them. And he was – I don't really want to say verbally abusive, because that's sounds really too strong. But he would sort of like talk to us about how we're all really antisocial and we weren't going to get into college, because we didn't know how to talk to people. And he would go off on tangents on things all the time. Like completely not relevant to the class at all. So I ended up writing a letter, with my classmates, asking him – at one point there was a like a really good week and he was actually really teaching class. It was good. And so we wrote the letter after that said we really liked when you did that can you keep doing that. And he didn't really react well to the letter. He kind of started ignoring me in the hall. So I backed off and then I dropped the class. And I figured it was okay. Like, it sucks because I really want to take calculus.



Dalia decided independently to drop AP calculus after she had this difficult experience. She did talk to her other teachers about her troubles in the class, but they expected her to resolve the issue on her own.

Shani: Did you talk to any other adults about the letter?

Dalia: I did. I talked to my computer science teacher, who also was my pre calc teacher last year. And then talked to my physics teacher about this. And they actually they suggested to write the letter.

Shani: The principal did you talk to her about it at all? Does she know about it?

Dalia: No. I think she knows that there's not much satisfaction with the class, because every year students continuously drop it.

Shani: Have you thought about giving her a copy of the letter?

Dalia: Yeah. I think I probably will do that. But I'm not sure if it would really, like, if it would help anything. I don't really want to make anything worse.

When she felt that she could not stay in the class any longer, no one talked to her about the significance of this decision for college applications. Dalia said that educators knew about the letter, including the principal. But no teacher made it his responsibility to help her through the challenging situation. Even though she was considered by teachers to be one of the smartest students in the school, and her focus was math and science, no one encouraged her to stay in the class. As I explain below it is probable that the lack of this class precluded her from being seriously considered at MIT

In addition, the lack of focus on ensuring that students had access to high-level classes meant that students needed to be persistent and advocate for themselves.

There was no person in the school who was responsible to act on their behalf. Patrick is an example of this. When he was not assigned to pre-calculus in his senior year, he went to the calculus teacher, the roster chair, and to other math teachers to ask for help with his predicament. In another example, a ninth grade student explained the self-advocacy that was required in order for him to take geometry in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Taking geometry in 9<sup>th</sup> grade put him on track to be able to take AP Calculus in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Zach

went to a middle school that administered the state algebra exam in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, as a result he was able to take geometry rather than algebra in ninth grade. The exam was part of a new system of graduation exams. Students had to pass the algebra test in order to graduate. In addition, the test was used to determine which 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were proficient in algebra, and therefore able to take geometry in tenth grade. Zach had attended one of a few schools administered the algebra test to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students:

Zach: I'm taking geometry, 'cause I already passed algebra state exam.

Shani: When did you take the algebra exam?

Interviewee: I took it last year, eighth grade. Luckily my last school provided us with taking the test. [Laughs] The unlucky part was I was put in algebra for a month in this school not knowing that I had passed the exam, so I had to go back to my old school and get my scores. And I found out that I had passed so they had to switch up and put me inside geometry.

Shani: Are there other ninth grade students who are in geometry with you?

Zach: There are a few of them.

Shani: And they all took the algebra state exam?

Zach: In eighth grade, yeah.

Zach was not automatically assigned to geometry. And he had some trouble convincing the roster chair to assign him to geometry in 9<sup>th</sup> grade:

Shani: You said you were in algebra for a month. So what happened that you got into geometry?

Zach: I was talking to my friends from my last school, and some of them were saying, "We're in geometry." They were really happy about passing [the state exam], and I'm like "how did you find out because I thought it was supposed to be mailed to you over the summer." But it never got mailed to me, so I'm like "did you get it in a letter or something like that?" And they're just like "no, we went to the school." So it was towards the end of September that I went to the school and talked to my old math teacher, and he said "oh yeah I have your scores right here." So I looked at it and he said "you passed," and I was like "okay, then I have to get out of algebra right now." So literally the next day I went to the office and told them my situation that I was in algebra and I had passed the test and I needed to be in geometry. And the lady - I think that whole month students were switching classes that they didn't like, but the lady at first she didn't like the fact that I came to her about that. She's just said oh you should've switched your classes earlier and it's too late to switch classes. So I'm just like "I'm not switching because I want to; I'm switching because I have to. I'm supposed to be in geometry." And I showed her the scores and stuff, and she's just like "oh okay, I'll switch you." So the day after that, instead of algebra in seventh period, it was

geometry.

Zach was highly motivated to leave algebra class because he knew that by passing the graduation exam, he had officially “finished” algebra. He was closer to finishing the math requirements for high school.

Shani: You said you’re lucky. Why is it lucky for you? What’s good about being in geometry now?

Zach: ‘Cause it’s just like the relief that the whole algebra exam is over with, because it’s like it’s you need to have both algebra and biology exams finished in order to graduate. Like that’s something you need to meet. And knowing that that one thing is out of the way it’s just like it’s a relief, like oh boy it’s finally done,

Shani: Any other benefit?

Zach: Just being ahead in those things and like – ‘cause it would be normal to be in algebra right now for me, but to know that I’m a little bit more advanced in a way it does like benefit me because I feel like I’m closer to getting to higher math, like calculus and stuff like that. So I guess in that way too. But I don’t know.

Zach was moderately concerned about having the opportunity to take more math classes, including calculus. But he did not associate advanced courses with preparation for college admissions. There were other students who said they wish that they, like Zach, had gone to a middle school that offered the algebra graduation exam. Some 9<sup>th</sup> grade students said they planned to request two math classes in their 10<sup>th</sup> grade year so that they could catch up with Zach and the other students who took geometry in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Jelissa was hoping to take two math classes in her sophomore year. She learned from Ms. Neale, the social studies teacher who had attended an elite college, that taking more math classes in high school could help her gain admission to some colleges. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to do that, but she liked that taking more math earlier in high school might prevent her from having to take math in her senior year.

Shani: Okay. Did you take Algebra in eighth grade?

Jelissa: We did pre-algebra and geometry.

Shani: Are you taking geometry next year?

Jelissa: Yes.

Shani: Did you do a whole geometry class in 8<sup>th</sup> grade?

Jelissa: Basically, because we only did about the first two months of pre-algebra but the rest of the year was geometry.

Jelissa said that she knew that students were able to skip algebra because they had taken the algebra test in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She wished that her experience in geometry in 8<sup>th</sup> grade could have allowed her to skip geometry in high school. Her teachers told her that it was not possible to skip geometry, so she wanted to take two math classes at once so that she could catch up with student who tested out of Algebra 1 in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. However, given limited resources in the school, it is not certain that she would have been permitted to take two math classes when the time came.

Jelissa: I wanted to double up on my math because I found it unfair how only kids from Gifted Academy took the exam, so if you passed they were, in Geometry in ninth grade, and everybody else had to do Algebra. They said we couldn't [skip algebra] because we were freshman and we didn't take the exam yet, but they said next year we could double up on math.

But, even though Jelissa wanted to take more and higher level math, it took some prodding to associate advanced courses with preparing for college.

Shani: why does it matter to you that you get to double up on math?

Jelissa: Because, one, I just love math, it's my favorite subject, and I get bored easily when I know something already and I'm waiting for the class. I like to be challenged, and this year I wasn't challenged because I already knew most of the stuff.

Shani: I see. Any other reason why you want to double up on math next year?

Jelissa: I get to get my credits and that way when I'm a senior I don't have to take those classes, or I could take Calculus and Statistics.

Shani: Why would you want to take Calculus or Statistics?

Interviewee: Because I heard they're hard.

Shani: Anything about college?

Jelissa: I heard that the more credits you have and the better – like, if you take AP Calc that it betters your chances of getting into certain colleges.

Shani: Who told you that?

Jelissa: My World History teacher, Ms. Neale she was saying that about AP Euro.

Jelissa acknowledged that the classes that she took might impact her college admissions eligibility. However, she was less concerned about college preparation and more focused on finishing math and taking classes that were challenging. Likely drawing on her elite college admissions experience, Ms. Neale advised Jelissa that taking more advanced courses could help their college admissions outcomes. But, other teachers encouraged students to limit their AP courses.

*Romano Teacher Advice to Students: Don't Take Too Many AP courses*

Students received minimal guidance when making course-taking decisions. However, when teachers did offer guidance to students, some encouraged them to take fewer AP courses. Patrick said that when he was trying to decide whether to take the AP calculus teacher told him, "Usually, I don't recommend students take more than two AP classes a year." Nicole senior at Romano, was enrolled in four AP courses in her senior year. She planned to go to nursing school, so she wanted to take AP biology. But, she decided to drop the class because she did not need it for graduation, and she thought it would cause her unnecessary stress.

Nicole: Well I was put into AP Lit. I couldn't get out of it but –

Shani: Why?

Nicole: I don't know and I just didn't want to take another AP course plus I wanted to take biology but I knew it would be too much to handle, three classes. Well I was given four courses without asking me. So, I dropped out of two of them and I ended up with AP Lit and AP Gov.

Shani: Why did you not want four AP classes?

Nicole: It would just be too much work and in my senior year I wanted to focus more on getting into college than stressing out over AP classes I wasn't passionate about.

Nicole's worry about the stress from taking too many AP courses was aligned with teachers' advice about taking AP courses. Teachers warned students about taking too many AP courses because of possible stress. This advice may have reduced the

number of AP courses that some students took over their four years of high school. As a result, the transcripts that students submitted to colleges may have underrepresented students' ambition and ability.

Many Romano students received the same advice from their teachers about taking AP courses. They advised students not to take more than two AP courses in an academic year. For example, Jasir said he went against the guidance of his Mr. C, a math teacher who treated him "like his son" when he decided to take 9 AP courses. Jasir was particularly motivated to go to Penn. He was determined to do whatever he could to be accepted there. I asked Jasir what teachers thought of his strategy:

Shani: Did you talk to anybody about the idea that you should take as many APs as you can?

Jasir: I had teachers who I knew who taught those classes, and I kind of went up to them. If I didn't know them I introduced myself and talked to them and asked them if they thought it was smart. I took four AP classes this year, and Mr. C will never forgive me for that because he says that even though it looks good on paper maybe, I could have done a lot better if I took two classes I might have done very very well on those two classes. Where I was taking four it kind of spread me too thin, and I might not have done as well as I could have. I understand the science behind that, but I feel like if I didn't and the opportunity was there, it might make me look bad.

Thus, in addition to limiting stress, teachers advised students to limit the number of AP courses that they took so they could maintain higher grades. This advice is contrary to elite college admissions because highly selective institutions choose students who choose to take the most challenging courses available. Teachers' advice contributed to Patrick's decision to not take AP calculus when he did not have the opportunity to take pre-calculus

Shani: You said a teacher recommended that you only take two AP classes, is he the only one who said that?

Patrick: Other teachers have mentioned it, 'cause they say too many seniors try to overwhelm themselves with more than two AP classes in their senior year 'cause they're trying to either impress the colleges or gets some college classes

knocked off.

Shani: And did they recommend not to do that?

Patrick: Yeah, 'cause they said from what they know, most students usually do a little bit worse in each of those classes. But if they had dropped one of those classes, they mighta did a little bit better in those other AP classes that they had.

Linda Mai took four AP classes in her senior year. By doing so, she went against the advice of her physics teacher and primary advisor, Mr. Laird. Her advisor warned her that taking four AP courses would make passing the AP exam more difficult.

Linda: Yeah, I asked him before I got into senior year, there was like a lot of AP classes to take, and I didn't know if I should take a lot. So I asked him about, and he helped me with that.

Shani: What did he say?

Linda: He said I shouldn't take a lot, but anyway, they gave me two classes that I couldn't really get out of, so – and I also wanted to take two other AP classes, so I just stuck with what I had.

Dr. Carter, the roster chair at Romano echoed teachers' advice about limiting the number of AP courses taken. Following the desires of teachers and students, the roster chair sometimes put four AP courses in a students' schedule. But she thought it was a mistake for students to do this:

Shani: What do you tell students about the number of AP classes?

Dr. Carter: It's not healthy for 12th-graders, in my opinion, to take five AP classes<sup>9</sup>

Shani: Sounds like you're saying that students probably take too many AP classes.

Dr. Carter: Too many.

Shani: Do some take too few as well?

Dr. Carter: Yes, but I really, honestly would rather have that. There's a lot of competition. I really see the problem in their senior year. Not so much in their 10th and 11th grade year, but more so in their – in their 12th grade year, because they're trying to get their rank. They're trying to get a certain GPA because they want to get the scholarships, and they want to get this and that.

Dr. Carter's comments suggest that students try to play catch up in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

This is not surprising, given that the school counselor said that she starts telling students

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<sup>9</sup> To my knowledge, no student took five AP courses in a single year.

to look at college admissions requirements in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Dr. Carter also reveals her view that taking many AP classes can be a problem that indicates too much competition among students. Her view contrasts with perspectives of educators in elite high schools who are highly motivated to help their students become strong candidates for elite college admission.

While most teachers were concerned about students' stress and maintaining grades, Dr. Carter also said that she did not think students should take AP courses that were not aligned with students' interests. In addition, Dr. Carter conveyed what I call a "utilitarian perspective" on AP courses. For her, an AP course should further a student's long-term college and career goals. She suggests that a student should take an AP class only if it can be used to further her educational and professional goals:

Yes, they're college-level classes, but we all know that once they get to college, they're taking classes that are geared towards a major. So if you're not a math person, why are you taking a college-level class that's math-related like AP calc or AP statistics and that's not your thing? A lot of the students want to take it because it will boost their GPA, not necessarily because it is a class that they want or need for college. Same thing for AP English. If English is not your thing, if you are not an avid reader, you should not just take AP English because you had an A in 10th grade and 11th grade.

Dr. Carter, the AP English teacher and roster chair, makes a specific argument about who should be taking AP classes. In her view, AP courses should not be for everyone who is able to succeed in them. They should be for students who anticipate a career in a relevant field. This perspective contrasts with the admission expectations of elite colleges, which presume that students will take the most advanced courses available in their school.

There were two issues that worked against some students taking more AP classes. First, the needs of the school and the needs of students clashed. There were



too few teachers and as a result, the school had to prioritize students who needed courses to graduate. The school was growing rapidly and Dr. Carter was tasked with ensuring that every student in Romano was able to take their required classes. This task was made more difficult by students who wanted to take more science and math classes than they needed to graduate.

Shani: If the students would take more than three math and science classes...?

Dr. Carter: And some have. I've had some students who you look at it, and I'm like, "How in the world?" And they actually have five years of a science or a math, and that's because at one time, when we didn't have close to 900 kids, people were doubling up on their math in their tenth-grade year. So we had some kids in their tenth-grade year, and they were taking algebra II and they were taking geometry.

While a teacher at a better resourced school might be impressed by a student who wants to take many more math and sciences classes than are required, Dr. Carter saw this as a problem that needed to be fixed in order to successfully do her job.

Second, like Dr. Carter, other teachers had an utilitarian perspective” of AP courses. Dr. Carter argued that students should not take AP courses if they did not plan to pursue a career in that field. Other teachers told students that they should not take AP courses if they were not able to also maintain high scores on the AP exams.

Linda: Mr. Laird said I shouldn't take a lot. He said that we will – even if we do good in our classes, we can't -- all of the AP tests are like sorta bunched together into two weeks, so he said it would be sorta hard for us to study for – like the whole year for all of 'em, and to actually get good grades on all of 'em.

This stands in contrast to a credential-based view of AP courses. A “credential-based” approach interprets the completion of an AP course as an accomplishment that can be used for future benefit. Jasir’s decision to take 9 AP courses reflects a “credential-based” understanding of AP courses. He took as many courses as he could, regardless of their focus, because he believed that doing so would help him get in to the University

of Pennsylvania. Jasir was also willing to take the risk of getting lower grades in each class. A credential-based view of AP courses is more effective approach for a student who wants to go to a highly selective college or university.

In Romano, there were many AP courses, but the number of spots in those classes was limited. Although the students that I interviewed did well, some very well, in high school, they did not have automatic access to high-level classes. In the context of a focus on graduating students, students who wanted to take more than the minimum number of courses were at a disadvantage in the rostering process. Students had their own motivation to make choices that would academically help them. But they often had to do this independently, without the guidance of teachers and counselors. Moreover, school officers resisted and actively restricted access and discouraged students.

### ***Allegiance: The Options are Limited***

When the Allegiance principal spoke to prospective students, he emphasized that the school was college prep. The school curriculum guide for students states that the school offers “an impressive list of Advanced Placement (AP) offerings.” However, Allegiance only offered 4 AP courses. Students at Allegiance, like those at Romano, received a roster form to fill out to request classes. But they did not have very many choices. Thus, while 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at Romano were choosing whether or not to take AP science and history classes, ninth grade students at Allegiance were far less familiar with AP courses and thought of them as something that they would learn about in the future.

### ***Looking Forward: Ninth Grade Perceptions of Course Offerings at Allegiance***

In contrast to Romano students, ninth grade students at Allegiance had fewer

course options. Students at Allegiance knew that there had been some budget cuts that impacted their experiences in school. Thus, rather than considering course options for future years, they were more aware of what options they did not have.

Remi: They actually said that [we have fewer classes], all the teachers. 'Cause Mr. Victor said they had a Spanish 4, they couldn't have it this year 'cause they didn't have any teachers for it. Miss Harris she talked about more cultural courses or social studies courses that they had a couple years ago and AP classes she talked to us about that.

Shani: Are there AP classes here?

Remi: No, not that I know of.

Shani: What do you think about that, about those teachers not being here?

Remi: It's a big loss.

The fact that Remi did not know that his high school had AP classes suggests that 9<sup>th</sup> grade students were not hearing about AP courses or elite college preparation in school. Other students, such as Nadine, speculated about what courses might be and whether she would be able to take one.

Nadine: No, but I never heard of the AP before so I look forward to that next year.

Shani: AP? They have AP courses here?

Nadine: I think so. I think it's for next year and the year after that.

Shani: How do you get into AP courses?

Nadine: By having straight As in math or something. I think if you're on Honor Roll you can do AP classes.

From my interviews at Allegiance, it appeared that ninth grade students knew little about possible course options and were not prepared to seek out courses that would prepare them for elite college admission.

### *The Course Taking Process at Allegiance*

The course taking practices at Allegiance High School differed significantly from Romano because the variety of courses simply was not available. The number of AP courses available at Allegiance, compared to Romano, is evidence of important differences between the two schools. Few students at Allegiance understood how limited

the course options were. Allegiance staff insisted that the school was college prep. However, some the teachers said that the school needed more teachers. The lack of classes also had to do with the size of the school and the financial crisis in the school district. While Romano started out small and then began to grow, Allegiance started out small and has stayed small.<sup>10</sup>

The rostering process at Allegiance was very similar to that at Romano. The roster chair, Mr. Drew gave a form to students to fill out with courses that they want to take in the following year. There was no formal advising process to help students make course-taking choices

Mr. Drew: We hope that they are keeping track of what they need and some of them do. They don't all keep track of what they need. They know what they would *like* and that doesn't necessarily translate into what they need in order to graduate. So, I have that list. Then I have another list of what they have taken and what they have passed. Then I compare the two... I have to decide, make judgments with what's available and what they need— then fill in with what they want if that's possible. And, sometimes it works out nicely and sometimes it doesn't. One of the problems with being a small school is that rostering is a lot more difficult because there are a lot fewer possibilities for classes to put a student into. So I do that. It's very labor intensive.

All Allegiance students took one AP social studies course in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Ms. Noel, a social studies teacher, explained that students were assigned to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade class based on their GPA:

I teach AP United States History. Tom teaches AP Gov. So there is a split and what often happens is some of the students who have higher GPA's get funneled into mine and so the students he teaches may be the students who are not some of the higher-achieving students. [Two years ago] it was a one-quarter, three-quarters split. Last year for the class of 2015 it was more like a half and half split.

Ms. Noel said that Allegiance took this approach because AP Government had a

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<sup>10</sup> It was in a small building that did not allow for a lot of room to grow. Also, it is possible that Allegiance was not asked to grow because they did not have the same level of success that Romano had. Students' test scores at Allegiance, while higher than the average high school, were not as high as Romano.

reputation of being an easier test than AP United States History. Ms. Noel further explained that higher achieving students, who were in AP U.S. History in 11<sup>th</sup> grade were assigned to AP English in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, “Usually the AP U.S. is the feeder for the AP Lit test or class, which is a senior class.” Thus, Allegiance students had a minimal role in choosing AP courses.

Opportunities to take foreign language were limited at Allegiance. Allegiance offered AP Spanish Literature; but there was no Spanish III or IV that students could take to prepare for AP Spanish. As a result, AP Spanish Literature at Allegiance largely enrolled native Spanish speakers. Mr. Drew explained how the Spanish class offerings had changed in recent years.

Shani: Can a student go from Spanish II to AP Spanish? Is that possible?

Dr. Drew: There are students who have, it's a big leap. The students who have tried it and just – I have had to take them out. And so it ended up being a class of under a dozen kids. It also is AP literature, which ended up having mostly native speakers in it. Although there were a couple of exceptions. We have one student who was in a school where they had Spanish immersion.

Shani: What was the motivation behind having AP Spanish instead of Spanish III?

Dr. Drew: I'm not really sure.

Shani: Is it unusual that you could have I and II and then you jump to AP?

Dr. Drew: Mhmm (shaking his head) Last year was the first year with AP. We had Spanish III and Spanish IV before. It was taught by the same person that teaches AP.

Shani: Did he request a change?

Dr. Drew: Yeah.

Shani: Okay. And so did he go to Dr. Edwards to request a change, is that how it worked?

Dr. Drew: Mm-hmm.

Mr. Drew seemed uncomfortable as he explained the Spanish course offerings. He opened his eyes wide and shrugged as if to say “it doesn’t make sense to me, but this is how we do it.” Dr. Drew seemed to understand the consequences that this choice could

have on college admissions. But, he emphasized that his primary concern making sure that students graduated:

Mr. Drew: My main goal is to get them all to graduation. Although certainly I work with anybody who's looking beyond that to give them what they, I mean students will come in and they'll say – I mean at one point we had Spanish III and Spanish IV and they say the program I'm going into says I have to have three years of a foreign language, and I could say okay. We can do that. Now I say, ah. We don't have that. We do have an AP class though, one AP Spanish class.

Mr. Victor, the Allegiance Spanish teacher, explained that he decided to teach AP Spanish because he thought he would enjoy teaching a class that analyzed Spanish literature. He asked Mr. Edwards, the principal, if he could make the change in the Spanish offerings. Mr. Victor explained, “In the past, we had a Spanish III course and then this year, I was very interested in doing AP so we have that instead of Spanish III.” Mr. Victor’s education degree was in secondary social studies not Spanish. It is possible that teaching AP Spanish literature allowed Mr. Victor to pursue his interest in teaching the humanities, rather than just language instruction. Because of the level of the course, only two out of 16 students had “no familial connection to Spanish.” The remaining 14 students spoke Spanish with family members at home.

Mr. Victor: The readings are even challenging for people who are fluent in Spanish. It's academic level. It's a survey course, so they're reading Spanish literature from the medieval period to the present, so it's challenging. I've identified the students who I thought would be interested and able to do the course and I contacted each of those students to gauge their interest. Most of them said that they were in fact interested, so therefore the students for the course were handpicked.

Having the ability to study Spanish literature in high school is a unique opportunity for a group of Spanish speaking Allegiance students. However, by excluding many of the academic achieving students at this school, this example stands in contrast to an elite college-going culture.. Mr. Victor changed course availability, to the detriment of non-

fluent Spanish students, because of his own teaching desires. This change reflects the school's focus on ensuring only that students have the minimum courses required for graduation. Northeastern School District only required two years of foreign language. Therefore, Mr. Victor and Mr. Edwards were able to eliminate Spanish III without reducing students opportunity to graduate.

At Allegiance, students did not have the option to take calculus or statistics. The math courses offered were algebra, algebra II, geometry, and pre-calculus. Calculus had been offered one school year when there was additional money in the budget. In that year there were four math teachers instead of three, but after that year the school the budget crisis necessitated a reduction in math teachers.

Mr. Drew, the roster chair said that when Allegiance students arrive in 9<sup>th</sup> grade they typically had not passed the algebra graduation exam that would allow them to move on to geometry. Thus, students who wanted to be on track to take calculus need to double their math classes and take algebra and geometry in one year. However, there was not an incentive to do this because calculus was not offered at the school. There was one student who tried to take calculus in his senior year. He went to a different high school to take the class there. But, in the second week of the semester, he experienced a violent incident that deterred him taking the class:

Mr. Drew: He was on his way back here and he was assaulted because he was by himself, of course he was on his iPhone and he was beaten up. Spent four days in the hospital. He came back, he looked awful. He was actually unconscious when they picked him up and took him to the hospital. So he decided, " I don't want to take calculus."

Mr. Drew explained that this student was a unique case at Allegiance. He was a recent immigrant from China. Mr. Drew worried that the student's limited English might prevent him from getting the mathematics training that was appropriate for his level. In this case,

Mr. Drew's investment in the student came from his role as a math teacher, rather than the roster chair.

He came in having passed Algebra I, so he took geometry his freshman year. Algebra II his sophomore year, I had him in Algebra II then he took pre-calculus his junior year, and I tutored him. He came down here every day after school for tutoring mostly because of the language problem. Understanding what actually was required. The math was not a problem.

Shani: Whose idea was it that he would go somewhere for calculus?

Interviewee: Well, I advocated that he needed to take calculus and we needed to find someplace for him to take calculus if we could. So the principal called around and found out some places where there was an opening with the nearby schools, within public transportation or walking distance and found that one.

Interviewer: So he was the only one –

Mr. Drew: He was the only one who was ready, yeah.

This event shows in dramatic terms just how difficult it can be for students to access the courses that are taken for granted in better-resourced schools. It also shows how important it is for students to have advocates. The student described above was able to take calculus because the roster chair knew him personally and believed he needed a higher level of training. Although it is not clear, Mr. Drew's comments suggest that he felt compelled to ensure that the student had the same level of math education that he would have had in his native country. Thus, he received special treatment from Mr. Drew. Mr. Drew claims that there were no other students in his school that were ready for calculus in their senior year. This may be true, but at the same time it is important to compare Ms. Drew's portrayal of only one student being "ready" with other school that might encourage students to move towards higher classes. This was not a focus for Mr. Drew. His focus was on making sure that students graduated.

Ms. Nichols, the counselor at Allegiance, was unaware that not taking calculus may be at a disadvantage in the college admissions process:

Shani: So, there's no calculus here.

Ms. Nichols: Right.



Shani: Is that something that is a concern for you?

Ms. Nichols: For SATs, no. I think that SAT, the most a student really needs to know is Algebra II, I believe.

Shani: But for college applications, is that something that works against students, not having higher math?

Ms. Nichols: I haven't heard that, no. I haven't heard that, at all. Yeah, no, it's interesting you say that, because Penn State does require calculus for certain majors, or pre-calculus. Yeah, pre-calc, not calc. I think we have pre calc.

The fact that Ms. Nichols says she is unaware of the benefits of calculus is especially striking because on one occasion I observed a recruiter from the University of Pennsylvania mention this very problem to Ms. Nichols following her presentation to the school.

Ms. Nichols tells Betsy, the Penn recruiter that she has never had a student get admitted to Penn<sup>11</sup>. Betsy says, "The real problem is that there is no calculus here. I wonder if there is a way for you to pair up with another school nearby and share a teacher. There is a medical school right in this neighborhood. Someone must be able to teach. It just seems like there must be a way to bring calculus here. Ms. Nichols halfheartedly shrugs and says, "maybe." She thanks her for taking time to visit the school.

Thus, contrasting drastically from elite high schools interest in giving students the opportunity to take calculus (Weis, Cipollone, Jenkins 2014), Ms. Nichols does not seem worried about ensuring that all students had the opportunity to take calculus. In fact, she was not entirely certain about the availability of pre-calculus. Thus, the two people who would be in a position to advocate for students' taking advanced courses were not focused on doing so. Ms. Nichols was a very experienced counselor who maintained a website that was meant to be a resource for Philadelphia students. Ms. Nichols was also highly invested in ensuring that all Allegiance students went to college. Yet, she was not oriented towards elite college admissions and she did not understand that taking calculus might help a student in the elite college admissions process.

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<sup>11</sup> It was Ms. Nichols first year at Allegiance, so she was referring to her experiences at other schools.

Like Romano students, most of the Allegiance students said they liked their AP classes because they were more challenging than their other classes. At Allegiance High School, all of the students said that the AP English teacher was their favorite. Many students echoed Lindsey Tobias' positive view:

My English teacher is the best English teacher on the East Coast. I had him last year and this year. He's just a great teacher. I have AP English this year, which is hard. All APs are hard, but it's an enjoyable class, and I actually like the books we're reading. He allows a lot of discussions. Since it's a Northeastern public school, it's very mixed in every way. I love the discussions in that class. I think it's so amazing to see the different viewpoints.

Lindsay wanted to Dartmouth University and she was pleased to be able to take a challenging English class that would prepare her to attend a prestigious institution. Most students said they believed that Allegiance would provide the classes that they needed to get ready for college. This is what students were told even before they arrived at Allegiance.

In fact, only one student out of the fifteen 12th grade students interviewed was aware that Allegiance had had fewer AP courses than other selective, college-prep, schools. In an interview, Bridget said that graduating from Yale University might benefit her more than graduating from a non-selective college, Susquehanna. She explained that like Susquehanna, Allegiance is not a school that is known for being a top ranked school.

Bridget: I think that's what a drawback is for going to this school, because not many people heard of this school...we don't have many academic higher classes. We don't have many AP classes. And I feel like that [will put me at a disadvantage with] employers. They see if I go to Yale instead of Susquehanna,

Bridget was unusual in her view of Allegiance among students at the school. Most students had a positive view of the academics at their school. However, students at Allegiance had less to say about AP courses, compared to Romano, because they had

very little choice about their classes. In addition, no one said that they wished that they had the opportunity to take calculus, perhaps because they did not understand that some high school students had the opportunity to take it.

Like most high achieving students at Allegiance, Travis, a student that teachers called “brilliant” and “very smart,” took only two AP courses – AP English and AP US History. He said that he only thought about taking additional AP courses when it was too late. He thought about it once he started looking at college applications.

Travis: I wish I'd have tried earlier 'cause now it's kinda too late for me to take another AP class.

Shani: What do you mean you wish you had tried earlier?

Travis: Because I just recently talked to Mr. Drew. He's the one that does everybody's roster, and they gave me yearbook as a class just to fill in a slot in my roster, and I wish I coulda got that class changed to another AP class.

Shani: When did you start thinking that?

Travis: I originally tried to get it dropped, like, yearbook dropped so I wouldn't have a class, but then I realized colleges look at the classes you take your senior year as well, and it kinda helps your GPA anyway

Thus, Travis was a senior when it dawned on him that it might be advantageous to try to take more AP courses.

My interviews suggest that course taking decisions were not something that students talked about with each other. There was little choice, so there was little to discuss. Tanya, a high achieving Allegiance student who wanted to go to veterinary school said that she never considered asking for more than the two AP courses

Shani: How did you end up in AP Gov last year?

Tanya: They preferred me with that class.

Shani: They put that on your roster?

Tanya: Yeah. They just put that on my roster.

Shani: Why do you think they put that on your roster, but they didn't put you in AP U.S. History?

Tanya: That I don't know. I never thought about it. I just thought that because I'm a junior that they wanted me to have an advanced class.

Shani: Did you never thought about asking, “Can I have more AP's?”

Tanya: No.

Like Romano, students at Allegiance did not have an assigned advocate or advisor. When they did make decisions about their classes, they made them independently. At Allegiance, some students decided to drop classes that they did not need in order to graduate. For example, Rosa decided to drop AP government in her senior year. She left Allegiance for her junior year when she moved to a different city. When she returned to Allegiance in her senior year, she was enrolled in an AP class with students she did not know.

Rosa: Yeah, there is AP government

Interviewer: What year was that?

Interviewee: This year. I had it, but then I dropped out of it because it wasn't hard, it was just that they weren't in the same grade as me. And that class was just annoying honestly. So I was always like, you know, I'm gonna drop out.

Mr. Drew said that some students decided to take fewer classes in 12<sup>th</sup> grade because they had already met graduation requirements; for example, Travis' initial plan to drop yearbook.

While there were students, like Rosa, who chose to drop an AP class, most students at Allegiance did not have an opportunity to take classes that would help them prepare for elite college admission. However, the teachers at Allegiance seemed either unaware or unconcerned about the limited opportunities for course taking at Allegiance. Indeed students took the classes they need to graduate. And on the website and in school brochures, Allegiance boasted a 100% college admission rate among graduates. This evidence suggests that Allegiance was successfully preparing students for college. However, when Allegiance students graduated, most were not eligible for elite college enrollment.

The course taking experiences of students at Allegiance limited their opportunity to successfully apply to elite colleges and universities. While some students at Romano had access to a wide array of courses, others struggled to get access to high-level courses. Romano offered thirteen AP classes including AP calculus, but many students reported that, despite their efforts, they were not permitted to take these courses. Moreover, teachers did not encourage teachers to maximize their AP course load. Students who took many advanced courses often did so against the advice of teachers. At Allegiance there were few advanced course options. At both schools, I find that teachers' primary concern was ensuring that all of the students met minimum requirements for graduation.

Generally, teachers at the two schools were not focused on helping high achieving students prepare for elite college admissions. Teachers were working with limited resources that reduced their ability to offer a wide range of courses. While some teachers said that they wished their school provided more course options to students, they did not seem to make the link between limited course options and limited access to some colleges. As a result of the course taking practices at the two schools, some students were not well prepared to apply to elite colleges. These findings suggest that Allegiance and Romano high schools lacked an elite college-going culture.

## **CHAPTER 6: Learning About College Landscape**

Educators play a critical role in helping high school students learn about the higher education landscape. They play a direct role in the colleges they recommend to students. For example, high achieving students in elite, high SES schools learn from teachers to see themselves as belonging at an elite college (Weis, Cipollone, Jenkins 2014). Educators also play an indirect role by deciding which colleges come to visit the high schools. Even if high school educators cannot always secure the college recruiters they wish, they help to sculpt the higher education landscape that students learn about in high school. In this chapter, I show that students had limited opportunities to learn about elite colleges in their high schools. This is another manner in which the college-going culture at Allegiance and Romano was not an elite college-going culture. As a result, high achieving students had limited opportunity to prepare for elite college and university applications.

During the fall, recruiters from non-selective and less-selective institutions visited both schools several times per week. Few recruiters from elite colleges visited Allegiance or Romano. The college-going culture at Romano and Allegiance provided frequent exposure to college, but only sparse contact with elite colleges. Students relied heavily on college recruiters for information about the higher education landscape. Many students chose to apply to colleges that visited their school. In addition to being more present in the schools, the recruiters from non-elite colleges seemed particularly attuned to students' concerns about college. Students also learned about the existence of colleges from teachers, who typically did not promote elite colleges. Instead, teachers

advocated colleges and universities that had low tuition rates, such as community colleges. Teachers drew on their own experience, and their observations of alumni from their respective high schools, when they advised students.

### ***Learning About Colleges: Formal Processes***

#### *Status and Recruitment Networks*

In *Creating a Class*, Mitchell Stevens writes about the limited scope of elite college recruitment efforts. While working as an admissions counselor for a selective liberal arts college, he only visited a subsample of high schools, primarily wealthy suburban schools, private schools, and well-known magnet schools. Moreover, the admissions officers at the college where he worked had relationships with the high school counselors at only these schools. The counselors at Allegiance and Romano had developed relationships with admissions officers during their years working in high schools. Ms. Nichols, the counselor at Allegiance said that she had a relationship with almost all of the recruiters that visited. The only recruiters she did not know were those from elite colleges. She said that she maintained her relationship with colleges by staying in regular contact with admissions officers.

Shani: Are there certain colleges where you know the person who comes?

Ms. Nichols: Oh, yeah, all of them. The only ones I didn't know were Carnegie Mellon and Penn. All the rest, I have good relationships with.

Shani: Can you describe the relationships?

Ms. Nichols: They're varied. I'm pretty close with East Stroudsburg – I've known him for 20 years. Whenever a new admissions officer comes in, I make it a point to make sure I get to know them.

Shani: How do you get to know them?

Ms. Nichols: Calling them, contacting them, constantly.

Ms. Emerson, the counselor at Romano, also developed a relationship with the recruiters who came year after year. She listed the colleges where they came from: Temple,

Kutztown, and Mansfield, and Penn State. She said that a recruiter from Rosemont College moved to more selective Villanova and continued to recruit at Romano. She said St. Joseph's University was really "making it a point to get to know our kids well." Like Ms. Nichols, the colleges that Ms. Emerson was in contact with were less selective or nonselective. One exception was Penn State University, which is a selective flagship university. However, the recruiter who visited represented all of the Penn State campuses, including non-selective commuter campuses.

The counselors at both schools said they had trouble getting recruiters from outside of their network, including highly selective colleges, to come to their school. This really bothered Ms. Nichols at Allegiance. She mentioned this issue often when I was in her office. It was the first thing she wanted to share in her interview. Her view was that elite colleges, and those that were not local, did not allocate resources to visit her school, perhaps because it was not as high status as some of the other selective high schools in the city:

Ms. Nichols: The thing that I'd like you to know is that a lot of schools don't come, even if you ask them to come, unfortunately. For instance, Drexel won't come, because it's not in their budget, to come. Of course, a lot of schools out-of-state will not really come, because it's not in their budget. It could be, as well, that maybe our school isn't as prestigious of a school, for them to wanna recruit students from. It might be different with the top high schools.

This quote shows that Ms. Nichols was concerned about how the status of Allegiance compared to other high schools might influence students' experiences and opportunities. She considers how the status of her high school affects her students' access to colleges and college information. Ms. Nichols described the difficulty of trying to access elite college representatives.

Interviewer: The student who was trying to get into Dartmouth, did you contact the admissions officer?



Ms. Nichols: No, it's too difficult. They're not readily available, to be able to talk with, at all. You have to go through too many lines, to be able to get to the admissions counselor, to be able to talk to them. See, the glory of some of the contacts that I have is that I can send a transcript through e-mail, with some of those admissions counselors who are very helpful. That wouldn't accept a student, but because of their connection with me and my knowledge of who I think could fit, they would accept the student. But, like, with Harvard and Dartmouth, I couldn't get in touch with anyone. They wouldn't let me past the student worker.

Both Ms. Nichols and Ms. Emerson were very pleased on the rare occasions when elite colleges contacted them. When a representative from the University of Pennsylvania contacted Ms. Nichols, she asked me with gratitude, "Did you do this?!" I explained that I had not arranged the recruiter's visit as she stared at me with genuine surprise and excitement. At Romano, Ms. Edwards made an excited announcement at the all staff meeting that Yale was planning to visit later in the school year:

Yale is coming. No Harvard. No, it's Yale. But, Harvard did come last year. I told the Yale rep, "We have good students here." He said "Yeah. I know. That's why I'm coming."

While the counselors displayed some deference for elite college recruiters, they also wanted to maintain some power in these exchanges. For example, Ms. Emerson prevented a recruiter from the very selective Naval Academy from coming because they could not agree on the terms of his visit – specifically, she wanted him to meet with juniors instead of seniors because she did not think seniors would have time to prepare a Naval Academy application. Ms. Nichols canceled a visit from a Harvard admissions representative when she learned that the person visiting was a student admissions employee who had recently graduated from a nearby high school. She was not confident that the college student would have the information that her students needed. She also felt slighted that the prestigious university would send a student rather than an admissions officer to speak with Allegiance students.

While Allegiance and Romano had limited access to elite recruiters, some less selective colleges and universities also had limited access to elite high schools. For example, during her visit to Romano, a recruiter from Eastern University, which admits 74% of applicants said that some high schools were not interested in having her present at their school:

She's not able to get into Dominion and Gifted Academy. They do not respond to her recruitment efforts. She says she tries to go to select high schools that are supposed to be good schools, but the best schools did not think her college was good enough for their students. *Field Notes*

Students at lower status college-prep high schools like Allegiance and Romano have limited access to elite colleges and universities. Schools are crucial mediators in the flow of information from colleges to students. At the same time, the recruiter's comments suggest higher status high schools may only allow a limited group of colleges to access their students. This recruitment matching limited the access of students at Romano and Allegiance to elite colleges.

#### *Contact with College Representatives*

In interviews, students identified recruiters, emails, and phone calls as the most important and influential source of information about the higher education landscape. Because colleges were often the source of information that students used to determine where to apply, colleges had significant power influence students' application decisions. The recruiters from less selective and non-selective colleges were particularly attuned to the concerns of the students at Allegiance and Romano. As such, these recruiters were able to present their colleges in a very appealing ways.

Students at Allegiance and Romano had most contact with less-selective institutions.

At both high schools the counselor worked with college recruiters to arrange

visits to the high school. Most of this recruitment occurred in the fall semester of students' 12th grade year. At both schools, there was a calendar on the wall that showed all of the upcoming visits by admissions officers. In addition, at Romano, the school secretary would make an announcement over the loud speaker announcing the arrival of the college visitor. In their presentations, college recruiters talked about the ways that their college would fit students' lifestyle by providing good food, a manageable commute, and scholarships. The admissions officers from non-selective colleges did not mention the school's ranking or perceived status. They said little about the academic areas where their school excelled. Few elite colleges visited Allegiance and Romano. The one elite school presentation that I observed was strikingly different from all of the other presentations in that the presenter seemed far less attuned to students.

#### *Addressing Students' Everyday Concerns*

On a cloudy Tuesday, just before Thanksgiving, an admissions officer from Mansfield University arrived at Romano in the late morning. Calvin Talbott was a black man in his late twenties, who was slightly overweight and wore gray pleated professional pants and a crisp button down shirt and tie. After being buzzed into the school, he went to the front office, where one of the school secretaries called the counselor to let her know of his arrival. I observed as the counselor, Ms. Emerson met him in the hallway outside of the office, where she shook his hand and welcomed him to Romano. His visit had been previously arranged for this time. She then called on a ninth grade student in the hallway; a member of the basketball team Ms. Emerson coached, to escort him on the elevator to the school library on the fifth floor.

Ms. Emerson scheduled recruitment visits at the same time as a 12<sup>th</sup> grade study

hall period in the IMC<sup>12</sup>. The students in study hall were a convenient audience for the recruiter. The recruiters had access to whichever students were scheduled to be in the IMC during that period. In addition, a few students who were especially interested in the college would be excused from their classes to go to the IMC. Students who had a class during the period needed to get permission from their teacher to go to the recruitment presentation. A school employee, who spent most of her day accompanying a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student with special needs, chaperoned the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students during this period. When Calvin Talbott arrived, he set up his guidebooks, applications, and flyers, on a table. The students talked quietly or worked on homework. After a few minutes of setting up, Calvin Talbott stepped into the middle of the room, introduced himself, and began his presentation. Once he began the presentation, the students became quiet. Some listened attentively. Other students worked on homework or whispered to friends. One student put his head down on the table in front of him to rest.

Calvin Talbott walked around the room as he talked to the assembled group of students. From the beginning of his presentation, it was evident that he was emphasizing the lifestyle benefits of living on campus at his college. Sounding as much like a salesman as a college admissions officer, he announced to students:

We have brand new housing and it's all suite style! You don't have to go to the bathroom with a bunch of other people. No sharing your bathroom! There are two types of units. You either share your room or you have a private room (raises voice) as a FRESHMAN! Let me tell you about the amenities - microwave and refrigerator are already in your room. Free laundry! Free laundry! Free laundry! All you need is detergent. WiFi is on the whole campus. If it's slow, you can always plug in to the wall. Your ID swipes you into the building. You have your own key for your room.

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, it was health class, but the teacher was out on maternity leave and had not been replaced. Even though there was no instruction, the students needed to take this "health" class in order to complete their health credits for graduation. During this period students talked with their classmates or did homework. They were chaperoned by a paraprofessional.

Calvin Talbott's presentation was particularly attuned to students' lifestyle concerns. The majority of students at Romano came from low earning families who lived in the city.

The students were concerned about money. In interviews, students said they worried about living away from their parents because they would not know how meet their basic needs. Many students considered commuting so that they could avoid the cost of living on campus. For example, Karen, a Romano senior thought that the cost of living on college campuses was too high:

Shani: All the schools you applied to are somewhat local. Tell me about that.

*Karen:* Honestly, I was really just looking for financial feasibility 'cause I know that room and board is very expensive. And I don't really know why I feel so much against the cost of room and board, but I just don't appreciate why it has to be \$10,000-\$15,000 just for a year to live in a room with one to several other people. And then eat food that may or may not be good, depending on where you go. And you don't really know until you get to the school unless you visit there and eat the food.

Calvin's presentation appealed to students lifestyle concerns.

At Allegiance High School, the college recruiters similarly emphasized the lifestyle benefits that were provided by their college, thereby addressing students' anxieties about transitioning to college. The presentations occurred in an empty classroom. The counselor would call the 12<sup>th</sup> grade teachers on their classroom phones to ask them to send interested students to the room where the presentation was to take place. At 9 am on one spring morning, a recruiter from Harcum College, a two-year degree granting institution, visited Allegiance. A small group of four black students, two boys and two girls, sat around a table with the counselor and the recruiter, Terry, a white woman in her fifties with a graying wavy bob, leaned towards the students as she spoke, and looked through delicate gold frame glasses. Terry began the presentation by asking the students to tell her their name and where they lived. The first student said,

“My name is Janea and I live in Northeast City.” Terry responded, “Where in Northeast City?” After Janea said the name of her neighborhood, Terry asked for the major intersection closest to her home. After each of the students stated their name and neighborhood, Terry spent several minutes telling each student which bus or train they would take to get to campus from their homes. She explained each step of the commute to Janea, “You would take the bus to 84 Street. Then you can switch to the regional train that will take you right to our front door. Or you can take the D train to town and you’ll walk 5 minutes to get to the college. A lot of our students come that way.” When Terry offered directions to each of the students, she spoke with a warm voice that one might use with a family friend. She further related to the students, as a fellow user of public transportation, by relaying frustration that the bus was often late, but assured students that the train was a reliable way to get to campus. The fact that Terry began her presentation in this way suggests that she was aware and responsive to students’ concerns about staying close to home and finding transportation to college. She described the commute with such detail that I could imagine the students in transit to the Harcum campus. The process of mapping the trip from students’ homes to the college, and showing that Terry was familiar with the path from their homes to the college, also affirmed that students like Janea belonged at Harcum.

When a recruiter from Villanova, a fairly selective religious institution visited Romano, she said more about the academic features of the school. Nonetheless, her leading comments also emphasized lifestyle issues, the food and the commute. The admissions officer, a black female in her 30s with a youthful face and dimples was dressed in a navy blue suit. She told students:

Always try the food. It’s really good. We’re not too far by train or bus. There are

only 25 students per class. Professors will teach your courses, not graduate students. You get your money's worth. And we want you out in 4 years. We love you but we want you out. *Field Notes*

She also said the priests of the Augustinian Order are “really great, you see them around campus and they like to chat with students. They’re really cool.” Several students smiled at the thought of cool priests. These college representatives and others described their colleges as places where the students would be comfortable and where they would not have to worry about having their needs met.

Most recruiters offered very specific details about the admissions requirements at their university. For example, Calvin Talbott, the Mansfield University recruiter, explained that there were three paths to admission: students could apply to a specific major, apply as an undecided applicant, or be admitted through a program that required participation in summer classes (a remedial program). He explained the admissions requirements for each pathway:

To be admitted to a major, minimum GPA is 2.9, SAT is 980 combined. Undecided, minimum is 2.6, minimum SAT is 800. For the summer program, you have to participate for 12 weeks and maintain a C average, the minimum GPA is 2.3 and minimum SAT score is 730.

Terry, the recruiter from Harcum College, told students exactly what they needed to do to ensure that they were admitted to her program. She explained,

All you need is a 2.0 GPA. I don't need SATs and I don't need an essay. If you don't have a 2.0, write me a letter explaining why you should get in, and I will take it to the admissions office and I will advocate for you. I've done it before and it usually works.

Furthermore, Terry told students that the college made the legal studies program, which she directed, easy to get into for the benefit of students. She said “You can always get a job in the law. Especially, if you go on to a BA Temple University, you can get really cool jobs. Because we know it's an important program that creates job opportunities, we want

to make it easy for you to get in.” With this statement, Terry suggested that the objective of the college was to look out for the best interests of applicants.

When a recruiter from Penn State University, a black woman in her 30s, visited Romano, she also conveyed that she was there to help students. She said that admissions requirements vary at the different Penn State campuses, but she would help students find someplace in the university system that was a good fit. The recruiter told the congregated students:

Even if you don't see yourself in the box, there are alternative options to make Penn State an option for you. Let the pieces fall and I'll make the puzzle come together. I can't walk on water, but I can make a lot happen

The fact that recruiters either gave concrete details about minimum admissions requirements or said that they could help anyone get admitted suggests that they understood that many students were anxious about the potential rejection associated with the college admissions process. As I will show in Chapter 7, some students did not want to apply to colleges where they felt certain that they would not be admitted.

Students at Allegiance and Romano did not have many opportunities to meet representatives from highly selective colleges. The recruiters from elite colleges rarely visited either school. Recruiters from elite colleges were also absent at the college fairs that the students visited. For example, the University of Pennsylvania and Carnegie Mellon were the only highly selective institution that visited Allegiance during the period of the study, out of more than 20 presentations. Ms. Nichols, the Allegiance counselor, was surprised and excited to have a recruiter from an Ivy League college visit her school. The presentation took place in an empty classroom. The dean of students, who handled any student behavior issues in the school, stood at the door and made sure that all of the students who came to the presentation had a pass from their teachers. She



also commented on students clothing and posture. She told male students to tuck in their shirts and told boys and girls to stand up straight.

The presentation offered by the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) recruiter differed significantly from the presentation offered by less selective institutions. While the less selective institutions emphasized students' everyday lifestyle concerns in their presentations, the Penn representatives said nothing about this aspect of students' college experience. Instead, they spoke in more vague terms about the life changing effects of attending the University of Pennsylvania. Rather than sending someone in their twenties or early thirties, the presenter was a black woman in her 50s or 60s.

She begins by asking students "who founded Penn? Anyone?" No one answers. "Ben Franklin." Think about how great of a person Ben Franklin was and what it means to go to a college founded by him. Penn is a place that changes you. When I arrived at Penn as a freshman more than 30 years ago, I knew that I would never be the same person again. Can anyone tell us any more facts about Penn? Students call out "It's Ivy league" "It's expensive."

In her presentation, the University of Pennsylvania recruiters attempted to appeal to students with her romanticized memories of her time as a student at the university. She also used the example of Benjamin Franklin so show that important people are associated with the institution. Students did not seem impressed by either of these strategies. The Penn recruiter made no reference to food, dorms, laundry or Internet. Moreover, when students asked about specific admissions requirements, the recruiter said, "We understand that applicants are coming from different school settings with different resources and we take that into consideration we look at your application." Compared to other recruiters, the Penn presentation was decidedly vague and did not answer students' specific questions about financial aid or the likelihood of being admitted. The recruiters' imprecision reflected the fact that the University of

Pennsylvania did not have a set of concrete minimum admissions requirements. It is likely that the recruiter wanted to avoid presenting the university in a way that would make Allegiance students feel excluded and hopeless. But, her vagueness did not address students' concerns. Moreover, she presumed that the students viewed Penn as a very attractive university; she did not try to "sell it" to students as an attractive college option.

### *Paying For College*

Students asked for specific information about the cost of attending the college each recruiter represented. Students also asked about the availability of scholarships at the different institutions. Although most seniors were aware of need-based financial aid (compared to freshmen who were not), interviews revealed that students were much more versed in the language of scholarships. In interviews and observations, students never mentioned need-based grants without prompting. Instead, they said that they hoped to would qualify for merit-based scholarships. They viewed scholarships as the primary method to pay for college, other than loans, which they wanted to avoid.

Consistent with students' focus on scholarships, some college admissions officers offered very detailed descriptions of the scholarships that were available to students.

For example, the Villanova recruiter told Romano students:

"For scholarships, we don't care about your parent's income. It's all about you in high school. Presidential scholarship is the big one. It's a full ride. You need a 1200 on the SAT and 3.8 GPA. Weighted or not weighted, we don't care. There are 30 awarded each year. Six for multicultural students - that's you all. You have to be nominated. St. Martens requires a B average and 1000 SAT. It is full tuition and we offer 15. Goizeta scholarship fund is \$12,500 and it's for Hispanic students. Then there's Rendezo, an endowed scholarship that is one full ride. What else? The Coca-Cola scholarship. *Field Notes*

As students listened with varying intensity, I observed Adriano, a Romano senior, looking intently at the recruiter and nodding enthusiastically. Later, he told me that Villanova was one of his top choices because they offered Presidential scholarships. Adriano, whose father did construction and mother worked as a waitress in a mall restaurant, was concerned about burdening his parents with debt:

My mom told me, "Well every college is expensive", and she said "You really don't wanna graduate with debt." And I looked into it like a couple colleges and I didn't really notice how expensive it really was. When you're younger, at least me, you hear "Oh, you're going to go to college" and all those parents are working like three jobs [to pay for tuition], and my mom only worked one job and even then we were not making it but we were just getting by, and I didn't wanna put that toll on her.

Most students at Romano and Allegiance would be eligible for need-based grants, especially if they attended colleges that offered comprehensive financial aid packages. However, students were less familiar with these resources to pay for college. Instead they looked for scholarships. In interviews, most 12<sup>th</sup> grade students said that they had already applied to at least one independent scholarship. The remaining students said that they were behind and needed to start applying for scholarships.

In a brief mention, the Villanova recruiter seemed to dismiss need-based aid when she said with a disparaging tone "with financial aid the more you earn the less you get. If dad works for post office and mom is a nurse, that's less money for you." The Villanova recruiter seemed to suggest that financial aid is unfair to deserving students whose parents are gainfully employed. It is not clear why this recruiter expressed this view of financial aid. Students did not seem to share her sentiment, but they did generally view money for college as something to be earned by applying for merit based grants. Therefore, in their college preparation, most students did not become attuned to the variation in available financial aid resources among institutions.

Students wanted to know if they were going to be able to afford to go to each college. The recruiters from non-selective colleges directly addressed students' worries about cost by describing available scholarships and offering a detailed summary of costs. Calvin, the recruiter from Mansfield, offered a detailed explanation of costs of attending his college, as well as available scholarship opportunities. During his presentation, he said that tuition was \$6820 per year.

A female student yells out "That's more than Arcadia!" Calvin quickly turns toward the student and looks at her with sharp, squinted eyes as if she is crazy to suggest that the cost is more than Arcadia University. The expression on his face is exaggerated. It is a face that a teen might make to another teen. He repeats, slowly, "Six thousand. It's \$20,000 total cost with everything. I just brought in this flyer from my car that I didn't share with the last group. If you meet these requirements, you automatically get \$3,400 off tuition. One student showed me his transcript and I was able to give him 2500 off." A student asks, "Do you have full rides?" Calvin responds "the most I can do is take off tuition if you meet requirements of the merit program. You must have no more than 2 Cs, but I take off the Cs if they are in honors classes." *Field notes*

Calvin suggested that these students were getting a special deal because he brought a flyer that he didn't share with other student groups. Calvin, like most of the recruiters, seemed determined to show that he wanted to help students achieve their goal of going to college. Moreover, he wanted to help students qualify for a reduced tuition rate.

When one non-selective college was more expensive than some other options, the recruiter explained why the extra cost was worth it. During the Harcum College presentation at Allegiance, a student asks, "How much does it cost?" Terry, the recruiter, said that tuition is \$19,000. Before students react, she said,

Yes, it's more than community college. Why pay more? Because you get so much more because it's a small school and classes are small. You get the college campus life and if you're lucky enough, you can live on campus for \$9000. It's a lot less than 4-year colleges. Four year colleges cost \$30,000 and up.

The recruiters from less selective colleges knew students were concerned about cost

and made an effort to address those concerns.

While recruiters from non-selective colleges seemed particularly attuned to students' concerns about paying for college, Betty, the recruiter from the University of Pennsylvania failed to effectively communicate with students. When a student asked, "do you all give scholarships?" the recruiters initial response was "no." Some students gasped when they heard this answer.

Betty says "We don't do scholarships, but we pride ourselves on being accessible. We offer a package with no loans only grants. There is an expectation that you will work for 8-10 hours per week in work study. You could work somewhere on campus. Or you will work in the summer. It's possible to leave debt free. *Field notes*

This statement was appalling to students. I looked around the room to see students with wide-open eyes and confused expressions. The students were so alarmed to hear that there were no scholarships that few seemed to hear the comments that followed about grants and leaving college debt free. Moreover, the dominant assertion in Betty's response was that students would have to work to earn money. Yet, among all of the colleges that visited Allegiance, the University of Pennsylvania offered the most comprehensive financial aid program. If a student from Allegiance enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania, she would likely graduate with minimal or no debt. However, Betty's statements were not framed in a way that was consistent with students' perspectives, namely that scholarships are the ideal method to pay for college. In interviews, some students said that they understood that some Ivy League colleges provided comprehensive financial aid packages, but most did not understand the extent of the need-based aid at some institutions. For example, Bridget chuckled at her decision to apply to Yale University because she did not think her family would be able to afford it:

Yeah. [Laughter] I kind of picked a lot of very expensive schools, and my family is not very — we're not good with finances, I guess. But that's why I'm hoping for — I've been trying really hard to get good grades. I'm hoping — and to get scholarships from the schools as well. I've already applied for a few scholarships.

The way that colleges addressed students' concerns about costs had the potential to make an important impact on students' choices. At Allegiance and Romano, it was mostly non-selective colleges that were effectively marketing themselves as affordable.

Representatives of elite colleges rarely visited Romano and Allegiance. I observed only one presentation by an elite college admissions officer. This presentation was much less attuned to students' worries were the presentations by less selective institutions. It is unclear why this was the case. One possibility is that elite college admissions officers are accustomed to presenting to more advantaged students whose worries are different than those found among students at Allegiance and Romano. Another possibility is that wealthier colleges have less at stake when recruiting students than less established non-selective colleges. Non-selective colleges typically lack a substantial endowment and rely on tuition to cover operating costs. Moreover, unlike elite colleges, there is no guarantee that lower status institutions will receive enough applications in a given year to fill the school. For these reasons, non-selective colleges may have more incentive to listen closely to disadvantaged students perspectives and address their particular concerns.

#### *Following-Up: Persistent Contact from Colleges*

Recruitment visits and college fairs were not the only ways that colleges communicated with students. During their junior and senior years, students were contacted as a follow-up to meeting at a recruitment visit or a college fair. For example, in her interview Tanya Min estimated in her interview that the admissions officer from

Wells College emailed her more than ten times after meeting him at a college fair. She developed a positive impression of the school as a result of these interactions. Colleges also contacted students that they learned about from the College Board. In many cases, emails and phone calls introduced students to colleges that they would not have otherwise known about.

Some students relied on emails from colleges as a primary source of information about existing colleges. When Patrick, a Romano student who loved math, wanted to learn about colleges, he simply opened his email account:

Shani: You said you did a lot of research about different colleges. How?

Patrick: Usually just going through my e-mails and look and see colleges. Then I'll click on one, click on the college and see – go through their majors, go through their costs, where they're at, and then that will determine because I wouldn't wanna go to a school all the way out west, like California. Then sometimes the cost, even though they say don't let the cost discourage you, it kinda did let it discourage me. I was like 'that's a little too high.'

For Patrick, the college choice set was limited to the colleges that pursued him. In this respect, the colleges had a great influence on his application decisions. He only applied to colleges that first selected him by sending him an email.

Another example of a student who looked to her email to develop a college choice set was Lara, 12<sup>th</sup> grade student from Allegiance who was interested in women's colleges and said that she was considering Simmons College in Boston. She said that she learned about Simmons from an email.

Shani: How did you learned about Simmons in the first place?

Lara: 'Cause College Board, they send stuff, and I learned from that way.

Lara's SAT scores ranked at 60<sup>th</sup> percentile among women (College Board). As such, she was in the range of the average SAT scores at Simmons College. This may be why she was contacted via the College Board. The fact that students learned about colleges

from the institutions themselves meant that the colleges had more control over the way that the students viewed the schools. In these cases, students did not compare the college's portrayal with an impartial evaluation. They also did not learn about colleges that failed to first contact them.

Some students thought that receiving mail from colleges was a beneficial and helpful part of the college selection process. To them, it was a chance to learn about opportunities that they might miss otherwise. Jasir, the Romano student who set out to take as many AP courses as possible was one of the few students who was determined to go to an elite college. Nonetheless, he appreciated receiving emails and letters from a variety of colleges. It made him feel like the colleges thought he was "special."

Shani: You said it was helpful to get things in the mail?

Jasir: Yeah, definitely. Emails, especially paper mail, it makes you feel special. Like oh, they're going to the effort of sending me this. They might really want me to go there. Or email is cool to because it exposes you to schools that you might never thought of before, schools that are across the country. I wasn't just getting local schools. I was getting schools from Florida and California. I had a school in Italy contact me. It's like "wow" there's a lot of different places that I could end up going. And I might have not known of those places and what they offer if I hadn't gotten these messages. My friend is going to a college in Virginia - pretty much full ride - that sent him an email, and offered him everything that he wanted. And if it wasn't for that email that went to him he might have never discovered it.

Although the colleges that emailed them were, essentially advertising, students felt special to targeted by the colleges (McDonough 1994).

On the other hand, this method of reaching students was not always effective. Some students thought the attention from colleges was excessive and irritating. For example, when I mentioned the names of a few local colleges to Britney she sighed and said "a lot of them emailed me."

Shani: How many times?

Britney: Probably once every week.

Shani: When a school emails you once every week, does that make you consider



them more or...?

Interviewee: No, I get just sometimes annoyed.

Some students said that they wanted more personal attention, instead of anonymous messages, from colleges in the pre-application phase. For example, Vicky, a Romano senior who wanted to study science, felt that the contact from colleges was too impersonal.

Vicky: A lot of these places they sent me a lot of mail but they just, there wasn't a personal touch to anything.

Shani: What would a personal touch have been like?

Vicky: Call my phone, leave a message but actually have a person leave a message. Like I don't like recordings. Mansfield, they gave me a lot of recordings and they would call me every day and then Kutztown would call me every day and leave recordings. But in places like Villanova, Saint Joe's they would call me and then they would have a person.

Initially, Vicky said that she felt special about receiving mail from colleges. But, eventually that feeling wore off as she heard from more of them. She was pleasantly surprised to receive a personal call from St. Joseph's University. She ignored the admissions events that the recordings advertised, but she went to an event at St. Joseph's after having a pleasant talk with a student.

Despite her irritation at receiving impersonal calls from colleges, Vicky did not see the materials from college as advertising that could be ignored. She thought that reading the documents that colleges sent was a part of taking college and the college search seriously.

Shani: What did you feel about getting mail repeatedly?

Vicky: At first I was really happy because I got mail freshman year. Okay colleges are sending me mail. And then sophomore year I'm just okay, another college letter. But I read all of them. I would open them all up and because my brother, he did this thing where he had a whole bunch of colleges send him mail but he never opened 'em up. He just put 'em off to the side because he was getting annoyed with them. And I was like okay, I don't wanna be like that. So I gave everybody a shot.

Vicky's brother went to Temple University for part of a year but left during the school year. At the time of the interview, he was working at a Chinese restaurant and a retail store. Vicky was one of many students whose older siblings and cousins had enrolled in but not graduated from a college. For Vicky, taking communications from colleges seriously was one step towards securing a more positive outcome.

Students also used informational websites to learn about colleges. Students would fill out a brief survey about their interests, preferred college size, and location and the website would provide a list of colleges the student might want to consider. While some of these websites were created by the nonprofit student-serving agencies, others such as "ecollegefinder.org" were created by marketing companies that to help direct students to the colleges that fund the site. Some websites provided detailed information, including admissions rates and 6-year degree completion rates. Although selective colleges performed better on some measures on these sites, it was not apparent to students in the study that certain colleges were more selective or had more status than others. Instead, students focused on other factors, including whether a college had their major.

At both Romano and Allegiance High Schools, directing students to informational websites were a big part of the counselors' advising strategy. Ms. Nichols, the counselor at Allegiance said that she did not have time to get to know all of the students and to help them find a college fit. Instead, she told students to take the personality tests and career tests online to find the colleges that would be the best fit. Other students said that they used resources that were developed by the College Board.

Interviewer: How are you learning about these different options?

Caleb: Yeah. I looked on the College Board, and show you what you have to learn, what you have to know [to be an athletic trainer], all this stuff about athletic

training.

Colleges use consultants to help them find the students they want and to get them to enroll. The admissions officer from Eastern College, which admits 74% of applicants, explained that her office used consultants to help them identify and contact prospective students. She complained about the ineffectiveness of the consultants:

We use admissions consultants to help them get more applications. The consultants contact prospective applicants. The consultants send students letters telling them that they are “select students” that have preference. Really, they shouldn’t be select students. Then we end getting a lot of applications from very low achieving students, which is not what we want. *Field Notes*

Although the consultants did not provide what this college wanted, the fact that Eastern hired consultants shows that some colleges went to great expense to attract applicants.

Ms. Nichols, the counselor at Allegiance reported a similar frustration with students getting messages from colleges telling them that they were specially selected, when in fact they were not qualified to gain admission to the college. She believed that her students were being used to decrease admissions rates at colleges.

Drexel, for the past five years, has said, to every student, "You are a VIP student. Apply with the VIP application" Every student, no matter what their grades are, no matter what their SAT scores are, they think they've been chosen to apply to Drexel. It made them think that they're gonna get accepted, that they've been chosen. I feel terrible about it. And I found out – I'm sorry, I get so excited - Drexel isn't having VIP this year. Which I was very happy about because the VIP really tricked a lot of kids into thinking they are worthy of Drexel. I mean worthy as far as fitting the requirements to get in. And they went through the whole process of applying, only to be denied. Do you know what I mean? So that bothered me so much. Students don't wanna hear it from me, it's almost like, "Ms. Nichols, she doesn't know her stuff," or, "She's putting me down, by saying I can't even go to Drexel." So this year Drexel chose not to do that (See Otto 2015)

In part, Ms. Nichol’s was happy with this change because she thought that Drexel was being dishonest with applicants. She thought her students were being lied to by the admissions office. But, she also seems to echo students’ anxiety about applying to

colleges where they may be rejected. She explained that Georgetown was another school that had a practice similar to Drexel's VIP admissions.

I'm a conspiracy theorist. Georgetown did the same type of thing – they personally called students. And I knew, in the back of my mind, this student with a 340 on the SAT in reading, a 360 in math, and a 400 in writing, was not going to get accepted to Georgetown. But this particular admissions counselor led that student into believing they were getting accepted. So, had them fill out – So my theory is that they needed minority students to apply, because they might've been told they don't have enough minority students who are applying to their college. So my theory is that they were targeting minority students to apply, and then, to say to whomever, "Well, these people applied, they were interested, but they don't qualify." So, I think Drexel was doing that, as well.

Ms. Nichols' comments here reflect her overall demeanor when discussing elite colleges. When talking about elite colleges, she spoke in a suspicious and doubtful tone. Previous research suggests that Ms. Nichols may not be entirely incorrect. Some colleges do encourage students to apply to their college, knowing that they will be rejected (Bruni 2014). These colleges want to reduce their admissions rates so as to increase the status of their institution. These institutions are "status-seeking." Their actions are designed to increase institutional prestige (Arum, Gamoran, Shavit 2007)

However, most of the colleges that recruited from Allegiance and Romano were client seekers (Arum, Gamoran, Shavit 2007) that rely on tuition for sustaining revenue. Client seeking institutions need students to enroll in order for the college to remain solvent. Some consulting companies helped client-seeking colleges develop a strategy for getting students to enroll. For example, Jenzabar, a company that provides enrollment and recruitment software for 20% of American colleges produced an online workshop that can be viewed on YouTube. In the workshop, the presenter advised colleges to figure out what it takes to get a student to decide to enroll in their institution (Jenzabar 2012):

Too many institutions are focused on application. We need to be focused on enrollment. The application is the new inquiry form. Applying to college is cheaper now than it was in the 1970s. We need to move the goal to enrollment, not application. People recruit people. Get your inquirers to your high impact events. Not to get them to apply. If you can get them to that event where students who go are likely to matriculate. That's a lot more important than getting them to apply.

Admissions officers from client-seeking institutions had more at stake when they interacted with students. Compared to status-seeking institutions, they had more reason to ensure that the students they encountered applied, and subsequently enrolled in their institutions. Client-seeking institutions need tuition revenue in order to remain solvent. They did not have elite status that guaranteed that they have many more students who wanted to enroll than they had slots. Thus, it is possible that recruiters from non-selective, client-seeking institutions made more of an effort to understand and address the particular perspectives of students like those at Romano and Allegiance.

***Learning About Colleges: Informal Processes***  
*Representations of College in Television and Film*

Students had minimal exposure to elite colleges in their high school, but for many, the first colleges they learned about were elite Ivy League institutions that were mentioned in television and movies. Some students said they dreamed of going to an Ivy League colleges when they were young. However, as they grew older, they doubted the desirability of an Ivy League education. For some students, there was something cliché about Ivy League colleges. Students described them as the colleges “everybody knows about” or the “popular colleges.” Students suggested that there was something impersonal about choosing such a college because other people think it is good. Moreover, some students felt that Ivy League colleges were not a good fit for people like them.

Jasir, the top ranked Romano student who took 9 AP courses summarized the view of Ivy League colleges shared by many students. Although Jasir wanted to go to an Ivy League college, he rolls his eyes as he described what he saw as the hackneyed reputation of Harvard and Princeton Universities.

People know Harvard. People know Princeton. Those things are like -- they're all a lot like -- it was in a Disney Channel movie. You know, the girl really wanted to go to Harvard, and it's not the best school in the country anymore, but it's just associated with it. The name is like really heavy.

Jasir was unique among study participants because college rankings were important to him. He was the most status-oriented student in the sample. Nonetheless, he doubted the legitimacy of the attention given to Harvard and Princeton. He insisted the Brown University was a better institution, but "no one has ever heard of Brown, at least not here." In fact, Brown University is very popular among high achieving students from elite middle class families. However, because it was less visible in the popular media, it escaped the slightly negative connotation some students in my study developed about Harvard and Princeton.

Some students, especially girls, said that they were initially attracted to the Ivies they saw on TV, but that they became less interested in those elite colleges over time. They described their interest in Ivy League college as a childhood fantasy that they grew out of. Lara said that she once thought she wanted to go to Harvard, but later decided that she would not fit in there. She laughed at her childhood self for wanting to go to colleges that she heard about on television.

Lara: When I was younger I always said I wanted to go to Harvard, but I never knew how hard, like difficult it was actually, like how good the school is.

Shani: What did you think about Harvard?

Lara: I don't know. I think movies. It was like glamorized going to Harvard or going to Yale or something like that. Then when you get older you do research and it's like "I don't want to go there."

Shani: Why is that?

Lara: It's like more racially, 'cause like culturally based I feel like I won't fit in there. And then it's like so far away from home.

As a young person, Lara was attracted to the “glamour” of Harvard, as it was portrayed on television. But as she got older, she became more concerned about everyday experiences of college. As a black student, she worried about fitting in at a majority white, elite college. Allegiance student Bridget described a similar attraction to Ivy League colleges as they were portrayed on film.

Bridget: I was mainly focused – I wanted to be a lawyer, because I saw Legally Blonde. [Laughter] And she went to Harvard, so that was my first choice. And then I heard of Princeton because of another show. [Laughter] I learned Princeton from the show called What I Like About You. It's a show with Amanda Bynes. And her ex-boyfriend went to Princeton and they were super smart. And I'm like, “Oh, okay. Smart folk go to Princeton.” But I was, like, seven. [Laughter]

MaryAnne also had very clear memories of learning about Princeton University from a TV show:

Watching Fresh Prince of Bel Air and Carlton, that was where my Princeton thing came from. Because you're like “Carlton's so smart” and you want to be like Carlton. You want to go to Princeton. You want to go to a good school and stuff. And then that episode with Will Smith when the Princeton Dean had a Rubik's cube on the table. Will Smith spoke to him, but the dean was like he's not smart enough obviously to go to this school. And then Will Smith picked it up, and he was just sitting there and he just fixed [the Rubik's cube]. And then the Dean was like wow, how did you do that? And I [thought] so when you go to college, and you get an interview, you don't need to be perfect, but if you have something in you that the Dean sees you might just get a chance to go to this school. That made me really want to go to Princeton.

But, by the time she was applying to college, MaryAnne was no longer interested in going to Princeton. She questioned whether popularity and TV presence was a good reason to choose a college.

MaryAnne: Later on in life I wasn't really intrigued by Princeton. Because the only reason why I wanted to go was because everybody else talked about it, or it looked good on TV, but would it be good for me? In 11th grade they started talking to us about where do you want to be? Where can you see yourself really

for four years? You don't want to go somewhere where you're going to leave. I don't feel like in this environment I'm going to really like it much.

These examples show that some students were once very attracted to status that that was ascribed to elite colleges on screen. However, as time passed, they became hesitant and jaded about the desirability of elite institutions

### *Parents*

Most students said that their parents told them to think about how their college choice would affect their future, but left the choice up to them. For example, Vicky described the advice she received from her mother.

She never said "Well I'll pick the school for you." She always says I'm gonna be the one going there. So she always gave me control over my future but she also put in her advice " don't go to a place where you'll be in debt with a whole bunch of loans" and stuff like that. Like think smart about it. Don't go to a school for a degree where you can't find a job." So she just gave me bits and pieces like that. She wanted to make sure I picked the school that was right for me.

In addition to protecting children from debt, a major concern for parents was that their children remained close. The common sentiment among parents was that their children should go to a college nearby. For example, Travis, said that his mother, an administrative assistant, wanted her children to stay close to home because she did not want to be lonely.

Travis: My mom want me to be as close as possible, but my dad is like, "It's really up to you."

Shani: Why does she want you to be as close as possible?

Travis: Cause she gonna miss us so she want all her kids to be close. 'Cause I think she's gonna get lonely without her kids.

However, several students were encouraged by parents to apply to an Ivy League college. For example, Allegiance student Rosa's mother wanted her to go to the University of Pennsylvania because her coworkers told her it was a good school. Rosa's mother worked as a receptionist at a social service agency and had not attended



college. In the recent past, she had worked in factory.

Interviewee: She's wants me to attend the best school. They told her in her job that Penn is really good.

Shani: What did they say was good about Penn?

Rosa: I don't know. She just told me that they said it was really good.

Shani: Have you heard that too, or –?

Rosa: No. I didn't even know what Penn was until last year. I didn't know.

[Laughter].

Rosa was ranked fourth in her class. Since she had never heard of the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League university, she said that she would not have considered Penn if her mother had not been advised by work friends. Other students also said that their parents shared information about elite colleges that they learned from work. Dana, a Romano senior said that her mother, who worked as a nail technician in a nail salon, encouraged her to apply to the University of Pennsylvania.

Shani: Has your mom said anything to you about college?

Dana: She wanted me to go to Penn, 'cause that's like the only school she knows.

Shani: Okay. How does she know about Penn?

Dana: From the other mothers down at the nail salon. She said she heard it was a good school.

In addition to parents who learned about colleges from work, some immigrant parents encouraged students to apply to colleges that were heralded in their local ethnic community. For example, MaryAnne's Haitian parents heard that Princeton University was the best college.

MaryAnne: ] because [my parents] were new here they were very influenced by what other people said. Other people was like you want your children to go to an Ivy League college, and they didn't really know but they heard a lot. And then a lot of other Haitians speak to my parents. Like you know, you want your children to go to good schools. Especially when you're new to a country you hear of one good school and you think that's the dream college, so it was Princeton.

Mita, an Allegiance student who was ranked 1 in her class said that her mother wanted

her to go to the University of Pennsylvania. Her mother immigrated to the United States from Bangladesh:

Shani: What does your mom know about Penn?

Mita: Because everyone thinks it's a good school so whatever she heard she was like okay, I want you to go with them.

Shani: Who did she hear that from?

Mita: She knows some Bengali people go there. So all this, they're parents are like oh, your daughter should go there. And she's like, oh okay, I want my daughter to go with them too. So that's it.

In these examples, students said that their parents knew very little about the higher education landscape. They trusted that the advice offered by work and neighborhood acquaintance about which colleges were the “best.” And they encouraged their children to apply to those elite colleges.

Although uncommon, there were a few middle-class students in the school. Their experience was distinctly different, since they were less school dependent. For example, two middle class students had parents who drew on their personal experience when encouraging their children to apply to elite colleges. These two students, one at Allegiance and one at Romano, had relatives who had graduated from elite universities.

Lindsey’s mother and stepfather wanted her to go to an elite university. Lindsay’s stepfather had attended several prestigious universities, including a bachelor’s degree from Dartmouth and a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, both in Education. He was a faculty member at a local nonselective college. Lindsay’s mother had a bachelor’s degree and had worked as a teacher and charter school administrator. Lindsey’s older sister had been awarded a scholarship to an elite boarding high school.

Lindsay: She went to Gifted Academy for middle school. Then she went to a private boarding school for three years. She's very smart. When she was in eighth grade, she took a bus down there [to the boarding school]. She set everything up because she knew that our parents would never let her go to – it's not that far. But to go away for high school is not something...Anyway, she set up

everything for herself, and then she presented it to our parents like, "This is where I want to go. I've been there. I really like it. I talked to people there. I just need to you sign this stuff," as an eighth-grader.

Lindsay did not know who first told her sister about the boarding school. But, she believed that attending the school set her on a path towards a rewarding life. Her sister subsequently graduated from Dartmouth. At the time of the interview, Lindsay's sister, 8 years her senior, lived in Manhattan, but was often traveling for her job in public relations. Lindsay said "All my sister's friends who went there are all doing really cool things now. They give a lot of opportunities from what I've seen from my sister and her friends."

Her stepfather joined the family after her sister graduated from Dartmouth; thus, two family connections to Dartmouth were coincidental. Lindsay was impressed by her stepfather's academic credentials and seemed proud that he thought she too could succeed at an elite institution:

Lindsay: Yeah, he has all of them. He went to Dartmouth, Harvard, Penn, which is crazy. He said that I would be good wherever he went, not that – just that he can see me at any of those places

Lindsay said that her parents debated which Ivy League college was the best fit for her. Her mother advocated for Harvard, while her stepfather encouraged her to apply to University of Pennsylvania. In Lindsay's case, informal knowledge of the status hierarchy flowed via family ties. However, Lindsay was at a disadvantage compared to students in high SES schools because she lacked the guidance of school staff that were knowledgeable about the elite college admissions process.

Ms. Nichols, the Allegiance counselor seemed irritated about Lindsay's experience applying to elite colleges. Ultimately, Lindsay was not admitted to Dartmouth or Harvard Universities. When I asked Ms. Nichols if elite colleges offered attractive

financial aid programs, she said she did not know because students almost never get accepted to those colleges:

Ms. Nicols: The issue is getting in, to be able to get that type of scholarship.

Shani: Do you wanna say more about that?

Ms. Nichols: Yeah. I mean, this year, knowing that a student [Lindsay] has full connection to Harvard, knowing that a student had connection to Dartmouth. Her SAT scores were okay, but had those connections, because relatives who have gone to Harvard, relatives who have gone to Dartmouth. She did not get in, at all.

Shani: She had the grades that you thought she needed?

Ms. Nichols: She had the grades. SAT scores probably could've been higher, and that could be the reason why. She, besides one other student, had the highest of the SAT scores, and couldn't get in. And those were her first choice schools. Okay, so, her highest SAT was a 610 verbal, 540 math, and 670 writing.

Ms. Nichols looked up Lindsay's GPA. It was 3.6. She was ranked 14 out of 84. Ms. Nichols thought that Lindsay met the requirements for admission to Dartmouth and Harvard Universities. And she thought that her connections to graduates of those colleges should make admission likely. However, Lindsay's GPA was low for admissions in these institutions and, because she went to Allegiance, her course load was less rigorous. Lindsay did not indicate that she was aware of these weaknesses in her academic record. It is unclear whether she would have better prepared for the elite college application if she had more information about the expectations of admissions staff at elite institutions. However, without the knowledgeable, elite-college oriented, guidance from the counselor, Lindsay had less chance to succeed in her goal of going to Dartmouth or Harvard.

David a senior at Romano, was another student whose parents went to an elite college. His parents encouraged him to apply to their alma mater:

David: Both of my parents went to Cornell and they kind of pressured me into applying there. I didn't know if I really want to go there, but they said, "You should apply just to see if you can get in." We won't make you go there but it doesn't hurt to apply. And my grandfather went there, too.

David did apply to Cornell University. While there were only two families with direct experience with elite colleges in the study, both encouraged students to apply to similar institutions.

There were also parents who advised their children to apply to less selective colleges. For example, Adriano's mother encouraged her son to apply to two non-selective colleges that were attended by her coworkers:

My mom is really pushing towards Penn State Berks and Cabrini College because where she works at the mall a lot of people go to Cabrini and Penn State and community college. She said I could just go there. But I keep telling her about Villanova.

Adriano hoped to be awarded the presidential scholarship from Villanova and he was motivated to attend a college that he viewed as high quality. But, his mother, concerned about cost, advised him to consider two low status institutions. Some parents referred to the experiences of older children when advising their children about college. For example, Karen's mother, an administrative assistant wanted her to go to a less selective institution with low tuition because she had been able to manage the costs for her older brothers who, at the time of the interview, were 29 and 31.

West Chester, it was really an obligatory thing from my mom, it wasn't really my choice. Because my brothers, both my brothers graduated from West Chester. And because it was more within our financial reach, without loans. So, that's why she offered—"Okay, but just apply there."

Thus, some parents encouraged students to consider specific colleges. Only one student, Rosa, said that her mother expressed a preference for her to attend a college that was far away "She said 'why do you want to stay here? Go far. Farther schools are better.'"

To summarize, I found that some parents encouraged students to apply to elite colleges. Other parents encouraged student to enroll in a school close to home. With few exceptions, students also stated in their interviews that they wanted to be close to home because they feared they would miss their family too much while they were away. However, most parents left the college choice decision to their children. Students had some constraints on their college choices, such as location, but they were largely open to suggestions from teachers, counselors, and other students at school.

### *Teachers*

High achieving students at Romano and Allegiance said that they had frequent informal conversations with their teachers. Most students said that they mostly checked in with teachers after they had already applied to colleges and were in the process of deciding where to enroll. Similarly, most teachers said that they rarely offered students advice about where to apply to college. Ms. Neale, a history teacher at Romano high school said she usually did not talk to students about college, but when she did it was after students had already made decisions.

Occasionally someone would come in and talk to me, and they would tell me about the schools they were applying to or what they were looking for in a school, and I tried to throw my two cents in here and there but it seemed like a lot of them already had a plan as to what they were doing.

Teachers at Romano said that it was not their job to suggest particular colleges to students. For example, Mr. Young, a math teacher:

Shani: Were there examples where people or students said I'm going to apply here and here and you said maybe you should also consider applying here?  
*Mr. Young:* That's more a counselor's job.

Since it was the counselors' role, teachers did not offer frequent advice. For example, Ms. Neale worried about the cost of private college, but did not share that worry with

students. She had attended elite colleges for her undergraduate and graduate degrees. She said she would not recommend that students make the same choice, because if she had chosen less expensive institutions she “wouldn’t have all this debt taking over her life.” But, she did not make it her mission to share this perspective with students:

Do you ever say to good students you might want to think about applying to Penn because they might give you aid?

Ms. Neale: No, I’ve never said to someone you should consider like a cheap, more affordable school at all. I leave that to the counselor. Because I really don’t know. I’m really not on top of what there are in terms of scholarships and financial aid, like how much aid is being offered to students, especially students at Romano and I just don’t know.

Although teachers said they left the formal, individualized, college advice to the counselor, teachers did make informal and more general comments about their experiences in college. Moreover, some Romano students said that they felt pressured to apply to Penn because that was the expectation for high achieving students at Romano. Romano seniors, such as Karen did not want to go to Penn, but because she had a 4.0 GPA and fairly high SAT scores, she felt pressure to apply:

There’s some weird Penn pressure in the school. Everyone implores, “Hey, you’re smart, you should apply there.” And, I mean, it happens to every graduating class. In every graduating class, there are some students that decide that they don’t want to apply.

According to Karen, it was a norm that high achieving students apply to the University of Pennsylvania. Mr. Young, a math teacher at Romano corroborated Karen’s portrayal. He said that he generally did not get involved with students’ college choices. But, he did have an opinion about applying to Penn. He thought it was a good choice for high achieving students:

Shani: What do you think about Penn?

Mr. Young: Top ten you should all apply. If you get in you’re probably getting a full ride because I think all of our kids that have gotten which is about two to three a year, get a full ride. So yes, apply and pray.

Shani: How about like Swarthmore, Haverford or any of those?

Mr. Young: Those are smaller liberal arts, which isn't my thing. So I don't – they don't come to mind.

Mr. Young had seen Romano students succeed at Penn get good financial aid packages, so he encouraged similar students to do the same. But, he does not offer the same advice about elite liberal arts colleges, perhaps because he has not observed student success at those colleges. Although Mr. Young said he did not offer students much college guidance, he did make recommendations to students that he thought were like him. Mr. Young went to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, which he recommended to “geeks” and students that he connected with. Mr. Young said “When I tell certain students I didn't take a single English class in college their eyes light up like “that exists?” I'm like ‘yeah, go to a tech college.’ I'm good at driving kids to tech colleges.”

Dr. Carter, the English teacher and roster chair said that she was not motivated to help her students prepare for admission to elite colleges.

Shani: What do you think about the different schools as far as selective places like Penn? Is it a priority for you for the students to go to a school like that?

Dr. Carter: Me, honestly, those things are not necessarily a priority. I do find that the kids who have gone to those schools from here have stayed, have graduated. The Drexel, the Penn kids, they don't go and waste time. Any of the kids that have gone, they're either still there or they are on their way out or have graduated. I have to say that about the upper-echelon schools, but I don't push anybody in that direction unless they're talking about it.

In her comments, Dr. Carter groups Drexel and University of Pennsylvania together as elite colleges, when Drexel University is far less selective and elite. Still, her comments show that elite college enrollment simply was not something that she prioritized for her students. However, she had been impressed that students who had gone to colleges had succeeded and done well.



Teachers at Romano had positive experiences with students going to elite colleges and they used those experiences to advise some students to apply to those colleges. There was also one isolated example of a teacher citing status differences among historically black colleges and universities.

Mr. Young: The historically black colleges. I'll talk to them about and when they say Spelman, yeah. Go to Spelman. Before Romano [when I taught at all black high school] I would always chase the kids away from the historically black colleges as much as possible, because those schools are 100% black. You need an education with diversity. These kids [at Romano] if you look this is a very colorful, diverse place, which is wonderful. So if a black kid wants to go to a historically black college here it's like, yes, but make sure it's Spelman or Howard or you know one of the ones that I've heard about and read about because they're as good as any college. Or better.

Mr. Young's distinction between Spelman and Howard and lower status HBCUs was one of very few direct references to status and institutional desirability among teachers.

Conversely, teachers at Allegiance High school said that they felt compelled to help students avoid debt by recommending lower cost institutions. Allegiance teachers said that they advised against private colleges because the cost. As the AP English teacher explained "some of 'em wanna go to Drexel or Penn, and a couple students have gotten in and accepted to those, but I try to – if money is an issue, I try to steer clear of the private schools." However, he remembered a "brilliant" student several years before that he had encouraged to apply to Penn. For students who were unsure of their post secondary path, the same teacher said "I try to tell a lot of the students that, if they don't know what to do, that they should go to community maybe, for two years or a school that's really cheap." Teachers at Allegiance seemed to be on a mission to send their students to community college. They had seen too many heartbreaking cases of students going off to college only to return with debt and no degree.

Ms. Noel, a social studies teacher at Allegiance, evoked on her own college choice experience to argue that private colleges with high tuition were not a realistic choice. She encouraged to not “caught up in the dream”, and think practically about choosing a college.

What I’ve told the kids is that you can do a program at community college and transition in two years and it’s so much smarter– the first two year are general requirements. As much as possible, try to discourage kids from going to schools like – I’ll give you my example. When I was in high school my first choice was Oberlin. I got it and my parents are like, “Great, we don’t have [the money] and you’re not gonna go,” and that was devastating for me but now I look back and, well yeah, we didn’t have it, so we didn’t go.

Ultimately, Ms. Noel moved from the Midwest to Philadelphia to Rutgers University. She said that Rutgers University was a school that had name recognition, but was still affordable. She felt that it was a more realistic option for her.

So that’s the reality that I think kids get caught up in the dream. The reality of student loan debt is so crushing. I’ve seen so many Allegiance kids going to college who had to come back and felt really bad about it, felt bad about themselves. It really bothers me.

I’m constantly with kids, “You’re going to Wagner University? How much is it?” “It’s \$55,000.” “That’s too much.” You just bought a house in four years. It’s too much, so I’m kind of like just a voice of reality, not to be a dream crusher but just to kind of like give the financial reality.

Mr. Victor, the Spanish teacher at Allegiance also encouraged his students to think about community college as a smart move. He wanted to decrease the stigma associated with community colleges among his students.

I feel like students are constantly getting the message that community college is inferior and they need to be going to the four-year school, but financially speaking, I feel like community college is the smart way to start. Speaking with students and hearing about past students that have graduated and gone to a four-year college for a semester, and then either they couldn’t afford to stay or they struggled ended up going to community anyway, and so it just seems a much smarter move. Throughout the day, as much as possible, I try to get the message out that community is a smart way to go.

Mr. Victor said that he suspected that counselors were pressured by the school district to

promote four-year colleges and “college for all” to students.

From what I understand, what I've heard, is that guidance counselors are pressured by the district to promote the four-year school, but I really think more students should be going the community route. And also, we should be educating students about what trade options are out there as well. It's something I feel like they don't hear about enough, but again, it makes a lot more sense economically.

He felt that this strategy that was detrimental to students. While Romano teachers did not mention community colleges as frequently as Allegiance teachers, some Romano teachers did hold a similar view. For example, Ms. Usher, the psychology teacher said, “people are always poo-pooing community college. I go, “It’s a good place to start, especially if you don’t know what you want to do. It’s a lot of money that you’re saving doing that.”

Ms. Nichols, the counselor at Allegiance encouraged students to apply to colleges in state, because state colleges offered financial aid. She explained why she advocated in-state colleges to students.

Ms. Nichols: this state has so many colleges, I mean, so many. There is a college for any student in this city, to match, in this state. There are so many colleges. So, I guess my thing is, why leave this state? If you are a student who financially is in need of money, and you are a lower income student, leaving the state would not be to your best advantage, because you're gonna get free money from the state, to be able to stay in the school in-state.

I asked Ms. Nichols if there were any elite schools that she knew of that provide scholarships and aid to students that is comparable to what states provide.

Shani: Are there colleges that give free money to students outside the state, too?  
Ms. Nichols: They do, but not enough.. Like, for instance, a student who wanted to leave and go to Morgan State can get money staying in-state. By leaving and going to Morgan, they're losing that \$4,000.00 that they could get by staying in-state. Not only that, now, Morgan, you're paying out-of-state tuition and fees. Some of the private schools will lower the amount and give scholarship money. However, it's not gonna pan out regarding the amount of money that they'll get if they stayed in-state.

Shani: But then there are some private elite colleges that pay 100%, for low-income students, right? Aren't there some that have no-loan policies for low income students?

Ms. Nichols: I haven't seen a no-loan policy.

Shani: You haven't seen that?

Ms. Nichols: No, mm-mm.

Thus, Ms. Nichols, the Allegiance counselor lacked important information about the financial affordability of elite colleges for low-income students. Therefore, she was unable to share this information with students.

Because they were unfamiliar with the availability of financial aid, some educators saw enrolling in an elite college as comparable to someone buying an expensive car that one cannot afford. In other words, some saw elite colleges as frivolous luxury that only the wealthy could afford. This is the message I think, Ms. Nichols wanted to convey to me when she sent me a link to an article with an email that read:

Hope all went well! Just wanted you to see this. The young man didn't choose an IVY because of money. Interesting.

The article (Nextshark 2015) was about Ronald Nelson, Jr. a black student who was admitted to all eight ivy league universities, as well as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, New York University, Vanderbilt and Washington University, but elected to go to the University of Alabama because “he simply just couldn’t afford” the Ivies. His father offered more details on Ronald Nelson, Jr.’s decision

With people being in debt for years and years, it wasn’t a burden that Ronald wanted to take on and it wasn’t a burden that we wanted to deal with for a number of years after undergraduate. We can put that money away and spend it on his medical school, or any other graduate school.

While the Ivy League institutions offered some financial aid, only the University of Alabama provided a full-ride scholarship. The article makes no reference to his parents' earnings and their impact on financial aid.<sup>13</sup> The article ends with the following line:

With the cost of college tuition rising faster than inflation, his decision shows that he is indeed one very smart young man.

The fact that Ms. Nichols sent me this article suggests, again, that she did not understand that Ivy League universities would provide a great deal of financial aid to most of her students at Allegiance, who were more economically disadvantaged than Ronald Nelson, Jr.. This article also gives some insight into Ms. Nichol's overall view of elite colleges as a source of debt that was not worth the burden.

One Allegiance teacher, Ms. Harris, said that she learned about financial aid available from Ivy League colleges when she called Princeton University on behalf of a student. She initially thought about contacting Princeton at the beginning of the 2013-2014 year, when there was no counselor on staff at the school.<sup>14</sup> But, by the time she actually called Princeton, the application process was over.

Ms. Harris: [I thought] you guys should all be going to Ivy League schools. You have the ability. You have the potential. I think you can handle it. And eventually, I actually started making some phone calls. I made a phone call for Jay, and I said, "You should be at Princeton," 'cause he's Princeton material. I can totally see him at Princeton. He wanted to stay close. The [students] looked at the admission requirements and they were like, "Oh, I don't have the SAT scores to get into this." And I didn't know. I'm busy teaching and then when I finally got around to it, I finally I called Princeton. It was too late for him.

Shani: Had he applied to Princeton already?

Ms. Harris: No. I said, "Here's the profile of this student. I'm the teacher. I'm his teacher, I know this kid." She's like, "He sounds probably he would have gotten in because the SAT score," she goes, "That could be overlooked if he had

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<sup>13</sup> The article Ms. Nichols sent me is a shortened version of a *Business Insider* article, which states that "His father, Ronald Sr., is an engineer who works as a manager at the Federal Aviation Administration and his mother, Sandra, works in management at FedEx headquarters."

<sup>14</sup> The counselor at Allegiance was laid off, along with hundreds of other counselors, because of budget cuts. A counselor was eventually hired in October 2013.

applied, but now it's too late." And I said, "Well, is it possible –" she said, "No." Oh! And we were talking about money. So he could have come out with less debt than he would – he woulda gotten a much better package going to Princeton than going to – or any Ivy League schools. I was just – I started asking her a bunch of questions about Ivy League schools and she was telling me 'cause me ears perked up last year, 'cause these kids. I love them and there's no guidance counselor. And I don't know much about it. But let me start to listen.

Ms. Harris was different from other Allegiance teachers in that her comments suggest that she saw elite colleges as inherently desirable. However, Ms. Harris' comments reveal that she knew very little about applying to Princeton, including the timeline of the process. She seemed excited to learn about the financial aid benefits of elite colleges. Ms. Harris' eager attempts to gather information from a Princeton admissions officer show how little information about elite college admissions was circulating among Allegiance staff. Moreover, Ms. Harris described her experience contacting Princeton as her attempt to fill the absence left by the counselor. She felt less compelled to be involved once a counselor was hired.

### ***Perceptions of Status***

Students had some sense that the status hierarchy existed among colleges, and that some colleges, such as the Ivy League, were widely viewed as "better" than others. However, for most students, elite status was not a major consideration in the evaluation of college options. Moreover, some students misunderstood the meaning of different terms used to categorize colleges. A number of students thought that liberal arts colleges were for students interested in visual arts, such drawing and painting.

What does liberal arts college mean to you?

Eddie: I think of—just the arts, dancing, writing, music, everything like that.

Shani :Do you know any liberal arts colleges?

Eddie: We have one nearby – the Art Institute.

Dalia, the Romano valedictorian that liked math, but dropped out of AP Calculus, had a

similar view of liberal arts colleges.

Shani: Did you think about applying to any liberal arts colleges?

Dalia: No. I don't really want to go to liberal arts.

Shani: So you're making a face, kind of scrunching your face up, tell me more.

Dalia: Because like, liberal arts is like arts and humanities and like it's definitely not enough math and computer stuff. I don't think so.

Shani: There's not math and computer stuff?

Dalia: No. I don't think so. I'm not sure, but like liberal arts. Yeah, I don't know. I just I feel like that too artsy stuff. Like I really don't like art stuff, or like you know I just don't know.

In another example of confusing categories of institutions, Eddie, an aspiring writer, conflated the idea that some school are more academically challenging than others with the NCAA Divisions of college sports.

Shani: So, you mentioned Temple and Syracuse as “the type” of school you’re looking at. What do you mean by that?

Eddie: Yeah, the type of school—a school that’ll challenge me. I got accepted to other colleges, but some people advised me to aim kinda higher. So, a school that’ll challenge me, that has my major and will help me see—add other things and help me work on my craft of writing.

Shani: What are some of the places that are less challenging?

Interviewee: Oh, I’m just saying division-wise. You know how some schools are division two and some schools are division one? That’s just based on population. There’s good professors everywhere, it doesn’t matter where you go. But, just the size of colleges and how they’re known nationwide.

College sports are divided into NCAA divisions based number of teams at the institution, size of teams, frequency of games, and level of financial support for the sports program. These NCAA divisions are not academic categories. However, Eddie evaluated colleges as if NCAA divisions were academic distinctions: Eddie wanted to go to a “better” school where he would feel challenged. However, he lacked some important information that could have helped him distinguish between colleges. In addition, he repeated a phrase that I frequently overheard between students that “it doesn’t matter where you go.” Eddie did not know what to look for to determine if a college had a strong writing program.

In an effort to understand how students understood the status hierarchy among colleges, I asked 12<sup>th</sup> grade students to rank colleges that were located within 200 miles. The college names were written on forty small cards. The cards were ½ x 2 inch pieces of paper that were laminated. I asked them to identify the colleges that were widely understood to be the best college and to create a ranking of the best to the worst colleges. It was an involved and time-consuming activity. Because of time constraints, I did the activity with only a sub-sample of students. Seven students participated in this activity at Romano, and nine participated at Allegiance. They arranged college name cards on a table. Students first began by removing colleges that they had never heard of from their ranking. The colleges on the bottom of the ranking tended to be ones that they had heard of but knew little about. In Table, I show which colleges students thought were the best. I also show that many students knew nothing about elite liberal arts colleges..

Analyzing the data produced from this activity is difficult. There was great variation in what students knew and how students perceived the colleges on the cards. Table 13 shows the colleges that were most frequently placed at the top of the ranking by student who participated in the activity. These “top” colleges include three private institutions and two public institutions. At Romano, all of the students identified the University of Pennsylvania as a top college. However, at Allegiance, only 4 out of 9 identified this Ivy League university as a top ranked institution. On the other hand, the students at Allegiance were more impressed by Drexel and Penn state than the students at Romano. Compared to Allegiance students, more students at Romano thought that Villanova was a top college. This difference may reflect the fact that Villanova visited Romano, but not Allegiance.



**Table 13: Student Rankings of Colleges**

	U.S. News Ranking	“One of the best”		“I don’t know it”	
		Romano	Allegiance	Romano	Allegiance
<b>Universities</b>					
University of Penn	9	7/7	4/9	0	0
Temple	115	4/7	8/9	0	0
Drexel	99	3/7	8/9	0	0
Penn State	47	5/7	9/9	0	0
<b>Liberal Arts Colleges</b>					
Haverford	12	1/7	1/9	3/7	7/9
Swarthmore	3	1/7	0/9	2/7	5/9

Students at both schools knew very little about elite liberal arts colleges that are located nearby. Only one student at Romano and 0 students at Allegiance identified Swarthmore, an elite liberal college, as a top school. Some students did not know that Swarthmore existed (2 at Romano, 5 at Allegiance); others placed them low on their ranking of colleges. Interviews also revealed that most students did not know that some liberal arts colleges were widely view to be “top schools,” or that elite liberal arts colleges were a category of sought after colleges. For example, Lara hoped to go to Swarthmore, which is the same elite liberal arts college where her teacher attended. However, she only applied to the one small liberal arts college. She did not look for other schools with a comparable reputation; neither did anyone recommend other liberal arts colleges to her.

Shani: Do you know any small colleges that have “good names” (using her language) besides Swarthmore?

Lara: No, not really.

Shani: How about Haverford?

Interviewee: I did hear about Haverford.

Shani: What did you hear about Haverford?

Interviewee: I don’t know. Like I just heard the name Haverford, 'cause I used to live on Haverford Avenue [Laughter], so I was like oh that’s the name of my street.

Although Lara’s first choice college was an elite liberal arts institution, her knowledge of

liberal arts colleges was vague. Lara at Allegiance and Olivia at Romano were the only students who expressed a preference to attend a liberal arts colleges. Olivia learned about liberal arts colleges from her college prep program:

Shani: Do you know of any liberal arts colleges in the area? (nodding) Tell me about what you know of.

Olivia: I know of -- I know like the top tier. I know the top tier liberal arts colleges. I know Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, and the other one.

Shani: Haverford.

Olivia: Yeah. Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, Haverford. And those are the ones that I only know. Because like in my College Prep program-- like I know all about the colleges because we learn about them. It was focused more on the top tier ones, so those are the only ones I know.

Olivia participated in a college preparatory program out of school that she learned about from a friend. This program, like Prep for Prep and other similar programs, had a focus on helping students prepare for enrollment in elite colleges (Jack 2014). Olivia was unique in her focus on “top tier” schools. Jasir, another status-oriented Romano student, was highly motivated to get into an elite college. However, he did not believe an elite liberal arts colleges would be academically rigorous enough for him.

Interviewer: Did you think about Swarthmore College?

Jasir shakes his head no

Shani: It's a college nearby. How about Haverford College?

Jasir: I've looked into Haverford. I didn't apply to them, but I did look into it. Decent school, but I the atmosphere wasn't for me.

Interviewer: What do you mean the atmosphere?

Jasir: I always think that I just needed somewhere a little bit more rigorous. Academically I needed somewhere with just a little bit more campus life.

Interviewer: where did you do research on Haverford?

Interviewee: They actually sent me a few emails.

Students' perspectives on the status hierarchy suggest that some institutions were more effective than others in their appeals to Allegiance and Romano students. Elite liberal arts colleges did not conduct presentations at Romano<sup>15</sup> or Allegiance. Jasir and Lara

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<sup>15</sup> Amherst College did visit for the first time during the study. I did not observe the session.

both said that they received emails from Haverford College, but neither of them was intrigued by the emails.

It is not clear why Romano students were more likely to view University of Pennsylvania as a top college than Allegiance students. One possibility is that Romano students knew that the “smart kids” from previous classes had matriculated at Penn and therefore thought it was a good school. This seems plausible, considering that Romano seniors said that there was an expectation that the best students would apply to Penn. Another possibility is that parents of Romano students had more ties to social networks that identified Penn as a top college.

An important part of the college choice process is learning about what colleges exist and what they have to offer. Students’ access to information about college options can have a significant impact on their postsecondary. However, information about colleges does not only come in the form of objective facts. Rather, the information is often laden by the experiences and perspectives of the person listening to, or the sharing, information. Thus, it is also important to consider how students acquire information and from whom.

In this chapter, I show that students learned the most about colleges from the colleges themselves at recruitment presentations and college fairs. School staff played a small role and students largely took cues from admissions officers. Students at Allegiance and Romano had most frequent exposure to less selective institutions. I observed that some less selective institutions were quite attuned to students’ concerns about cost, admission, and life on campus. Elite college representatives rarely visited Allegiance and Romano. However, the one presentation by an elite college that I observed was far less effective than other presentations. These presentations likely

contributed to students' decisions about where to apply to college. The process by which students at Allegiance and Romano learned about colleges shows that high achieving students at Allegiance and Romano had few opportunities to prepare for elite colleges and universities. The fact that elite college recruiters rarely visited the two schools was a mechanism of social reproduction that prevented students from low SES families from accessing elite institutions of higher education.

Most students were not focused on elite colleges as their preferred college destination. However, those students who did think that elite colleges were desirable developed that preference through their relationships with parents and other family members rather than high school staff or college representatives. They did not cite the US News Report or ranking. Students came to view elite schools as desirable through interactions with people they trusted. Thus, impersonal facts about which colleges are the "best" may not be sufficient impetus for choosing to apply to an elite college.

Generally, teachers said they were not highly involved in educating students about college choices. However, evidence suggests that the top students at Romano were encouraged to apply to the University of Pennsylvania. Conversely, at Allegiance high school, some teachers had a personal mission to discourage students from pursuing private colleges with high tuition rates. Allegiance teachers encouraged students to consider community colleges rather than four-year institutions to save money. These differences between the two schools may explain why several students from Romano, but not Allegiance, went to Penn each year. The disparity in elite college enrollment between the same schools may also be attributed to differences in course offerings at Allegiance and Romano. Allegiance also lacked high-level courses, which facilitate elite college admissions.

Allegiance teachers advocated community college for their students because they wanted to protect them from crippling debt. From teachers' perspective, there was no difference between community college and the first two years of a degree at a 4-year institution. In fact, higher education research shows that students who begin at a community college are less likely to graduate with a four-year degree than students who begin at a four-year college (Long and Kurlaender 2009). Students with a four-year degree, or higher, are most successful in the labor market; however there are earnings benefits associated with two-year programs and degrees (Hout 2012).

I found that students' perspectives on the "best" schools did not match dominant rankings such as US News and World Report and Barron's. For example, students saw University of Pennsylvania and Drexel as comparably good schools, while national rankings would place these schools at very disparate status locations. Student developed their own status hierarchy, which placed larger nearby universities – and the state flagship school – at the top. However, there was also noteworthy variation between the students at Allegiance and the students at Romano. All of the Romano students said that Ivy League Penn was an elite school, compared to less than half at Allegiance. Students' college application choices will reflect these varying perceptions on the quality of an Ivy League institution.

With few exceptions, students at Allegiance and Romano High Schools were united in their disinterest in elite liberal arts colleges. This finding suggests that communication from liberal arts colleges to Allegiance and Romano students was especially limited and ineffective. It may also indicate that teachers, students and parents were not embedded in social networks where elite liberal arts colleges were known or esteemed.

Overall, college recruitment efforts had the greatest influence on students' developing choice sets, but few elite colleges recruited at their schools. Students had limited opportunities to learn about elite colleges. In addition to the colleges themselves, teachers also provided occasional information to students. Teachers' advice was based on their own experiences as college students and on their observations of previous graduates from each high school.

Some parents also shared information about college with students. The advice that parents provided to students depended on their social networks, on their own experience with school and work, and on lessons learned from older children. In some cases, parents advised students to apply to one or two elite colleges. However, it was not enough to have a parent who encouraged a student to apply to an elite college. Students needed to also be supported by teachers in the process of preparing for elite college admission. Thus, even when parents promoted elite colleges among students, an elite college-going culture was needed to ensure that students were able to take the right preparatory steps in high school. This did not happen for many students at Romano or any students at Allegiance.

## CHAPTER 7: Making Choices

At both Romano and Allegiance high schools, nearly 100% of graduates participated in the college application process. More than 90% of seniors at each high school graduated in 2014. The percentage of graduates who enrolled in college in the fall after graduation was 69% at Allegiance and 75% at Romano in 2014 (Northeastern School District report). These college enrollment rates are significantly higher than those at neighborhood schools, which were in the 20% to 40% range. However, when comparing the college enrollment outcomes at Allegiance and Romano to those at a nearby wealthy suburb, it is clear in Table 14 that students in the suburb were more likely to enroll in college in general, as well as more likely to enroll in elite institutions.

**Table 14: College Enrollment Comparison to Adjacent Wealthy Suburb**<sup>16</sup>

	<b>Wealthy Suburb</b>	<b>Romano</b>	<b>Allegiance</b>
Total graduates:	520	200	100
Directly to college:	500 (96%)	75%	69%
Popular In-State Schools:	Penn State 36, Temple 23, Pittsburgh 17, Drexel 16, Penn 15, Franklin and Marshall 7, Muhlenberg 7	<sup>17</sup> Temple, Drexel, Kutztown, University of Pittsburgh	Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, Temple, Bloomsburg, Community College of Philadelphia, Mansfield, Penn State
Popular Out-of-State Schools:	George Washington 10, Maryland 9, NYU 7, Tulane 7, Boston University 6, Syracuse 6, Ithaca 5, Northwestern 5, Harvard 4, Tufts 4, Michigan 4, Vanderbilt 4, St. Andrews (Scotland) 4	None	None
Ivy League:	29 (Penn 15, Columbia 4, Harvard 4)	4 Penn	

In this chapter, I analyze the college choices of nine students: five at Romano and four at Allegiance. I chose students that provided representative examples of the themes in the data. In this analysis, I highlight the ways that the absence of an elite college-going

<sup>16</sup> Data collected from school district website.

culture influenced students' choices. This aspect of the school environment reduced student's opportunity to prepare for and apply to elite colleges and universities. Students' decisions about where to apply and enroll were shaped by an interrelated set of mechanisms. The school culture was not the only factor of importance. Student preferences, parental advocacy, and college recruitment strategies also influenced the choice process. However, in students' description of their college choice process, the importance of the school context is clear. I have chosen to organize this chapter around students' stories. An analysis of students choosing colleges is more effective if it focuses on the entire process as the story unfolds.

I show that Romano High School provided academic opportunities that made elite college enrollment a possible outcome for high achieving students. Some Romano students had access to the high level classes, including calculus, which facilitated elite college admissions. However, as I show in Chapter 5, some students did not have access to these classes. Moreover, I show that students made college choices without substantial input from teachers and counselors. Some students made choices that a counselor at a middle class school would view as odd (Hoxby and Avery 2012). Unlike elite high schools, the school staff was not focused on helping high achieving students apply to elite institutions (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). While there was an expectation that top students would apply to the University of Pennsylvania, the counselor and teachers did not provide students with a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the higher education status hierarchy. As a result, many students were unprepared to seek elite college admission. The college application and choice decisions of Romano students are described in Table 15.



Compared to Romano, students from Allegiance had fewer opportunities to prepare for elite college admissions. They did not have access to calculus and they had fewer AP course options. There were no AP science courses offered at Allegiance High School. Moreover, students at Allegiance were not encouraged to apply to the University of Pennsylvania or any other elite university. Nonetheless, several Allegiance students decided to apply to Ivy League colleges. However, they did so with minimal guidance from the counselor who was not experienced with elite college admissions. This likely put them at great disadvantage in the process, compared to high achieving students at elite high schools serving high SES students (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). While the college application and choice decisions of Allegiance students are described in Table 16.

**Table 15: College Choices of Romano Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Colleges/Universities Applied</b>	<b>Decision</b>
Adriano	Villanova, St. Joes, UPenn	CCP
Britney	Temple, Drexel, U of Toronto, UCLA, UPenn, SUNY Buffalo	Temple
Dalia	MIT, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Drexel, Cal Tech	Drexel
Dana	Temple, Drexel, Fordham, Pitt, UPenn	UPenn
David	Cornell, Pitt, Drexel, Worcester Polytechnic Institute	Pitt
Eddie	Kutztown University, California University of Pennsylvania, Shippensburg.	Kutztown
Jasir	Drexel, St. Joes (2 safety schools, could not remember names), UPenn	UPenn
Karen	University of Sciences, Philadelphia University, West Chester, Widener, Drexel	Drexel
Linda	Arcadia, UPenn, Temple, UCLA, Drexel	Drexel
MaryAnne	Temple, UPenn (early), Drexel (early), Penn State Berks, Arcadia, Washington Adventist, Princeton	Drexel
Nicole	Widener, University of San Francisco, Temple,, Drexel, NYU, Penn State	Penn State Main Campus
Olivia	UPenn, Smith, Pitzer, Trinity, Amherst, Drexel, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Temple, Mansfield, Spellman, Northeastern, Villanova	Smith
Patrick	Shippensburg, Widener, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Millersville Hampton, Lewisburg, Virginia State, Susquehanna, Kutztown	Virginia State
Vicky	Drexel, Villanova, Kutztown, Wagner, Susquehanna, Robert Morris, St. Joes	St. Joes

***Romano High School: The Application Process***

**Jasir**

Penn had been Jasir’s dream since the beginning of high school. More than any other student in the school, Jasir described his academic and extracurricular choices in high school as an intentional process of preparing for elite college admissions. He had a 4.05 GPA and scored 1770 on his SATs. His mother encouraged him to pursue Penn. Also, his father worked in maintenance on the Penn campus. Jasir explained what going to Penn meant to him, “In my life my dad is my hero. He had an idealistic feeling about going to the elite college where his father cleaned offices.

In addition to Penn, Jasir applied to colleges that sent recruiters to Romano. When Jasir listed the four colleges where he applied, it was clear that he was not interested in going to any of them.

Drexel. Saint Joe's. This place in York in upper PA. Well, five. Because there were four that I saw who came here so I ended up applying for them. And I think it was in the South the last one. None of those schools compared to Penn on an academic caliber, but they were just a bunch of safety schools just in case.

Thus he applied to one highly selective college and four safety schools. Jasir felt committed to Penn as the best-fit college for him. He felt that if he did not get into Penn, he would not get into any Ivy League college.

*Shani:* Did you ever consider applying to Princeton?  
*Jasir:* Definitely did. And maybe now thinking back on it I might have if I'd known that I could have gotten accepted ...but I knew that even if I did that's not where I would have went.  
*Interviewer:* Well let's say you did not get into Penn, and you had gotten into Princeton.  
*Interviewee:* Then I would definitely have gone to Princeton, but I figured that if I didn't get into Penn I wouldn't get into Princeton. I just had so much going for me for Penn, like I had the back-story. I had my father. I had the fact that I've been on campus so many times.  
*Interviewer:* So you felt that if you didn't get into Penn then you could not get into any schools of Penn's caliber?  
*Interviewee:* Maybe that's just me not giving myself enough credit. It's done, and I ended up getting into where I wanted to go.

In addition to thinking he would not be admitted to any other Ivy League college, Jasir thought it would be dishonest to write an essay proclaiming his commitment to another comparable college. For him, it seemed wrong to apply to more than one "high caliber" school. He considered applying to Princeton University, but decided that it would not be right to do so. He explained,

[Penn] has always been the school that I wanted to go to. And I think that with my essay that I wrote for them, and through all the writing process I did, I think the message really came across. And it would be, I think, hypocritical of me if I

did that for other schools. This is the school I want to go to, and I'm going off and applying to a bunch of other schools that are the same caliber?

This example suggests that some students at Allegiance and Romano did not know how to strategize to increase the chances of getting into a "good" school. Hoxby and Avery (2012) found that this strategy of applying to a single elite college was a common strategy among low-income students who undermatched. The authors call this strategy "odd" because applying to multiple elite colleges significantly increases a high achieving student's chance of being admitted to one of these colleges. The most selective colleges receive applications from many more qualified applicants than they can accept. Therefore, no applicant, regardless of qualifications, can be certain that he will be admitted to an institution like Penn, which has an admissions rate of 14%. Jasir made his college choices without guidance from his teachers or the counselor. More than any other student at Allegiance and Romano, Jasir was guided by U.S. News and World report rankings and motivated by the pursuit of prestige. He attributed this focus to his identity as a first generation American:

When you are the son of immigrants, and you push through the ranks and you actually become something that prestigious, it looks good on your parents and it looks good on you...I just think that if the son of two immigrants who started from the very bottom and ended up going to an Ivy League school, and ended up continuing his education. If I can become an ambassador to a country, and just help force peaceful relationships between the United States and other countries, I would feel like -- it would just give me this giant sense of accomplishment

Jasir's goal to become an American diplomat would likely be more attainable at an elite institution such as Penn, Princeton, Harvard, or Yale that has historically educated political elites. Yet, no one at Romano advised him that applying to only one elite institution might put his prestigious dreams at risk. Moreover, he was not advised by teachers or counselors to look at colleges other than those that visited the school or

emailed him.

Jasir was fortunate to be admitted to Penn, “Next year I’m going pretty much full ride to Penn - the place where my dad works environmental services. It’s the American dream in action.” The college application process was successful for him, but he was lucky to achieve his goal of attending a prestigious college when he only applied to one such institution. Jasir would likely have been advised to several reach schools if he had the attention of the counselor. Moreover, if he had attended a middle class school, he would have learned about the strategies students use to be admitted to an elite college, including applying to more than one.

### **Olivia**

Olivia was senior at Romano high school. In the sixth grade, she moved with her mother, father, and younger sister to Northeastern city from a suburb in the Midwest. Her mother was from Northeastern city and they returned to be close to maternal family. A couple of years after the move, her parents divorced and her father moved back to the Midwestern community where he was from. Her father earned a bachelor’s degree from Norfolk University in Virginia. Her mother attended Norfolk College but left one semester before graduation when she became pregnant. At the time of the interview, Olivia’s mother worked as an insurance auditor at a hospital and her father worked as a counselor at a jail.

Olivia had a simultaneously cheerful and serious demeanor and was an active member of the Romano community. After her first visit to Romano, she “fell in love” with the high school. Over the years that she was there, she felt that the school had changed dramatically as the school district experienced financial strains. Nonetheless, she said, “I

had a good experience throughout all throw my four years.” Olivia had a 4.0 GPA and scored 1610 on her SATs.

In the summer before her junior year Olivia became involved in a college preparation and youth leadership program located at a university. Her mother drove the 30-minute drive each weekend to attend the program. She learned about the program from a classmate. Olivia attended the program from 10am to 4:30 pm every Saturday during the school year. The goals of the program were to “strengthen their personal academic success skills, develop a deep understanding of the college admissions and application process, and take steps to bridge disparities in college awareness and enrollment in their communities.” The program directors promoted elite liberal arts colleges among participants. Olivia explained, “they really push liberal arts colleges -- it’s smaller, more personal, and especially if you want to go to graduate school and get your doctoral degree it’s really helps you with critical thinking and writing.” With the college preparatory program, Olivia visited a number of colleges including Boston College, Harvard University, Tufts University, and Northeastern University.

As part of her involvement in the program, she organized a college awareness week at Romano. During the week, she showed a film designed to help students understand their financial aid eligibility and she invited a recruiter from Villanova to come to the school and offer general college admissions advice. She scheduled these events with the principal, but did not ask Ms. Emerson, the counselor. When I asked the counselor about it, she rolled her eyes and said Olivia is someone that she never saw. She expressed mild irritation at learning about Olivia’s college awareness week from fliers that were plastered in the hallway.

Olivia said that she was an introverted person and always knew she wanted to go someplace small where she would not feel lost. When she thought about it independently, she imagined she would go to a historically black college. But, the college prep program convinced her that liberal arts colleges were the best fit. With the help of the college prep program director, Olivia chose to apply to fifteen colleges. Out of the fifteen, she said, "I wouldn't mind going to Franklin and Marshall College, Lafayette College, Amherst, Smith, Penn, Pitzer, and Trinity, I was really looking at like the liberal arts colleges and then that one Ivy League school." Olivia visited most of these colleges, including Pitzer (the college paid for her cross country flight). The other places where she applied, but did not want to go, were Temple, Drexel, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Mansfield University, Spelman College, Villanova University, and Northeastern University. Her first choice was Amherst College

Olivia was not admitted to Amherst College, but she was admitted to many other colleges and narrowed her choices to University of Pennsylvania and Smith College. Her classmates and teachers encouraged her to go to Penn because that was, in their view, where smart people went to college. Penn had a track record of enrolling Romano students and graduating them in four years. University of Pennsylvania required a \$1000 per year financial contribution (\$4000 over 4 years). Smith expected that she would contribute \$3,000 per year and acquire a \$3,000 loan (in total, \$24,000 over 4 years). Despite the substantial difference in final cost, Olivia knew that she wanted to go to Smith College. Still, she debated between the two colleges until she had to make a choice:

Now when I think about it I don't even know what I was -- I was just -- because I really knew I wanted to go to a liberal arts college, but I think I was holding it off for so long because so many people in my family, at my school, even my friends

were saying that you should just consider Penn. Just consider it. Take a tour. So for a whole like -- for weeks I was deciding between Smith and Penn. But I don't even know. I honestly don't even know what I was comparing because I knew I wanted to go to a liberal arts college.

Ultimately, she accepted the spot at Smith. At Romano, the top students were encouraged to apply to University of Pennsylvania, but not other selective colleges. Olivia said her friends and teachers could not understand why she would not go to Penn if it was an option. Part of the college-going culture at Romano was the idea that smartest students went to Penn. Her friends and teachers drew that conclusion without being privy to the financial aid details that, if they had known, might have further strengthened their conviction. For them, Penn was more desirable than any liberal arts college.

Olivia's participation in an out-of-school program likely changed the trajectory of her postsecondary education. From the program, she learned about elite liberal arts colleges. She learned that financial aid could make elite colleges affordable. She learned that she might be able to get into colleges like Penn and Smith even though her tests scores were significantly lower than the average at both schools. She learned that applying to more than one elite college increased her chances of admission to one elite college. Olivia's mother had a college degree, but Olivia relied primarily on the college preparatory program for guidance with the process.

She also had school experiences that facilitated her admission to elite colleges. She was able to take AP calculus in her senior year. In her interview, she noted that one of the reasons that she left the charter school that she attended in middle school, which continued to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, was that the school did not let students choose their own AP courses. Olivia's experience at Romano, combined with her college preparation



program, provided the experiences and lessons that contributed to her enrollment in an elite college.

### **Patrick**

Patrick Jones was a tall Romano senior who typically wore a hoodie and sweatpants to school. Patrick's parents were separated but lived close enough to each other that he lived in both homes simultaneously, moving back and forth from one to the other during the week. Both of Patrick's parents were disabled – his dad had a stroke and his mother had multiple illnesses including diabetes. Neither of his parents attended college. Before becoming disabled, his mother had been a medical assistant and his dad was a mechanic. Patrick spent the most time with his mom, he said, because she needed more help around the house. He was the younger of his parents' two sons. His older brother, Tyree, was incarcerated. Tyree had graduated from high school graduate and taken classes at a technical college. Patrick's family lived on a limited income and he would likely be eligible for significant financial aid.

Patrick's SAT score was 1660 (69<sup>th</sup> percentile) and his GPA was 3.79. When I interviewed him in late fall of his senior year, Patrick said that he planned to study regional planning in college. He explained his understanding of this career, "Say they want to build a new arena, and there's plenty of places to choose from. I don't know exactly what job title it would be, but to get to influence where they put it." Initially, when looking at colleges, Patrick looked for places that had a city or regional planning program. He did not see many colleges with this major, so he started looking for architecture as a secondary option and then settled on civil engineering.

When Patrick was ready to investigate colleges, he looked no further than his email. He reviewed the websites of colleges that contacted him. He considered the

majors available and the college's distance from home. He wanted to stay within eight hours drive from his parents because he worried that his parents might need him. However, for Patrick, the most important factor was the cost. Patrick said that his parents were willing to take out loans for him, but he was determined to not burden them with debt. Also, he feared going into debt himself. Therefore, Patrick did not plan to attend an "expensive" college. Patrick said that some people told him he should apply to colleges regardless of expense, but he explained that that approach was not for him:

You might be willing to pay or take out these loans and pay them back later. I don't want to – I'm a person that doesn't like being too much in debt after college especially if I don't get a job immediately or like within the six months that they give you in order to pay the stuff back, then I don't wanna be stuck without a job and have these loans, too.

Patrick imagines what his life would be like after college if he had to take out large loans and he does not like what he sees.

Nonetheless, Patrick planned to apply to two "expensive" colleges. He was interested in Villanova because an intern in the counselor's office was a student there and liked it. He was also interested in Syracuse University because he thought the campus looked nice on the website, and it had architecture and engineering majors. He selected colleges based on information provided by the college and its representatives. He did not look at independent sources of information. He never had a one-on-one meeting with a counselor. He evaluated the options largely by himself.

Villanova and Syracuse were the only institutions where he wanted to apply that required essays and he put off writing the essays until his other applications were submitted. Ultimately, he did not apply to Villanova or Syracuse. He missed the deadline for the presidential scholarship that would have made Villanova affordable. With schoolwork, he had trouble finding time to write the essay that was required for the

scholarship application. Then he gave up on the idea of applying to either college because he was discouraged by the prospect of paying for them.

Patrick knew that his parents' low income would qualify for financial aid. Still, he was skeptical that financial aid would be sufficient for his needs.

Shani: Do you think you'll be eligible for financial aid?

Patrick: I should be.

Shani: Do you think that could make a big difference for these "expensive" places?

Patrick: Well, it depends on how expensive because they'll only give you – there's the difference between getting 50% of all expenses covered or financial aid at a \$17,000.00 school and a \$60,000.00 school. At the \$17,000.00 school, if I get \$9,000.00 covered, all I have to do is pay \$8,000.00. Whereas, at a \$60,000.00 only get \$30,000.00 covered and that's another \$30,000.00, per year, that I'll have to pay back.

For Patrick, going to a college with high tuition seemed like a bad financial decision. He believed that expensive colleges cost too much and that adequate aid would not be available. However, his comments suggest that he did not understand that colleges provide varying amounts of financial aid and some expensive colleges might become affordable with aid. Instead, he only knew about presidential scholarship, which was promoted at Romano by the Villanova recruiter.

Ultimately, Patrick applied to Susquehanna University, Robert Morris, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Millersville, Shippensburg, Lewisburg, Hampton, Virginia State, and Widener. The admissions rates for these colleges range between 58% and 80%, with the exception of Hampton (36%). At the time of his application, he said that his final decisions would depend on multiple factors, "it's all gonna come down to who accepts me, how much scholarship money I have raised, and how much financial aid I get for that school. At no point in the process could Patrick identify his "first choice." Unlike Jasir and Olivia, he did not have a dream college. Instead, he was most

concerned about going to the college that would help him go to college without accruing debt.

All of the colleges where Patrick applied offered their own fee waivers, making it easier for him to apply at no cost. Different colleges had different fee waiver systems. Patrick applied to four colleges on-site at a college fair where college representatives simply told him the fee was waived. These colleges also offered students instant admission. They would tell students immediately, but tentatively, if they had been accepted.

Patrick: I applied to four schools at the college fair. So that was automatically fee waived.

Shani: What were those four?

Patrick: Lewisburg, Shippensburg Kutztown and IUP.

Interviewer: Did they have instant acceptance?

Interviewee: They can tell you if you're accepted or not.

Interviewer: Did they?

Interviewee: Yeah. All four said I was admitted, but I still have to wait for my email. They say it's not guaranteed until they send a letter, but the admissions – the person there said, "We looked at your transcript. We looked at your SATs. Yeah, you're admitted, and just wait for the email in the mail."

Patrick had not planned to apply to four colleges at a college fair, but decided to do so because they were there, they had his major, and it was easy to apply.

Patrick was admitted to every college where he applied. Given his grades and test scores, all of the colleges where he applied, except for Hampton, were safety schools. When I asked him if he wished he had applied to more selective colleges he said:

I wanted to apply to schools I knew that I fit the criteria. I can get in. If it's like, 300 above SAT scores and there's .3 above my GPA, I'm not going to reach for it. I don't want to waste my time on it. It wasn't like I had a dream school. I just started applying to schools.

Patrick also reminded me of his concerns about cost

And it was also money too because I know Villanova is \$60,000 a year, and I missed a deadline for the Presidential Scholarship, how am I going to pay for that?"

Patrick approach, which was to not apply to reach schools limited his college choice set. Unlike Olivia, who learned from her college preparatory program that she had a good chance of being admitted to reach colleges, and to expect substantial aid, Patrick took the reasonable stance of avoiding what seemed to be unnecessary risk.

At the end of senior year, Patrick was planning to enroll at Virginia State. He chose the college because it offered a scholarship that covered all of his tuition and room and board. Virginia State was one of the last colleges where Patrick applied. He learned about it when a representative came to Romano and offered him immediate admission. I asked Patrick if he knew that he would get a good financial aid package when he applied. He said,

Well, when I applied, she told me [I was admitted]. And I felt like they had low standards for getting in that I was way above. So I figured I would get something. And then when I got my package, I was excited.

Patrick's statement highlights a common view among students: that they would get money for college if they were higher achieving than the average student at the school. Students were much more conscious of this type of aid, such as Villanova's presidential scholarship, than they were of need-based aid. Patrick had a lot to be excited about. He was going to college where, at least for the first year, he did not have to worry about paying tuition or room and board. He had achieved his primary goal of not putting a financial burden on himself or his parents. Nonetheless, he was going to a college with a 6-year graduation rate of only 43%. Moreover, after registering at Virginia State, he found out that his major had been discontinued and he would have to travel to a partner college to take the courses in his major. He was also traveling further from home than he

had hoped to attend Virginia State. Thus, although he would avoid debt in his first year, there were multiple factors about his college choice that could jeopardize his degree completion.

For Patrick, attending a selective college was not a priority. In fact, he believed that it was a waste of time for him to apply someplace where he might not be admitted. However, given his strong academic record, a counselor who had time to meet with him might suggest applying to colleges with higher graduation rates. Moreover, with a counselor's attention, he may have found more programs in city planning so that he could pursue this specific interest, rather than civil engineering, in college.

Patrick did not have adequate opportunities in high school to prepare for selective college admission. His high school course load was lighter than some of the other high achieving students at Romano. He took fewer AP courses than and he did not take pre-calculus or AP calculus (see Chapter 5). He wanted to take more advanced classes than he was permitted to take. Although racialized tracking was not pervasive at the school, it is possible that Patrick was disadvantaged in course taking because he was a black male student.

Because Patrick did not apply to selective colleges, it is impossible to if he would have been admitted to an elite college or a more selective college with a higher graduation rate. However, it seems possible that he would have been attractive to more selective colleges as a low-income, first generation college applicant with especially strong math skills. He was admitted to every college where he applied, most of which had admissions requirements that were lower than his own academic achievement. Thus, he was ultimately undermatched at Virginia State (Hoxby and Avery 2012).

**Vicky**

Vicky praised Romano and fondly reminisced about her time in high school:

I love it here. It was everything that I expected from it from the beginning I still have those high expectations of this school and I think everything has worked out perfectly. I wouldn't choose any other high school. And there are ups and downs with every high school but I wouldn't choose any other high school.

Vicky liked math and science, but said that the English and history teachers at Romano helped her enjoy humanities as well. She was on the honor roll throughout high school and was a member of National Honor Society. Her GPA was 3.97 and her SAT scores were 1790 (82<sup>nd</sup> percentile).

When it was time to choose a college, Vicky said her mother told her “don't go to a place where you'll be in debt with a whole bunch of loans. Don't go to school for a degree where you can't find a job.” Her mom wanted her to apply to the University of Pennsylvania, because that's where Vicky had wanted to go when she was young. Some of her teachers and peers also encouraged her to apply to the University of Pennsylvania, but she was not interested because she thought that there was “a lot going on” at Penn and she might become distracted. She said that people who dropped out of college did so because they picked colleges for the wrong reason and she thought she might become one of those people if she went to Penn.

Vicky: When I look at people's stories and think why didn't they finish? It's because either they'd gone to a place that they're not familiar with or they've gone to a place where there's distractions. They go there for the wrong reasons.

Shani: What are the wrong reasons?

Vicky: To go someplace just so they can say, 'I went to a Ivy League school' or say 'I went to a school downtown' or something like that. I wasn't really fascinated with or obsessed with applying to all Ivy Leagues. Some people said, “Okay, I have to apply to Princeton.” I have to apply to Penn, I have to apply Columbia and things like that but I'm just, I wasn't that type of person.

Vicky did not apply to Penn. She said that the right reason to choose a college is that people are happy there. She also wanted to make sure that the institution valued her

major. For example, she did not like that Drexel's physics lab appeared to be out of date when she visited, which indicated to her that there were disparities between academic departments at Drexel.

Vicky wanted to stay close to home. In part, she wanted to be close to family. She wanted to "keep an eye" on her mother who at fifty-three, she said, "Was getting older." She also worried that moving to a new place would cause distractions in her life, "I was on a mailing list for Berkeley, UCLA. I was gonna go all the way out but I don't know, I just – I didn't wanna experience culture shock and then get distracted and stuff."

In deciding where to apply, Vicky considered colleges that contacted her as well as those that she saw near the city and heard about in school. Ultimately, she applied to eight universities, the most selective of which was Villanova.

I already knew that I wanted to apply to Villanova because I'm familiar with the area. I applied to Drexel because of engineering, why not apply to Drexel? I applied to Kutztown because everybody here applies to Kutztown. I applied to Saint Joe's only because I've seen it and I actually used to play tennis on their courts and run on their track. So, why not apply there? I had no interest of going there but I just decided to apply.

Like Patrick, Vicky did not have a first choice. Also like Patrick, Vicky was accepted by all of the colleges where she applied, including Drexel, Villanova, Kutztown, Widener, Susquehanna, Robert Morris and St. Joes. At first, she said she was surprised that every college admitted her. It was a relief and confirmation to know that colleges had both accepted her and offered some grant money:

Because it's college, it's a big deal and when I got my first acceptance, it was Widener and I opened up the envelope and it says congratulations on it. I thought 'this is good news.' So then I open it and then I see 'you got accepted.' And then I see scholarship money. I'm like 'not only did I get accepted, I got money.' My mom, she's just sitting there and she says, 'Why are you surprised that you got money and that you got accepted? You have the grades. You have the scores. You're a great person.' I'm just like, "But it's still nerve racking 'cause I've never been there before." So I was really excited about that.



Vicky's mother was impressed, but not surprised by her daughter's college admission because she knew her daughter had done well in high school. In fact, her admissions success is not surprising because she applied to undermatched colleges. Vicky said she got "a full ride" to Susquehanna, Eastern, and Robert Morris, but she decided to attend St. Joseph's University. For her, the deciding factor was her visit to the St. Joe's campus for accepted students day. St. Joe's was the only accepted student day that she attended. Once she visited St. Joe's, Vicky was certain that it was the place for her. She learned about the accepted students day when a current St. Joseph's student called her to tell her about it:

I'm bad at answering my phone, but I answered my phone on this random day and the lady, she's like "Oh, I'm at Saint Joe's, I'm a student at Saint Joe's," [sounding] really happy. And I'm happy because it's a real person; it's not a recording like other schools. So she's inviting me to the upcoming admitted students day, which is that Saturday. She registers me and I'm all excited to go. I go down there and everybody's so welcoming and friendly and there's diversity, – not saying I love diversity but it's good to see. Then I walk around campus and it's not like overly friendly when people are just trying to get you to come there – everything was genuine. Then we went to the dorms and this one girl, her room looks exactly how my room looks at home. There's pictures on the wall, there's colors everywhere, she has a little iPod dock in her room and I walk in like, "Mom doesn't this look familiar? It looks just like my room at home. I love it." So I can actually see myself at that school because there are people like me at the school already.

Vicky said that by the end of the accepted students day she had decided that she would go to St. Joseph's University. The institutional outreach was effective in convincing Vicky that St. Joseph's was the best fit for her. The tuition and room and board was \$57,000. The college provided \$40,000 in scholarships and grants and \$4000 in loans. Vicky said she planned to pay the remaining \$13,000 by "getting a few jobs and loans." She thought her mom would be willing to provide assistance but said, "I don't really wanna put that on her."

Vicky did well with her college application process. She was awarded a “full ride” from three colleges. She is planning to enroll in a college that felt like a good fit for her. But, she needed to pay \$52,000 over four years and pay back \$16,000 in loans. She had not systematically compare St. Joes with than Eastern, Susquehanna or Robert Morris, with the help of a counselor or parent. The event that Vicky went to at St. Joe’s was effective in getting Vicky to matriculate there. It is the type of event that was described in the online admissions officer workshop that was quoted in Chapter 6. Once Vicky got to the event, she felt certain that she had found the college for her. Vicky’s decision to enroll at St. Joe’s can be attributed to the university’s intentional and effective recruitment efforts. Had she had considered a wider set of colleges, including more selective reach institutions, she may have found a college that she liked as much as St. Joe’s that offered her a better financial package.

### **Dalia**

Dalia was a Romano student who regularly wore black jeans and a black T-shirt. She was valedictorian of her senior class. Her GPA was 4.08 and her highest SAT score was 2080 (96<sup>th</sup> percentile). Dalia moved to Northeastern city from the rural Midwest. Her mother, a fitness instructor, moved to Northeast City to be with a man she met on the Internet when Dalia was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Her father remained in the Midwest where he worked in the post office. He did not contribute to the family financially. Neither of her parents went to college. Her father, she said, did not think that college was necessary and spent money her mother tried to save for college. Her sister, who was one year older than her had not earned high grades in high school. She went to a private college for a music production, but dropped out after one year and moved to California with her boyfriend.

Dalia considered herself a “geek.” She liked playing social online games and wanted to go to a college with a strong geek culture. Her favorite teacher, Mr. Young, who taught math and physics, encouraged her to apply to technical colleges. Mr. Young specifically recommended that Dalia apply to his alma mater, Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI).

Shani: Why WPI?

Dalia: I went up and visited there. My teacher went there, so he told me about it. And it seemed like a really good school. It has – it's a really math-oriented, which is cool. You don't have to take any English classes, which would be really awesome for me. So it just it seemed like a really cool place.

Dalia applied to Cal Tech, Rochester Institute of Technology, WPI, MIT, and Drexel University. She was most interested in MIT and WPI. She knew MIT had a reputation as a great college. She decided to apply to WPI early decision. She was only accepted to Drexel and WPI. She withdrew from WPI because it did not provide adequate financial assistance. With no other options, she decided to go to Drexel because it provided a better financial aid package. However, at the end of her senior year, she was not exactly certain what her financial aid package would be.

Dalia decided not to take calculus in her senior year of high school because she thought that the teacher was not doing a good job. Although it is impossible to know for sure, it is likely that Dalia would have had more college options available to her if she had taken a math class in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. On the admissions website for MIT, calculus is listed as an admissions requirement. Thus, Dalia's decision to drop calculus may have influenced MIT's admission decision. However, Dalia did not talk about the significance of her dropping calculus in her college admissions experience. It is unclear whether she understood that some colleges required calculus for admission.

At the end of her senior year, I talked with Dalia as she stood outside of school waiting for a ride. She looked anxious about her plans for next year. Compared to earlier in the year, she was more hesitant and had less anticipation when talking about college. She was not sure what she would have to pay and she was disappointed about not being able to go to an institute of technology. Dalia would have likely had more options had she chosen to apply to a wider set of colleges, given her very high GPA and SAT scores at the 96<sup>th</sup> percentile. Her options were constrained because she did not take the highest math class, but she only applied to colleges that highly valued math. Mr. Young encouraged Dalia to apply to technical colleges, like he had, because he thought she would fit in with the school culture. Dalia felt connected to the community she observed at WPI. Perhaps if she had researched non-technical colleges she may have found a similar “geek” culture at other institutions.

## ***Allegiance High School: The Application Process***

**Table 16: College Choices of Allegiance Students**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Colleges/Universities Applied</b>	<b>Decision</b>
Beth	U of Arts, Temple, Carnegie Mellon	U of Arts
Bridget	Arcadia University, Susquehanna University. Yale University, NYU, Temple	Temple
Caleb	Pitt at Bradford, Temple, Bloomsburg, Widener, Lock Haven	Pitt at Bradford
Chris	Lincoln, IUP, Bloomsburg, East Stroudsburg, Robert Morris. Pittsburgh Penn State	Bloomsburg
Halima	NYU, Georgetown	Community College
Kyle	No College	No College
Lara	Temple, LaSalle, Swarthmore, UPenn, Rosemont	Rosemont
Lindsey	Dartmouth, University of Hawaii Pacific, UC Berkeley, Pepperdine, UCLA	Temple
Mita	LaSalle, University of the Sciences, UPenn State, Temple	Temple
Nathan	UNC, NYU, Harvard, Yale UPenn, Duke	UNC
Rosa	La Salle, Cabrini, Kutztown, Penn State, Abington.	LaSalle or Cabrini
Sabrina	LaSalle, University of the Sciences, Penn State, Temple	Temple
Samuel	UPenn, Drexel, Temple	Drexel
Tanika	CCP	CCP
Tanya	UPenn, University of Penn, Wells College, NYU, Cornell, Kutztown, Shippensburg Bloomsburg, Temple, Drexel, and Penn State	Wells
Travis	Penn State	West Chester

### **Travis**

Travis liked to hang out in the counselor’s office at Allegiance. Once, when he left the counselor’s room, Ms. Nichols looked at me and said “isn’t he amazing?” Travis is a tall boy with a broad grin and smiling eyes. He had a 3.79 GPA and is ranked number three in his class. However, his highest SAT score was low at 1360 (34<sup>th</sup> percentile). His history teacher Ms. Harris said, “Travis has always done what he should have done.” But she said he was not the “super star” he should have been because he got involved in classroom disruptions caused by football player “problem kids.” “It’s like everybody got

dragged down.” In the view of this teacher, the presence of football players at the school had a negative impact on other Allegiance students, including Travis.

Travis lived with his mother. His parents were not together, but he saw his father often. Travis’ mother was caseworker with the department of human services. His father drove a local distribution truck for a milk company. Neither of his parents went to college. He has two sisters. One was a student at community college and worked at McDonalds. The other sister was still in high school. Travis’ mom did not want her son to go far for college. But, he said that he would go where he wanted to go.

She told me that if I like Penn State, I could go there, but I mean, either way, I'm goanna go to where I wanna go to, but she try to say, "No, you can't," 'cause I tell her I'll leave the state. I'm going to a place where it's always hot like Florida. She like, "You can't go that far."

Diversity was a major concern for Travis. He said, “I wanna go to a school where I see enough black people that I could kinda not feel like I'm the only black person at the school.” He wanted small class size. He wanted to go to a college with a business program because he was interested in one day opening a restaurant with his mother’s family.

For Travis, the best part of the college application process was receiving letters of admission. To maximize the number of acceptance letters he got, Travis applied to 24 colleges. As much as she appreciated Travis, the Allegiance counselor, Ms. Nichols was exasperated by his many applications. She said that any time he saw that one of his classmates was admitted someplace, he wanted to apply there too. Ms. Nichols said, “He’s one of those kids who just wants to be able to say he got into a lot of places. That’s why I don’t like having that billboard up.”

Among the twenty-four colleges where Travis applied were Penn State, Arcadia, Robert Morris, Susquehanna, Albright, Widener, West Chester, Cheney, Hampton, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Temple, Millersville, Bloomsburg, and Drexel. Travis applied to some of these schools simply because they offered fee waivers.

I apply to so many just because a bunch of schools I applied to offered fee waiver, so I didn't have to pay to apply. If I had to pay to all the schools I applied to, I probably wouldn't have applied to that many schools. And then just having a lot of acceptance letters to just sit around in my room and stuff – it gives me a sense of pride that I accomplished something, like, at least I have options on what I do after high school.

Travis considered applying to Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. But, he did not know that these colleges required the SAT subject tests until it was too late to take them. Travis said that he was not especially disappointed that he could not apply to these Ivy League colleges.

Shani: How did you feel when you realized that you weren't eligible?

Travis: I mean, I didn't feel any kind of way because they were just schools I wanted to apply to just to see if I would get accepted.

Travis was not especially focused on going to an elite or a selective college, but he had heard that some college degrees have more social currency than others. He said, “I wanna go a good school where the degree would mean something...some schools, they say even if you show 'em a degree, it probably won't have value because of the school you went to.”

Shani: Who told you that?

Travis: A couple people. I mean, the people at Penn State said that the degree actually means something because of the networking. He gave me an example of a business where everyone in business, nine out of ten of 'em went to Penn State, and that meant something, like, it holds weight behind the degree for just the name of the school.

After this conversation with a Penn State recruiter, Travis felt confident that Penn State was a good school with a good reputation.

Travis learned more about Penn State when he went to the main campus for a minority student recruitment event. He spent the night on campus with two students.

After that event, he decided that Penn State was his first choice.

It's diverse. It's a big school and campus. It never gets boring. I mean, I had good time. I could just picture myself at the school... when I was walking around, I could just see me every day, walking around, getting to my classes... the school spirit they had, it's really like you're apart of their family. Like when they say, "we are," everybody say, "Penn State," and all that, everybody seems happy about it, and it's just like everybody's excited. I'm a person that's just happy every day, so I would be around people that's happy every day. I haven't seen a person that just looked upset or mad when I was there.

Travis said that if he were not admitted to Penn State, he would “probably go to the school that give me the biggest scholarship compared to their tuition.”

Travis did not strive to get into an elite college. Getting an admissions letter from any college made Travis feel proud of his academic achievements. However, if Travis had wanted to go to an elite institution, he would have been stymied by his lack of important information about the admission requirements for elite colleges. He did not know that he needed to take SAT subject tests until it was too late. In fact, I found that most students at Allegiance had not heard of SAT subject tests, which are required by most elite colleges. He also did not have access to courses, such as calculus, that most selective colleges expected applicants to take. Moreover, Travis did not know that taking calculus, or at least four years of math, was important for admission to some colleges.

Travis was accepted to all of the colleges where he applied, except the University of Pittsburgh. Ms. Nichols was surprised that he was not admitted to Pittsburgh and thought it was an error. At the end of the year, Travis ultimately decided to go to West Chester University rather than Penn State because it offered a better financial aid package. His example shows that even when students apply to “good” schools, in this



case Penn State, and are admitted, they do not always choose to attend, either because of cost, perceived fit, or location.

### **Rosa**

Rosa was an Allegiance senior with a 3.7 GPA. Her highest SAT score was low 1220 (19<sup>th</sup> percentile). Rosa was the oldest child, she had two young siblings aged 4 and 2. In recent years, Rosa's mom had worked in a factory and as a receptionist at a behavioral health center. Her father lived in New York City and she rarely talked to him.

In college, Rosa planned to major in business because she had taken "millions" of personality tests and they all recommended she go into business. Rosa said that one of the things she liked about going to Allegiance High School was that she saw professional people every day on the streets outside the school. She said, "Seeing people like that walking down the streets here – because you see that a lot downtown. That was amazing." Rosa saw college as her first step towards a career, rather than the jobs worked by most people she knew, which required her to stand up all day in fast food or retail.

She applied to four colleges: La Salle, Cabrini, Kutztown, and Penn State Abington. She learned about each of these colleges when a representative visited Allegiance. Initially, she wanted to go to Cabrini. She said "For some reason when I imagine myself in college, I imagine Cabrini, like I imagine walking around Cabrini. I had a dream about it and everything." Rosa wanted to stay close to home, she worried that she would not be able to take care of herself if she was too far from home, "I don't know how you start that, how you just leave, not knowing what things cost. I don't know how to do that." But her mother wanted to go far away because she thought that better

colleges were further away. The one selective college that she thought about applying to was Penn, because her mother wanted her to apply there:

Rosa: She told me to apply there, and I was like 'no.'

Shani: Why?

Rosa: You need four essays to get admitted. That is way too much. Just one school, and I don't know if I'll get accepted? That's like a lot of pressure without even going to the school.

Shani: Why do you think they ask for so much? Why is it different from other places?

Rosa: I don't know. They could be like an English-based school, like you have to write a lot. I don't think it's because they want to see what students could do. I don't think it's because of that because there are higher schools that are more known and more populated than Penn, and they don't require four essays. I don't know if Penn is really strict on the four essays, like if you don't do the four essays you're not going in. I'm not sure. But they're just different; I guess you could say.

Later, Rosa told me that she guessed that very few students applied to Penn because no one would want to write that many essays. Apart from her mother's advice, she had no reason to believe that Penn would offer more prestige than any other institution. The fact that Rosa did not know that Penn was a high status institution is evidence that Allegiance did not promote an elite college-going culture among students.

Rosa was admitted to all of the colleges where she applied. She went to the accepted student event at LaSalle, after which decided she wanted to go there. Although she initially preferred and dreamed about Cabrini, she said LaSalle "kept calling her" in her mind. She did not go to the accepted student event at Cabrini. She had a scholarship for the \$17,000 LaSalle tuition, but not room and board. She hoped to live on campus at LaSalle, but when she tried to register for housing she was surprised to learn that the college had categorized her as a commuter student.

Rosa's SAT scores were quite low, which suggests that she probably would not been admitted to an elite college or very selective college. However, the fact that she was admitted to every college where she applied, suggests that she may have had

access to a more selective college if she had applied. It is not apparent that a more selective college would have provided a better academic experience for her, but a wider set of options may have exposed Rosa to more options for financial aid and the option to live on campus.

### **Tanya**

Tanya liked Allegiance because she felt that it offered classes that prepare students for college, especially when she took AP courses. Tanya planned to major in biology or chemistry. Tanya believed that some colleges were inherently better than others. She said, "Mainly I want to go to a college that has good academics that can lead me to what I want to do when I grow up. I want to have good people to be with. I wouldn't want to be with people who are a bad influence." She also said that she would consider courses available and the tuition when choosing a college. Tanya was ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in her senior class. She had a GPA of 3.76. Her combined highest SAT score was 990 out of 2400. While her GPA placed her near the top of the class, she had extremely low SAT scores (3rd percentile).

Tanya's mother encouraged her to apply to the University of Pennsylvania. Tanya described her mother as a central part of her college choice process. Tanya wanted to be a veterinarian. Her mother advised her throughout the process of applying to college, with the plan that she would go to veterinarian school:

Before I started all of my applications for colleges, I sat down with her. I told her that I needed help applying. I know it's not her choice, but she can help me with what colleges she thinks I can probably fit in. She told me Penn was my first choice.

Tanya's mother worked as a receptionist in the Neurology department at a Penn Hospital. Her mother did not have a degree but was also taking occasional classes

towards a degree at a non-selective institution. Her father, who worked “under the table” in a factory, died at age 42 when Tanya was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Tanya is an only child. Her mother wanted her daughter to go to a college close to home. Tanya’s mother asked doctors at her job for college advice for Tanya. The doctors recommended that Tanya apply to Cornell and Penn.

In addition to Penn and Cornell, Tanya became increasingly interested in Wells College after being in contact with students and recruiters for several months.

Tanya: I was interested in Wells College because I went to a college fair and I was talking to the college admissions counselors, and he was telling me more about it. It has things that involve what I want to do when I grow up. I’ve been having communication with them here and I’ve been sending him e-mails helping me apply to their school and everything. He brought attention to me at that school. I had talked to one of the students there. She had encouraged me and talked about how everything is there. It seemed more interesting.

Tanya was concerned about the status of the college she would attend and she thought that Wells College was comparable to an Ivy League college. In fact, when talking with me, she was surprised to learn that Wells College was not an Ivy League institution. The Wells College representative had a major influence on how she saw the college. Thus, in the absence of knowledge about elite colleges, a student could be persuaded to believe that a non-selective college was “very exclusive.”

Tanya applied to 13 different colleges, including two highly selective Ivy League colleges. In all, she applied to Cornell, Penn, NYU, Wells College, Kutztown, Bloomsburg, Temple, Drexel, and Penn State. Tanya had a difficult time applying to college. She found the college application process to be overwhelming as she simultaneously managed schoolwork. She also worked 4-5 hours per week at a local mall. She said that she considered dropping out of high school:

At the beginning of senior year, I wanted to drop out. It was really stressful. It was before my early decision that I had to submit to Penn. That week I was really stressed because added onto it was the essays I had to write for them. There was school, tests, studies, and work. It was all pushing me out. I was really close to just dropping out and giving up. I just thought this was the time when I wouldn't go any further. I talked to my mom about it, and she said, "It's just the beginning of your senior year. You can do this."

Tanya also went to her counselor for help during this low time in the application process.

Tanya raved about her counselor, Ms. Nichols, helping her a lot. At the same time, when she told the counselor that she was having a difficult time, Tanya said she "didn't really say much about it." Tanya said that the counselor also took a hands-off approach to preparing the application, "She didn't really help me with Penn because she wants to see if I can do it on my own. After I finish submitting, she'll tell me, 'I'm proud of you,' because I did it." She also talked to her AP English teacher. She said "I talked to him about the University of Pennsylvania. He'll help me with my personal essays and stuff. I told him about how my interviews go. He asks me about how everything goes. He'll say, 'You're going to get accepted there.' He just sends positive thoughts to me."

According to Tanya, her mother believed that she should be admitted to an Ivy League college because her grades were good and she was ranked #5 in her class.

Tanya further explained:

She wants me to get in to Penn, Wells, NYU or Cornell. I would be disappointed because I worked my hardest to get accepted to any of them. If it turns out that it didn't happen, I would be really upset.

However, there were several aspects of Tanya's preparation that make enrollment at an Ivy League unlikely. First, she had low SAT scores. At the time of her interview, Tanya understood that the SAT was a weakness in her college application

Shani: "Do you feel like you have a good chance of being admitted to one of those schools?"

Tanya: Yes – but then again no, because my SAT score is not that good. The first SAT score I had was 930. I don't think I would get in with it.

She hoped that her scores would improve the next time she took them again in November. She said she wished that she had begun to prepare for the SAT earlier. She went to a free SAT class at a charter school in the fall of her senior year. She also studied a book that she borrowed from the AP English teacher.

Second, Tanya only took two AP courses and she did not take a calculus class because it was not offered. She took AP English in her senior year and AP World History in her junior year. At Allegiance, the convention was for students to take one of the two AP history courses offered. I asked Tanya if she ever thought about trying to take both AP history courses.

Tanya: No. They just preferred for me to be in this course.

Shani: What do you mean they preferred it for you?

Tanya: I just got my roster and it's on there so I took it. I didn't make a fuss about it or anything. I just took the class.

Neither Tanya nor her mother intervened or tried to get her enrolled in an additional AP course. Thus, while her mother was involved and motivated to get her daughter to apply to an elite selective college, she did not take these extra steps to increase her daughter's chance of being admitted.

Tanya was not admitted to Cornell or University of Pennsylvania. However, she was admitted to Wells College, a liberal arts college in New York State, where she decided to enroll. She believed that Wells College was an elite institution, based on her conversations with recruitment officers from the college. Ms. Nichols, the counselor said Wells was a "very exclusive" liberal arts college. However, it is ranked 136<sup>th</sup> on the U.S. News and World Report list of liberal arts colleges. Ms. Nichols said that it was an unusually exclusive college for an Allegiance student to attend. When I asked her what

she meant by “exclusive,” she explained that she was referring to the cost: \$39,000 tuition and \$13,000 room and board.

There are some students going out-of-state, here, and going to – So, I have a student, for instance, right now, who is going to a school in New York, a very exclusive private school. Wells College. Pretty expensive. But her mother also works at a college, where they are going to pay 80% of it. So right there, that student definitely can go out-of-state, because the family can afford it. I think if mom wasn't working at a particular college that would pay the tuition, I'm not sure if she would be able to go there.

Tanya unsuccessfully pursued admission to several highly selective colleges. In many respects she was a strong student. Ultimately, she was happy with her college choice. She believed that she was going to an exclusive liberal arts college. However, more than 40% of Wells College students do not complete a degree in six years. The school has no endowment.

Tanya had a desire to attend an elite and exclusive college. Her mother wanted her to attend an Ivy League institution. Her counselor took a hands-off approach. Tanya's low SAT scores would likely preclude her from being admitted by the most selective colleges. However, she may have been admitted to a less selective college with better student outcomes if someone had helped her identify such institutions. Ms. Nichols, while supportive of Tanya, did not help her find better-matched institutions.

### **Nathan**

Nathan Graves was an Allegiance student who moved to Philadelphia from North Carolina during the summer before ninth grade. Nathan went to a racially diverse, but primarily middle class, Montessori charter school in North Carolina and said it was an adjustment for him to move to an urban school district. In his senior year, his GPA was 3.8 and his SAT score was 1930 (90<sup>th</sup> percentile), one of the highest at Allegiance.

Nathan said that when he arrived at the school he focused on grades first and made friends along the way. He thought freshman year was easy. It started to get a little harder as the years progressed. But, he said that he never had difficulty with the content of his high school courses.

Both of Nathan's parents went to college after high school and then dropped out. Both of his parents eventually returned to college. When he and his sister were young, they both earned business degrees from National University, an online college. His parents separated when he was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. His mother worked as a secretary. His father had once worked for an insurance agency, but he did not know what his father did at the time of the interview. After the separation, his father had moved to California to live with Nathan's grandfather. Nathan had an older sister who was just two years ahead of him in high school. She also attended Allegiance. She was enrolled at Penn State.

Nathan Graves was universally described as an excellent student by Allegiance staff. For example, his Spanish teacher said, "He was a wonderful student, very unique. He just has this very creative mind, not afraid to be different, plays the guitar, and is just very talented artistically and creatively." Mr. Roberts, the AP English teacher said, "Last year, I had Nathan Graves, who was accepted to NYU, but he ended up going to the University of North Carolina, and he was brilliant. Nathan said he did no SAT preparation at home, but he thought that the vocabulary lessons in his English classes at Allegiance helped him prepare for the SAT. It is likely that attending a middle class elementary school also provided some advantages compared to students who attending elementary and middle school in the city.



Nathan wanted to be a pediatrician, which he said combined his desire for a stable job and his interest in working with kids. He planned to major in biology. Like many of his classmates, Nathan's mother wanted him to go to an Ivy League college:

Shani: Did you have a first choice of where you wanted to go to college?

Nathan: Well, so my mom had, she had encouraged me try to apply to some of the Ivy Leagues. So I applied to Harvard and Yale. (chuckle)

Shani: Why are you laughing?

Nathan: Because.

Shani: You got into University of North Carolina. That's a hard school to get into.

Nathan: Yeah (shaking his head)...So I applied to Penn and I applied to like Harvard, Yale, Duke and of course I didn't get in. I only got into UNC and NYU.

Nathan debated whether he should apply to Ivy League colleges because he did not want to experience rejection. He explained, "I didn't want to apply to the Ivy Leagues because I didn't want to get like my hopes up and not get accepted to the program." But when he told Mr. Edwards that he was thinking about applying to Harvard, the principal said, "If you get in, you'll be the first student from our school to get into Harvard." Nathan said that seemed like a good reason to apply, so he decided to proceed with the application process. His mother thought he had a good chance of being admitted to one of the Ivy League colleges. But, she was also worried about what the outcome would be:

She was also flipping out because she was helping out with the process and she was like, "You know I have a good feeling. I think you're gonna get into these schools and people I've talked to said that you have a good chance. And I had interviews with Harvard, Duke and Penn. And so she asked how the interviews went. I'm like, "Oh, yeah, they were pretty good." I felt like I made a good impression on the people and stuff like that. And she was like, "Yeah, so I think you have a good chance of getting into the schools with the interviews."

Nathan remembered being told by the principal that he should apply to three reach schools, three match schools, and three safety schools. He said he only heard that message once, at an assembly with the entire senior class.

However, Nathan did not apply to any safety schools. He said that he struggled with time management and he did not leave enough time to apply to all of the colleges on his list. He wrote his college applications at the last minute. He said he had planned to apply to safety schools like North Carolina State, but he ran out of time. He wrote his application essays during winter break on the day before the application was due. Because he wrote them at the last minute, Nathan was unable to get feedback on his essay from his teachers.

Shani: Did you get help with your essay?

Nathan: I got help from my mom. That was basically it. The time I was doing it was over winter break so I was trying not to – I would have emailed my English teacher but he was grading. We had turned in a bunch of work and he was grading everything over the holiday so I was like, I'll just do it myself and check with my mom.

Nathan did not feel comfortable asking for help with his essay. He knew that teachers were grading papers and he did not want to burden them with another task. He also had a traumatic moment on the last day of school before winter break, when he thought he could only apply to two colleges because he only had two fee waivers. He presumed that he could get more fee waivers from the counselor, but the counselor was not at school that day. He talked to Mr. Drew, the roster chair and math teacher, who he knew well. Mr. Drew told him there was no way around the situation, and he would have to apply to the two that he knew for certain would accept him. In this case, Nathan had to figure out a solution on his own and he felt desperate as he tried to find a way to apply to more than two colleges.

I was freaking out thinking that I had already finished one application completely but that was for an Ivy League school. It was probably the Harvard application. I had done the essay at home so I knew that one of my fee waivers had to go to the school. And so I was trying to figure out which other schools that actually might expect to get in.

Ultimately, Nathan was able to apply to more colleges because he got some fee waivers from friends who had not used all of their waivers.

Nathan said that he was looking forward to enrolling at the University of North Carolina. North Carolina felt like home to him and he had fond memories of living there. He had kept in touch with his friends from North Carolina, and some of them would be at UNC with him. He also felt positively about his financial aid package. UNC awarded him some grants and he would do some work-study. He expected to take out \$9,000 in loans for his first year. He was also awarded a scholarship by a company that he learned about from someone at his church.

Nathan's grades and test scores made him eligible for very selective colleges. And he was successful in getting to enroll in a very selective university. Nonetheless, he may have had more options if he had gotten more assistance with his essay and more guidance with the overall process. His admissions outcomes would have also been better if he had taken calculus and more AP courses. Moreover, in contrast to high achieving students at elite high schools where students come to believe that they belong in an elite high school, Travis went to a high school where elite college admission was not expected of students (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). In fact, he laughed at the idea that he would be qualified for an elite college admission, despite his very strong academic record. Travis' self-doubt may have prevented him from making his best effort in the elite college application process. For example, if his teachers told him he was qualified, he may have not waited until the last minute to write his application essays.

### ***College Strategies Influence Student Decisions***

The review of students' application choices reveals that there were several ways that colleges encouraged students to apply and enroll in their institutions. Colleges used strategies to bring their college to the attention to the students, and then to help the students imagine themselves attending the particular college. These strategies included making recruitment visits to high schools and college fairs, providing fee waivers, offering instant admissions decisions, and hosting admitted students events.

#### *Showing up*

Perhaps the most important thing that college recruiters could do to promote application and enrollment at their college was just showing up at high schools and college fairs. Many students said that they chose to apply to colleges that they learned about when a recruiter visited their school. Students responded well to one-on-one contact with recruiters. And, as I show in Chapter Six, some recruiters were skilled at addressing the Romano and Allegiance students' concerns about college.

Some colleges also contacted students through email or phone. Communication that was not face-to-face was less effective. But, some students did respond quite positively to emails and other correspondence from colleges.

Less selective colleges far outnumbered the selective colleges that contacted Allegiance and Romano students. Moreover, less selective colleges were better at making their colleges appear desirable to students. Students who chose to apply to less selective colleges did so as a result of the colleges' recruiting efforts. In contrast, students who chose to apply to selective colleges were motivated by an outside source, such as parents, TV shows, or college preparatory programs.

#### *Fee Waivers*

The College Board provided counselors with four fee waivers for each eligible student to apply to any college. These fee waivers were designed to help low income students have access to the college application process. None of the students that I spoke with at Romano or Allegiance paid to apply to any college. They all used fee waivers.

According to Ms. Nichols, until 2013, the College Board did not track the usage of fee waivers. As a result, the counselor was able to make multiple copies of fee waiver and distribute them to students as needed. However, the College Board began tracking whether a fee waiver had been used. As a result, the access to fee waivers was reduced.

Some colleges distributed their own fee waivers to students at high schools and college fairs. Fee waivers were a major impetus for students to apply to a college. With the school-specific fee waivers, the choice was easier because using it did not require choosing one college over another. For some students, applying to colleges that offered their own fee waivers was a “no brainer.” Often these schools did not require that applicants provide an essay or recommendations. The fee waiver further facilitated the application process, making a college more appealing. Students perceived that there was little to lose, and much to gain, by applying to a college that offered fee waivers.

#### *Instant Admission*

In addition to giving out fee waivers, another strategy of non-selective colleges was to offer on-site admission. For many students, getting admitted to a college was the goal of the admissions process. Students said that they felt proud when they knew they would have someplace where they could enroll in the fall. Some students, like Travis, felt proud about each acceptance letter that they received. At the same time, students felt

anxious about experiencing rejection. Some avoided applying to more selective colleges because they did not want to experience rejection if they were not admitted. Colleges capitalized on students desire to be accepted and anxiety about being rejected by telling students immediately if they had been accepted. For example, an email that Ms. Nichols forwarded to her students depicts the manner in which colleges appealed to students desire to be admitted to a college and to be able to afford it.

Wednesday, November 26 from 3:00pm to 6:30pm at Northeast District Office. There will be 40 HBCUs available to meet with your students and many will provide on the spot admissions and offer scholarship monies. Each year of the last three years will have had over **500 students accepted on the spot** and over **\$500,000** in scholarship monies awarded.

The Mansfield College recruiter got a room full of Romano students to apply after offering instant acceptance. At a college fair, Patrick applied to four colleges that offered instance acceptance. Instant acceptance eliminated the waiting period students had to endure before getting admissions letters in the mail. Once a student was admitted, she knew that she would have somewhere to go in the fall. Thus, instant acceptance made some colleges more attractive to students.

### ***High School Effects***

Students' college choices were influenced by their experiences in high school. At Allegiance and Romano High Schools, high achieving students' high school experiences were not structured specifically to prepare them for elite college admissions. Teachers and counselors were not focused on helping students get to elite colleges. Some students were encouraged by parents to apply to elite colleges, but few had the opportunity to make themselves optimal candidates. Important aspects of their high school experience included the course taking, the availability of elite college-specific guidance and counseling and the college going expectations in the school community.

### *Academics*

Some of the high achieving students at Romano High School took courses that prepared them for applying to highly selective colleges, including calculus. But others, including Dalia and Patrick did not take needed courses. Patrick was not permitted to take pre-calculus. There were not enough teachers to ensure that students had full class schedule. At Romano, there was inequality in access to high-level courses. Dalia chose to not take calculus, which may have cost her admission to MIT. However, she did not seem to understand the consequences of her decision to drop calculus. With more guidance from someone familiar with elite college admission, she may have made a different choice.

Compared to Romano students, Allegiance students were disadvantaged in their ability to prepare for elite colleges admission. There was no calculus, limited foreign language, and limited science classes offered at Allegiance and there were few AP courses. There was less inequality between students at Allegiance, but the overall access to courses was lower. As a result of their limited course offerings, any selective college was a reach for Allegiance students.

There was also a substantial difference between the SAT scores of Romano students and the SAT scores of Allegiance students. High achieving Romano students did better on the SAT than high achieving Allegiance students. I do not have adequate data to assess whether these differences indicate that students at Allegiance received a lower quality education than students at Romano. Although it is clear that there were fewer opportunities to learn at Allegiance than there were at Romano. Another plausible explanation is that the SAT scores reflect preexisting disparities between Allegiance and Romano students. While quite possible, this explanation is surprising because students

at both schools were screened to have high test scores. Moreover, it is noteworthy that many of the students with the highest SAT scores - Nathan, Dalia, Olivia, Jim (not mentioned above) - came to the school after moving from other states. This suggests that these students may have arrived in Northeast School District having absorbed the benefit of going to better-resourced schools.

As I show in Chapter Five, while there were these important differences between the two schools, the roster chairs at both schools were equivalent in their prioritizing minimum graduation requirements over advanced course taking. The roster chairs had limited resources with which to ensure that students got the courses they needed. Thus, opportunities to provide additional courses were constrained. But, in this process, neither roster chair was concerned about helping students prepare for elite college admissions.

#### *Guidance and Support*

In addition to roster chairs, the counselors at Allegiance and Romano did not promote elite colleges among high achieving students. Ms. Nichols, the Allegiance counselor was overtly suspicious of elite colleges. She also believed that public in-state colleges and universities were always the most advantageous choice for students. Ms. Emerson, the Romano counselor, was indifferent with the higher education status hierarchy. She told students that it did not matter where they went to college.

Both counselors seemed unfamiliar with the dominant status hierarchy. For example, when I asked them about students who went to elite highly selective institutions, both counselors mentioned Drexel University, which accepts 76% of applicants, and the University of Pennsylvania, which admitted 14% of applicants, as comparable examples of an elite college. Neither Ms. Nichols or Ms. Emerson knew that



there were advantages associated with elite college attendance, including financial aid packages and higher graduation rates.

In addition, the counselors at both schools were inexperienced with elite college admissions. Students who wanted to apply to elite colleges had to learn about the process on their own. As a result, students learned about admissions requirements late in the process. For example Travis learned about the SAT subject test requirement when it was too late. Other students applied to elite colleges without knowing that their application put them at great disadvantage. For example, Dalia did not know the potential significance of her decision to not take AP calculus

#### *Post -Secondary Expectations*

The teachers at Romano and Allegiance high school did not expect high achieving students to go to elite colleges. They expected students to go to college and they hoped that students would be able to make it to graduation. They worried that students would have to drop out because they had too much debt. In fact, many of the Allegiance teachers hoped that more students would choose to enroll in community college. They were unaware that community colleges had lower graduation rates than four-year colleges (Long and Kurlaender 2009).

There were substantial differences in the expectations that were established for high achieving students at each school. At Romano, it was a tradition for high achieving students to apply to Penn and several students were admitted to the Ivy League university each year. This tradition at Romano came about because teachers saw that students who went to Penn were able to graduate in four years with out accruing a lot of debt. Thus, institutional status did not motivate teachers' endorsement of Penn among students. There was not a comparable expectation that top students at Allegiance would

go to Penn. It is unclear whether this difference impacted students' choices. As the examples above show, many Allegiance students did want to apply to Penn even though it was not encouraged in the way that it was at Romano. Low SAT scores and few advanced course options prevented Allegiance students from gaining admission at Penn. A greater focus by educators on getting Allegiance graduates prepared for a broader group of college destinations, including the very selective, could have resulted in an acknowledgement of the school's failure to prepare students for admission to elite institutions.

### *Race and Gender*

In Chapter 3, I explained that I chose not to focus on variation in students' experience by race or gender in this study. Indeed, I argue that the absence of an elite college-going culture at Allegiance and Romano affected the experiences of all students. However, the choice to not analyze racial and gender differences is not meant to convey that individual race and the racial makeup of the school are insignificant. On the contrary, research in the sociology of education makes clear that race and gender plays an important role in determining students' access to educational resources, including AP classes (Kelly 2009; Solórzano and Ornelas 2004; Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby 2008).

A review of class ranking at the two schools clearly shows that white and Asian students, and female students were more likely to be at the top of their class. Still, teachers and students infrequently talked about race or gender in their interviews, and even less often in my observations. Nonetheless, there were some interesting perspectives shared, particularly by teachers that warrant mentioning and further research. At Romano, there was a narrative about hardworking Asian students and their interventionist parents. Also, at Romano, there was one teacher who had a lot to say

about variation in academic success by race and gender. At both schools, teachers perceived black male students' academic success as endangered by the attraction of "the street." Each of these issues may have influenced the way that teachers provided guidance to students in different race and gender categories.

Teachers at Romano viewed Asian students to be particularly hard working and motivated. Their comments about these Romano students were consistent with the stereotype of the model minority (Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007).

Mr. Laird We have a lot of really hard-working Asian students, like, really, really hard-working Asian students. And I think that's a cultural thing.

Mr. Young, while pointing out high achieving students in the school yearbook: I'm pointing to more Asian girls than any other group and I talk to my students about this on why is that? They are definitely the most motivated population of students. While recognizing that they earned high grades, English teacher Dr. Carter's comments were somewhat critical of Asian students for overestimating themselves and undervaluing class participation.

Dr. Carter: What I find typically with a lot of Asian students that are in the top 10% of the class. What I find is that they don't realize how much they don't know until they take certain classes...another part about some of my Asian students, about them not liking to talk. You have to pull. I try to get them to understand that in order to be a more well-rounded student, it's not just about grades, but it's also about showing yourself or prove there's this well-rounded person.

Mr. Young also had a critical view of Asian, particularly female, students for focusing too much on their GPA and not enough on learning.

Mr. Young: He (pointing at a photo of a white male student in the yearbook) should be a top ten student. He should be number one or two in the – but in pre-calculus class he sat next to his girlfriend who was Vietnamese. He's better at math than she is. He's better at math than most of the kids in the room. He sits in the back of the classroom and he'd get an A- on a test. He's like "that's fine." But his girlfriend was an Asian female, "I got a 96 is there anything I can do to fix my grade?" "You have a 96." "Yeah, how can I fix this?" The top ten of our class, they take more AP classes because it affects their average. They play those games. If you look at our top 30 kids you'll see more males [than in the top ten] because they're not playing those games, which are disgusting games to play. Part of me likes seeing them play the games because that means they care, but in the end it's like, care a little bit more about learning.

In this quote, Mr. Young is both complaining that Asian girls are too focused on grades, and lamenting that a white male student is not in his rightful place in the class rankings. Thus, while teachers viewed Asian students as hardworking, they were also suspicious of their motivation, their respect for learning, and their merit. The teachers' comments speak to the ways that the model minority stereotype can lead to discriminatory views of Asian American students in classrooms. These views may have impacted the way teachers advised students.

Some teachers also made critical comments about Asian parents' involvement in their children's post-secondary choices. For example, Mr. Laird described conversations he had with some of his Asian students about choosing a career:

Especially in the Asian community it's really common for Asian parents to want their daughters to become nurses and their sons to be doctors or engineers. And, so, sometimes I've had girls say, like, I want to go to school for nursing and I will say "why?" And they're, like "oh, my parents want me to. They say it's a good job." And I'll say "have you considered engineering?" And they'll say, "no, mom says I can't be an engineer. It wouldn't be good for me."

Mr. Laird said it bothered him to see his students directed into gender specific career tracks. He saw this as a specifically a problem with Asian parents. Other teachers said that Asian parents prevented their children from taking advantage of educational opportunities. Ms. Usher, the AP English teacher at Romano provides one example:

Ms. Usher: I've noticed the Asian parents are the ones that tell them, "No, this is what you're doing." 'Cause we had one student a few years ago, maybe three, actually got a full scholarship to a university in the Netherlands, and she was gonna get a free ride, they were gonna pay for her airfare and everything. And her parents go, "Well, you're gonna leave me alone? Why are you gonna go to school? Why don't you just stay here with me?" And they actually made her stay. Everybody else, their parents seem to let them do what they need to do.

Thus, some teachers thought that Asian parents limited students occupational and educational opportunities. Although it is unclear, it seems possible that these perceptions of Asian students and parents may have influenced the kind of guidance and support

offered to Asian students at Romano.

Mr. Young talked extensively about race and gender at Romano. He saw clear race and gender patterns that organized academic achievement at the school:

Mr. Young: what I have seen is the Asian girls typically are performing the best as a group. Then the black girls, then the Asian boys then the black boys.

Shani: Where are the white kids in there?

Interviewee: That's such a small percentage of kids that it's hard to get a grasp. The white kids I also feel are much more random.

As Mr. Young spoke, it became clear that this ranking of race and gender groups had real significance for how he understood students at Romano. It seems plausible that his perspective would impact his interactions with students. In particular, Mr. Young grouped the black students – boys and girls – into categories. He said that it was important to help promising black students avoid involvement with their “bad” black classmates.

[When I like a new black student] I'm like, well we have to make sure that he connects with the right group, because there's two groups of black kids in our school. There are the ones that hang out in the hallways and there are the ones that go to class immediately... Yeah the African Americans, it's almost like a 50/50 thing. The Asians it seems, and I don't have any hard numbers – the Asian male actually, I wouldn't even want to say because I haven't witnessed enough, the Asian female it's 90% they're in class when the bell rings.

In the quote below, Mr. Young discusses a student, Corey, who he perceives as representative of the “black male stereotype.” In Mr. Young's view, he is an example of a student in the “bad” group, despite the fact that he is doing well in school. Mr. Young's comments show that a teacher can perceive a student as “street” and anti-school, regardless of his actual school effort and achievement

Mr. Young: I teach statistics it's very fun to go there [and discuss racial disparities] because it's okay to go there as long as you're making statements of fact and not inferring things. So the Asian females historically have been doing best in my math classes and in every math classes in our school. So when I have a black male walk in my classroom should I dismiss them? And the answer obviously is no, I shouldn't. That black male has the same potential as every Asian female in the room. Get to know everyone and then see if the stereotypes

still hold true because the black male is also normally the most struggling student in the classroom.... But not every black male is struggling in math. Taylor was one of my best kids – black male. But Corey lives up to the stereotypes. He's a stereotypical black male.

Shani: What does that mean?

Mr. Young: When I say stereotype I guess I should say street cred type guy, streetwise black male. Corey could go hang out on whatever corner in Northern City and fit in. Taylor, no chance. So it's accepting that black male stereotype street culture. How he communicates. If he misses class it's no big deal. If he misses school one day, no big deal. Not that he misses school very often at all. I think he's probably going to a good college because he had – I mean he is the stereotype of the black male but he's not falling into the traps that a lot of our young black men fall into. He's going to college. He gets good grades.

Later, Mr. Young said that having “street cred” was “an awful thing” that was anti-school and pro-drug dealing, that probably resulted from black boys not having father figures in their lives. In this example, Mr. Young saw Corey in a negative light, compared to Taylor, despite Corey’s academic success. It seems likely that Mr. Young’s perspective would influence his decisions about recommending Corey for AP courses, as well as the college advice he offered Corey. However, I do not have evidence to address this question. Moreover, Mr. Young was one of the first interviews I conducted at Romano. In subsequent teacher interviews at Romano, I asked, “Some teachers say that there are differences in achievement by race or gender, have you observed that.” For the most part, teachers said had not noticed any difference or that they did not pay attention to race and gender in their teaching.<sup>18</sup>

In light of comments made by teachers, especially Mr. Young, I wondered in particular about the potential role of race in students’ access to advanced courses. I

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<sup>18</sup> Mr. Young, who is white, told me that he spent a lot of time talking about race with Ms. Usher, a black teacher at Romano. He said that because of his experience talking with her, he felt more comfortable talking to me about race than he would with a white person: “I think when I talk it matters who I'm talking to because if I'm talking to a white person then I shouldn't be having certain conversations about race, because it can get racist. If I'm in mixed company then it's much easier to talk and get put in my place.” This statement may help explain why Mr. Young talked extensively about race and gender, while other teachers ha less to offer on this topic.

wonder if being perceived<sup>19</sup> as white helped Jasir and David have more success accessing advanced classes, compared to Patrick and Eddie. I noted that teachers repeatedly named David as a top student when many other non-white students with the same GPA were not. Thus, I have questions about how teachers may privilege some students over others. These are questions that should be considered in future research.

### ***Absence of an Elite College-Going Culture***

An examination of the college application choices of students at Romano and Allegiance reveals the absence of an elite college-going culture in both schools. Generally, students were not encouraged to apply to specific schools. Some teachers explicitly argued against elite colleges. Instead, the message they received from school staff was that it did not matter where they went to college as long as it was affordable. Students chose colleges with which they had some direct contact. Typically, students had the most contact with non-selective institutions whose recruiters visited their school.

A number of school-based factors discouraged students from pursuing elite colleges and universities, including course opportunities, access to recruiters, and teacher advice. When students did apply to elite colleges, it was often because someone outside of school encouraged them to do so. However, in most cases, students' school experiences, such as course taking, were not ideal for elite college admission. Thus, it was not enough to have parents advocating for students to apply to elite colleges. To be successful with elite college admissions, students also needed to have prepared throughout high school. That preparation required the support of educators in school. Moreover, students needed assistance with the process of writing the application itself,

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<sup>19</sup> Jasir is the child of Lebanese immigrants.

including essays. Elite college applications are unique in that they often required multiple essays. Although the educators at Romano and Allegiance were not opposed to helping students with essays and other aspects of the application, doing so was not expected of teachers. If the educators at Romano and Allegiance had been determined to help top students access elite colleges, their support of the application process would have likely been more extensive and more responsive to the specific nature of elite college admissions.



## CHAPTER 8: Elite College Knowledge, Elite College Choice

Every year, thousands of upper middle class students begin the elite college application process for which their teachers and parents have spent years preparing them. Students and parents alike are anxious about what they perceive to be an all-important moment in their educational careers. Graduating from an elite college is a mechanism by which upper middle class students can authenticate their standing among the social elite. Widespread panic about this process is particularly evident in the *New York Times*, where stories about the college admissions frenzy are published with regularity (Bruni 2016). These articles empathetically address parents who are presumed to be doing everything in their power get their children admitted to elite colleges (Carey 2014). Some articles describe students as stressed and overwhelmed by the pressure to meet the standards of admissions committees (Kaminer 2014). Others try to dissect exactly what colleges are looking for in applicants (Starkman 2013).

At the same time, researchers and journalists have raised concerns that the competitive admissions process at elite colleges is especially inaccessible for students from low-income and working class families. Students from less advantaged backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in elite institutions. This fact is troubling to those who believe schooling should be a meritocratic open contest for students of all backgrounds. Researchers have sought explanations for the underrepresentation of disadvantaged students in elite colleges (Hoxby and Avery 2012, Roderick et al. 2011). For example, Hoxby and Avery (2012) show that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are less likely to apply to elite colleges. Studies show that less advantaged

students lack information about applying to college (Holland 2015). Other studies point out that less advantaged students go to schools with fewer resources, and do not have money to pay for SAT training or supplemental college counseling (McDonough 1997). In addition, students from poor families misunderstand the cost of college and make inaccurate cost based decisions (Grodsky and Jones 2006; Roderick et al. 2008).

Some colleges have begun to take notice of unequal access to their institutions and are seeking ways to make elite higher education more accessible for children from lower SES families. Several elite colleges have introduced no-loan financial aid policies, making elite college financially affordable to students from lower earning families. In addition, a group of elite colleges have formed a coalition intended to make the elite college application process more accessible to low-income students. Further, some colleges are considering changing the admissions criteria so that a wider set of students is eligible for elite college admission. For example, the University of North Carolina vice president for enrollment said the school had “downgraded the importance of ‘A.P. everything,’ which doesn’t necessarily measure true ability or intellectual hunger” (Bruni 2016). Thus, some elite college representatives have been motivated to address some of the factors that make elite colleges inaccessible for students from low SES families. However, in the deliberation summarized above, researchers, journalists, and colleges fail to consider how students become interested in attending elite colleges. I argue that, in addition to parents and peers, this happens through exposure to a school culture that prioritizes elite college enrollment for high achieving students (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). Moreover, even when students’ parents encourage elite colleges, those who do not have access to an elite college-going culture at school are less likely to take the steps required to prepare for elite college admissions. This is especially the case for

students from low SES families, whose parents may advocate elite education but lack knowledge about the admission process and are less likely to pressure schools to improve the support provided to their children (McGrath and Kuriloff 1999; Lareau 2000).

Hence, I find that the school-based adults who advised the students, while vigorously promoting “college for all,” did not advocate elite college enrollment for high achieving students. Students’ lack of exposure to school staff that promoted elite colleges for high achieving students is an important difference between Allegiance and Romano and elite high schools serving high SES students. Many of the teachers at Allegiance and Romano were either unfamiliar with the higher education status hierarchy or dismissed its legitimacy. The students who pursued a position at an elite college did so at the urging of people outside of their high schools, including parents. Nonetheless, in many cases, students’ academic experiences in high school precluded their eligibility for elite college admissions.

I argue that students’ high school experiences shape their college preparation and choice. I attempt to identify the factors that determined whether high achieving students prepared for, and apply to, elite colleges and universities. In particular, I show that that while the college-going culture at both schools prepared students for college, neither had a well established elite college-going culture that prepared high-achieving students to apply to elite colleges. Previous research suggests that socioeconomically disadvantaged students have less access to college information and college preparatory resources (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna 2009; Kimura-Walsh et al. 2009). However, previous studies have failed to convey the importance of teachers’ knowledge and investment in the dominant higher education status hierarchy. Teachers in elite high schools allude to the structure, and confirm and legitimacy, of the higher education

status hierarchy (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). However, the students in this study were not exposed to these messages at school. Rather, experiences at Allegiance and Romano led many high achieving students to reject or ignore elite colleges.

Considering why high achieving students like those at Allegiance and Romano were not prepared for elite college admissions is important for understanding processes of social reproduction. Elite education is a mechanism by which elite young people reaffirm their elite status. Students who graduate from elite colleges and universities have increased access to high status occupations of power and influence. Thus, studying why non-elites have unequal access to elite colleges contributes to our understanding of how social and cultural elites retain social, cultural, political, and economic power. While many of the economic and social benefits of education can be accessed in a variety of post secondary institutions, elite colleges are unique in their provision of status and power. Thus, the argument that I make in this dissertation is not primarily about the factors that determine whether a student is able to get a “good” education and a stable job. Rather, I explain factors that ensure that most low SES students who do well in school are nonetheless unable to access colleges where students are most likely to retain or acquire status and power.

There are three points to my argument about how teachers at Allegiance and Romano deterred students from enrolling in elite colleges and universities. First, I suggest that educators varied in their knowledge of the status hierarchy in higher education. Some were unaware of the potential benefits of attending an elite institution as well as the details of elite college preparation. Second, educators differed in the degree to which they accepted that the status hierarchy as fundamentally legitimate. The participants in the study did not universally agree, for example, that the University of

Pennsylvania was a more desirable higher education destination than a school like Elizabethtown College. For example, when I asked Ms. Nichols, the Allegiance counselor where she hoped her teenage daughter would go to college she said her top choice would be Elizabethtown, her alma mater:

Definitely Elizabethtown. Just, my love for Elizabethtown. Do I think she could do Penn? I think she could. I think the pressure, for her, if she was an athlete at Penn – just looking at that athlete who committed suicide, really gets to me. So, we probably will avoid Penn, because of that. I don't want her to have too much pressure, academically, as she's playing sports.

In this example, Ms. Nichols acknowledges the Penn's elite status. However, by suggesting that the pressure at University of Pennsylvania caused a tragic suicide, she delegitimizes the idea that elite colleges are inherently desirable. Many school staff doubted the desirability of elite colleges. It was not a priority, in either school, to structure educational opportunities in ways that prepared students for elite college admissions.

Third, I argue that unlike educators in elite high schools, teachers' actions at Romano and Allegiance did not promote elite college preparation and choice. For example, I show that the providing top students with course taking opportunities to prepare for elite college admission was not a main priority for staff at either school. Instead, they were focused on preparing all students to reach the minimum requirements for graduation. As a result, some high achieving students did not have access to the courses that they would need in order to be eligible for elite college admission, including AP courses. The students who did access multiple AP courses were assertive self-advocates and sometimes went against the advice of their teachers. For example, some students ignored teachers' advice to take no more than two AP courses per year.

Teachers were limited in their ability to offer advanced courses to high achieving students. There were inadequate resources in the schools with which to provide courses

beyond what was required for graduation. Thus, educators may have had little choice but to focus on meeting students' minimum requirements. Still, teachers at Romano and Allegiance did not tell students about the importance of taking four years of math and four years of foreign language for elite college admissions. Educators did not recommend students take more than two AP classes, even when there was space in the class. Teachers did not encourage students to take supplemental courses at community colleges. Therefore, the constraints on course taking opportunities were not simply a result of limited financial resources. They can also be attributed to the absence of an elite college-going culture in the two schools.

Another important way that educator practices influenced college preparation and choice was by inviting college recruiters to make presentations in school building. For students to apply to elite colleges, they had to know about them. Moreover, they had to learn information that made elite institutions appear desirable. Previous studies have not sufficiently investigated this crucial point (Dillon and Smith 2013; Hearn 1984). I find that students had minimal exposure to arguments about the benefits of attending elite colleges. The majority of the recruiters came from less selective and non-selective colleges. These non-elite recruiters were particularly attuned to students' concerns about college, including cost, staying close to home, and becoming employable. Few elite college representatives visited either high school.

In some cases, students described a process by which their interest in elite institutions decreased over time. Although it was not clear, their stories suggested the possibility that they were "turned off" of elite colleges though their experiences with college preparation and choice in high school. Several students said that the first colleges they heard about were Ivy League institutions that were mentioned on television

and in movies. These students explained that they initially were interested in going to an Ivy League institution, because the message on the TV and in the movies was that the smartest students went to Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. However, some students described their interest in Ivy League colleges as childhood folly. They no longer thought those institutions would be a good fit for them. It seemed that, as students learned more about college, elite institutions appeared less desirable. The reason for this is unclear, but it may be a reflection of the fact that the students went to a high school that lacked an elite college-going culture. It is also possible that as students learned more about their own positioning in society, they identified less with television characters.

When students decided where to apply to college, few said they considered the status of the institution. Elite status was not a college characteristic that students learned to value. Although it is unclear exactly what the relationship is between students and educators' perspectives, my research shows that counselors and teachers also paid little attention to status and reputation for quality in their evaluation of colleges. Moreover, they did not know which schools were at the top of the dominant status hierarchy. For example, when I told teachers that I was interested in why some top students went elite selective colleges and others did not, most teachers mentioned Drexel University as an example of a selective, elite institution. However, Drexel is not elite or especially selective. Allegiance and Romano were schools where college enrollment was expected, but the status hierarchy was misunderstood and elite colleges were not prioritized.

I observed an important exception to this view of elite college at Romano, where there was an expectation that the highest achieving students would apply to the University of Pennsylvania. Each year, several Romano students were admitted to Penn. However, there was not a subsequent push to apply to other elite colleges. Teachers

encouraged student to apply to Penn, not because it was elite, but because it was tried and true. Over several years, teachers observed that students who went to Penn graduated on time and with minimal debt. When the teachers understood the benefits associated with one elite college, they became advocates for that college. However, these teacher recommendations did not extend to other elite colleges with similar financial aid policies. Thus exposure to the benefits of one elite college did not lead to the creation of an elite college-going culture at Romano high school.

### ***Implications for the Sociology of Education***

Research in the sociology of education has provided useful insights into the processes by which the high school context influences the chances that low-SES students will enroll in elite colleges and universities. Researchers find that high schools vary in their course offerings. Therefore, students in some, particularly low SES high schools have less opportunity to take courses in preparation for elite college admissions, compared to students in high SES schools (Klugman 2012). Moreover, Klopfenstein (2004) finds that black and Latino students take AP courses at half the rate of white students and a primary factor driving this difference was low income (Klopfenstein 2004). This disparity is more prevalent in magnet programs. However, the author finds that mentoring black and Latino to enroll in advanced courses can decrease course taking disparities.

Stevens (2009) work suggests that elite colleges are connected via professional networks with elite private high schools and top ranked public school. As a result, students from other types of schools may have less exposure to recruiters from elite colleges. Hoxby and Avery (2012) show that students who attend high schools that do



not have an established record of graduates attending elite colleges are less likely to apply to highly selective colleges. McDonough shows how different types of high school develop varying sets of colleges that are considered acceptable by for graduates of the school (1997). Roderick and co-authors (2011) show that some students lack access to counselors that can help students with the college application process.

In combination, these studies help to explain why high achieving students in low SES schools are less likely to apply and be admitted to elite colleges, compared to students in elite high schools. However, each of these studies fails to take into consideration educators' knowledge and perceptions of the higher education status hierarchy. Previous research has also paid too little attention to how teachers actions facilitate or constrain students opportunities to prepare for elite college admissions. Previous studies have not asked whether teachers and counselors *want* to see their students' enroll in elite institutions. Moreover, they do not ask whether educators' actions promote elite college admissions. By looking specifically at how teachers and counselors view elite colleges and how their actions shaped students ability to participate in elite college admissions, this study addresses questions that have been overlooked in previous research. The resultant findings suggest that attending a high school without an elite college-going culture can place students at a disadvantage in the elite college application process.

### ***Policy Implications***

Attracting more disadvantaged students to elite colleges will require changes in the marketing and recruitment strategies of elite colleges. New strategies must respond to interests and concerns of socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Recruitment

efforts cannot rely on the prestige of institutions. Colleges must respond more directly to students' concerns about cost. Colleges must also assure students that their basic needs, including laundry and meals, will be met while they are enrolled. Students know that without adequate financial support, they may struggle to afford food and housing (Goldrick-Rab and Broton 2015).

The exact amount of grants and financial aid available to a student cannot be determined until a financial aid officer reviews a particular student's application. Nonetheless, more can be done to unambiguously show students that they can afford an elite college. Students from low earning families tend to underestimate the amount of financial aid that would be available to them. When students understand the real cost, they may be more likely to choose elite colleges with hefty tuitions (Hoxby and Turner 2013). The College Board and some colleges offer net price calculators on their websites. However, students need to be directed to these resources and informed about their significance.

Elite college admissions staffs need to do more to make their elite institutions appear desirable and beneficial to students and the adults who help them with college choices. Elite colleges have better student outcomes than non-selective colleges. But it is quite difficult for a prospective student to determine if a particular institution produces strong student outcomes. The new Coalition for College Access is a coalition of selective colleges that is working together to encourage enrollment of underrepresented students in selective colleges. Membership in the coalition is only offered to colleges that have a six year graduation rate of 70% or higher. Thus, the coalition signals to students that their member institutions offer more opportunities for success than others.

Underrepresented students could also benefit from more exposure to recruitment officers from elite colleges. Very few elite college recruiters visited Allegiance and Romano. Previous research suggests that recruiters only go to high schools where there is a concentration of very high performing students (Hoxby and Avery 2012). A more efficient way to reach students would be to attend a college fair. However, elite colleges are also absent at the college fairs that students at Allegiance and Romano attended. Elite institutions sometimes organize their own events (Exploring Options, The Association of Black Admissions and Financial Aid Officers of the Ivy League and Sister Schools). But, these events are rare and sometimes take place in suburban locations. Moreover, by holding separate events, recruiters make the assumption that students want to know about their college. Thus, the institutions rely on prestige to attract students. For example, the first sentence on the Exploring College Options site reads, “Exploring College Options is a special recruitment program sponsored by the undergraduate admissions offices of five of the country's leading universities.” This sentence presumes that the audience will simply accept that member organizations are the best. Holding separate events from non-selective institutions is a mechanism by which elite colleges articulate and maintain their status position by, but it also represents a lost opportunity to connect with students who are not focused on institutional prestige.

Perhaps the most important policy change would be to change the way elite colleges interface with teachers and counselors at school like Allegiance and Romano. Rather than presume that everyone dreams of sending their students to an elite colleges, admissions officers need to convince school staff that their college is desirable and affordable. Colleges have limited resources and admissions staff is not available to talk with every high school counselor. However, elite college admissions officers could to

do more to engage a wider swath of counselors. They could produce a film, interactive website, or other media that argue the benefits of elite education, without relying on prestige-based arguments. The counselors in the study felt shut out from colleges where they did not have a personal connection with an admissions officer. Thus, colleges should also consider the creation of an online forum or communication tool that would give counselors more access to elite colleges

### ***The Status Hierarchy and Inequality***

The students I met at Allegiance and Romano High Schools were determined to graduate from college. They saw college as a necessary step towards adulthood. They felt that they needed college in order to get a high quality job. But few students knew how much colleges varied. The students did not know that there was one group of elite colleges whose large endowments provided exceptional academic opportunities and funded extensive financial aid packages. In short, students did not fully understand that colleges were organized in a status hierarchy with elite colleges at the top.

Students did not know about the higher education status hierarchy, or were not invested in it. I suggest that this may have been because the adults around them, especially teachers and school counselors, were similarly unfamiliar and not invested. Moreover, as others have shown, elite colleges failed to contact and share information with students at Allegiance and Romano High Schools (Stevens 2009). Without knowing about the status hierarchy, students who may have wanted to attend a prestigious institution were unable to do so. Other factors also played a role. The underfunding of education in the Northeastern School District made preparation for elite college admission particularly challenging at Romano and Allegiance. Nonetheless, the fact that

the college-going culture at Allegiance and Romano did not emphasize elite colleges prevented students from preparing for, and participating in, for elite college admission.

Among student who chose to apply to elite colleges, many were encouraged to do so by their parents. Parents got information about the higher education status hierarchy and the benefits of elite college attendance from professional co-workers or co-ethnic acquaintances. As previous research on education and social reproduction has shown, parents impact students' access to educational resources (Lareau 2000; 2011). Parents who can successfully advocate on behalf of their children accrue benefit for them. However, in this study I find that parental encouragement was not enough. Students also needed to have the high school experiences that made them eligible for elite college admissions. While some parents advocated elite colleges, they did not know that their children needed to take four years of math or and improve their SAT scores in order to be eligible for admission. Thus, parents were important, but students also needed access to school experiences that were oriented towards elite college admissions.

In addition, this research suggests that familiarity and knowledge of the dominant status hierarchy may be an important and overlooked form of dominant cultural capital. High achieving students from upper middle class families take for granted that elite schools are the best and spend years preparing for admission. These students function in social settings where they are repeatedly exposed and indoctrinated in the dominant higher education status hierarchy. As a result, upper middle class students are better positioned to seek a spot at the top. Students whose schools lack an elite college-going culture are thus in a disadvantaged position.

Knowledge of the status hierarchy may be an important variable in the reproduction of inequality. It is plausible that efforts to achieve social mobility are stalled for people who do not understand or are not concerned about reaching the top of the dominant status hierarchy. For example, someone who wants to be a top film producer needs to know which entertainment companies dominate the filmmaking field, and believe in the legitimacy of the status hierarchy. Without such knowledge and belief, aspiring producer may spend years in a small, unknown production company, not knowing how to move up. In this example, knowing about and believing in the dominant status hierarchy is not the only explanatory factor, but it may be one whose significance deserves more attention. Thus, additional research is needed to determine whether familiarity with, and investment in, the dominant status hierarchy is an important stratifying mechanism in a variety of social settings.

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