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High School Interrupted: A Case Study of Postsecondary Pathways and College Choices Following the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

HIGH SCHOOL INTERRUPTED: A CASE STUDY OF POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS AND COLLEGE CHOICES FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Northern Illinois University, 2023
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This instrumental case study explored how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced postsecondary pathways and college choices of participants in an Upward Bound Program. In the aftermath of the pandemic, community college enrollment was projected to increase, instead two-year institutions experienced significant declines. Prevailing assumptions about college enrollment may not be accurate, and existing college decision models do not account for the effects of a worldwide pandemic. The study was guided by the Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories, and the college-conocimiento framework. The findings suggested students' academic engagement and mental health declined during the pandemic. This in turn impacted their resolve to attend college, and influenced the factors they considered when selecting a college. Additionally, the findings suggested students relied on Upward Bound as their primary postsecondary planning resource.

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HIGH SCHOOL INTERRUPTED: A CASE STUDY OF POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS
AND COLLEGE CHOICES FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

BY

ROBERT COOK
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A DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Carrie A. Kortegast

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PREFACE

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced post-secondary pathways and college choices of graduates in the Upward Bound program at Alan Keys High School.

This dissertation of practice is comprised of three artifacts. Chapter One is an artifact from the dissertation of practice proposal that was defended in June 2022. It serves as an introduction to the research and outlines the initial plan to conduct the study. Chapter Two is a publishable paper of the study and findings suitable for a scholarly journal. It describes the procedures that were carried out, the participants involved, the study findings, and implications for practice. The findings reflected five themes regarding student experiences during the pandemic that influenced their college going experiences and decision-making. These themes included: (a) their level of academic engagement decreased, (b) their mental health declined, (c) they considered delaying or not enrolling in college, (d) they reevaluated college search criteria, and (e) Upward Bound was their primary postsecondary planning resource. Chapter Three is a scholarly reflection of my experience at the end of the dissertation of practice.

CHAPTER ONE

PROPOSAL

In the aftermath of the initial COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, higher education experts predicted students would reevaluate their post-secondary plans due to the cumulative effects of the pandemic (Community Design Partners, 2020; NICHE 2020; Patch, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Community college enrollment was projected to increase, based on enrollment patterns during previous economic downturns and predicted changes in student behavior (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019; Barrow & Davis, 2012; Schueler, 2020). Instead, community colleges experienced significant enrollment declines compared to other institutions (Freeman et al., 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCHC], 2020). According to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic was a leading factor in fall 2020 headcount enrollment declines at two-year institutions in the state of Illinois. While many institutions increased online courses and expanded virtual support services for students, fall 2020 headcount enrollment at Illinois community colleges decreased 13.7% from fall 2019 (ICCB, 2020a).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing enrollment challenges at Holmes College (pseudonym), a public community college in western Illinois. Holmes College's enrollment challenges cannot be dismissed as an unpreventable consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prevailing assumptions about enrollment may not be accurate, and existing college decision models do not account for the effects of a worldwide pandemic.

Since 2007, Holmes College has operated an Upward Bound program at Alan Kay High School (pseudonym; Alan Kay HS). The program targeted potential first-generation college students who reside in low-income households. The objective of the program was to provide academic services and support to students in earning a post-secondary degree. The program was integrated into Alan Kay HS and was designed for intensive contact with students multiple times per day, five days per week. The COVID-19 pandemic required Holmes College completely change operations and how the Upward Bound program delivered services. Between March 2020 and April 2021, all academic services, advising activities, and student contact were conducted virtually. Additionally, many of the college transition support activities that were designed for peer interaction, could not be effectively replicated in a virtual environment. While the pandemic affected the experience of all program participants, there was a significant impact on students in their senior year.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. This qualitative study is focused on participants in the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS who graduated in 2020 and 2021. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary choices?
2. How did Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates make their post-secondary decisions?
3. What influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary plans?

4. What support systems do Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates utilize to plan for life after high school?

This study is significant because it will provide an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary plans. The study will provide important information about the college decision process for participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will also provide insight into participants access to and use of support systems for college planning.

Literature Review

A multitude of interconnected factors influence a student's postsecondary plans. A student's social identities, family, peers, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, information, and experiences in society can influence if, why, and what college a person attends (Bowen et al., 2009; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). This study begins with a review of existing literature on postsecondary access and college choice.

Ethnicity and Race in College Choice

Hossler and Park (2015) described race/ethnicity as one of the most cited factors in college choice research. Literature on college choice has often addressed race and ethnicity as a singular entity. This approach steered researchers to consider the obstacles an African American student, or a Jewish student may face, but not the challenges an African American Jewish student may encounter. To understand how students' race and ethnicity influences their postsecondary path, we must consider the original research upon which future studies were based.

Existing research on the influence of race in college choice is frequently grounded in Braddock and McPartland's (1989) *segregation perpetuation* theory. They proposed African

Americans choose to live, work, and associate with one another because they were raised in segregated neighborhoods and attended segregated schools. This theory has been used to explain the enrollment patterns of African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities¹ (HBCU, Braddock & Eitle, 2004) and Predominantly White Institutions² (PWI, Crain & Wells, 1994). Other research presented racial stereotypes about intellectual inferiority (Antonio & McDonough, 1996) to explain why African American students are underrepresented at selective institutions. This is an example of a practice Stanfield (1993) identified where researchers unwittingly used fallacies of racial superiority to ignore systematic structures of inequality that have created seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Butler (2010) explained the gap in qualitative research on the influence of race in college choice has prevented a broader understanding of the topic. Early studies were conducted with data sources that are now considered outdated, and during an era that is no longer reflective of today (Baker et al., 2018b; Holland, 2020a). Later research projects focused on the outcomes and extent of racial disparities in higher education, while less attention was paid to how the disparities came to exist (Charles et al., 2007). Freeman (2005) argued the college process is not the same for all students, and researchers should examine the unique circumstances groups face pursuing higher education.

Several studies have found similarities and differences in cultural factors that influence the college choice process. Family has been universally regarded as an integral component of the college choice process. Freeman (2005; 1998) explained African American students' families

¹ Historically Black Colleges and Universities are accredited postsecondary institutions established before 1964 to educate Black students (Ameen, 2020).

² Predominantly White Institution is an unofficial designation of postsecondary institutions where the number of White students far exceed the number of students from underrepresented racial groups (Bourke, 2016).

play a significant role in the college decision process. In African American culture, family often includes immediate and extended family members, and non-relatives with whom there is a close relationship. In their qualitative study of student resources and networks, McDonough and Pérez (2008) found Latina/o/x high school students relied heavily on their peers, siblings, and other family members to aid in their college search. They reported Latina/o/x students developed networks that included extended family members, and persons they did not know, but who were known to trusted family members in their college choice process. As found in research on African American students, Latina/o/x's definition of family is broad. This differs from the measure of family involvement which considers only parent actions (Perna & Titus, 2005).

College aspiration, the desire to pursue higher education, is the impetus for the college choice process (McDonough, 1997). Researchers have differed on the effects of race and ethnicity on college aspiration. Briggs et al. (1997) purported that African American and Latino students' aspirations to attend college were lower than students in other racial and ethnic groups. Pitre (2006) found African American students aspired to attend college at the same rate as White students. Other studies (Battle et al., 2010; Kao & Tienda, 1998) alleged racial disparities in achievement gaps were caused in part by insufficient levels of aspiration.

Hossler et al. (1999) and Freeman (1999) theorized that ethnicity in of itself does not affect aspiration, but a student's experiences based on their ethnicity can influence aspiration. In other words, a student's race does not determine the postsecondary goals they set for themselves. However, their lived experiences can affect their college aspirations. This is supported by Pitre (2006) who explained students lowered their postsecondary aspirations when they felt their high school was not preparing them academically for college, and Bishop et al. (2021) who reported

female students of color limited their postgraduate aspirations as their perception of racial, ethnic, and gender barriers increased. Researchers (Freeman, 2005; Lewis & Pattison, 2010) explained that disproven tropes about African American student ambition have been used to explain academic achievement gaps, instead of acknowledging real inequities.

The racial and ethnic composition of a college campus can be a factor for some students. Holland (2020a) looked at how African American students factor campus diversity in the college choice process. They found that students' experiences in high school influenced the level of importance they placed on diversity. African American students who preferred to attend an HBCU cited instances of bias from teachers, racial inequities, and segregated social groups (Holland, 2020a). Other studies (Ameen, 2020; Freeman & Thomas, 2002) found alumni recommendations, and a desire for cultural exploration have led African American students to attend an HBCU.

According to Holland (2020a), African American students who preferred to attend a PWI cited the superior benefits of a diverse campus or the desire to attend a more selective institution. They described students rationalizing the decision to attend a PWI with negative connotations about HBCU's as indicative of the White racial frame. The White racial frame is a world view that embraces racial stereotypes, prejudices, and ideologies that support White norms, and practice otherism (Feagin, 2013). Conversely, Freeman and Thomas (2002) explained African American students were motivated to attend PWI's because of academic reputation and financial aid packages.

While Holland (2020a) found African American students college decisions were influenced by the make-up of their high school, earlier studies had different findings. Butler

(2010) reported the ethno-racial make-up of high schools was a factor for Latina/o/x students, but not African American students. Latina/o/x students strongly considered campus diversity when they attended high schools where their ethno-racial identities were the majority, and less so when other identities were prevalent. In contrast, Butler (2010) reported Latina/o/x students who graduated in the top 10% of their class, or whose parents held college degrees preferred to attend colleges with low enrollment of Latina/o/x students. Butler (2010) found family, peers, and diversity were significant factors in what school African American students chose to attend. Their study determined African American students considered the diversity of students and faculty at an institution, and prioritized schools where family and peers attended.

The location of a college is an important factor in the college choice process. Previous qualitative and quantitative studies have identified ethnic and cultural factors that make the location of a school a deciding factor. Familism is the concept in which the needs of a family take precedence over the individual (Bámaca-Colbert & Hernández, 2016). Fuligni and Hardway (2006) studied family relationships and found Mexican American children have a significant sense of family obligation. This internalized feeling of responsibility can lead a student to selecting an institution closer to their family, or forgoing college. Desmond and Turley (2009) explained Latino/a/x students were likely to prioritize their family when making postsecondary plans. The research showed a consensus that Latino/a/x students are more likely than other groups to live at home and attend local postsecondary institutions (Atwell et al., 2018; Bowers & Núñez, 2011; Ceja, 2004; McDonough & Pérez, 2008; Ovink, 2014; Perna, 2000; Vega, 2018). Kalogrides and Ovink (2015) contributed to the literature and reported the influence of familism on Latino/a/x student college trajectories diminished with the third generation of the family.

Structural barriers in access across different racial and ethnic groups need to be understood when looking at college choice (Freeman, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005). Studies have determined racial disparities in school discipline continue to persist. African American and Latino/a/x high school students are disciplined and suspended from school at disproportionately higher rates than other student groups (Ibrahim & Johnson, 2020; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Morris & Perry, 2016; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). In a study of high school discipline, Morris and Perry (2016) determined an association between school suspensions and decreased academic achievement. Similarly, Ibrahim and Johnson (2020) found school suspensions had a persistent negative effect on student performance in mathematics courses over several semesters. The impact of school discipline has been studied extensively. In early 2000, researchers described the increased implementation of zero tolerance policies and involvement of law enforcement in noncriminal discipline matters as the school to prison pipeline (Losen & Wald, 2003). More recent research has looked at the role of school discipline in racial gaps in postsecondary achievement. Bacher-Hicks et al. (2019) explained repeated instances of school discipline had a negative impact on educational attainment.

Sexual Orientation and College Choice

The college choice process can be a stressful journey for an 18-year-old student, however that process is even more fraught for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning/queer (LGBTQ) students. Burleson (2010) explained selecting a college can have significant health and safety implications for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students are at increased risk for victimization and abuse (Balsam, 2011; Burleson, 2010, Mobley & Squire, 2015). In 2019, 33% of LGBTQ high school students were bullied at school, 27% were victims of electronic bullying, 13% were

the victims of dating violence, 19% survived a sexual assault, and 23% attempted suicide (Haderxhanaj et al., 2020).

Mobley and Squire (2015) explained high school students who have intersecting marginalized identities (i.e., African American, and gay) can feel overly oppressed at school. In a survey of LGBTQ high school, undergraduate, and graduate students, 16% described their high school environment as fairly supportive (Burleson, 2010). However, students reported the level of support they received in high school was not a factor in their college decision process.

Burleson (2010) reported the top five factors LGBTQ students consider in a college are: (a) quality of education, (b) reputation, (c) student organizations, (d) LGBTQ friendly campus, and (e) diversity.

Mobley and Squire (2015) sought to understand how identity influenced the college decision process for African American gay male students. Their qualitative study focused on students at an HBCU and neighboring PWI. Through in depth interviews they determined distinct contrasts in the saliency of sexual orientation and race. They explained, students who connected strongly with their racial and ethnic identities chose to attend an HBCU (Mobley & Squire, 2015). Conversely, the students who attended a PWI explained they identified as a gay man, and their racial identity was not important. The researchers noted that the participants at both institutions initially believed a PWI would be more accepting of LGBTQ students (Mobley & Squire, 2015). Interestingly, students who attended an HBCU reported they ultimately found their institutions were accepting and supportive. Identity is a significant factor, but saliency is individually specific. Amarao et al. (1991) advised researchers not to assume participants are homogeneous groups, or risk missing important data.

Socioeconomic Status and College Going

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a measure of educational attainment, occupation, and income to approximate access to financial, social, cultural, and human capital resources. Individuals and families are categorized as having low, middle, or high SES (Beale Spencer et al., 2012). A student's SES can affect their post-secondary aspirations, college matriculation, and the selectivity of the college they attend (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Enberg et al., 2016; Lynch & Wells, 2012; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Walpole, 2003). Multiple studies have identified disparities in college readiness, enrollment, and completion rates of students from different SES backgrounds. Barmer et al. (2019) explained students from low SES backgrounds self-reported lower educational attainment goals than students from middle and high SES backgrounds. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found a 26% gap in the rate of college applications submitted between students from low SES backgrounds and high SES backgrounds. In a follow up to the national high school longitudinal study of 2009, Baum and Ma (2016) reported 28% of students in the lowest SES category had enrolled in college compared to 78% of students in the highest SES category.

Family income, parent education, and occupation are the primary measures of SES. Of the three components, parent occupation has the least influence on college matriculation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Lynch & Wells, 2012). A family with a higher annual income is more likely to reside in a neighborhood where schools have sufficient resources. A report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2018) determined students who attended high poverty public high schools³ had less access to college preparatory courses. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001)

³ High poverty refers to schools where more than 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

found high school students from low SES backgrounds were 24% less likely to be academically prepared for higher education. A family with a higher annual income is more likely to have access to academic support services and extracurricular activities that are desired by selective enrollment institutions (Enberg et al., 2016).

The educational attainment level of parents is a predictor of college enrollment (Lynch & Wells, 2012). It is assumed that a parent with a college degree possesses the knowledge and experience to help their child navigate the college admissions process and critical deadlines. A parent with a college degree is more likely to discuss higher education with their child earlier and set an expectation of attending college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Parents who have earned a college degree can provide their children with valuable cultural capital. For instance, Bowen and Lee (2006) studied the relationship between parental involvement and cultural capital. They reported parents or caregivers who possess an associate degree or higher, have more frequent academic conversations with their child, and have higher educational expectations.

Students from low SES backgrounds are at increased risk of encountering barriers that postpone higher education. Parental job loss, decrease in family income, increased student responsibilities, and or poor academic performance are all factors that can interrupt a student's postsecondary path (Cox, 2016). Lynch and Wells (2012) reported students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to plan delaying college. Data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (Bozick & Lauff, 2007) found that high school graduates in the lowest family income quartile had the highest rates of delayed postsecondary enrollment, and not enrolling out of all income groups. It is widely accepted that students who delay enrolling in college are less likely to enroll later.

High School and Institutional Agents

High schools play an important role in the college choice process. McDonough (1997) listed high schools as one of the factors that determines how a student perceives their college opportunities. High schools prepare students for postsecondary success by providing information about postsecondary options and supporting students and their families as they navigate the college admissions process. (Bowen et al., 2009).

According to Duncheon and Knight (2020), the most important factors to establishing a college going culture at a school involve actions taken by counselors and teachers. High school guidance counselors are typically tasked with coordinating a school's college service. This consists of arranging college visits, delivering workshops, assisting with college, financial aid, and scholarship applications, and conducting parent outreach (Coca et al., 2011). McDonough (2007) explained guidance counselors develop the worldview a school provides students about postsecondary options. They construct this view based upon their perception of students' abilities and the general expectations of administration, parents, and the community. High schools often serve as a student's primary source of information about colleges (Coca et al., 2011). Having accurate information about college is critical to actualizing postsecondary plans. Students and parents from low SES backgrounds lack clear information about college costs which can impact their postsecondary plans (Horn & Velez, 2018). Horn and Velez (2018) found 44% of students in the lowest SES category overestimated the cost of public universities.

The approach counselors utilize to advise students is important. Holland (2020b) explained counselors should alter their postsecondary advising strategy based on that student's knowledge of institutions, and the evaluation method they will use. The advising process can be

counterproductive if a student does not understand the difference in institutional type, size, location, academic offerings, and cost.

Counselors and teachers have a strong influence on a student's academic trajectory (Howell et al., 2012). Counselors serve as opportunity gatekeepers. They are a point of contact for college representatives, college access programs, organizations that provide scholarship, and other unique opportunities. Studies have determined high schools can have a greater impact on postsecondary enrollment than college entrance exams (Deming et al., 2015). Duncheon and Relles (2019) discussed the importance of high schools establishing connections with colleges and college access programs. First generation students and those who come from low SES backgrounds may not have established connections to alumni of selective enrollment institutions, or college representatives with insight into early deadlines. This is critical for high poverty schools where students may lack sufficient social capital to pursue higher education.

TRIO Programs

TRIO is the name of eight federal programs designed to assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities in their pursuit of higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The first program, Upward Bound, was developed as a part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The second program, Talent Search, was created under the Higher Education Act in 1965. Student Support Services program was authorized in 1968.

The U.S. Department of Education continuously expanded TRIO programs throughout the United States, territories, and commonwealths with amendments and reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act (Armesto & McElroy, 1998). In 1972, two programs to serve adults were

created, Educational Opportunity Centers, and Veterans Upward Bound. The Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs was developed in 1976 to provide training for project staff. In 1986, The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program (McNair Scholars) was created in honor of Dr. Ronald E. McNair, who perished during the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. A third version of Upward Bound called Upward Bound Math Science was created in 1990 to increase careers in math and science professions. The TRIO moniker describing the original programs is used as a source of pride by current participants, alumni, and staff.

Grants for TRIO programs are awarded every five years to educational institutions and community-based organizations based upon a competitive grants process. Each TRIO program serves a specific range of eligible students in a designated area. To be eligible for a TRIO program, students must be a U.S. citizen national, permanent resident, or have applied for permanent residency. Additional criteria include being (or would be) a first-generation college student, residing in a low-income household, and additional program specific guidelines. McNair Scholars is the only TRIO program that considers the ethnicity and race of participants for admission (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

In 2020, TRIO projects served 808,345 students through 3,193 projects, including multiple TRIO programs at Holmes College (U.S. Department of Education, 2021b). TRIO programs have been effective at improving college access, persistence, and completion rates for both low-income and first-generation college students (Addison et al., 2020; Bentz et al., 2019; Constantine et al., 2006; Heuer et al., 2016).

Community College and College Choice

Attending a community college is often viewed through a deficit lens and regarded as undermatching (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Dillon & Smith, 2017; Howell et al., 2013).

Undermatching occurs when students attend a less selective institution than they are academically qualified to attend (Dillon & Smith, 2017). Educators and policymakers have increasingly examined undermatching in their efforts to improve postsecondary completion rates. Researchers report students who attend institutions they are overqualified for are less likely to complete a degree program (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Howell et al., 2013). Conversely, students who attend selective institutions that match their academic profile are more likely to graduate, and earn a higher salary (Attewell & Witteveen, 2017; Horn, 2006; Light & Strayer, 2000; Zhang, 2005). These findings are based on the premise that selective institutions offer additional resources and are of greater academic rigor than less selective institutions. Recent studies have challenged these assertions.

Challenge Success (2018) questioned the long term economic and emotional benefits citing low job satisfaction among graduates of selective institutions (Gallup Inc, 2014), and argued the student's role in their success. This is supported by Carini et al. (2006) who explained student precollege characteristics and expectations are significant determinants of success at selective institutions. The education, experiences, and opportunities available at selective institutions are evident, however the premise of undermatching contributes to the stigma of attending less prestigious institutions. This is of particular concern for students from low-income households whose college choices are more likely to be identified as undermatched. Howell et al. (2013) stated students from low SES backgrounds undermatch 50% of the time. Bowen et al.

(2009) reported African American students, and students with low SES were more likely to undermatch and not graduate. Alternatively, Belasco and Trivette (2015) reported African American students were significantly less likely to undermatch by selectivity.

The binary assessment of enrollment decisions is often determined with inaccurate information. Downey et al. (2017) and Bastedo et al. (2014) explained there is no universal determinant of undermatching. They found significant differences in undermatching based on varying definitions of gender, race, first generation, and SES. Lowry (2017) countered students make an informed decision to attend a two-year institution. Labeling a student's college choice as right or wrong can negatively affect students. Gauthier (2020) discussed the stigmatization of community colleges is demoralizing to students.

Institutional Factors in College Choice

There are a variety of specific institutional factors that students consider when selecting a college. Students consider the type of school, location, campus size, academic programs, athletics, cost, and reputation. In a follow up to the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018), 23,000 students reported the most important factors in selecting a college were: (a) academic reputation, (b) desired program offered, (c) future job placement, (d) cost, and (e) graduate school placement. Aragon et al. (2020) found similar results in a survey of 95,505 first year students at 148 four-year institutions. The top reasons students reported for selecting their school were: (a) academic reputation, (b) employment prospects, (c) academic reputation of intended major, (d) cost, and (e) financial aid package.

Heckert et al. (2016) examined college choice through a consumer decision framework. They argued institutions market themselves and students make decisions in a process akin to selecting consumer goods. Colleges use their most recognizable features to promote their brand and distinguish themselves from other institutions (Heckert et al., 2016). Consistent with prior studies, they reported students valued feedback from family or friends who were familiar with an institution. Further, students indicated the reasons for selecting an institution were: (a) desired major offered, (b) price, (c) visits, (d) perception of others, (e) size, (f) location, and (g) campus environment (Heckert et al., 2016).

When considering institutions, students often compare schools in different categories (Heckert et al., 2016). For example, a student may compare the facilities of a research university and a liberal arts institution without considering the different focus of the schools. Soliz (2018) explained some students view institutions interchangeably, particularly for-profit and community colleges. Researchers have determined that students were more likely to attend for-profit institutions when they considered a limited range of schools, or found attending any college acceptable (Holland, 2020b; Iloh & Tierney, 2014). Chung (2012) found students with limited knowledge of higher education were susceptible to choosing an institution based upon marketing campaigns and name recognition.

Community colleges are often regarded as less desirable postsecondary options. Surveys of students, families and institutional agents have determined there was significant stigma about community colleges. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (2018) reported 54% of students, and 60% of families perceived two-year institutions negatively. Approximately 28% of high school teachers and administrators indicated negative perceptions of

community colleges. In their annual survey of perceptions of postsecondary education, Acosta et al. (2019) reported 22% of participants indicated community colleges were not for people like them.

Government Policy and College Access

The federal and state governments serve vital role in higher education. The federal government uses funding and regulations to provide access, assure equity, and support the advancement of research (Baum et al. 2017). State governments perform similar functions, albeit on a smaller scale and in a manner that varies across the nation (Laderman & Tandberg, 2018). There are three ways in which state and federal governments⁴ can directly affect the college choice process: funding, policy, and information. While there are numerous issues within the aforementioned areas that can impact the postsecondary pathways of students, this review focuses on issues that high school students are likely to be aware of.

The cost of college is a significant factor for students. According to NCES (2018) more than 95% of high school students indicated cost was an important consideration when picking a school. Studies have determined positive correlations between increases in financial aid awards and enrollment gains (Bettinger, 2015; Brinkman & Leslie, 1987; Heller, 1997). In 2018, the federal government invested \$98 billion in federal student aid, including loans, scholarships, grants, and work study (DataLab, 2019). Avery and Hoxby (2004) found students are more likely to attend a school that offers a larger financial aid package. The Federal Pell Grants are an example of how federal policies can affect college enrollment. Pell Grants are need based awards designed to assist students who meet income guidelines with their pursuit of an undergraduate

⁴ Scholars have questioned the effectiveness of federal financial aid programs (Bell et al., 2008), however the efficacy of aid programs is beyond the scope of this paper.

degree (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Researchers and policy experts have credited Pell Grants with increasing college access and improving the postsecondary achievement gains for students from low-income backgrounds (Denning et al., 2019; Horn & Wei, 2009; Parrott & Protopsaltis, 2017). Gonzalez et al. (2021) reported two pilot studies that expanded Pell eligibility for income eligible students pursuing very short-term occupational training, and those with baccalaureate degrees pursuing short term occupational programs in emerging fields, increased enrollment 10% and 20%, respectively. In March 2020, approximately \$12 billion was appropriated under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) for the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) to support postsecondary institutions and students in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (GAO, 2021). Subsequent legislation in December 2020, and March 2021 added additional funds for a total of \$74.9 billion (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education [OESE], 2021a). Between March 13, 2020, and December 31, 2020, more than \$5.8 billion in direct aid was distributed to 8.2 million undergraduate students under HEERF (OESE, 2021b).

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a federal policy which provided undocumented immigrants who came to the United States before the age of 16 temporary protection from deportation (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021). Introduced in 2012 during President Obama's second term, Kuka et al. (2018) found DACA increased undocumented student high school completion and postsecondary enrollment rates. Nienhusser and Oshio (2020) explained DACA motivated undocumented students to pursue higher education. In 2017, President Trump attempted to end DACA which enrolled 700,000 persons (National Immigration Law Center, 2019). At that time, approximately 18% of DACA

participants were enrolled in college, however 44% had completed high school but were not yet enrolled (Batalova et al., 2017). Gonzalez (2010) explained many undocumented students do not pursue higher education because they fear deportation. President Trump's immigration policies created a culture of fear in schools that serve Latino/a/x students and their families (Burkett & Hayes, 2018).

State policies enacted in response to federal regulations have impacted postsecondary options for undocumented students and others. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2021) 22 states enacted legislation or policies that extended in-state tuition rates for public colleges and universities to undocumented students. These steps were necessary because section 505 of The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act prevent undocumented persons from receiving postsecondary benefits from state institutions, unless all United States citizens receive the same benefits without residency restrictions (Adams & Boyne, 2015; Olivérez 2007). Illinois has taken several steps that addressed barriers to pursuing higher education. In 2003, Illinois passed the Higher Education-In State Tuition Act which permitted undocumented students to pay the discounted Illinois resident rate for tuition and fees at public institutions⁵. According to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC, 2021) the Illinois DREAM Fund was created in 2011 to support undocumented students through private scholarships, access to the state's prepaid tuition program, and professional development for institutional agents. In 2019, Illinois developed the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid which enabled students ineligible or unable to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to access state financial aid (ISAC, 2021).

⁵ Persons were eligible if they graduated from a high school in Illinois, or received the equivalency of a high school diploma, and provided an affidavit of their intent to become a permanent resident of the United States.

Federal and state policies that target immigration issues can have a significant effect on persons regardless of their residency status. Dafarty (2018) explained a mixed status family refers to a family whose members have different residency statuses. For example, one parent may be an undocumented immigrant, and their child is a United States citizen. The American Immigration Council (2021) noted 4.4 million adolescents in the United States reside with a parent who is undocumented, and 6.1 million reside with a relative who is undocumented. Relationships and household dynamics are impacted when family members have different immigration statuses (Dreby, 2015). In their study of families with mixed and non-mixed citizenship status, Daftary (2018) found levels of privilege within a family based on the members' immigration status. As siblings with different statuses near the completion of high school, their different opportunities to continue their education become more apparent. Nienhusser and Oshio (2020) explained despite supportive federal and state initiatives, higher education remains considerably more expensive for undocumented students. Aside from the financial aspects, which can affect which institution a student considers, the decision to attend college could impact families whose loved ones are undocumented. Daftary (2018) reported students fear completing college admissions and government forms may highlight the status of undocumented family members increasing their risk of deportation or detention.

College Choice Theories

Whereas early research on college choice centered around why a student did or did not enroll in college, the focus has shifted to understanding where and why a student chooses an institution. Research on college choice has increasingly gained interest from entities outside of higher education, including stakeholders in government, business, technology, and communities

(Behrman et al., 1998; Braxton et al., 1989; Chung, 2012; Gallagher & Hossler, 1987). Federal officials are interested in college choice models for regulatory and accountability reasons.

Braxton et al. (1989) explained that economic and political interests have motivated state and local policy makers to examine college choice models. Public and private institutions have invested significant resources in understanding college choice. As colleges developed enrollment management systems, understanding college choice became integral to recruitment, retention, and student success initiatives (Hossler & Park, 2015).

A variety of college choice theories have been developed and align with one or multiple theoretical frameworks. These include economic approaches, sociological approaches, and combined economic and sociological approaches. College choice models in the economic framework (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Behrman et al., 1998; Paulsen & St. John, 2002) utilize a cost benefit analysis to select an institution (Braxton et al., 1989; Hossler & Park, 2015). Students compare the financial cost, time, and effort required to attend college against future earnings, knowledge, and other benefits of a college education. College choice models in the sociological framework (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna, 2006) consider the social and economic factors that influence college aspirations and decisions (Hossler & Park, 2015). Combined choice models provide a framework for the process and steps in choosing a college (Braxton et al., 1989; Hossler & Park, 2015). In this approach, the college decision process occurs in sequential stages. Chapman (1981), and Litten (1982) proposed models with five stages, which served as the foundation for Gallagher and Hossler's (1987) three stage model. A student decides to attend college during the first stage,

followed by the search process in the second stage, and selects an institution in the third stage (Braxton et al., 1989).

Subsequent college choice models expanded the combined frameworks and incorporated various socioeconomic, socioemotional, and personal characteristics (Hossler et al., 1999). The studies acknowledged that parents, peers, and high-school factors significantly influence the college choice process, however the research was focused on students who graduate and immediately enroll in college without disruption (Freeman, 2005). Common critiques of previous research on college choice models are they rely on unrealistic premises, and they do not adequately account for the experiences of underrepresented groups. Iloh and Tierney (2014) explained that college choice models in the economic and sociological framework presume students make rational decisions, a questionable assumption. Perna (2006) noted seminal theories (Gallagher & Hossler, 1987; Paulsen, 1990) relied heavily on quantitative analysis, and lacked the perspective qualitative data can provide. Behrman et al. (1998) was equally critical of college choice models that were developed from earlier studies which contained questionable quantitative data.

Researchers, educators, and policy makers have acknowledged the narrow focus of early research on college choice (Braxton et al., 1989; Hossler & Park, 2015; Hossler et al., 1999). The models do not account for students whose matriculation is delayed, college plans regress, or have independent status. Andersen (1993) explained research is often centered from the perspective of a *White, middle-class male*, a model of the dominant group. This positions participants who are different to be inherently interpreted as deviations from the norm. Two models that take a

broader inclusive approach are the Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories, and the College-conocimiento framework.

College Conocimiento

Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained there is a gap in knowledge about how Latino/a/x students navigate institutional and individual variables when choosing a college. The author reported Latino/a/x students were underrepresented at colleges with selective admissions criteria and have disparate college completion rates (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Acevedo-Gil (2017) proposed a college framework that accounted for nonlinear college choices, and the intersectional experiences of Latino/a/x students. The model incorporated Anzaldúa's (2015) theory of *conocimiento*, and Perna's (2006) college choice model.

Perna's (2006) college choice model combines economic and sociological themes to understand how students choose a college. The model proposes students receive influence from four perspectives:

- student habitus: a student's beliefs, values, identities, social, and cultural capital
- school and community: school resources and support systems, teachers, counselors
- higher education: location and characteristics of institutions, recruitment efforts
- social, economic, and policy context

According to Acevedo-Gil (2017), while Perna's college choice model does account for institutional and individual factors that influence students, the model does not account for racial and ethnic factors.

Conocimiento is a critical reflective process in which an individual constructs a new way of knowing over seven interdependent stages (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Anzaldúa, 2015). It is a critical theory and entails recognizing, challenging, and changing oppressive conditions. Acevedo-Gil (2017) characterized inequities in educational resources for Latino/a/x students as oppressive. Conocimiento has not been extensively studied, but the theory has been used recently in higher education. Fernández and Magaña Gamero (2018) integrated the theory into a critical reflective writing course for Latino/a/x and Chicanx students.

In Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college conocimiento model, students reflect on college information in relation to their identities. In the seven-step model, students will successfully navigate societal and institutional barriers, and develop a new consciousness which spurs self-advocacy and peer support.

The first step begins when a student has a transformative moment and envisions themselves completing a post-secondary degree. This moment can occur at any time, but it is prompted by the student's habitus, school, and community (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). The student is receptive to college information in step two. Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained family and peers are often the primary source of college information for Latino/a/x students. School counselors and college representatives must also play a proactive role in providing students with information (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).

In the third step, the student begins to consider various academic and financial obstacles to attending college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Support from their school counselor, college representative, or knowledgeable adult is important to helping the student overcome self-doubt.

With support and self-visualizing themselves overcoming obstacles, the student begins planning and applying to colleges in the fourth step, and choosing a college in the fifth step.

In the sixth step, the student is in college. Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained the student may develop imposter syndrome and struggle with belonging in a new environment. These internal challenges can occur in other stages, before the student enrolls in college. In the seventh stage, the student advocates for themselves and engages in advocacy to support other Latino/a/x students (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). This advocacy could be in the form of social action, assuming leadership roles in student governance, and volunteering with organizations.

COVID-19 Pandemic & Education

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Adhanom, 2020). Shortly thereafter, the Governor of the state of Illinois issued a series of mitigation protocols to stop the rapid spread of the disease. On March 13, 2020, the Governor ordered all Illinois public and private pre-kindergarten through secondary schools to close (Exec. Order 2020-05, 2020). Approximately one week later, the Governor issued a statewide stay at home order that ultimately lasted 70 days (Exec. Order 2020-08, 2020). The initial 14-day school closure order was later extended through the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year and all Illinois public school districts transitioned students to remote learning.

The terms remote learning, virtual learning, and online learning are used interchangeably. They describe the process by which educational lessons are delivered digitally with teachers and students in separate locations (Ferri, 2020). During the 2020-2021 academic year, 71% of Illinois public schools implemented remote only, or a combination of remote and in person instruction models (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2021). The potential advantages of remote

learning could not be realized because of the rushed implementation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hash (2021) described the rapid transition from in person instruction to remote learning without the requisite technology, resources, and time to plan as emergency teaching.

Remote learning was stymied by existing inequities in access to technology, insufficient internet bandwidth, and overall health issues (Angrisani, 2020; Freeman et al., 2021; Hash, 2021). In addition to technology issues, Ferri (2020) identified pedagogical challenges as a major obstacle to an effective remote learning plan. The statewide stay at home order in of itself contributed to the difficult learning environment. With childcare facilities closed, teachers described dividing their attention between their students and their own children (Ferri 2020; Hash, 2021). Teachers and students were impacted by repeated quarantines, schedule changes, and internet fatigue (Dorn et al., 2021).

The U.S. Department of Education (2021a) reported the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students' academic growth, exacerbated mental health issues, and increased the risk of harm for those in unsafe homes. While many school districts suspended or postponed standardized assessments during the pandemic (OESE, 2021c), many students showed declines in reading and math achievement compared to pre-pandemic levels (Kuhfeld et al., 2021). On average, students ended the 2020 – 2021 school year five months behind in math, and four months behind in reading (Dorn et al., 2021).

Research indicated students of color, members of underrepresented groups, and families with incomes below the poverty line were disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Doubeni et al., 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) reported racial and ethnic minority groups were disproportionately represented among COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations,

and deaths. African American, Latino/a/x, and students from low-income households had larger achievement declines than other student groups (Dorn et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021a).

The pandemic had a significant impact on college enrollment. In a two-year span, overall undergraduate enrollment decreased 8%, and community college enrollment decreased 15% (NSCHC, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education (2021a) explained students reported forgoing or dropping out of college to act as caregivers for sick family members. The lives and postsecondary plans of high-school seniors were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students lacked regular access to their high school counselors, school resource centers, and peer networks they relied upon for information about college (Freeman et al., 2021). The pandemic created new barriers and mitigated support systems in place to help high school graduates pursue higher education. Nationally, college first-year student enrollment declined 13% in 2020 (NSCHC, 2021). The percentage of Illinois high school graduates who enrolled in college in 2020 decreased four percent from the previous year (Illinois Report Card [IRC], 2021). There was a disproportionate impact on students of color and college enrollment. Studies indicated African American and Latino/a/x students canceled college enrollment plans due to the pandemic at higher rates than White students (Ahn & Dominguez-Villegas, 2022; NCES, 2022). According to the NCES (2022) first-year enrollment of African American students at community colleges decreased 32.2% between fall 2019 and fall 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on the economy, workforce, and public health throughout Illinois. An economic impact study reported the state of Illinois lost \$1.44 billion in total revenue between April 2020 and November 2020 because of COVID-19 (Kriz,

2021). During the same eight-month span, the average unemployment rate in Illinois increased 200% from the previous period (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Economic analysts estimated Illinois will not recover the jobs lost during the pandemic until 2023 (Crane, 2021). The staggering economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic paled in comparison to the overall health effects on society. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health (2021) more than 24,000 residents in Illinois succumbed to the disease. In a weekly survey measuring the impact of COVID-19 on mental health in the U.S., 37% of adult respondents in Illinois reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression in the previous seven days (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by the Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories, and the college-conocimiento framework. These theories account for the racial and ethnic identities of the researcher and participants. Seminal theories on college choice do not adequately reflect the college going experiences of African American, Latino/a/x, first generation, and low-income students.

Gallagher and Hossler's (1987) three stage model is one of the most established college choice models (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2002; Cowan et al., 2006; Perna, 2006). The model described the college decision process as occurring in three sequential phases. The major criticism of the theory is that it is outdated and is not inclusive of underrepresented groups (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Iloh, 2018). Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained that existing college choice models assume family support systems and resources that first generation students often lack. Further, the theories do not sufficiently account for societal, economic, cultural, and academic

inequities (Cowan et al., 2006; Iloh, 2018; Perna, 2006). While subsequent college choice models (Cox, 2016; Perna, 2006; Walpole, 2003) accounted for the influence of various societal and institutional factors, gaps still existed. Acevedo-Gil (2017) combined Anzaldúa's (2002) theory of *concomimiento* with Perna's (2006) college choice model and developed a framework to understand the college choice process for Latino/a/x students. Similarly, Iloh (2018) explained the Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories was created to understand how the various factors in a student's world influence their college decision.

The term college choice is used to describe the college decision process; however, the word choice infers a student has more than one college option available. Iloh (2018) explained the word choice presents a false narrative that minimizes the inequities in access to higher education. Further, Iloh (2018) faults current research on college choice for focusing primarily on four-year institutions.

Iloh (2018) proposed an ecological college choice model that considers the individual environmental factors that impact a student's access to college. The model accounts for different pathways including transfer, returning, part-time, non-degree seeking, and certificate students at community colleges. The model differs from previous college choice models. Iloh (2018) accounts for adult learners who may work full-time or care for a family. Where traditional college choice models presume college is the sole focus in a student's life, Iloh (2018) accepts that a student may exist in multiple realities.

The Iloh model proposed college going decisions and trajectories are influenced by information, time, and opportunity. The three components are not steps; this differs from Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college *concomimiento* model. For example, Jack learns about a new

photography course at his local community college, *information*. Jack confirms that his employer will pay for the course, *opportunity*. In the scenario, Jack is influenced by information and opportunity to take the class. However, the three components are not static. Jack could decide not to take the class if there is a schedule change, *time*, or he does not own the requisite camera equipment, *opportunity*.

Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college *conocimiento* model consists of seven stages through which a student challenges the institutional and societal barriers that threaten their success. The model provides a framework for the unique experiences Latinx students face in the pursuit of higher education.

- El Arrebato: aspirations to attend college
- Nepantla: searching for college information
- Coatlicue: anticipating college obstacles
- El Compromiso: planning and applying to college
- Coyolxauhqui: choosing a college
- A clash of realities: entering and conflicting with college
- Spiritual activism: self-advocacy and peer support

It begins with a transformational moment that changes a student's perspective. They become aware of their potential and realize their college aspirations. Through the stages the student addresses their insecurities and develops the ability to navigate unwelcome environments. The college *conocimiento* model is rooted in critical theory. This is evident throughout the stages when a student simultaneously self-advocates and provides resources to empower their peers.

The Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories, and the college-conocimiento framework are non-linear, and account for the varied and unique experiences Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates may have encountered in pursuing higher education.

Description of the Case

The focus of this case are participants in the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS who graduated in 2020 and 2021. Since 2007, Holmes College has partnered with Alan Kay HS to operate the Upward Bound program at the school. These entities are within the bounds of the case study.

Alan Kay High School

Alan Kay HS is a public four-year secondary school located in western Illinois. In 2020, the school enrolled 4,070 students of whom 89% identified as Hispanic, 7% African American, and 2% White. Less than one percent of students identified as Asian, or American Indian. Most teachers in the district, 76%, identified as White. Approximately 1% identified as Asian, 3% Black, and 18% Hispanic.

Alan Kay HS offers Advanced Placement (AP) courses in science, mathematics, English, history, and world languages. In 2020, 18% of students took one or more AP courses. Overall, 21% of Alan Kay HS students took early college coursework. The school did not administer the state assessment in 2020 due to COVID-19 (OESE, 2021c) however between 2017 and 2019 an average of 15% of students achieved performance on SAT.

Approximately 61% of students were classified as low income based on their household income. Alan Kay HS is designated a Title I school and operated a schoolwide support program to improve academic performance. Armor and Sousa (2016) explained schools with a significant

percentage of students from low-income households are eligible for federal funds to implement school wide initiatives. In 2020, the graduation rate was 75%, and 59% of graduates enrolled in college. Teachers and students at Illinois public schools complete the 5Essentials, an annual measure of school climate. Highlights from the 2021 Alan Kay HS 5Essentials report indicate teachers do not expect students will pursue higher education. It provided 64% of teachers do not expect students to go to college, 78% of teachers indicate students are not planning to go to college, and 20% of teachers do not feel their job is to prepare students to succeed in college.

Holmes College

Holmes College is an Illinois public community college that offers transfer programs, workforce education, pre-college programs, and student services. Holmes College's district encompasses 624 square miles and includes portions of five western Illinois counties. The college operates four campuses, employs 1,108 staff, and enrolls 8,348 students. Approximately 80% of students are enrolled part-time, and 73% are age 24 years and under. The largest racial and ethnic identities of the student body are 56% White, 31% Hispanic or Latino, 8% African American, and 5% Asian.

The college has transfer partnership agreements with more than 25 four-year institutions, and community partnerships with several community agencies. Holmes College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) by the U.S. Department of Education. The college celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2000.

Holmes College Upward Bound Program

In 2007, Holmes College was awarded a five-year grant for an Upward Bound program to serve 50 Alan Kay HS students annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The program

targeted students who resided in low-income households, who would be a first-generation college student, and had an academic need. The objective of the program was to provide academic services and support to assist a cohort of students in completing high school and then enrolling in and earning a post-secondary degree. The Upward Bound program was needed because students at Alan Kay HS faced significant barriers to completing high school and enrolling in college. Holmes College reported that when compared to state and national rates, Alan Kay HS had a significantly higher student dropout rate and low high-school graduation rate.

The Upward Bound program was subsequently refunded in 2012 and 2017 to serve 65 Alan Kay HS students annually. The program served 67 students in 2019 and 2020. The program consisted of a forty-week academic year component, and a six-week summer program. During the academic year component, Holmes College had the exclusive use of a classroom at Alan Kay HS to work with students before, during, and after school.

The program's major services included tutoring, instruction, academic advising, college readiness workshops, assistance with the college admissions and financial aid process, and college visits and cultural enrichment activities. The six-week summer program was designed to simulate a college-going experience and prepare students for the academic rigors of the next grade level.

The program was administratively housed within Holmes College's Student Affairs division. Holmes College was responsible for financial management, personnel management, compliance, and oversight of the program. Alan Kay HS was a collaborative partner however they did not have any administrative responsibilities. The U.S. Department of Education assessed

the performance of Upward Bound programs annually by their progress in achieving six academic objectives each year of the five-year grant period. Upward Bound programs have been effective in assisting students with overcoming socioeconomic barriers in pursuing higher education (Addison et al., 2020; Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014; Harris et al., 2014). A national evaluation of Upward Bound (Arif et. al., 2009) led to faulty results which were used to support budget cuts and policy changes (Cahalan et al., 2018; Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014).

Research Design

This qualitative study will use an instrumental case design to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay High School graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. Qualitative research uses nonnumerical data to understand the behavior and experiences of individuals or situations (Armino et al., 2014). Further, Algozzine and Hancock (2017) explained a qualitative approach is appropriate when a researcher explores multiple factors that may influence the focus of the study.

The study will be guided by constructivism. Constructivism proposes a person can have multiple context specific realities, which are shaped by their experiences, identity, status, culture, and how they view the world (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 2013). Moreover, constructivism is interested in how individuals understand and make meaning of their own experiences. This approach aligns with this study because it accounts for the unique experiences of individual participants in the research.

Methodology

A case study is in an intensive study of an individual, group, or system bound by a specific space and time (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Armino et al. (2014) explained instrumental case studies are about understanding an issue. Instrumental case studies narrow the focus of research to a specific aspect or issue in a situation (Corbett-Whittier & Hamilton, 2013). Yin (2018) explained that case studies are best suited for how and why research questions. Thus, an instrumental case study is appropriate because this study aims to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices.

While an instrumental case study is an appropriate design, there are limitations. Yin (2018) explained the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the limitations of case study research. One of the criticisms of case study research is their results are not generalizable (Cohen et al., 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 2013; Yin, 2018). This criticism is seemingly valid only when viewing qualitative research through a quantitative lens. Quantitative research tests a predetermined hypothesis, while qualitative inquiry is conducted to understand a subject or phenomena (Cohen et al., 2018). This study was conducted to understand the specific issues of an identified group during the specified time period. While generalizability is often used to determine the validity of quantitative research, Yin (2018) suggested transferability is more applicable when assessing case study findings.

Research Site

The research site will be Alan Kay HS, a public four-year high school in western IL. Since 2007, Holmes College has partnered with Alan Kay HS to operate the Upward Bound program at the school.

Participants

Participants will consist of students in the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS who graduated in 2020 and 2021. Students will be invited to participate regardless of their post-secondary enrollment status. All students are included because the focus of the research is understanding post-secondary pathways and college choices.

The participants will be selected using a purposive sample. Utilizing a purposive sampling in case studies ensures the inclusion of participants who can provide data of the specific issue being studied (Cohen et al., 2018). A minimum of 10 participants will be included in the study. The maximum number of participants will be 33, the total number of graduates in the 2020 and 2021 cohort. This is a sufficient sample size. Yin (2018) explained the sample size of a case study is determined by the purpose of the research.

An Alan Kay HS staff member will also be invited to participate in the study. They can provide insight into how the school prepared students for postsecondary success. Their participation is desired because they can provide qualitative data necessary to answer the research questions. Additional staff identified during interviews will be invited to participate in the study. Once data saturation (Baker et al., 2018a) is reached, no further participants will be sought. All participants will have attained the legal age for consent prior to being recruited for participation.

I will recruit participants by sending the identified students and the Alan Kay HS staff member an email inviting them to participate in the study. The email will state the purpose of the research, the expected time commitment, and explain their participation is voluntary and they

may stop at any time. I will follow up with a phone call and or text message to request their participation.

Three important ethical principles when conducting research with persons are do not harm participants, obtain informed consent, and maintain confidentiality (Cohen et al., 2018). It is imperative that researchers consider the ways and likelihood a person could be harmed by participating in a study. Qualitative research is not value free and can result in unforeseen consequences (Huberman et al., 2020). Foreseeable risks to participants in this study are feeling embarrassed, ashamed, or disappointed in their postsecondary plans. To reduce the likelihood of harm, I will confirm participants have willingly consented to engage in the survey, check that participants' information is reported accurately, and maintain the privacy of the data.

Kaiser (2009) explained that maintaining the confidentiality of participants while presenting detailed findings is a unique challenge of qualitative research. Qualitative research produces rich, detailed, and in-depth data that could be used to identify participants. A reader familiar with the research site could parse details and identify a participant. I will control for this by addressing confidentiality throughout each phase of the research process. I will assign each participant a pseudonym which will be used when collecting and analyzing data. Participant names and pseudonyms will be stored in a separate electronic file. All identifying characteristics will be changed, and uniquely identifiable information that cannot be changed will not be included in the research findings. Electronic data will be secured in an encrypted drive on a password protected computer and backed up on an encrypted drive. Paper documents including consent forms, field notes, and artifacts will be secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office. I am the only person who will have access to the data. These procedures help protect the

confidentiality of participants (Armino et al., 2014; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018; Huberman et al., 2020; Kaiser, 2009).

Data Collection

Data will be collected through individual interviews, and document analysis. The collection protocols will be specific to the type of information being collected. Yin (2018) explained the importance of triangulation when conducting a case study. Researchers should collect data from multiple sources to support the same finding.

The primary sources of data for this study will come from individual interviews with the student participants and an Alan Kay HS staff member. Interviews can elicit unique and rich data from the perspective of participants (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Turner, 2010). I will interview each student participant twice with the initial interview taking approximately 60 – 90 minutes, and the follow up interview taking approximately 30 – 60 minutes. I will use the initial interview to develop a rapport with the participant, gather information about their background, and early experiences in high school. Additional questions will focus on their experience navigating the college search process during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resources and support systems they used.

I will use the second interview to summarize the participants' initial account and check the accuracy of my interpretations. Member checking is used to improve the credibility and validity of a study (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I will also ask participants specific questions to follow up on information collected during the first interview. Additional questions will focus on their experiences after graduating high school.

I will interview the Alan Kay HS staff member twice with the initial interview taking approximately 45 – 60 minutes, and the follow up interview taking approximately 30 – 45 minutes. The initial interview with the Alan Kay HS staff member will focus on developing a rapport, gathering information about their role, and exploring their experiences supporting students' post-secondary plans during the pandemic. I will use the second interview to summarize their initial account and check the accuracy of my interpretations.

The interviews will be semi-structured and consist of open-ended questions, as well as follow up questions generated by the discussion. Turner (2010) advised open-ended questions provide participants an opportunity to elaborate and contribute detailed information and allows the researcher to ask additional probative questions. The Interviews will be conducted in person, when possible, at the Holmes County Public Library, Holmes County Park District, or Nineteen Coffee Shop (pseudonyms). These facilities provide private meeting rooms, are likely easily accessible to participants, and are neutral locations. Algozzine and Hancock (2017) explained conducting interviews in neutral locations free from distractions can make participants comfortable and elicit quality information. Interviews may also be completed virtually utilizing the Zoom platform. Virtual interviews are a suitable alternative when logistical challenges prevent in person interviews (Ambagtsheer et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020). Virtual interviews allow researchers to observe a participant's body language during an interview. This nonverbal data usually only collected during in person interviews, can greatly enhance findings. In person interviews will be audio recorded, and virtual interviews will be video and audio recorded. I will verify a completed informed consent form has been received and confirm consent for audio and video recording before beginning the interview.

I will take field notes sparingly during the interview. My field notes will be used to record any non-verbal communication that give context to verbal communication that would not be apparent in a recording.

I will request participants submit copies of admission essays, personal statements, and social media posts regarding significant personal views about higher education, generated between March 2020 and their first date of post-secondary enrollment. Social media posts may reveal relevant views or opinions that participants did not recall. In a study of social media usage among students, Alhabash and Ma (2017) reported self-documentation was one of the primary motivating factors students engaged on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These documents may provide additional insight or clarity about data constructed within the bounds of the case study. Participants may print artifacts or email them to my student account. All identifiable information will be redacted upon receipt.

Data Analysis

A systematic analysis of the data will be conducted throughout the collection period. When conducting case study research, information should be continuously examined as it is collected. The simultaneous collection and analysis of data allows opportunities to develop new questions that answer the main research questions (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017). I will listen to the interview recording and have them transcribed verbatim. Transcripts of the recorded interviews will be checked for accuracy and summarized. I will review the summaries with the participants during their second interview to verify I have accurately portrayed their perspective. Shenton (2004) explained this is a critical step in the data analysis process and supports the trustworthiness of the research.

Coding is the process through which a researcher discovers meaning in the data they have collected. It is the second step in the data analysis process and is the systematic categorization of data to identify themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). I will review the interview transcript, and written artifacts line by line, repeatedly, as I code. Saldaña (2021) explained coding data is a cyclical process and requires multiple cycles to identify the most important aspects of the data. I will use a deductive coding process to begin analyzing the data. In this approach, I will develop the initial codes and categories before I begin coding. The codes are: (a) COVID-19, (b) college process, (c) influence factors, (d) support resources, and (e) feelings. This approach follows critical realism ontology and allows for the addition, revision, and removal of codes as the analysis progresses (Fletcher, 2017). My codes will determine the categories I use. Categories are groups of codes that share a characteristic or pattern (Saldaña, 2021). After the initial coding, I will review the patterns and identify themes. As themes develop, I will use analytic memos to reflect on the data and conceptualize my thoughts. Huberman et al. (2020) described analytic memos as one of the most powerful instruments a researcher can use to understand their data.

Data will be maintained in a secure computer file. The participant data will be kept separate from the researcher's report. Yin (2018) explained the security benefits of utilizing electronic storage. It is important to store participants' raw data and the researcher's material separately. This will enable future readers to compare the findings and raw data, which increases the reliability of the study (Yin, 2018).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of case studies is often questioned because validity and reliability are measured differently in qualitative and quantitative research (Cohen et al., 2018; Shenton, 2004). The quality of a case study is determined by credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2018). One of the most critical factors in the quality of a study is the researcher who is conducting the project. The researcher's qualifications, experience, and assumptions are central to the quality and trustworthiness of their study. Huberman et al. (2020) described credibility as being determined by the subjects of a study and the readers of its findings. I will address credibility by reviewing my research protocols with my dissertation committee, triangulating data, and member checking.

Transferability is the process of applying the findings of a study to other contexts (Huberman et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). The value of a study is typically measured by its breadth of application. However, the bounded format of a case study can limit or negate transferability. I will address transferability by providing a rich and thorough description of the case and participants. Guba and Lincoln (1989) explained a researcher cannot determine if their work is transferable to other situations. Rather, a researcher should provide sufficient information that allow readers to assess if a study is applicable to their area.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) described dependability as an assessment of the research process, and confirmability as an assessment of the results or product of the study. Both criteria are equally important to establishing trustworthiness. I will address dependability and

confirmability by reviewing my research protocols with my dissertation committee, triangulating data, and member checking.

Researcher Positionality

Carl and Ravitch (2016) explained that a researcher's identity, experiences, and beliefs influence every aspect of their study. My worldview shapes the purpose of my research, the questions I ask, how I interpret the data, and how it is presented. Drawing upon my background and existing knowledge can allow a better understanding of the data, and strengthens the credibility of the project (Maxwell, 2012). Of my various identities, my profession as an educator, will have the most impact on this study. From my experience working with first-generation college students, I understand the barriers and challenges students face in seeking higher education. My professional position provides me access to and familiarity with research participants.

Since 2012 I have worked as the Upward Bound Manager at Holmes College, and I directly oversee the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS. Because of this connection I am considered an insider (Mercer, 2007). Some of the risks when conducting inside research are an imbalance of power, blurred boundaries, and researcher bias. To mitigate these risks, I will seek approval from Holmes College's Institutional Review Board, review my research protocols with my dissertation committee, and regularly consult with my dissertation chair.

Conclusion

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. This qualitative study is guided by the Iloh model of college going decisions and

trajectories, and the college-conocimiento framework. This study is significant because it will provide an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the college decision process, access to support systems for college planning, and post-secondary plans

CHAPTER TWO

HIGH SCHOOL INTERRUPTED: A CASE STUDY OF POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS AND COLLEGE CHOICES FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the aftermath of the initial COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, higher education experts predicted students would reevaluate their post-secondary plans due to the cumulative effects of the pandemic (Community Design Partners, 2020; NICHE 2020; Patch, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Community college enrollment was projected to increase, based on enrollment patterns during previous economic downturns and predicted changes in student behavior (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019; Barrow & Davis, 2012; Schueler, 2020). Instead, community colleges experienced significant enrollment declines compared to other institutions (Freeman et al., 2021; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCHC], 2020). According to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic was a leading factor in fall 2020 headcount enrollment declines at two-year institutions in the state of Illinois. While many institutions increased online courses and expanded virtual support services for students, fall 2020 headcount enrollment at Illinois community colleges decreased 13.7% from fall 2019 (ICCB, 2020a).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing enrollment challenges at Holmes College (pseudonym), a public community college in western Illinois. Holmes College's enrollment challenges cannot be dismissed as an unpreventable consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prevailing assumptions about enrollment may not be accurate (Ho, 2020), and existing college

decision models do not account for the effects of a worldwide pandemic (Bobek & Schnieders, 2023).

Since 2007, Holmes College has operated an Upward Bound program at Alan Kay High School (pseudonym; Alan Kay HS). The program targeted potential first-generation college students who reside in low-income households. The objective of the program was to provide academic services and support to students in earning a post-secondary degree. The program was integrated into Alan Kay HS and was designed for intensive contact with students multiple times per day, five days per week. The COVID-19 pandemic required Holmes College completely change operations and how the Upward Bound program delivered services. Between March 2020 and April 2021 all academic services, advising activities, and student contact were conducted virtually. Additionally, many of the college transition support activities that were designed for peer interaction could not be effectively replicated in a virtual environment. While the pandemic affected the experience of all program participants, there was a significant impact on students in their senior year.

This instrumental case study was conducted to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. This qualitative study focused on participants in the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS who graduated in 2020 and 2021. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary choices?
2. How did Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates make their post-secondary decisions?
3. What influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary plans?

4. What support systems do Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates utilize to plan for life after high school?

This study was significant because it provided an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary plans. The study provided important information about the college decision process for participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also provided insight into participants' access to and use of support systems for college planning.

Literature Review

This literature review begins with an overview of college choice theories. It continues with a discussion of the factors that influence the college decision process, and how high schools support postsecondary access. The review concludes with a review of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on students.

College Choice Theories

A variety of college choice theories have been developed and align with one or multiple theoretical frameworks. These include economic approaches, sociological approaches, and combined economic and sociological approaches. College choice models in the economic framework (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Behrman et al., 1998; Paulsen & St. John, 2002) utilize a cost benefit analysis to select an institution (Braxton et al., 1989; Hossler & Park, 2015). Students compare the financial cost, time, and effort required to attend college against future earnings, knowledge, and other benefits of a college education. College choice models in the sociological framework (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2002; McDonough, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna, 2006) consider the social and economic factors that influence college aspirations

and decisions (Hossler & Park, 2015). Combined choice models provide a framework for the process and steps in choosing a college (Braxton et al., 1989; Hossler & Park, 2015). In this approach, the college decision process occurs in sequential stages. Gallagher and Hossler's (1987) three stage model is one of the most established choice models (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2002; Cowan et al., 2006; Perna, 2006). The model described the college decision process as occurring in three sequential phases. A student decides to attend college during the first stage, followed by the search process in the second stage, and selects an institution in the third stage (Braxton et al., 1998).

Subsequent college choice models expanded the combined frameworks and incorporated various socioeconomic, socioemotional, and personal characteristics (Hossler et al., 1999). The studies acknowledged that parents, peers, and high-school factors significantly influence the college choice process; however, the research was focused on students who graduate and immediately enroll in college without disruption (Freeman, 2005). Common critiques of previous research on college choice models are they rely on unrealistic premises, and they do not adequately account for the experiences of underrepresented groups. Iloh and Tierney (2014) explained that college choice models in the economic and sociological framework presume students make rational decisions, a questionable assumption. Perna (2006) noted seminal theories (e.g., Gallagher & Hossler, 1987; Paulsen, 1990) relied heavily on quantitative analysis, and lacked the perspective qualitative data can provide. Behrman et al. (1998) was equally critical of college choice models that were developed from earlier studies which contained questionable quantitative data.

Researchers, educators, and policy makers have acknowledged the narrow focus of early research on college choice (Braxton et al., 1989; Hossler & Park, 2015; Hossler et al., 1999). The models do not account for students whose matriculation is delayed, college plans regress, or have independent status. Andersen (1993) explained research is often centered from the perspective of a White, middle-class male, a model of the dominant group. Persons and groups outside of those descriptors are perceived as deviations from the norm. Two models that take a broader inclusive approach are the College-conocimiento framework, and the Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories.

College Conocimiento

Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained there is a gap in knowledge about how Latinx students navigate institutional and individual variables when choosing a college. Acevedo-Gil proposed a college framework that accounted for nonlinear college choices, and the intersectional experiences of Latinx students. The model incorporated Anzaldúa's (2015) theory of *conocimiento*, and Perna's (2006) college choice model.

Perna's (2006) college choice model combines economic and sociological themes to understand how students choose a college. The model proposes students receive influence from four perspectives: (a) student habitus, (b) school and community resources, (c) higher education characteristics and outreach, and (d) social issues, economic factors, and public policy.

According to Acevedo-Gil (2017), Perna's college choice model does account for institutional and individual factors that influence students, but the model does not account for racial and ethnic factors.

Conocimiento is a critical reflective process in which an individual constructs a new way of knowing over seven interdependent stages (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Anzaldúa, 2015). It is a critical theory and entails recognizing, challenging, and changing oppressive conditions. Acevedo-Gil (2017) characterized inequities in educational resources for Latinx students as oppressive. In Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college conocimiento model, students reflect on college information in relation to their identities. Through seven-steps, students successfully navigate societal and institutional barriers, and develop a new consciousness which spurns self-advocacy and peer support.

The first step begins when a student has a transformative moment and envisions themselves completing a post-secondary degree. This moment can occur at any time, but it is prompted by the student's habitus, school, and community (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). The student is receptive to college information in step two. Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained family and peers are often the primary source of college information for Latinx students. School counselors and college representatives must also play a proactive role in providing students with information (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).

In the third step, the student begins to consider various academic and financial obstacles to attending college (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). Support from their school counselor, college representative, or knowledgeable adult is important to help the student overcome self-doubt. With support, the student visualizes themselves overcoming obstacles and begins applying to colleges in the fourth step and chooses a college in the fifth step.

In the sixth step, the student is in college and may develop imposter syndrome and struggle with belonging in a new environment (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). These internal challenges

can also occur in other stages before the student enrolls in college. In the seventh stage, the student advocates for themselves and engages in advocacy to support other Latinx students (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). This advocacy could be in the form of social action, assuming leadership roles in student governance, or volunteering with organizations.

Iloh Model of College Going Decisions and Trajectories

Iloh (2018) proposed an ecological college choice model that considers the individual environmental factors that impact a student's access to college. The model accounts for different pathways including transfer, returning, part-time, non-degree seeking, and certificate students at community colleges. The model differs from previous college choice models and accounts for adult learners who may work full-time or care for a family. Where traditional college choice models presume college is the sole focus in a student's life, Iloh (2018) accepts that a student may exist in multiple realities.

The Iloh model proposed college going decisions and trajectories are influenced by information, time, and opportunity. The three components are not steps; this differs from Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college *conocimiento* model. For example, Jack learns about a new photography course at his local community college, *information*. Jack confirms that his employer will pay for the course, *opportunity*. In the scenario, Jack is influenced by information and opportunity to take the class. However, the three components are not static. Jack could decide not to take the class if there is a schedule change, *time*, or he does not own the requisite camera equipment, *opportunity*. The Iloh model simplifies the complex nuances in a student's life.

Factors that Influence College Choice

Hossler and Park (2015) described race and ethnicity as one of the most cited factors in college choice research. The focus is often on African American, Latinx, and White students; while Asian American and Pacific Islander students are frequently overlooked (Allen et al., 2004; Haviland et al., 2015; Suzuki, 2002). Further, literature on college choice has often addressed race and ethnicity in a monolithic and exclusive manner. In this approach, a researcher would investigate the obstacles an African American student, or a Jewish student may face, but not the challenges an African American Jewish student may encounter. Specific groups were viewed as undifferentiated and having the same experiences. Thus, it is important to understand how college going is mediated by different social identities including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Researchers have differed on the effects of race and ethnicity on college aspiration. Briggs et al. (1997) purported that African American and Latino students' aspirations to attend college were lower than students in other racial and ethnic groups. Pitre (2006) found African American students aspired to attend college at the same rate as White students. Other studies (Battle et al., 2010; Kao & Tienda, 1998) alleged racial disparities in achievement gaps were caused in part by insufficient levels of aspiration. In some instances, racial stereotypes have been disguised as positive generalizations. For example, the model minority myth has been used to propound the intellectual superiority of Asian American students (Kang et al., 2018; Suzuki, 2002) and validated the bootstrap fallacy. The premise that societal inequities could be overcome through hard work alone has been used to blame individuals for their experiences.

Hossler et al. (1999) and Freeman (1999) theorized that ethnicity in of itself does not affect aspiration, but a student's experiences based on their ethnicity can influence aspiration. In other words a student's race does not determine the postsecondary goals they set for themselves; however their lived experiences can affect their college aspirations. This is supported by Pitre (2006) who explained students lowered their postsecondary aspirations when they felt their high school was not preparing them academically for college, and Bishop et al. (2021) who reported female students of color limited their postgraduate aspirations as their perception of racial, ethnic, and gender barriers increased. Researchers (Freeman, 2005; Lewis & Pattison, 2010) explained that disproven tropes about African American and Latino student ambition have been used to explain academic achievement gaps, instead of acknowledging real inequities.

The role of family has a significant influence in college choice process. Several studies have found similarities and differences in cultural factors that influence the college choice process. Family has been universally regarded as an integral component of the college choice process. Researchers have traditionally only considered the actions of parents when describing family involvement (Perna & Titus, 2005). This narrow view can limit the study of students with broad and inclusive definitions of family. Freeman (2005; 1998) explained African American students' families play a significant role in the college decision process. In African American cultures, family often includes immediate and extended family members, and non-relatives with whom there is a close relationship. In their qualitative study of student resources and networks, McDonough and Pérez (2008) found Latina/o/x high school students relied heavily on their peers, siblings, and other family members to aid in their college search. They reported Latina/o/x students developed networks that included extended family members, and persons they did not

know, but who were known to trusted family members in their college choice process. In their study of Southeast Asian American students, Kang et al. (2018) explained parents, siblings, and extended relatives were closely involved in the college decision process. It is important to respect and be aware of the role family may play in a student's life.

A student's SES can affect their post-secondary aspirations, college matriculation, and the selectivity of the college they attend (Allen et al., 2004; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Enberg et al., 2016; Lynch & Wells, 2012; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Walpole, 2003). Multiple studies have identified disparities in college readiness, enrollment, and completion rates of students from different SES backgrounds. Barmer et al. (2019) explained students from low SES backgrounds self-reported lower educational attainment goals than students from middle and high SES backgrounds. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found a 26% gap in the rate of college applications submitted between students from low SES backgrounds and high SES backgrounds. In a follow up to the national high school longitudinal study of 2009, Baum and Ma (2016) reported 28% of students in the lowest SES category had enrolled in college compared to 78% of students in the highest SES category.

Family income, parent education, and occupation are the primary measures of SES. Of the three components, parent occupation has the least influence on college matriculation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Lynch & Wells, 2012). A family with a higher annual income is more likely to reside in a neighborhood where schools have sufficient resources. A report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2018) determined students who attended high poverty public high schools⁶ had less access to college preparatory courses. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001)

⁶ High poverty refers to schools where more than 75 % of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

found high school students from low SES backgrounds were 24% less likely to be academically prepared for higher education. A family with a higher annual income is more likely to have access to academic support services and extracurricular activities that are desired by selective enrollment institutions (Enberg et al., 2016).

The educational attainment level of parents is a predictor of college enrollment (Lynch & Wells, 2012). It is assumed that a parent with a college degree possesses the knowledge and experience to help their child navigate the college admissions process and critical deadlines. A parent with a college degree is more likely to discuss higher education with their child earlier and set an expectation of attending college (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Parents who have earned a college degree can provide their children with valuable cultural capital. For instance, Bowen and Lee (2006) studied the relationship between parental involvement and cultural capital. They reported parents or caregivers who possess an associate degree or higher have more frequent academic conversations with their child and have higher educational expectations.

Students from low SES backgrounds are at increased risk of encountering barriers that postpone higher education. Parental job loss, decrease in family income, increased student responsibilities, and poor academic performance are all factors that can interrupt a student's postsecondary path (Cox, 2016). Lynch and Wells (2012) reported students from low SES backgrounds were more likely to plan delaying college. Data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (Bozick & Lauff, 2007) found that high school graduates in the lowest family income quartile had the highest rates of delayed postsecondary enrollment, and not enrolling out of all income groups. It is widely accepted that students who delay enrolling in college are less likely to enroll later.

Institutional Factors in College Choice

There are a variety of specific institutional factors that students consider when selecting a college. Students consider the type of school, location, campus size, academic programs, athletics, cost, and reputation. In a follow up to the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018), 23,000 students reported the most important factors in selecting a college were: (a) academic reputation, (b) desired program offered, (c) future job placement, (d) cost, and (e) graduate school placement. Aragon et al. (2020) found similar results in a survey of 95,505 first-year students at 148 four-year institutions. The top reasons students reported for selecting their school were: (a) academic reputation, (b) employment prospects, (c) academic reputation of intended major, (d) cost, and (e) financial aid package.

Heckert et al. (2016) examined college choice through a consumer decision framework. They argued institutions market themselves and students make decisions in a process akin to selecting consumer goods. Colleges use their most recognizable features to promote their brand and distinguish themselves from other institutions (Heckert et al., 2016). Consistent with prior studies, they reported students valued feedback from family or friends who were familiar with an institution. Further, students indicated the reasons for selecting an institution were: (a) desired major offered, (b) price, (c) visits, (d) perception of others, (e) size, (f) location, and (g) campus environment (Heckert et al., 2016).

When considering institutions, students often compare schools in different categories (Heckert et al., 2016). For example, a student may compare the facilities of a research university and a liberal arts institution without considering the different focus of the schools. Soliz (2018)

explained some students view institutions interchangeably, particularly for-profit and community colleges. Researchers have determined that students were more likely to attend for-profit institutions when they considered a limited range of schools, or found attending any college acceptable (Holland, 2020b; Iloh & Tierney, 2014). Chung (2012) found students with limited knowledge of higher education were susceptible to choosing an institution based upon marketing campaigns and name recognition.

The racial and ethnic composition of a college campus can be a factor for some students. Holland (2020a) investigated how African American students consider campus diversity in the college choice process. They found that students' experiences in high school influenced the level of importance they placed on diversity. African American students who preferred to attend an HBCU cited instances of bias from teachers, racial inequities, and segregated social groups (Holland, 2020a). Other studies (Ameen, 2020; Freeman & Thomas, 2002) found alumni recommendations, and a desire for cultural exploration have led African American students to attend an HBCU.

For some students, a diverse student body is not desirable. Holland (2020a) explained African American students who preferred to attend a PWI cited the superior benefits of a diverse campus or the desire to attend a more selective institution. They described students rationalizing the decision to attend a PWI with negative connotations about HBCUs as indicative of the *White racial frame*. The White racial frame is a world view that embraces racial stereotypes, prejudices, and ideologies that support White norms, and practice otherism (Feagin, 2013). Conversely, Freeman and Thomas (2002) explained African American students were motivated to attend PWI's because of academic reputation and financial aid packages.

While Holland (2020a) found African American students' college decisions were influenced by the make-up of their high school, earlier studies had different findings. Butler (2010) reported the ethno-racial make-up of high schools was a factor for Latina/o/x students, but not African American students. Latina/o/x students strongly considered campus diversity when they attended high schools where their ethno-racial identities were the majority, and less so when other identities were prevalent. In contrast, Butler (2010) reported Latina/o/x students who graduated in the top 10%, or whose parents held college degrees preferred to attend colleges with low enrollment of Latina/o/x students. Butler (2010) found family, peers, and diversity were significant factors in what school African American students chose to attend. Their study determined African American students considered the diversity of students and faculty at an institution, and prioritized schools where family and peers attended. There is limited research on how campus demographics impact the college decisions of Asian American students. However, in a limited study of Asian American students enrolled at an HBCU, Maramba et al. (2015) found specific programs, affordability, and school location were deciding factors in the college decision process.

Where a college is located can be an important factor in the college choice process. An area's political climate, demographics, weather phenomena, and distance from home are considered. Previous qualitative and quantitative studies have identified ethnic and cultural factors that make the location of a school a deciding factor. Familism is the concept in which the needs of a family take precedence over the individual (Bámaca-Colbert & Hernández, 2016). Fuligni and Hardway (2006) studied family relationships and found Mexican American children have a significant sense of family obligation. This internalized feeling of responsibility can lead

a student to selecting an institution closer to their family, or forgoing college. Desmond and Turley (2009) explained Latino/a/x students were likely to prioritize their family when making postsecondary plans. The research showed a consensus that Latino/a/x students are more likely than other groups to live at home and attend local postsecondary institutions (Atwell et al., 2018; Bowers & Núñez, 2011; Ceja, 2004; McDonough & Pérez, 2008; Ovink, 2014; Perna, 2000; Vega, 2018).

Allen et al. (2004) reported differences in the importance of location among Asian American ethnic groups. They found Filipino American and Southeast Asian American students gave greater consideration to school location than Japanese American and Korean American students.

Community College and College Choice

Community colleges are often regarded as less desirable postsecondary options. Surveys of students, families, and institutional agents have determined there was significant stigma about community colleges. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (2018) reported 54% of students, and 60% of families perceived two-year institutions negatively. Approximately 28% of high school teachers and administrators indicated negative perceptions of community colleges. In their annual survey of perceptions of postsecondary education, Acosta et al. (2019) reported 22% of participants indicated community colleges were not for people like them.

Attending a community college is often viewed through a deficit lens and regarded as undermatching (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Dillon & Smith, 2017; Howell et al., 2013). Undermatching occurs when students attend a less selective institution than they are

academically qualified to attend (Dillon & Smith, 2017). Educators and policymakers have increasingly examined undermatching in their efforts to improve postsecondary completion rates. Researchers report students who attend institutions they are overqualified for are less likely to complete a degree program (Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Howell et al., 2013). Conversely, students who attend selective institutions that match their academic profile are more likely to graduate, and earn a higher salary (Attewell & Witteveen, 2017; Horn, 2006; Light & Strayer, 2000; Zhang, 2005). These findings are based on the premise that selective institutions offer additional resources and are of greater academic rigor than less selective institutions. Recent studies have challenged these assertions.

Challenge Success (2018) questioned the long term economic and emotional benefits citing low job satisfaction among graduates of selective institutions (Gallup Inc, 2014), and argued the student's role in their success. This is supported by Carini et al. (2006) who explained student precollege characteristics and expectations are significant determinants of success at selective institutions. The education, experiences, and opportunities available at selective institutions are evident; however, the premise of undermatching contributes to the stigma of attending less prestigious institutions. This is of particular concern for students from low-income households whose college choices are more likely to be identified as undermatched. Howell et al. (2013) stated students from low SES backgrounds undermatch 50% of the time. Bowen et al. (2009) reported African American students, and students with low SES were more likely to undermatch and not graduate. Alternatively, Belasco and Trivette (2015) reported African American students were significantly less likely to undermatch by selectivity.

The binary assessment of enrollment decisions is often determined with inaccurate information. Downey et al. (2017) and Bastedo et al. (2014) explained there is no universal determinant of undermatching. They found significant differences in undermatching based on varying definitions of gender, race, first generation, and SES. Lowry (2017) countered students make an informed decision to attend a two-year institution. Labeling a student's college choice as right or wrong can negatively affect students. Gauthier (2020) described the stigmatization of community colleges as demoralizing to students.

High School and Institutional Agents

High schools play an important role in the college choice process. McDonough (1997) listed high schools as one the factors that determines how a student perceives their college opportunities. High schools prepare students for postsecondary success by providing information about postsecondary options and supporting students and their families as they navigate the college admissions process. (Bowen et al., 2009).

According to Duncheon and Knight (2020), the most important factors to establishing a college going culture at a school involve actions taken by counselors and teachers. High school guidance counselors are typically tasked with coordinating a school's college service. This consists of arranging college visits, delivering workshops, assisting with college, financial aid, and scholarship applications, and conducting parent outreach (Coca et al., 2011). McDonough (2007) explained guidance counselors develop the worldview a school provides students about postsecondary options. They construct this view based upon their perception of students' abilities and the general expectations of administration, parents, and the community. High schools often serve as a student's primary source of information about colleges (Coca et al., 2011). Having

accurate information about college is critical to actualizing postsecondary plans. Students and parents from low SES backgrounds lack clear information about college costs which can impact their postsecondary plans (Horn & Velez, 2018). Horn and Velez (2018) found 44% of students in the lowest SES category overestimated the cost of public universities.

The approach counselors utilize to advise students is important. Holland (2020b) explained counselors should alter their postsecondary advising strategy based on that student's knowledge of institutions, and the evaluation method they will use. The advising process can be counterproductive if a student does not understand the difference in institutional type, size, location, academic offerings, and cost.

Counselors and teachers have a strong influence on a student's academic trajectory (Howell et al., 2012). Counselors serve as opportunity gatekeepers. They are a point of contact for college representatives, college access programs, organizations that provide scholarship, and other unique opportunities. Studies have determined high schools can have a greater impact on postsecondary enrollment than college entrance exams (Deming et al., 2015). Duncheon and Relles (2019) discussed the importance of high schools establishing connections with colleges and college access programs. First generation students and those who come from low SES backgrounds may not have established connections to alumni of selective enrollment institutions, or college representatives with insight into early deadlines. This is critical for high poverty schools where students may lack sufficient social capital to pursue higher education.

TRIO Programs

TRIO is the name of eight federal programs designed to assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities in their pursuit of higher

education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The first program, Upward Bound, was developed as a part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The U.S. Department of Education continuously expanded TRIO programs throughout the United States, territories, and commonwealths with amendments and reauthorizations of the Higher Education Act (Armesto & McElroy, 1998). Upward Bound programs work with a specific target high school to serve a cohort of high school students. Some programs were integrated within a high school and considered an institutional agent.

Grants for TRIO programs are awarded every five years to educational institutions and community-based organizations based upon a competitive grants process. Each TRIO program serves a specific range of eligible students in a designated area. To be eligible for a TRIO program, students must be a U.S. citizen national, permanent resident, or have applied for permanent residency. Additional criteria include being (or would be) a first-generation college student, residing in a low-income household, and additional program specific guidelines. McNair Scholars is the only TRIO program that considers the ethnicity and race of participants for admission (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

In 2020, TRIO projects served 808,345 students through 3,193 projects, including three TRIO programs at Holmes College (U.S. Department of Education, 2021b). TRIO programs have been effective at improving college access, persistence, and completion rates for both low-income and first-generation college students (Addison et al., 2020; Bentz et al., 2019; Constantine et al., 2006; Heuer et al., 2016).

COVID-19 Pandemic and Education

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Adhanom, 2020). Shortly thereafter, the Governor of the state of Illinois issued a series of mitigation protocols to stop the rapid spread of the disease. On March 13, 2020, the Governor ordered all Illinois public and private pre-kindergarten through secondary schools to close (Exec. Order 2020-05, 2020). Approximately one week later, the Governor issued a statewide stay at home order which ultimately lasted 70 days (Exec. Order 2020-08, 2020). The initial 14-day school closure order was later extended through the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year and all Illinois public school districts transitioned students to remote learning⁷. During the 2020-2021 academic year, 71% of Illinois public schools implemented remote only, or a combination of remote and in person instruction models (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2021).

The potential advantages of remote learning could not be realized because of the rushed implementation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hash (2021) described the rapid transition from in person instruction to remote learning without the requisite technology, resources, and time to plan as emergency teaching. Remote learning was further stymied by existing inequities in access to technology, insufficient internet bandwidth, and overall health issues (Angrisani, 2020; Freeman et al., 2021; Hash, 2021). In addition to technology issues, Ferri (2020) identified pedagogical challenges as a major obstacle to an effective remote learning plan. The statewide stay at home order in of itself contributed to the difficult learning

⁷ The terms remote learning, virtual learning, and online learning are used interchangeably. They describe the process by which educational lessons are delivered digitally with teachers and students in separate locations (Ferri, 2020).

environment. With childcare facilities closed, teachers described dividing their attention between their students and their own children (Ferri 2020; Hash, 2021).

The U.S. Department of Education (2021a) reported the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students' academic growth, exacerbated mental health issues, and increased the risk of harm for those in unsafe homes. While many school districts suspended or postponed standardized assessments during the pandemic (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education [OESE], 2021c), many students showed declines in reading and math achievement compared to pre-pandemic levels (Kuhfeld et al., 2021). On average, students ended the 2020 – 2021 school year five months behind in math, and four months behind in reading (Dorn et al., 2021). Student engagement during the pandemic has not been widely studied, however Allensworth et al. (2022) reported the grades of high school students in Chicago improved during the pandemic and inferred strong academic engagement.

Research indicated students of color, members of underrepresented groups, and families with incomes below the poverty line were disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Doubeni et al., 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) reported racial and ethnic minority groups were disproportionately represented among COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.

The pandemic had a significant impact on college enrollment. In a two-year span, overall undergraduate enrollment decreased 8%, and community college enrollment decreased 15% (NSCHC, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education (2021a) explained students reported forgoing or dropping out of college to act as caregivers for sick family members. The lives and postsecondary plans of high school seniors were particularly affected by the COVID-19

pandemic. Students lacked regular access to their high school counselors, school resource centers, and peer networks they relied upon for information about college (Freeman et al., 2021). The pandemic created new barriers and mitigated support systems in place to help high school graduates pursue higher education. Nationally, college first-year student enrollment declined 13% in 2020 (NSCHC, 2021). The percentage of Illinois high school graduates who enrolled in college in 2020 decreased seven percent from the previous year (Illinois Report Card [IRC], 2021b). There was a disproportionate impact on students of color and college enrollment. Studies indicated African American and Latino/a/x students canceled college enrollment plans due to the pandemic at higher rates than White students (Ahn & Dominguez-Villegas, 2022; NCES, 2022). According to the NCES (2022) first-year enrollment of African American students at community colleges decreased 32.2% between fall 2019 and fall 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on the mental health of adults and adolescents. In a weekly survey measuring the impact of COVID-19 on mental health in the U.S., 37% of adult respondents in Illinois reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression in the previous seven days (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021). Block et al. (2021) reported persons of Asian descent were the targets of racism and blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian American students were particularly impacted by this. In their study, Cheng et al. (2022) found college students experienced increased anxiety and had heightened awareness for attacks during the pandemic. Other studies found increases in anti-Asian incidents targeting younger students. Hinduja and Patchin (2022) reported Asian American adolescents experienced a 35% increase in cyberbullying. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; 2023) there was an 89% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes between 2019 and 2021.

Methodology

This qualitative study used an instrumental case study design. Qualitative research uses nonnumerical data to understand the behavior and experiences of individuals or situations (Armino et al., 2014). A case study is an intensive study of an individual, group, or system bound by a specific space and time (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) explained that case studies are best suited for how and why research questions. Thus, an instrumental case study was appropriate because this study aimed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound Alan Kay HS graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices.

While an instrumental case study is an appropriate design, there are limitations. Yin (2018) explained the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the limitations of case study research. One of the criticisms of case study research is their results are not generalizable (Cohen et al., 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 2013; Yin, 2018). This criticism is seemingly valid only when viewing qualitative research through a quantitative lens. Quantitative research tests a predetermined hypothesis, while qualitative inquiry is conducted to understand a subject or phenomena (Cohen et al., 2018). This study was conducted to understand the specific issues of an identified group during the specified time period. While generalizability is often used to determine the validity of quantitative research, Yin (2018) suggested transferability is more applicable when assessing case study findings.

The study was guided by the Iloh model of college going decisions and trajectories, and the college-conocimiento framework. These theories account for the racial and ethnic identities of the researcher and participants.

Description of the Case

The focus of this case were participants in the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS who graduated in 2020 and 2021. Since 2007, Holmes College has partnered with Alan Kay HS to operate the Upward Bound program at the school. These entities were within the bounds of the case study.

Alan Kay HS

Alan Kay HS is a public four-year secondary school located in western Illinois. In 2020, the school enrolled 4,070 students of whom 89% identified as Hispanic, 7% African American, and 2% White. Less than one percent of students identified as Asian, or American Indian. Most teachers in the district, 76%, identified as White. Approximately 1% identified as Asian, 3% Black, and 18% Hispanic.

Approximately 61% of Alan Kay HS students were classified as low income based on their household income. Alan Kay HS is designated a Title I school and operated a schoolwide support program to improve academic performance. Armor and Sousa (2016) explained schools with a significant percentage of students from low-income households are eligible for federal funds to implement school wide initiatives.

Alan Kay HS offers Advanced Placement (AP) courses in science, mathematics, English, history, and world languages. In 2020, 18% of students took one or more AP courses. Overall, 21% of Alan Kay HS students took early college coursework. In 2020, the Alan Kay HS graduation rate was 75%, and 59% of graduates enrolled in college.

Teachers and students at Illinois public schools complete the 5Essentials, an annual measure of school climate. Highlights from the 2021 Alan Kay HS 5Essentials report indicated

Alan Kay HS teachers do not expect students will pursue higher education. It reported that 64% of teachers do not expect students to go to college, 78% of teachers indicate students are not planning to go to college, and 20% of teachers did not feel their job is to prepare students to succeed in college. This was important because it gives insight into the college going culture established in classroom.

Holmes College

Holmes College is an Illinois public community college that offers transfer programs, workforce education, pre-college programs, and student services. Holmes College's district encompasses 624 square miles and includes portions of five western Illinois counties. The college operates four campuses, employs 1,108 staff, and enrolls 8,348 students. Approximately 80% of students are enrolled part-time, and 73% are age 24 years and under. The largest racial and ethnic identities of the student body are 56% White, 31% Hispanic or Latino, 8% African American, and 5% Asian.

Approximately 20% of graduates from 13 in-district high school enrolls at Holmes College. The college has transfer partnership agreements with more than 25 four-year institutions, and community partnerships with several community agencies. Holmes College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) by the U.S. Department of Education. The college celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2000.

Holmes College Upward Bound Program

In 2007, Holmes College was awarded a five-year grant for an Upward Bound program to serve 50 Alan Kay HS students annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The program targeted students who resided in low-income households, who would be a first-generation

college student, and had an academic need. The objective of the program was to provide academic services and support to assist a cohort of students in completing high school and then enrolling in and earning a post-secondary degree. The Upward Bound program was needed because students at Alan Kay HS faced significant barriers to completing high school and enrolling in college. Holmes College reported that when compared to state and national rates, Alan Kay HS had a significantly higher student dropout rate and low high-school graduation rate.

The Upward Bound program was subsequently refunded in 2012 and 2017 to serve 65 Alan Kay HS students annually. The program served 67 students in 2019 and 2020. The program consisted of a forty-week academic year component, and a six-week summer program. During the academic year component, Holmes College had the exclusive use of a classroom at Alan Kay HS to work with students before, during, and after school. The program's major services included tutoring, instruction, academic advising, college readiness workshops, assistance with the college admissions and financial aid process, and college visits and cultural enrichment activities. The six-week summer program was designed to simulate a college-going experience and prepare students for the academic rigors of the next grade level.

The program was administratively housed within Holmes College's Student Affairs division. Holmes College was responsible for financial management, personnel management, compliance, and oversight of the program. Alan Kay HS was a collaborative partner however they did not have any administrative responsibilities. The U.S. Department of Education assessed the performance of Upward Bound programs annually by their progress in achieving six academic objectives each year of the five-year grant period. Upward Bound programs have been

effective in assisting students with overcoming socioeconomic barriers in pursuing higher education (Addison et al., 2020; Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014; Harris et al., 2014). A national evaluation of Upward Bound (Arif et. al., 2009) led to faulty results which were used to support budget cuts and policy changes (Cahalan et al., 2018; Cahalan & Goodwin, 2014).

Participants

The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sample. Utilizing a purposive sampling in case studies ensures the inclusion of participants who can provide data of the specific issue being studied (Cohen et al., 2018). The eligible participants included 32 Upward Bound Alan Kay HS students who graduated in 2020 and 2021. One student transferred out of Alan Kay HS in 2020 and was not included in the study. The students were invited to participate regardless of their post-secondary enrollment status. I also invited an Alan Kay HS staff member who could provide insight into how the school prepared students for postsecondary success. An additional staff member and adult mentor were identified by participants as significant persons during my initial interviews. They were invited and agreed to participate in the study.

I recruited participants by sending an email inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix C and D for recruitment emails). I followed up with phone calls and text messages to request their participation. I interviewed 10 student participants, 2 Alan Kay HS staff members, and 1 adult mentor. See Table 1 for student participant demographics. Two students declined to participate, and four students accepted but did not schedule an interview. The sample size was sufficient to answer the research questions and data saturation (Baker et al., 2018a) was achieved.

Table 1.

Student Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity / Race	College Type Attended	Alan Kay HS Graduation Year
Louisa	Woman	Hispanic	2 Year	2020
Mateo	Man	Hispanic	4 Year	2020
Kimberly	Woman	Asian	4 Year	2021
Bianca	Woman	Hispanic	4 Year	2021
Jasmine	Woman	Hispanic	4 Year	2020
Charlene	Woman	White	4 Year	2021
Anna	Woman	Asian	4 Year	2021
Jorge	Man	Hispanic	2 Year	2020
Josefina	Woman	Hispanic	4 Year	2021
Aaliyah	Woman	African American	2 Year	2021

Note: The Federal designations for ethnicity and race are reported rather than student self-reports

Data Collection

The data sources for this study were individual participant interviews and document artifacts (see Appendix A and B for interview protocols). Prior to their interview, participants completed an informed consent form and a separate consent form for audio and video recording (see Appendix E for informed consent form). I assigned each participant a pseudonym that reflected their culture and background, but also protected their confidentiality. All interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom and were recorded. The participants declined in person interviews citing convenience. Virtual interviews are a suitable alternative when logistical challenges prevent in person interviews (Ambagtsheer et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2020).

The interviews were conducted in May and June 2023, and averaged 70 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions, as well as follow up questions generated by the discussion. I used the initial interview to develop a rapport with the participant, and to gather information about their background and early experiences in high school. I continued the interviews by exploring their experience navigating the college search process during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resources and support systems they used.

Initially planned for the second interview, questions about participants' experiences after graduating high school were better suited for the initial interview. I took field notes during the interview and noted specific follow up questions.

Document artifacts included scholarship essays from four participants, and Alan Kay HS COVID-19 documents. I requested participants submit copies of admission essays, personal statements, and social media posts regarding significant personal views about higher education, generated between March 2020 and their first date of post-secondary enrollment. These artifacts may have provided additional insight or clarity about data constructed within the bounds of the case study. The participants declined to share social media posts; however, I received copies of scholarship essays from four participants.

The second interviews were conducted in June and July 2023, and averaged 25 minutes. I used the second interview to summarize the participants' initial accounts and checked the accuracy of my interpretations. Member checking was used to improve the credibility and validity of the study (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process researchers use to understand the information they have collected. I continuously examined information as it was collected. Algozzine and Hancock (2017) explained the simultaneous collection and analysis of data allows opportunities to develop new questions that answer the main research questions. After each interview, I listened to the recording and immersed myself in the words of the participant. Next, I used Sonix AI, an automatic transcription software to transcribe the interview recordings. I compared the initial transcript with the recording and my field notes and made corrections as necessary. I also

removed identifying characteristics and uniquely identifiable information from the transcript.

Once I was satisfied the transcripts were accurate and confidential, I proceeded to coding.

Coding is a process through which a researcher discovers meaning in the data they have collected. Saldaña (2021) described coding as a cyclical process, requiring multiple cycles to identify the most important aspects of the data. I used deductive coding and began with five codes: (a) COVID-19, (b) college process, (c) influence factors, (d) support resources, and (e) feelings. Deductive coding is useful when information is anticipated based on your methodology (Saldaña, 2021). To assist with the coding process, I used Delve qualitative coding software. I reviewed the transcripts line by line and assigned codes to sentences and phrases. I used analytic memos during coding to reflect on the data and conceptualize my thoughts. Huberman et al. (2020) described analytic memos as one of the most powerful instruments a researcher can use to understand their data.

I received copies of four scholarship essays during my initial analysis. I removed any identifying characteristics and uniquely identifiable information from the artifacts as I reviewed them. I also recovered documents describing Alan Kay HS COVID-19 protocols. I followed the same coding process for the document artifacts. During my initial analysis I developed 19 additional codes. See Table 2 for a list of all codes. The codes were then condensed into seven categories: (a) family interaction, (b) college factors, (c) college information and support, (d) COVID-19 and mental health, (e) college motivation, (f) COVID-19 and school, and (g) identity. I reviewed patterns in the categories and began to identify themes. As themes developed, I listened to the interview recordings and reviewed my field notes. From the data, five themes emerged that will be discussed in my findings.

Table 2.

List of codes

Codes		
Academic	Extracurricular	Mental Health
Alan Kay High School	Family	Money
College Applications	Family Background	Motivation
College Information	Feelings	Peers
College Process	Homelife	Racism and Discrimination
Community College	Identity	Support Resources
COVID-19	Influence Factors	Teacher / Counselor
Decision Process	Insecurity and Doubt	Upward Bound

At the end of the analysis, I chose not to include data from one Alan Kay HS staff member in my findings, as I could not protect their confidentiality. Because of their unique role at Alan Kay HS, I could not sufficiently anonymize their data and maintain the integrity of their words. It is likely they would be deidentified through deductive disclosure. Additionally, their data did not add insight into college decision process for students, or into postsecondary resources and support services at Alan Kay HS that were not previously known by this researcher.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the process through which a researcher demonstrates their study is of high quality and their findings are credible (Armino et al., 2014). I utilized several methods to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. I began by using methods that are best suited for qualitative studies. Validity and reliability are commonly used to determine the quality of quantitative research, however qualitative research is measured by credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability.

Credibility measures the accuracy of findings as determined by others (Huberman et al., 2020; Morrow, 2005). I increased the credibility of the study by providing a rich and thorough description of my methods, the case, and participants. A thorough description of my methods gives a reader confidence I have carefully planned and developed rigorous protocols. A rich description of my case and participants demonstrates I possessed the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate my participants experiences (Milner, 2007). Additionally, I collected data from multiple sources and confirmed my findings with the participants through member checking. Member checking allows participants to verify they have been portrayed accurately (Candela, 2019).

I enhanced transferability by describing in detail my research plan, methodology, and protocols. I also provided a rich description of my case and participants. This allows a reader to assess if my study is transferable to their situation or applicable to their area (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I enhanced the dependability of my study by reviewing my research protocols with my dissertation chair and receiving approval from dissertation committee and Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning my study. I followed my research protocols and documented my work which gives readers confidence my study was conducted in a consistent and appropriate manner.

Lastly, I increased the confirmability or objectivity of my study by reflecting on my positionality and being aware of my own biases and beliefs. I also confirmed my findings with the participants through member checking and discussed them with my dissertation chair. These steps give a reader assurance that my findings are accurate and free of my influence.

Researcher Positionality

Carl and Ravitch (2016) explained a researcher's identity, experiences, and beliefs influence every aspect of their study. My worldview shaped the purpose of my research, the questions I asked, how I interpreted the data, and how it is presented.

Of my various identities, being an African American, a man, my educational experiences, and being an educator, had the greatest impact on this study. I attended a similar high school to the participants and could relate to their experiences attending predominantly White institutions. My experience as an educator gave me a unique understanding of first-generation college students. I understood the barriers and challenges students faced in pursuing higher education. Most importantly, my professional position provided me access to and familiarity with research participants.

I directly oversee the Upward Bound Program at Alan Kay HS. Because of this connection I am considered an insider (Mercer, 2007). I could not have completed this study if I were not an insider. My history and rapport with the participants gave me credibility. They trusted that I would tell their story accurately and respect their confidentiality. The participants were incredibly open and forthcoming about their experiences during the pandemic. They shared their thoughts and feelings without hesitation. I appreciated their honesty and willingness to help me explore their history. Some of the risks when conducting inside research are an imbalance of power, blurred boundaries, and researcher bias. I mitigated these risks through my research protocols and regular consultation with my dissertation chair.

Findings

Based on interviews with participants and document analysis, five themes emerged regarding student experiences during the pandemic that influenced their college going experiences and decision-making. These themes included: (a) their level of academic engagement decreased, (b) their mental health declined, (c) they considered delaying or not enrolling in college, (d) they reevaluated college search criteria, and (e) Upward Bound was their primary postsecondary planning resource.

Decreased Academic Engagement

Participants stated their level of academic engagement drastically decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was expressed both by participants who graduated in 2020 and in 2021. They discussed technology issues, distractions at home, and difficulty adapting to online learning as contributing to their disengagement. However, the most cited factor was the modified grading policy implemented in March 2020. Counselor Pat explained Alan Kay HS followed state directives that students' grades and standing could not be negatively impacted during the statewide closure. They shared:

We went from kids needing 22 credits to graduate to kids being able to graduate with 17 credits, which obviously changed a lot of things too, as did the removal of F's and everything being pass or incomplete. The worst a student could do was receive an incomplete.

The policy was reasonable as students should not have been academically penalized when a sufficient learning environment could not always be provided. However, the certainty of receiving a passing grade disincentivized students from actively engaging in courses. For example, Jasmine explained "Once Covid hit, your grade didn't change. So, basically, I gave up on school. I really didn't do any studying or work after March happened." Anna described her

effort as lacking and shared “My drive and motivation just went down so much. I fell asleep during class sometimes. I would eat during class... I would be doing my own thing.” Mateo rated his level of effort towards school as 8 out of 10 before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 4 out of 10 afterwards. He shared:

They gave us less work to do. They gave us extensions on any assignments that we either didn't get done or didn't do well in. And, no points were taken off, so I took advantage of that leniency. I wouldn't say I was lazy, but I wasn't being as efficient as before.

For participants, the relaxed grading policy during remote learning contributed to a decrease in their academic engagement.

Participants also perceived their classes as less challenging during remote learning. Charlene described remote learning as a “coast year” and said, “you could get away with doing nothing and you would still pass the class... I didn't have any effort.” Similarly, Josefina recalled studying throughout the night and worrying about grades before the pandemic. However, during the pandemic she shared, “I was a lot more carefree. I didn't stress as much about it [class] because things just weren't that hard anymore.” She described her classes as “watered down versions on Zoom.” Jorge referred to remote learning as “free game” and recalled frequent class disruptions due to technology failures.

The decrease in academic engagement was significant because students were academically driven before the pandemic. For instance, Jasmine explained she enrolled in all honors courses her first two years of high school and all AP courses her last two years. Similarly, Josefina said, “I always took either honors or AP classes. I never took a regular class in high school.” It was difficult for high achieving students accustomed to demanding coursework to adapt to lowered academic expectations.

It was also difficult for students to adapt to learning in an online modality. Aliyah recalled initially struggling with online learning saying, “so, it took me a little bit, but I got the gist of it eventually.” She described herself as “more of an in-person learner” and reported putting forth less effort during the period. Kimberly’s excitement for her courses dissipated when they transitioned online. She said:

I just didn't really care about the classes. I was really looking forward to a drama class, but then it was online, and it was just so boring. And then obviously for band, we couldn't do anything online, so I just had nothing to look forward to. I just didn't want to learn about stats or physics or anything. I just wanted to go to work.

This was a remarkable change in Kimberly’s engagement and attitude. It demonstrated the connection students had with specific teachers and classes. It also suggested a student’s overall academic engagement was negatively affected when their enthusiasm was not nurtured.

As remote learning continued into the 2020 – 2021 school year, students experienced the symptoms of zoom fatigue. For example, Bianca described feeling burnout attending “hour after hour of lectures.” She said having all online classes “definitely made me less engaged and less focused” and began submitting assignments late. Bianca also had to contend with family demands that conflicted with school. For example, her parents expected her to babysit her younger siblings as she described:

My parents felt like they had more help at home just because we were all home for school. I had to really set my boundaries and be like “I can’t watch them while you guys [*sic*] are away because I have class.” When I put those boundaries, they were more respectful of my time for school.

Bianca’s experience advocating to her parents highlighted the ripple effects of the statewide closure on family support systems. She had to choose between assisting her family or focusing on school. This is a difficult decision for a young person, and even more difficult during

a world pandemic. The academic disengagement experienced by students highlighted the risk of implementing remote learning as Counselor Pat described, “without the infrastructure for them to do their learning online.” Counselor Pat discussed the challenge in rapidly implementing remote learning and new technology. They described the process as, “we're kind of building the plane mid-flight... and trying to provide the best experience we could while going through this unprecedented, mass national trauma of the pandemic.” Their recollection gave important insight into implementing remote learning from a staff perspective in that schools had to pivot to remote learning with little advance warning and support. Overall, students identified the shift to remote learning and changing academic expectations contributing to decreases in their academic engagement.

Mental Health Declined

Students shared that their mental health declined during the pandemic. The findings suggested there were a multitude of factors that impacted students' wellbeing. The participants openly shared how the near constant threat of illness, grief, social isolation, and racial trauma affected them emotionally. Louisa described the fear in her household saying, “Throughout the whole pandemic we were scared. We didn't know if we were going to get through this. Were we going to survive this virus that can cause a lot of damage to the body... we were just scared.” Fears were heightened for participants whose parents worked in health care settings. For example, Anna shared, “My dad worked with a lot of patients that had Covid, so there was always a fear for him and for us at home.” Similarly, Kimberly reported experiencing severe anxiety until her mother stopped working at a local hospital. She was particularly concerned about her grandmother becoming ill. Josefina recalled the fear she experienced when her father

became sick: “It was really scary. One minute he’s not feeling well, and the next he has pneumonia and is on a ventilator.” Her father recovered, but other participants lost loved ones. Bianca shared the death of a close relative left her immediate family members “anxious, panicky, and always on edge.” Mateo said, “We did have a couple of folks that passed away, unfortunately.”

The emotional toll on students was severe because contracting the coronavirus could have a cascading effect on families. The high transmissibility of the virus meant there was a greater risk for older adults in the household and others with compromised immune systems. If a parent or provider became ill, there could also be a financial impact on the family. Jorge explained a constant concern among parents was, “if I get sick, I'm going to lose two weeks of pay and we're going to be behind on our bills.” In actuality, the total income lost could have been far greater for students and their household as a sick employee could miss additional time because of COVID-19 testing requirement and quarantine guidelines. This underlines the vast and unpredicted impact of the pandemic which participants were acutely aware of and was a source of stress and anxiety.

Several participants referenced the enormity the statewide closure had on them. Charlene described her emotions as “all over the place” and said, “Covid was so traumatizing. Like... I mean, they shut down kind of everything.” Jorge initially viewed the closure as an opportunity to relax, but said, “as the months went on and seeing everything closed and seeing all the death and casualties... [pause] people who succumbed to Covid... it all sent me on a downward spiral.”

The pandemic prevented the respite from family conflict that school and extracurricular activities normally provided. Students were active in a variety of sports, clubs, honor societies,

and performance groups before the pandemic. Aside from personal development, scholarship opportunities, and mentorship, these activities gave students a safe space to be. For instance, Jasmine described thinking about her homelife as the shutdown neared. saying, “I got very depressed when Covid hit. I knew I would be stuck at home in like a very toxic environment... My mom’s spouse was emotionally abusive to her.” Similarly, Aaliyah shared her mental health was affected by a “very toxic relationship” with a stepparent. Other student participants also described how their family dynamics affected them. Bianca is the oldest of four children and said her parents “constantly yelled at everyone.” She recounted this occurrence during class:

They’re yelling during lecture. And, I had to constantly be like, I have class... you can’t be yelling at me right now. It just took a big toll. I ended up working my retail job to get away and then I was worried I would get Covid. Everything just impacted it [mental health] so much.

As the pandemic continued, the political divisiveness and polarization began to influence students’ mental health. Kimberly described arguing with her parents about their political beliefs and opposition to health practices as emotionally draining. Louisa shared her parents believed the vaccine was a form of government mind control. The disagreements about the efficacy of wearing masks and the vaccine increased conflict within families and highlighted the isolating effects of the shutdown.

Students frequently discussed how being isolated from their peers impacted their mental health. Anna shared her mental health declined and the isolation “strained friendships.” She described losing friends and connections saying, “I feel like a lot of people that I did rely on are no longer in my life. When you don’t see each other every day, eventually bad texting habits, or just poor communication. You lose those connections.” The loss of peer support systems affected how student participants dealt with stress. Kimberly explained: “I felt like I couldn't really talk to

anyone about it [depression] besides my friends but we kind of just stopped talking. So, I didn't have anyone." Students found the isolation had a strong influence on their wellbeing.

However, some students worked at *essential* retail store that were permitted to remain open during the statewide closure. Mateo shared working his retail job allowed him to be around people. He attributed his positive mental health to having regular interactions with customers and coworkers. Josefina also found being an essential worker supported her mental health. She shared, "I wasn't struggling as much because I was getting enough social interaction at the store, and I could entertain myself at home." For some students, the opportunity to work was not only a source of income, but it also provided human connections with others. While not the focus of this study, this provided insight into how students form connections. This suggested that students developed new social networks when their other ones were unavailable.

Whereas most students did not have any difficulty completing college applications because of pandemic related adjustments and accommodations, Kimberly's experience auditioning for music programs affected her mental health. Because of the pandemic, in-person auditions were not permitted, and she did not have access to her schools recording room. Kimberly explained, "I'm recording auditions on an iPhone in a carpeted bedroom... my musicality just wasn't heard. It wasn't organic." She described getting rejection letters and feeling "I would have nailed the performance live." Kimberly said, "it definitely impacted the way that I saw myself as a musician and saw myself as a person." This was a such a devastating experience for Kimberly because she was passionate about music and felt like she was rejected due to circumstances beyond her control.

Participants shared that they did not disclose their feelings and mental health concerns to their parents. Some participants cited cultural approaches to trauma, while others assumed it would burden their families. When asked who they talked to about their feelings, Jasmine said: “I did not talk to anyone. Growing up the way that I did, I was like, I can take care of myself. I can fix it. Once I fix it, I can talk about it.” Jorge shared mental health was not discussed in “uber conservative Mexican households.” He added, “My mom didn’t understand mental health at all.” Louisa felt as the oldest child, she had to “set a good example” as her parents expected her to succeed. She did not believe her parents would provide a supportive response saying, “They would make you feel worse... [by asking] how you got yourself into that position.” Louisa’s situation was disturbing because she associated mental health with being weak. However, she was not alone in her perceptions about mental health.

Looking back, Bianca and Charlene wished they had told someone about their feelings and mental health struggles. At the time, Bianca felt her problems would only burden her parents, but said, “I probably should have told them.” Charlene said emphatically: “If I could go back, I would definitely find like a virtual counselor or something to talk to.” Interestingly, Charlene indicated she preferred to speak with a therapist virtually. This suggested she had access to professional behavioral healthcare, a service not consistently available to all students. For example, Anna reported attending counseling for a short time, but could not afford to continue. She said her parents “would occasionally catch what was going on” but she “just kept things in my own head... I never really felt comfortable going to others for help.”

As discussed, it was not unusual for students to suppress their feelings, but it became very dangerous for one student. Jorge described experiencing a series of events that resulted in alarming symptoms:

My life was like a Mexican country song. My girlfriend at the time broke up with me. Then my dog of 16 years died. I had a really bad medical scare and started thinking about my mortality. It messed me up and ultimately, I crashed. I just exploded. I unleashed all my frustration, anger, sadness, tears, you name it to my mother. I was suicidal [pause] it felt like it wasn't going to get better, and I couldn't hold it in anymore.

Fortunately, Jorge sought assistance and was able to receive the care he desperately needed. His experience, as well as the experience of the other participants, demonstrated the tremendous toll the pandemic had on students emotional and physical wellbeing.

Reconsidered College

The third finding was students considered delaying or not attending college because of the pandemic. For instance, the isolation Jorge experienced during the pandemic led him to consider “not pursuing higher education.” He explained: “Being cooped up in a room without interacting with a lot of people and not doing anything productive really zapped away all motivation.” Mateo also considered “taking some time off for myself” and delaying college. Because of the statewide shutdown, Mateo did not have the traditional “[high school] senior” experience and lacked excitement for college.

Students viewed senior honors night, prom, and other school traditions as sentimental prerequisites before college. The public celebration of their accomplishments was important to students and their family. To students, the virtualization of their milestone events indicated they would not have the first-year college experience they imagined. For Jasmine, the pandemic

protocols implemented at most colleges meant she would not have the “college experience I’ve been working this hard for.” She explained:

I almost did not go to college because of Covid. I was going to take a gap year. At the time I worked at Ralphie’s grocery store [pseudonym], and I thought the extra income would help, just in case my mom gets laid off or something. Also, everything was going to be online... I didn’t want to do online college.

The experience of living on campus, learning new things, and making new memories was important to Jasmine. Further, being away from her peers affected her motivation for college. She said, “We were super competitive about our grades and ranking. We all talked about going to college and the future. It was a good environment, but once the pandemic started, I didn’t have that to motivate me.” This, in of itself, suggested the competitive drive of high achieving students was diminished when they were not sufficiently challenged academically. However, other students indicated that they redirected their competitive drive into working.

The shortened schedule during remote learning became an opportunity for students to work more hours in high school and take advantage of higher wages. This led students to consider forgoing college by continuing working and earning more than before the pandemic. For example, Josefina attributed her employment to the pandemic: “I was able to get a job because of the pandemic because if it hadn't occurred, I would have been in school.” Mateo said, “I did work more only because school was online and that shortened my commute a lot. It was easier to go in earlier or work longer.” Kimberly focused on work after several negative experiences applying to college. She said:

It was always go to college for music... college plus music, but it kind of changed my senior year. I was working and making a lot of money. I saw it as a long-term position where everyone likes me, so, I started thinking is college even something I really wanted?

The duality of working during the pandemic was profound. Employment allowed students to interact and engage with others outside of their homes which in turn supported their mental health.

However, students' employment became an alternative to pursuing their college aspirations. This was significant because all students indicated before the pandemic, they planned to enroll in college following high school. When asked what options they considered, Mateo responded, "College was the only path that I considered." Louisa shared, "I didn't always know where or what I would go for, but it was expected that I would go to college." Josefina was equally firm on her post-secondary plans. She said, "I always wanted to go to college. I didn't think there was anything else you would do. It was always, you're going to college." Students had to weigh their desire to go to college with the ability to earn money.

Their decidedly intentions to go to college became less certain as their academic engagement decreased and mental health declined. Ultimately, all the students enrolled in college. Jorge planned to work at a local factory, but his mother gave him an ultimatum which pushed him to enroll in college as planned. He explained, "She told me no breaks... if I didn't go to school, I would have to work fulltime." He relented saying, "I bit my tongue, swallowed my pride, and went to college." Kimberly's parents disagreed with her plan not to go to college. She said, "we didn't talk about it, we argued about it. They were pretty mad at me." Kimberly did not agree with her parents' approach but was appreciative and grateful for their efforts. She said her decision to enroll in college came down to, "Am I going to stay here and be complacent with my job and not experience these new things? Or am I going take this risk and experience my music

in a different kind of way.” Kimberly, like other students, she persevered through adversities during the pandemic and enrolled in college.

Parent Motivation

A subtheme that developed suggested the students’ parents played a significant role in motivating them to pursue higher education. Several student participants said their parents made college an expectation. Charlene described her mother’s insistence she go to college, saying “My mom instilled college in my head because at her job they always picked people with degrees over someone without one.” Bianca’s parents also underscored the importance of college. She explained: “Growing up, my parents would emphasize you graduate high school and then go to college. College was an expectation for me.” She believed her parents were determined she attend college because they did not complete high school. She recalled her parents would “emphasize how it’s a lot harder for you to get a good paying job without a college degree.”

Whereas Bianca perceived her parents’ pressure to attend college as “pretty negative”, Anna “embraced and thrived off” her parents’ pressure for higher education. Anna said, “their [parents’] expectation always was for me to go to college. A lot of that pressure to do good and succeed comes from Asian culture.” Anna shared her father did not take advantage of an opportunity to attend college for free which left him at a disadvantage. She explained:

I wanted to do better than my parents, because I have this expectation for myself to support my family when the time comes. And I knew that going to college and getting a degree was going to get me there.

For Anna, the cultural pressure to succeed was reinforced by seeing her father’s career plateau because he did not have a degree. Her aim to do better than them did not seem to come from a place of malice, but in appreciation for the support they provided.

The perceived financial benefits of attending college were also a motivator for students. For instance, Louisa was motivated in part by the financial benefits of a college education. Louisa said she wanted to attend college so she could provide for her parents. She discussed the goals her parents shared with her at a young age:

My mom would always say she dreamed of me and my brother, maybe being the president of the United States, becoming a doctor, a teacher, or whatever we wanted to be. My parents didn't want us living in poverty, worrying about our next meal, running out of money, or living on the street.

Louisa said, "I wanted my parents to have a better life. If I have a college degree, I can hopefully have a good income and do that." Josefina also discussed wanting to give her parents a better life. She described college as "the only pathway I saw to a better life." For Josefina, that entailed having the financial security to support her parents.

Moreover, Jasmine viewed college as her way out and "breaking the cycle of poverty." She felt higher education would improve her life and allow her more opportunities. Jasmine shared an experience from which she grew strength:

I remember one time my mom couldn't pay the electricity bill, so we didn't have power for a week. I saw the way my mom worked and I was grateful for her efforts, but I didn't want to live like that. I was like, I'm definitely going to college.

That experience was particularly distressing because her mother was not able to provide for the family. It strengthened her resolve to change her situation and secure resources for her future. This was a common theme in the data. The students viewed a baccalaureate degree as their primary method to securing a lucrative career. Their college aspirations began with their parents, but it was nurtured by the challenges they experienced growing up. Their college goals were significant and purposeful. Their parents' experiences and encouragement shaped

participants' college goals were significant and were motivators in overcome the adversities during the pandemic to enroll in college.

Reevaluated College Search Criteria

The fourth theme that emerged was student participants reevaluated their college search criteria as it related to cost, location, and diversity of colleges because of the pandemic. This led some student participants to make decisions based on factors that were not considered prior to the pandemic.

Cost to Attend

The expected cost of college was identified as an important factor in the college decision process before and during the pandemic. However, some student participants reported college costs became a deciding factor because of the pandemic. For example, before the pandemic, Louisa focused on the location and size of a school. She wanted to attend a “small” school that was “not too busy” and had a slower pace. However, during the pandemic she became increasingly concerned how attending college could impact her parents. She said, “If I go to this school that is more expensive, and someone got sick, or maybe couldn't work, I'm risking putting my parents in a financial situation they can't come back from.” Louisa began viewing schools by cost, referring to schools with higher costs as “risky” and less expensive schools as “safe routes.” She was also concerned her decision could impact her sibling's college choices the following year. Louisa shared she decided “The best option was to stay closer to home and not be so financially burdened.” This is significant because the economic uncertainty of the pandemic, led Louisa and other students to reconsider cost in their decisions.

Aaliyah dreamed of attending college in California. The warmer climate, culture, and distance from home appealed to her. She said, “It’s nicer over there... it’s hard to explain, but that’s where I wanted to be.” Aaliyah planned to begin her college career at a four-year institution, however she elected to begin at a two-year institution due to lower tuition costs. She explained, “It [four-year institution] was going to be more expensive and with everything happening with Covid, it made more sense to just start there [two-year institution]. Aaliyah believed she would have attended college out of state if it were not for the pandemic but did not regret her decision.

Location Closer to Home

Before the pandemic, school location was a major factor for students. They believed four-year institutions offered better academic and student experiences than local institutions. However, during the pandemic, a school’s location was viewed through a health lens. For example, Jasmine said, “Before the pandemic, I wasn’t staying in Illinois. Every college I looked at was out of state. But once the pandemic hit, I was like, I have to stay close to my mom just in case something happens.” For Jasmine, the pandemic necessitated she balance attending her desired college against the risk of not being able to assist her mother in an emergency.

Kimberly also factored in her family’s health and where she would attend college. She said, “I wasn’t concerned about me, it was my grandma getting sick.” Kimberly felt she would visit her family more often if she attended a school in proximity, which would increase their risk of exposure. She was particularly concerned about her grandmother. Kimberly reasoned by attending a school further away, she would not be able to visit as easily, and less likely to unknowingly spread a virus.

Jorge recalled he always wanted to attend college out of state. He said, “I wanted to be far away from here. It didn’t matter where... a school with a good music department that was far away from Illinois.” Jorge said he found a school that met his criteria, but “Covid hit and threw everything out the window.” Despite being steadfastly opposed to attending a community college, Jorge ultimately chose to enroll at a two-year institution. The physical and mental health issues he experienced during the pandemic factored into his decision.

Jorge, like other students was opposed to attending a community college based on information from teachers, family, and because it was local. Jorge explained: “Even though it’s [community college] cheaper, I was told some universities disqualify you from certain scholarships if you transfer in.” His understanding of scholarship eligibility was correct, however other students were dissuaded by negative stereotypes about community colleges. For example, Aaliyah said, “A teacher would always tell us in class, if you guys don't study well, you guys will end up [at a community college].”

Although four-year universities were viewed more favorably, students were disinterested in area universities because they were local. Like community colleges, the local universities were viewed as providing an inferior student experience. Anna shared, “There’s like a running joke between students that they’re [the local universities] the 13th grade because so many people from high school go there.” She said, “I wanted to kind of live away from home and experience being independent and by myself and kind of growing.” Both local four-year universities were on Anna’s “not interested list”, however she ultimately chose to attend one of the local schools. For Anna, the financial aid package was the deciding factor. Like Aaliyah, she believed she would

have attended another college if it were not for the pandemic. Anna felt she would have been more engaged and sought more scholarships but was happy with her school selection.

Campus Diversity

The level of student diversity at colleges became more important to some students following the rise in Asian hate crimes during the pandemic and increased attention on the Black Lives Matter movement. Kimberly discussed experiencing racism early in the pandemic:

Around February, when Covid first hit the States, I remember somebody asked me if I had Covid or if I ate bats. I was just confused... me being Asian, I experienced a lot of name calling, stereotypes, and mocking in middle school, but people should be more mature now.

Kimberly recalled watching news reports of racially motivated attacks against Asian Americans. She said, "It was honestly kind of scary because you see they're targeting Filipinos and you know you're not safe from this." The increase in violence was a factor in eliminating one school from her list. Kimberly explained, "The school was in my top 3, but it was very White. It was in a predominantly White town too, so it made me nervous on what they would think of me."

Anna also shared her experiences with racism and prejudice in high school. She remembered being told, "Filipinos are the trash of the Asian community" and other disparaging comments. Anna said, "I'm very White passing, so I didn't directly experience anything during the pandemic, but it was hard seeing my mom go through that, and so many others in the media." She also discussed the impact of the murder of *George Floyd* an African American man killed by police in March 2020:

I did look into the school's demographics. I wanted it to have an inclusive mix of students from different backgrounds, something not predominantly White. I wanted it to be in an area and in a community that aligned with my views. I took that into consideration, and it was really important to me at the time.

Campus diversity was often viewed by students as a predictor of belongingness and comfortability. A diverse campus meant they could find a community and feel welcomed. However, during the pandemic Anna and other students began to look at campus diversity from a safety perspective.

The murder of George Floyd led to over 11,000 protests across throughout the United States (Jones et al., 2021) and was widely reported in the media. Students were aware of the protests and began to reconsider campus diversity as a result. For Bianca, the increase in local Black Lives Matter marches caused her trepidation. She said, “I started to get a little bit worried because the school was predominantly White, and all of these things were happening.” This finding was significant because campus diversity was not an important factor to students before the pandemic. However, participants indicated that this changed due to a heightened awareness of issues targeting Asian and African Americans.

Upward Bound was the Primary Postsecondary Planning Resource

The final theme that emerged suggested Upward Bound was the primary resource students used to plan for life after high school. Students reportedly underutilized the postsecondary resources provided by Alan Kay HS. The reliance on Upward Bound was not unexpected as they were participants in the program. However, while all students were aware of the school’s Kay College and Career Center (pseudonym; KCCC), the majority reported they did not utilize the service. Josefina recalled, “I relied more on Upward Bound. I know there was a college room or something [KCCC] but again, I didn't use it. Upward Bound was a greater source of college information for me.” Likewise, Anna identified the KCCC as a school resource for college assistance, but said, “I never went there or utilized it because I always had Upward Bound.” This sentiment was also expressed by Bianca and Kimberly.

Jorge and Louisa both reported utilizing the KCCC and Upward Bound. Jorge said, “I visited [KCCC] frequently for lectures and college visits.” Louisa described visiting the KCCC her senior year: “I went there to turn something in, and they must have sensed I was stressed, because we started talking and they gave me some advice about mindfulness that really helped.” Student participants did not report adverse experiences with the KCCC and held neutral to favorable perceptions of the resource. They explained they received sufficient college support from Upward Bound and deemed the KCCC redundant.

While some student participants discussed their college plans with their teachers, others did not consider them as a resource. For example, Louisa explained, “I was of the mindset that you only talk to your teacher about what you’re learning in class. I never thought of talking to them about college.” Interestingly, student participants indicated they only discussed college with teachers in advanced placement, dual credit, and honors level courses.

Jasmine and Josefina were the only student participants to discuss extensively utilizing another college support resource outside of Upward Bound. Jasmine described a community mentor as her “biggest supporter” and said they provided mentoring, academic assistance, and critiqued her scholarship essays. Josefina participated in a different community program that provided similar services. They both said they learned of the opportunities through Upward Bound. Overall, participants mostly utilized Upward Bound rather than the high school college research for their college search process.

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced students’ post-secondary pathways and college choices. The research questions

sought a better understanding of how students made decisions and the resources they use to plan for life after high school. There were five findings which suggested students' academic engagement decreased and their mental health declined during the pandemic while in high school. This affected their desire to attend college, and influenced the factors they considered when selecting a college. Additionally, the findings suggested students relied heavily upon the support they received through Upward Bound during their search process, and underutilized postsecondary resources provided by their school.

Students' academic engagement decreased during the pandemic due to several factors including grading policy, technology issues, and difficulty adapting to online learning. This finding was expected based on reports from the U.S. Department of Education (2021a) which described the negative effects of the pandemic on students. As well as reports that indicated significant declines in academic achievement (Dorn et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2021). The students' decreased academic engagement likely influenced their college decisions. For example, participant Anna felt she would have been more diligent in searching for scholarships had she been more engaged. She selected a college because of cost that she initially did not want to attend. This was consistent with literature (Bobek & Schnieders, 2023) that reported changes in students' academic motivation and performance during the pandemic affected where they applied to college. For some participants, their overall interest in higher education waned because they anticipated colleges would continue to operate remotely. Their predictions seemingly manifested from their existing frustration with online learning rather than information from school sources. Their academic disengagement because of online learning ultimately effected their enthusiasm for college.

The findings suggested the participants mental health declined because of the pandemic. This was consistent with health surveys (Fair Health Inc, 2021; National Center for Health Statistics, 2021) that described the mental health declines observed during the pandemic. Students shared raw emotional experiences of fear, toxic relationships, and in one instance, suicidal ideation. Their struggle with mental health likely influenced the colleges they selected. For instance, participant Jorge planned to attend college out of state, but enrolled at a two-year institution after experiencing severe mental health issues and ceasing his search. His emotional health suffered significantly during the pandemic ultimately leading to suicidal ideation. In the midst of his episode, Jorge stopped all college search activities which was a symptom of his mental illness. His experience was consistent with pandemic era studies (Bobek & Schnieders, 2023) that found student mental health issues influenced their college decisions.

Among the various pandemic related factors that affected students' mental health, racial trauma was unique in that the student's ethnicity and race increased their risk of harm. Researchers determined the emotional, and psychological well-being of Asian, African American, and Latinx students were affected by experiencing or witnessing racial discrimination during the pandemic (Brenneke et al., 2020; Cadenas et al., 2022; Molock & Parchem, 2022).

This was significant because nine of the ten participants identified as African American, Asian American, and Hispanic. Before the pandemic, students indicated campus diversity was not a significant factor, however this changed following the rise in Asian hate crimes during the pandemic and increased attention on the Black Lives Matter movement. The recorded killing of African Americans by law enforcement during the pandemic was widely broadcast on television and social media (Anderson et al., 2010). The images were often shared to maintain awareness of

the crimes; however, the circulation of the videos was retraumatizing for African Americans (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023).

Students were aware of these issues, and it affected their college search factors and the institutions they attended. The level of diversity at colleges became more important to many students. For example, participants Kimberly and Anna developed a heightened concern for their physical safety in response to discrimination and hate crimes targeting Asian Americans. Kimberly was so concerned about her safety; she eliminated a school from her list because the campus and surrounding community lacked diversity.

Participant Jasmine was particularly impacted by the frequency of incidents where African Americans were targeted by law enforcement. As a Hispanic female, she sympathized with the mistreatment of any person of color. She experienced concern and anxiety about her decision to attend a primarily White institution but remained committed to her choice. Their experiences were supported by a national survey (SimpsonScarborough, 2022) that reported female students and persons of Asian descent paid greater attention to campus safety when choosing a college during the pandemic.

Some participants maintained positive mental well-being by working, however the increase in earnings led some to consider forgoing college for their jobs. This was a significant shift in participants' postsecondary plans prior to the pandemic. The students held strong aspirations to attend college, which centered around eventually supporting their families. Thus, their consideration of forgoing college was significant. Still, this was consistent with studies that showed students of color canceled college enrollment plans due to the pandemic at higher rates than other student groups (Ahn & Dominguez-Villegas, 2022; NCES, 2022).

It was also consistent with the Iloh model (Iloh, 2018) of college going decisions and trajectories. The Iloh model accepts that work or family obligations may take precedence over college in a student's life. When viewed through the Iloh model lens, the student's thoughts of deferring college to work were logical. The unique circumstances of the pandemic provided them an opportunity to earn a significant sum of money. The money would have allowed them to assist their family with immediate needs and thus took precedence over college.

The dilemma students faced was not unexpected, as the data suggested they possessed a strong sense of familism, a concept in which an individual's needs become secondary to familial needs (Bámaca-Colbert & Hernández, 2016). Ultimately, all participants ended up enrolling in college as planned. To understand how they resolved their plight, Acevedo-Gil's (2017) college *conocimiento* model, and the role of families can help explain this.

In the college *conocimiento* model, students navigated the college choice process through seven nonlinear steps. The process began when a student had a transformative experience that shifted their reality, and they committed to completing college. I argue this was the most important step because it is when a student saw beyond their circumstances and internalized the value of higher education. For example, participant Jasmine recalled her family's utilities being disconnected as the moment she committed to attending college to secure a better life. Likewise, Anna committed to higher education after reflecting on the opportunities her father missed because he did not have a degree. The students aspired to attend college to improve their lives and support their families. This was powerful motivation and was identified as a factor in their decision to pursue higher education as planned.

It is important to note that family is involved throughout the college *conocimiento* model, but particularly in the first step. Acevedo-Gil (2017) explained parents' discussion of higher education was the impetus for students' college aspirations. As reported in the findings, students recalled their parents' discussed college with them as early as elementary school. Parents expected their children to go to college, and this was continuously reinforced upon students. Participant Louisa explained, her parents did not complete high school, but they understood the value of a college education. This sentiment was expressed by many of the participants in discussing their parents' encouragement and support. The students' parental support was consistent with existing research that discussed the role of family in the college decision process of African American, Latina/o/x, and Southeast Asian American students (Freeman 2005; Kang et al., 2018; McDonough & Pérez, 2008).

This support often came in the form of aspirational capital, a concept Acevedo-Gil (2017) described as visualizing the achievement of students' dreams. This support was critical for potential first-generation college students, whose parents lacked familiarity with the intricacies of the college admissions process. The college *conocimiento* model accounted for the gap in parental knowledge through participation in college outreach programs. Acevedo-Gil (2017) described college outreach programs such as Upward Bound as college institutional agents. Moreover, college outreach programs reinforced college aspirations, provided information, and assisted families with college decisions. In the college *conocimiento* model, college outreach programs served to mitigate the barriers and obstacles often experienced by students with limited resources.

The fourth major finding was students reevaluated the cost, location, and diversity of colleges in making their decisions. These factors were directly connected to experiences during the pandemic. The cost of college was of more concern because families no longer had the same job security as before the pandemic. This was not unexpected based on economic trends during the pandemic. In a survey of 3,000 high-school seniors, approximately half selected a less expensive college, one closer to home, commuted, or deferred admission as a result of the pandemic (Howland et al., 2021). Additionally, cost was found to be a determining factor before the pandemic. This was consistent with existing research on college decision factors (Aragon et al., 2020; Heckert et al., 2016; NCES, 2018). It was also consistent with the student's goals of achieving financial security, which would be more challenging with college debt.

Before the pandemic, students discussed wanting to attend college further away from their hometowns and did not want to attend a community college or local four-year university. However, the pandemic led many students to reconsider their desire to move away to remain close to home. They did this in order to assist family members and/or because of cost. The findings regarding student views on community college was anticipated, however their opposition to local four-year institutions was surprising. Although four-year universities have been viewed more favorably (Acosta et al., 2019) student participants expressed disinterest in local universities because of their proximity to home.

Existing literature has discussed students who attend college near their home in two areas. One, studies have explored the experience of local college students who commuted to campus and found they had difficulty connecting with peers, missed out on activities, and lacked a sense of belonging (Burke & Taylor, 2022; Johnson & Wiese, 2022). Burke and Park-Taylor's

(2022) study was particularly relevant because they focused on African American, Latinx, and Southeast Asian American students. The inability to connect with peers was confounded by strained relationships at home, brought on by time away commuting and increased academic demands. Other studies explored how local college students were perceived by their non-local peers. Aden et al. (2010) defined townie as a pejorative term used by non-local students to describe residents of a college town. The origins of the widely used term are unclear, but it has come to include local students as well as those who are not enrolled. The term was used to denigrate local students in an unofficial college caste system. Local students were perceived as less than their non-local peers because they had not left their hometown. Several of the participants echoed this thought as participant Anna said, “Going there [local university] was like going to the 13th grade.”

Lastly, students underutilized the postsecondary resources their school provided and primarily relied upon their participation in Upward Bound to plan for life after high school. Most participants reported they did not utilize the KCCC, Alan Kay HS’s main college planning resource. Only two participants indicated they regularly used the service. Participants did not perceive the KCCC negatively, rather they did not seek additional services once they felt their need was met. This finding was consistent with existing literature on student and staff interactions.

According to Bryan et al. (2009) high-school students were less likely to seek college information from their school counselor when they believed they had other postsecondary expectations for them besides college. The KCCC was charged with advising a variety of postsecondary paths for students including four-year, two-year, and for-profit institutions, the

military, and workforce. This schoolwide approach was utilized by high schools to broadly address the needs of all students (Domina, 2009). The participants were focused on attending four-year institutions; thus, they may have underutilized the KCCC because it marketed vastly different pathways. Moreover, the Upward Bound program offered students an alternative source of postsecondary assistance.

Robinson and Roksa (2016) explained high school students no longer viewed their counselors as their sole source of college information because a variety of external postsecondary resources existed. The Upward Bound program and the KCCC provided similar services, such as college visits, albeit on different scales. For example, Upward Bound visited colleges more frequently and traveled further than the KCCC. The program targeted a smaller cohort of students and provided them individualized support and resources that were not available at the KCCC. The students' underutilization of postsecondary resources at Alan Kay HS was not unexpected as the Upward Bound program services were deemed more beneficial. This is consistent with Miranda et al. (2015) that reported high student satisfaction with Upward Bound support services.

Implications for Practice and Recommendations

The findings yielded important information about students and how they access higher education to achieve their goals. In this section, I will discuss the implications and recommendations for three findings, the mental health of students, community college stigma, and the Upward Bound program.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on the mental health of students. Unfortunately, it only exacerbated existing mental health challenges experienced by youth before

the pandemic. Between 2015 and 2019, there was a 25.6% increase in adolescents who experienced a major depressive episode (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). That percentage increased 28% between 2019 and 2021. There has been a concerted effort in higher education and the K – 12 level to address the mental health of students. Institutions have adopted trauma informed teaching practices, employed licensed social workers and clinicians, and partnered with community health organizations. These efforts are most often focused on the student. The findings from this study suggest there is an opportunity to better engage parents in addressing their child’s mental health symptoms. Many of the participants discussed their reluctance to share the emotional challenges they experienced. Supporting parents with continuous education, peer connections, and other resources would be beneficial. Particularly, focusing on how to identify signs of mental illness and substance use, and how to engage their child and create open lines of communication.

Findings from the study suggest community colleges continue to be regarded as less desirable postsecondary options. Students, families, and high school staff perceived two-year institutions negatively. Community colleges should take a multipronged approach to dispelling myths about their institutions. First, they should include high school teachers in their enrollment management plans. Most colleges outreach efforts routinely target high school counselors, however, high school teachers have considerably more contact with students and can hold greater influence. Second, community colleges should develop outreach events that target parents. Typical recruitment events target students, or students and their parents. By intentionally focusing on parents, an event can be designed to specifically address their concerns. These events should be held in community spaces convenient to parents. As such, a campus location

may not always be appropriate. It is important to establish relationships with respected community partners. These relationships can help mitigate cultural, language, and unforeseen barriers.

Lastly, the findings suggest the Upward Bound program was a vital resource for students. The participants identified the college advising sessions with staff, college readiness workshops, and campus visits as important services. Overall, the Upward Bound program was perceived favorably, however the data indicates there is an opportunity for improvement. The Upward Bound program should increase collaboration with Alan Kay HS. While the program met the needs of students, they underutilized the postsecondary resources their school provided. It is likely there are other resources the students are not utilizing. Program staff should consult with Alan Kay HS officials and review their current student resources. Next, they should identify the services they do not provide and that could supplement what is provided to students. Increasing collaboration with the school would benefit students and increase their likelihood of success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the post-secondary pathways and college choices of students. The findings provided important insight into the challenges students experienced during the pandemic, and how they made decisions about their future. More importantly, the findings described the resiliency, strength, and courage of ten young adults as they created the next chapter in their family story.

CHAPTER THREE

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

When I began the community college leadership program in the summer of 2019, I was excited about the program and looked forward to the support a cohort offered. I believed the program would give me the requisite knowledge, skills, and resources to be an effective administrator in higher education. My primary research interest was high school students who attended alternative schools due to discipline issues. I wanted to study how community colleges could effectively serve students who had negative experiences in education. I was immensely interested in the topic because it connected my current position in higher education, and my previous work in the juvenile justice system.

My research interest changed as the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the latter part of my program. Ironically, I began to recognize my own struggles while watching a webinar on how to support students returning to the classroom. It seemed obvious I had been affected by the pandemic, and I wanted to understand how the pandemic influenced their post-secondary pathways and college choices.

I planned to conduct my study by interviewing an Alan Kay HS employee, and a minimum of ten Upward Bound students who graduated in 2020 and 2021. I initially identified 33 eligible participants; however, one student transferred out of the school and was not included in the study. The interviews were to be conducted in person and virtually. I would also collect copies of admission essays, personal statements, and social media posts regarding significant personal views about higher education, generated within the bounds of the study. These artifacts

would provide additional insight into the case. Overall, the study went according to my plan, however there were two unexpected issues during data analysis that I will discuss later in this section.

After securing approval from the institutional review board, I began recruiting participants. As an insider, I was known to the participants which made contacting them relatively easy. The first student I contacted responded immediately and agreed to participate. This gave me a greater sense of confidence as I continued my outreach. This study was my first research project. I had completed research assignments for undergraduate and graduate level courses, but this was real research.

After conducting my first interview, I was in awe of the depth of data before me. The participant was open and forthcoming. With each follow up question, they revealed more of their thoughts and feelings. The next interviews were equally revealing. As I continued and analyzed the data, I was ashamed of how little I knew about some of the participants. I had known them for more than four years and had numerous conversations and interactions. I realized how surface our conversations had been and how much I did not know. I also felt an immense sense of pride that we were able to have these conversations. They were not obligated to speak with me but did so enthusiastically. They trusted me to share their stories. They believed I could portray their words accurately and maintain their confidentiality.

The ease and speed in which I secured the first five participants ceased when a student declined to participate in my study. I anticipated this would occur and planned for it in my schedule. The subsequent interviews seemed to take longer to secure, and three students rescheduled their appointments. Ultimately, two students declined to participate and four

consented, but did not schedule an interview. The most challenging part was scheduling the interviews with the Alan Kay HS staff. During the initial student interviews, an additional staff member and adult mentor were identified as significant persons. They agreed to participate in the study, however they had limited availability and took longer to respond.

In total, I interviewed 10 student participants, 2 Alan Kay HS staff members, and 1 adult mentor. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, however I anticipated most of them would be conducted in person. My graduate peers, colleagues, and students all seemed to be exhausted with virtual activities, however all participants opted for virtual interviews. Their preference was a matter of convenience and did not appear to negatively impact the data. In fact, I found conducting the interviews virtually to be beneficial. With the knowledge the interview was being audio and video recorded, I felt confident I would not miss any data. I felt more engaged during the interviews because I was not preoccupied with recording their thoughts verbatim.

There were two issues during data analysis that I did not anticipate. First, the participants declined to share social media regarding their views about higher education generated within the bounds of the study, however, I received copies of scholarship essays from four participants. The participants did not discuss college on social media, could not access the content during that time frame, or preferred not to share their social media information. The scholarship essays did not elicit any significant information; however, it was consistent with data obtained during the participant interviews. I was confident the data was sufficiently rich and thorough, and answered the research questions.

The second issue was I chose not to include data from one Alan Kay HS staff member in my findings, as I could not protect their confidentiality. I could not sufficiently anonymize their data and maintain the integrity of their words because of their unique role at Alan Kay HS. The study was not compromised by the exclusion of this participant, as their interview provided data about the college decision process for students, and postsecondary resources at the high school that was already known.

Overall, I was satisfied with the research process and felt I answered the research questions. Looking back, I would have preferred to have interviewed some students who did not enroll in college. All the participants in my study attended college and discussed their individual journeys. However, I was unable to gain the perspective of students who pursued other postsecondary options. Their insight would have provided an even better understanding of students' postsecondary pathways. If I were to redo the study, I would identify and include additional procedures to recruit participants not in college. Additionally, I would seek the perspective of parents. Their participation would provide a unique perspective into the family.

The dissertation of practice process was beneficial personally and professionally. Personally, I gained a deeper admiration for my students through my study. I was not ignorant to the challenges and difficult circumstances through which they triumphed. However, I learned how these situations motivated them. I learned how resilient and determined they were to achieve their goals. I learned more about their parents and how they instilled their values in their children. Most of all, I learned how we weathered a pandemic, separately, but together.

Through this process I have become a better educator. The responsibilities of my position limit my time with students. I understand the importance of having a rapport with students, so I

have been intentional about creating opportunities to connect with them. In conducting this study, I realized how surface my interactions with students have been and how little I knew about them. It is important that I have more meaningful conversations with students. I want to understand what has shaped their goals and what motivates them to achieve their dreams. This will enable me to a better leader and support my students and team.

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APPENDIX A
STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol No. 1 Students

Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me. The purpose of this study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. Your information will be kept confidential. You may choose a pseudonym, which will be used in any reports or publications. You have the right to withdraw participation in this project at any point in time. You have already signed and sent me your consent form. Thank you for doing that. Do you have any questions about the consent process?

Interview Questions

1. Demographic Questions
 - a. Name
 - b. Preferred Pseudonym
 - c. Race and Ethnicity
 - d. Sexual Identity
 - e. Gender Identity
 - f. Age; Birth date
 - g. High School Graduation Year
 - h. College Status

2. Tell me about your experience in high school before covid.
 - a. Who did you live with?
 - b. Who were the adults in your life?
 - c. How would you describe your family's income level?
 - d. What was your family's educational background?
 - e. How would you describe your friends?
 - f. What activities were you involved in?
 - g. What type of classes did you take?
 - h. How would you describe your grades?
 - i. What school resources were you familiar with?
 - j. How did you earn money?

3. What were your earliest thoughts about what you would do after graduating from high school?
 - a. What options did you consider?
 - b. Who did you talk to about your plans?
 - c. Who was supportive of your plans?
 - d. Who were you hesitant to share your plans with?
 - e. Where did you get information from?
 - f. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, how did your plans change or evolve?

4. Tell me about when you first began thinking about college.
 - a. Where did you get information from?
 - b. Who did you talk to at school?
 - c. What concerns did you have?
 - d. When you think about the people who were close to you - what were their thoughts about college?
 - e. Did you feel you had an advantage in going to college?
 - f. Did you feel you had a disadvantage in going to college?

5. When did you decide you wanted to go to college?
 - a. Why did you want to go to college?
 - b. Who was the most influential person in your desire to go to college?

6. Where did you want to attend?
 - a. What schools did you not want to attend?
 - b. What factors did you consider when choosing a school?
 - i. How would you rank those factors with 1 being the most important?
 - c. What interaction did you have with college representatives?
 - d. What interaction did you have with alumni?
 - e. What did you know about the school before you selected them?

7. When did you first become aware of the pandemic?

8. How were you and your loved ones impacted by the pandemic?

9. Tell me about your experience in high school during the pandemic.
 - a. How did your classes change?
 - b. What type of school resources did you use?
 - c. What type of community resources did you use?
 - d. How did you interact with your friends?
 - e. How did your plans for college change or evolve?

10. Tell me about your experience applying to college during the pandemic.
 - a. Where did you apply?
 - b. What challenges did you face applying to college?
 - c. What factors did you consider when choosing a school?
 - i. How would you rank those factors with 1 being the most important?
 - d. Where did you get information from?
 - e. What interaction did you have with college representatives?
 - f. What interaction did you have with alumni?
 - g. Who did you talk to about your plans?
 - h. When you think about the people who were close to you - what were their thoughts about college?
 - i. What concerns did you have?
 - j. Did you feel you had an advantage in going to college?
 - k. Did you feel you had a disadvantage in going to college?

11. Tell me about your life after graduating from high school.
 - a. Where do you go to school and what are you studying?
 - b. What factors did you consider when choosing (SCHOOL ATTENDING)?
 - i. How would you rank those factors with 1 being the most important?
 - c. How do you pay for school?
 - d. What are your career goals?
 - e. How would your life be different if the COVID-19 pandemic had not happened?
 - f. How would you describe your social identities in high school?
 - i. Which if any of your identities impacted your college choice?
12. Is there anything else, related to your experience planning for college, that we have not talked about but that you think would be important for me to know?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for speaking with me and sharing your experiences. After I review the transcript of the interview, and any written artifacts you provide, I will contact you for a second interview to check the accuracy of my interpretations. Earlier, I you received a sheet with contact information. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, my instructor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, or the NIU Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety. There is also a list of community-based counseling resources for your convenience.

Interview Protocol No. 2

Students

Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me again. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. Your information will be kept confidential. You may choose a pseudonym, which will be used in any reports or publications. You have the right to withdraw participation in this project at any point in time. You have already signed and sent me your consent form. Thank you for doing that. Do you have any questions about the consent process?

Interview Questions:

I will begin with a summary of their initial interview and check the accuracy of my interpretations.

I will then ask participant specific questions to follow up on information collected during the initial interview.

1. Tell me about your experience applying to college during the pandemic.
 - a. Where did you apply?
 - b. What challenges did you face applying to college?
 - c. What factors did you consider when choosing a school?
 - i. How would you rank those factors with 1 being the most important?
 - d. Where did you get information from?
 - e. What interaction did you have with college representatives?
 - f. What interaction did you have with alumni?
 - g. Who did you talk to about your plans?
 - h. When you think about the people who were close to you - what were their thoughts about college?
 - i. What concerns did you have?
 - j. Did you feel you had an advantage in going to college?
 - k. Did you feel you had a disadvantage in going to college?

2. Tell me about your life after graduating from high school.
 - a. Where do you go to school and what are you studying?
 - b. What factors did you consider when choosing (SCHOOL ATTENDING)?
 - i. How would you rank those factors with 1 being the most important?
 - c. How do you pay for school?
 - d. What are your career goals?
 - e. How would your life be different if the COVID-19 pandemic had not happened?
 - f. How would you describe your social identities in high school?
 - i. Which if any of your identities impacted your college choice?

3. Is there anything else, related to your experience planning for college, that we have not talked about but that you think would be important for me to know?
4. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for speaking with me and sharing your experiences. Earlier, you received a sheet with contact information. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, my instructor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, or the NIU Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety. There is also a list of community-based counseling resources for your convenience.

APPENDIX B
STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol No. 1

Alan Kay High School Staff

Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me. The purpose of this study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. Your information will be kept confidential. You may choose a pseudonym, which will be used in any reports or publications. You have the right to withdraw participation in this project at any point in time. You have already signed and sent me your consent form. Thank you for doing that. Do you have any questions about the consent process?

Interview Questions

1. Demographic Questions
 - a. Name
 - b. Title
 - c. Preferred Pseudonym
 - d. Race and Ethnicity
 - e. Gender Identity
 - f. Age; Birth date
2. Tell me about your educational and career background.
3. What was your job during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years?
 - a. What were your primary responsibilities?
4. How would you describe Alan Kay HS?
 - a. What type of academic resources were offered?
 - b. What type of post-secondary resources were offered?
 - c. What type of community resources were available?
5. In your experience, what post-secondary options did Alan Kay HS students consider?
 - a. When did they begin expressing an interest in college?
 - b. What factors influenced their decisions?
 - c. Who had the greatest influence on them?
 - i. Staff, family, peers, etc.
 - d. Where did they get information from?

6. Tell me about the post-secondary planning process for Alan Kay HS students?
 - a. Who was responsible for planning and implementing the plan?
 - i. What type of professional development or support did the responsible party receive?
 - b. When did the process usually begin?
 - c. What was the goal?
 - i. What metrics were measured?
 - d. Who was usually involved?
 - i. Staff, family, peers, alumni, community, etc.
 - e. What resources did students have access to?
 - i. At school, home, community, etc.
7. In your experience, what colleges did Alan Kay HS students want to attend?
 - a. What colleges were they least interested in?
 - b. What factors did they consider when choosing a school?
 - c. Where did they get information from?
 - d. Describe the interaction they had with college representatives.
 - e. Describe the interaction they had with alumni?
8. What advantages did students have in pursuing higher education?
 - a. What disadvantages did they have?
9. Tell me about working at Alan Kay HS during the pandemic.
 - a. How did the post-secondary planning process change?
 - b. How did you interact with students?
 - c. What changes did you observe in students?
 - d. What were the biggest challenges?
 - e. What were your biggest successes?
10. How did you assist students with completing college, scholarship, and financial aid applications?
 - a. What were the biggest challenges?
 - b. Did students' post-secondary plans change?
11. How would students' lives be different if the COVID-19 pandemic had not happened?
12. Is there anything else that we have not talked about, but you think would be important for me to know?
13. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for speaking with me and sharing your experiences. After I review the transcript of the interview, I will contact you for a second interview to check the accuracy of my interpretations. Earlier, I you received a sheet with contact information. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, my instructor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, or the NIU Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety.

Interview Protocol No. 2
Alan Kay High School Staff

Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me. The purpose of this study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. Your information will be kept confidential. You may choose a pseudonym, which will be used in any reports or publications. You have the right to withdraw participation in this project at any point in time. You have already signed and sent me your consent form. Thank you for doing that. Do you have any questions about the consent process?

Interview Questions:

I will begin with a summary of their initial interview and check the accuracy of my interpretations.

I will then ask specific questions to follow up on information collected during the initial interview.

1. Is there anything else that we have not talked about, but you think would be important for me to know?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for speaking with me and sharing your experiences. Earlier, you received a sheet with contact information. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, my instructor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast, or the NIU Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety.

APPENDIX C

STUDENT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Student Recruitment Email

Dear [Name]:

I am inviting you to participate in my research study about how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' college choices. Participation will involve a **60-90**-minute interview about your experience planning for life after high school, and a **30-60** minute follow up interview about your experiences after graduating high school. The interviews will be conducted virtually, or in person at a neutral location in the [REDACTED] area. Interviews will be audio or video recorded for accuracy. The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. The identity of participants will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity. The study has a low potential of risks including feelings or embarrassment, shame, or disappointment in postsecondary plans. The benefits include contributing to the college choice field of research.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please reply to this email, or contact me at [REDACTED].

I hope you will choose to be part of this project!

Robert Cook
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
[REDACTED]

Recruitment Text / SMS

Hi [Name]

I'm following up on the email I sent you about participating in my research study about college choice. Please contact me when you have time. I hope you will choose to be part of this study.

Thanks! Robert Cook [REDACTED]

APPENDIX D

STAFF RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Recruitment Email
Alan Kay High School Staff

Dear [Name]:

I am inviting you to participate in my research study about how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' college choices. Participation will involve a **45-60**-minute interview about your experience assisting students in planning for life after high school, and a **30-45** minute follow up interview. The interviews will be conducted virtually, or in person at a neutral location in the [REDACTED] area. Interviews will be audio or video recorded for accuracy. The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. The identity of participants will not be disclosed, and pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity. The study has a low potential of risk. The benefits include contributing to the college choice field of research.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please reply to this email, or contact me at [REDACTED].

I hope you will choose to be part of this project!

Robert Cook
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
[REDACTED]

Recruitment Call / Voicemail

Hi [Name]

I'm following up on the email I sent you about participating in my research study about college choice. Please contact me when you have time. I hope you will choose to be part of this study. Thanks! Robert Cook [REDACTED]

APPENDIX E
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study:

High School Interrupted: A Case Study of Upward Bound Graduate's Postsecondary Pathways and College Choices Following the Covid-19 Pandemic

Investigator:

Robert Cook

Department of Counseling and Higher Education

Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary pathways and college choices. This study is significant because it will provide an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary plans. The study will provide important information about the college decision process for participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will also provide insight into participants access to and use of support systems for college planning.
- This study involves providing demographic information and answering questions about planning for college before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The benefits include contributing to the college choice field of research; the risks include feelings or embarrassment, shame, or disappointment in postsecondary plans.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' college choices, and what support systems they used.

The guiding questions are:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary choices?
- How did Upward Bound graduates make their post-secondary decisions?
- What influenced Upward Bound graduates' post-secondary plans?
- What support systems do Upward Bound graduates utilize to plan for life after high school?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- agree to a 60-90 minute audio recorded in person, or video recorded virtual interview;
- agree to a 30-60 minute audio recorded in person, or video recorded virtual follow up interview; and
- submit copies of admission essays, personal statements, and social media posts regarding significant personal views about higher education, generated between March 2020 and their first date of post-secondary enrollment.

Risks and Benefits

The study has a low potential of risks including feelings or embarrassment, shame, or disappointment in postsecondary plans. The benefits include contributing to the college choice field of research.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file on an encrypted drive. Audio and video recordings will only be accessed by the researcher and a professional transcriber, and only be used for educational purposes. Once the research is completed all recordings will be destroyed. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you. Your identity will not be made known and you will be assigned, or may choose a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity.

I am a mandated reporter and required by Illinois law to report suspected child abuse. As an employee of [REDACTED], I am required to report any instances of harassment, discrimination, or sexual misconduct to the [REDACTED].

Your Rights

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Robert Cook at [REDACTED] or by telephone at [REDACTED]. You may also contact my instructor, Dr. Carrie Kortegast at [REDACTED] or by telephone at [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by me or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Future Use of the Research Data

After removing all identifying information from your data, as appropriate, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigator.

 Participant Signature

 Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the in-person interview or video recorded during the virtual interview, as appropriate.

Participant Signature

Date