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Rethinking Counseling for College: High School Counselors' Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges

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Rethinking Counseling for College:
High School Counselors' Perceptions
of Community and Technical Colleges

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Administration

by

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Abstract

While approximately 62% of high school graduates enroll in college, almost half of these students do not return for their second year in school. This demonstratable gap in college interest and reaching actual goals speaks to a need for information on how to facilitate the precollege guidance process to achieve more successful high school graduate and postsecondary institution matches. Much information is available in regard to the college choice process of high school students considering four year colleges and universities; scant information is known about how students discover information about the complete range of postsecondary educational opportunities. In particular, the community and technical college postsecondary education options have received minimal attention. Providing precollege counseling and information to students is considered a function of the high school counselor. Therefore, their perceptions and knowledge of postsecondary educational institutions are important in understanding the information they relate to their students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options. The study probed into the unique experiences of high school counselors from a major school system and examined how their perceptions were informed and shaped. A qualitative research design incorporating one-on-one interviews was conducted.

The conceptual framework guiding this study was informed and developed by integrating three respected models –McDonough's (1997) model of building a

comprehensive college culture in the high school, McClafferty and McDonough's (2002) model and the American School Counselor Association National Model.

The perceptions of the high school counselors resulted in five themes which included experiences with university bound students, experiences with community and technical college bound students, pathways of awareness of community and technical colleges, precollege counseling, and perceptions of community and technical colleges. The study concludes with implications for policy, practice, and recommendations for further study.

Keywords: Precollege counseling, Perceptions, High school counselors, Community college, Technical college.

Chapter One Introduction

The future of the United States or any country is profoundly integrated with how successfully prepared each citizen is to be accountable and productive. Comer (1995) highlights the importance of providing advanced educational opportunities for our young people in order for them to excel in a global economy that will require increasing demands for constantly advancing technology and a highly skilled work force. He cogently observes that “we cannot afford to lose the talent of those who are either uninformed or misinformed about postsecondary education” (p. xi).

Providing appropriate information to youth in an effort to help them make decisions is an important goal of school counseling programs (American School Counselor Association, 2005). High school students naturally move through a wide variety of developmental processes in their secondary school years including academic achievement, social acceptance, self-awareness, sexual development and others (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Swanson, Spencer, & Peterson, 1998). The specific experience of postsecondary education and career selection is an important and often puzzling decision in the life of a young person (Herr & Cramer, 1996; Isaacson & Brown, 2000).

The postsecondary education decision is thought to be one of the first significant noncompulsory choices made by teenagers and is an important indicator in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The choices that students make in this transition from high school to the future can have a long term influence on their careers, source of income, and way of life for themselves as individual Americans and of the whole society (Matthay, 1995a).

An extremely important factor in guaranteeing that high school students have access to postsecondary education and training is making sure that information is accessible, reliable, and accurate about all available postsecondary options (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Plank & Jordan, 2001). In contrast to countries such as Germany and France where there are few postsecondary education options, the United States has a vast array of possibilities. The options are varied and include possibilities such as four year colleges and universities; community and technical colleges; military academies; distance learning and weekend colleges; proprietary schools; and others (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008).

Although one of several resources for precollege information, the high school counselor is considered to be a vital link in the communication of information used to guide high school students concerning their decisions about higher education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2002; Herr, 2002; Kern, 2000; King, 1996; Lautz, Hawkins, & Perez, 2005; Muhammad, 2008; Ray, 1992). McDonough (2005) emphasized that within the high school no professional is more important than the counselor in efforts to improve college enrollments. She persuasively argued that “examining high school counselors and the role they play in the college access process could not be a more timely or vital action to undertake” (p.2). The quality and accuracy of the postsecondary information that the high school counselor provides can make the college choice process less complicated, make possible more suitable decisions and inspire more confidence in students to help assure a more successful transition to postsecondary education (Ray, 1992). However, the advice and information the high school

counselor is able to provide is limited by their own knowledge and awareness of all the education and training opportunities available to their students after high school (Matthay, 1989; McDonough, 2004; Orfield & Paul, 1993).

Whether a person pursues postsecondary education has a major impact on life chances, occupational status, and potential wealth (Plank & Jordan, 2001). Because pursuing postsecondary education can have a significant impact on an individual's future, research on this decision process for high school students must be on-going. A review of the literature reveals that there is much research available on the college selection process in regard to students considering or ultimately choosing to attend four year postsecondary institutions. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989), King (1996), Matthay (1989), McDonough (1997), Tinto (1994), and others have conducted numerous studies on the college choice process and examined situations that resulted in the selection of a four year postsecondary institution. These studies found that students who received counseling services from their high school counselor were more likely to matriculate to a four year college or university and that the availability of precollege counseling and college information was important in their decision to enroll. Very few studies have investigated the college choice process that results in the selection of a postsecondary option other than the four year college or university. This seeming oversight in the literature justifies the importance of further research examining choices other than four year options in particular the community and technical college options.

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2006), approximately 90 percent of the 2004 high school sophomore cohort desired a college education, and over 70 percent expected to complete a four year college degree. Using National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2006 data and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2006 results, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems reported that only 62 percent of high school graduates enrolled in college, and almost half of those that matriculated to colleges did not return for a second year (2006). This demonstrable gap in college interest and reaching actual college goals also serves to justify the need for continuous research on how to facilitate the precollege guidance process to best achieve an appropriate high school graduate and postsecondary institution fit. Additional exploration and information could potentially result in more young adults reaching their postsecondary educational goals.

The goal of this study was to examine high school counselors understanding of community and technical colleges and their perspectives of these institutions as viable postsecondary options for their students. We must understand more about their function in the precollege guidance process particularly about the information they share with high school students concerning postsecondary options.

Precollege Information Sources

Research by Villella and Hu (1990) that focused on the college choice process suggested that a limited, imprecise search strengthens the possibility of a student choosing the wrong postsecondary training, being disillusioned with the choice, and exiting before graduation. The National Postsecondary Education

Cooperative's (MacAlllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007) report suggested that "access to and use of practical, accurate, and actionable information are critical dimensions of the complex pathway students and families follow in enrolling in postsecondary education" (p.iii). The report included a literature review and summary of focus group research gathered in eight states. It centered on improving information for student decisions about postsecondary education and revealed the variety of individuals and resources that high school students and their families rely on to assist them in transitioning from high school to postsecondary education. Among the information sources identified in the report are parents, siblings, extended family, fictive kin, family friends, peers, counselors, teachers, mentors, church members, coworkers, college/university staffs, and occupational role models. The high school counselor is one of several potential sources for the student to garner information about postsecondary education options.

High School Counselor Precollege Role

The high school counselor is described as one of the most significant high school-based resources for students interested in attending college (College Entrance Examination Board, 1986; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Plank & Jordan, 2001). The high school counselor's active involvement in this decision process can be important for all students and is considered to be even more important for specific groups of students such as those of low socio-economic status; those who would be the first in their family to attend or first generation college students; African American and Latino students (Borman & Schneider, 1998; Freeman, 1997; Johnson & Stewart, 1991; King, 1996; Levine &

Nidiffer, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2004). The counselor serves as an important resource, not only for students, but also for parents, teachers, and administrators. A general overview of the ways the high school counselor functions in the college choice process include: recognizing the potential in every student, talking with students about their goals, providing career guidance, sharing information about all college options as early as possible, revisiting college themes frequently and consistently, and planning positive outreach to family members (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2004). The high school counselor serves as the cornerstone for the precollege guidance program for students.

It is important to emphasize that the counselor's function is not to make decisions for the student, but to provide the kind of information and encouragement that will allow them to decide on the most suitable and appropriate postsecondary option and how to successfully complete the option (White, 2008; Zuker, 1995). Because the counselor's purpose in precollege advising is to provide information about all postsecondary options (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008), it is important to consider the unique research of technical college students by Ireh, Savage and Hatch (1995). One of their findings included that high school counselors were identified by participants as the least influential factor out of twenty-three factors they had used to guide their career decisions.

The finding that the high school counselor was not an influential factor in guiding these technical college students in their career decisions is significant because it stimulates the discussion about possible reasons why the high school counselor was not identified as more of an influence for students. Considerations

about why high school counselors were not identified by these technical college students could be that high school counselors had inadequate information about technical colleges or that high school counselors may have had misperceptions about technical colleges. It is also important to consider the 'what if' factor. What if the high school counselors had more knowledge about the technical college option, could they have influenced students that had not considered a technical college as a postsecondary choice. Another consideration is the fact that most high school counselors have traveled the pathway of high school, four year institution, and graduate school to reach their current position. Most have minimal work experience outside the educational system (Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001). This does call to question whether or not their educational journey leads them to have a tendency to direct students in this same pathway. The quest for possible answers to these questions validates the importance for research on high school counselors' perceptions about community and technical colleges. The next section describes the important role that community and technical colleges have in the education and training of individuals preparing for rewarding careers and meeting the workforce needs of our nation.

Community and Technical College Education

Since education and training beyond high school are necessary for employment in the workforce of today and tomorrow (Holzer & Lerman, 2007), it is therefore critical that high school students plan for and determine how they will obtain the workforce skills they are interested in as they complete high school. Using U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics- 2004-2014, Holzer and Lerman (2007)

emphasized the need for enhancing the skills of America's workers particularly by means of more and higher quality education and training. They argued that roughly half of all employment today is in the middle-skill occupations or those that require more than high school but less than a four year degree. Community and technical colleges are postsecondary institutions that can provide this education and training. These institutions, approximately 1,173 in number, offer regionally accredited associate degree and occupational certificate programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010; College Board, 2008). Offerings include both training in particular skills (such as automotive technology and practical nursing) and the first two years of a liberal arts curriculum. The length of programs varies from one year to two years depending on career focus. Community and technical college education is the largest sector of higher education in the United States. These colleges enroll nearly half of all undergraduates (College Board, 2008).

Hoyt (2001) has emphasized that the occupational society in our country has shifted in the direction of drawing greater and greater differences between skilled and unskilled workers, and not necessarily between college graduates and non-college graduates. Additionally, he stressed that careful consideration should be given to the range of other types of postsecondary career-oriented educational institutions, beside four year options, that are also available to students. In their 2008 analysis of new jobs in the United States for the next 10 years, the National Commission on Community Colleges reported that at least some postsecondary education will be necessary for half of the identified jobs (College Board, 2008).

Specific to the state of Louisiana, the educational opportunities that students pursue in community and technical colleges have the potential to lead to jobs that comprise about 65% of the job market. In a report published in November of 2003 by McNeil, the postsecondary educational pursuits of the Louisiana high school class of 1999 was compared to the skill levels needed for job market projections up to the year 2020. The report concluded that there are more high school graduates pursuing four year college degrees than there are workforce needs for this educational level. In addition, the data revealed that most of the jobs will require two years or less postsecondary education or training and that only a small percentage of Louisiana high school graduates have self-reported their intentions to follow this option. McNeil (2003) argued that there is a significant workforce gap in Louisiana.

A recent Louisiana legislative response to the growing workforce needs in the state was the passage of Act 309 that established the Postsecondary Education Review Commission. The commission was charged with conducting a comprehensive review of the state's postsecondary education system and making recommendations for improving its role in the state's economic development. Of particular interest to this study was the commission's interest in the need for more emphasis on two year community and technical colleges in order to meet the workforce needs of the state (Louisiana Postsecondary Education Review Commission, 2010).

Community and technical colleges have the potential to provide education and training to many and yet the possibility exists that either because of lack of information or views that they are less valued than other options; many students do

not consider this type of postsecondary education. Based on the projected job market opportunities and training and education options at community and technical colleges, raising student awareness of the breath of these choices should be an educational priority. The critical dilemma experienced by some high school students is that too often the idea of attending a community or technical college is presented only after a student has not been accepted into a four year institution. Introducing the options of community and technical colleges as a substantial choice along with four year options prevents the mistaken impression that community and technical colleges should be considered only when all other options are not possible (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008).

Perceptions of Community and Technical College Education

The examination of perceptions of community and technical colleges delivering postsecondary education must begin with questions. Is there a predisposition in our country toward four year college education as compared to other options for education and training such as community and technical colleges? Is this preference due to the lack of understanding and knowledge about the opportunities and options that community and technical college education has to offer to individuals seeking education and training that can prepare them for their careers and workforce choices? Dougherty (1994) summarized the important and controversial position of community colleges in the postsecondary arena after extensive research on these institutions with the following statements:

Community colleges have not received the attention they deserve. These public two year colleges play a critical role in American higher education and,

indeed, American life. Yet both scholars and laypeople often know very little about them, believing they are only a peripheral part of the collegiate system, a catch basin for those few students unable or unwilling to enter “regular” colleges. But this ignorance is badly mistaken. (p.3)

Dougherty’s point about the lack of knowledge and understanding about community and technical colleges highlights the need for more research about the perceptions of community and technical college education.

Parnell (2001), researcher and outspoken advocate for the ‘neglected majority’ of high school students, continues the debate about biased views on postsecondary education and misperceptions about community and technical colleges. He defines this group of students as those unlikely to seek a four year degree and he asks the question:

Where in our culture have we developed the bias that the only road to occupational happiness and success begins with a four year college baccalaureate degree? Furthermore, this foggy notion has led many people to conclude that anyone not following this road must somehow be considered a second-class citizen. (p. iii)

The perception that pursuing less than a four year college education will result in one being considered a less important citizen must be explored with additional research that examines understanding and knowledge about community and technical college education.

In an avant-garde and extensive study, Hoyt and Maxey (2001) collected data from over 40,000 students in 361 postsecondary institutions and 2,100 occupation

programs and reported that too many individuals in our country conclude that the only postsecondary education option is the four year college or university. Additionally, if individuals do think about other kinds of postsecondary institutions, “they do so under an assumption that they are ‘second best’ when compared with four-year colleges” (p. 28). Therefore, understandably the perception of community and technical colleges is that they are less valued or a last resort as a postsecondary option as compared to the four year college or university option.

In a recent study by Caporrimo (2008), a survey was used to compare the perceptions of community college students to four year college students’ perceptions in regard to the value of community college education as compared to four year institutions. Community college education was perceived as less valued by society in general by 80% of the community college and four year college participants. LaPaglia (1994) conducted an extensive search of American fiction to explore the image of the two-year college and in addition asked current female community college students to share their journeys. She found a “dissonance between fiction’s image of the two year college (and the view of our culture at large, since that is what fiction mirrors)” (p.viii) and the views presented by the study’s participants. LaPaglia concluded that “our society’s professional storytellers usually ignore two year college people altogether, making them almost invisible in importance, perhaps even to themselves” (p.viii). The women recorded information about their journeys in community college education and yielded rich details of their achievement, success, and satisfaction.

Defining the Problem

Many high school students, their parents, educators, and counselors believe that pursuing education after high school means attending a four year postsecondary institution. Gray and Herr (2000) describe this belief as “college mania” (p.7). They use the ‘one way to win’ paradigm to illustrate the perceived idea that the only chance that today’s young people have for future financial security is obtaining at least a four year college degree acquired with the expectation that it will provide a family-sustaining salary in a professional job.

In order for the college choice process to be successful, it requires much attention and realistic information in regard to a student’s interests, abilities, and personal goals (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Hoyt & Maxey, 2001; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008) and attention to postsecondary institution fit (Bossel & Fredland, 1999; Kern, 2000; Rosenbaum, 1998; Sachs, 2003; Tinto, 1994; Wiese, 1994; Williams, 1989). Many high school students are lacking vital information needed to make an appropriate individual college choice (Conley, 2008; Hamrick & Hossler, 1995; Schneider, 2003; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). This information gap results in many students matriculating inappropriately to four year institutions; consequently they become dissatisfied with their college choice or become discouraged for various reasons and choose to leave. The ‘lost talent’ (Plank & Jordan, 2001) results in individuals who have not achieved their career goals, parents who are frustrated and disappointed, and job loss for a state’s economy.

One of the various reasons that the majority of high school students matriculate to four year postsecondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008) is that high school counselors emphasize and encourage students to pursue this pathway to the exclusion of consideration of potentially more appropriate postsecondary options (Kotrlik & Harrison, 1989). Overlooking the community and technical college options (Hoyt, 2001), ultimately results in disadvantaging many students in their college choice process and postsecondary education decision making. A possible cause of this 'four year college for all' mentality is that high school counselor perceptions of community and technical colleges are influenced by their inadequate and vague information about these institutions or their lack of recognition that they are legitimate postsecondary options (Mitkos & Bragg, 2008). To better understand the knowledge base of high school counselors with respect to community and technical colleges and their perspectives of these institutions as viable options for their students, we must understand more about their position in this process. The purpose of this study therefore will be to explore high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is informed and developed by integrating three respected models found in the current literature. The three models include McDonough's (1997) model of building a comprehensive college culture in high school, McClafferty and McDonough's (2002) template for creating a school environment for building a college culture, and the American School Counselor

Association (ASCA) National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs.

The cornerstone of the framework will be the high school counselor serving as the institutional agent in regard to precollege advising of high school students. The ASCA model serves to establish the counseling program as an integral component of the school, helps to make certain every student has access to information, identifies the knowledge and skills all students should acquire, and ensures comprehensiveness in design and systematic delivery (ASCA, 2005). A focal point of the framework is the influence of the high school counselor's perceptions and knowledge of postsecondary education institutions in their precollege guidance.

Research Questions

The principle question pursued in this research was:

What are high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options for high school students?

Secondary questions that were addressed included:

- (1) How are high school counselors' perceptions formed about community and technical colleges?
- (2) What information do high school counselors have about community and technical colleges and how did they obtain this information?
- (3) How are perceptions of community and technical colleges reflected in high school counselors' information to students?
- (4) How do high school counselors determine what information and counseling to share with individual students in regard to precollege planning?

Overview of Methodology

The primary goal of this study was to understand the particular phenomenon of high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. The study of a phenomenon is best accomplished with qualitative research design (Creswell, 2003). A qualitative research design using a phenomenological strategy was used to capture and describe the essence of individual high school counselors' understandings of community and technical colleges. The phenomenological approach established an investigation that allowed a description of the sense of the lived experiences of high school counselors from their vantage point (Schram, 2006). The focus of the research was capturing individual high school counselor's perceptions of community and technical colleges and their comprehensive descriptions of what their experiences meant to them. An important phenomenological assumption highlighted by Schram is that perceptions supply us with facts about the world.

In a related and unique 2008 qualitative study, case study inquiry was used by Mitkos and Bragg to determine high school counselors and advisors' perceptions of the community college. Their research explored how perceptions were informed by selected school leaders, faculty, and students and investigated how the high school counselors' perceptions were reflected in descriptions of their postsecondary advising of students. This study was somewhat similar to the Mitkos and Bragg study in that it also utilized qualitative methodology in order to capture the descriptions of how high school counselors' perceptions were formed and how those perceptions are reflected in their descriptions of their postsecondary advising. Of

note are the distinctive differences in the two studies. The Mitkos and Bragg study was conducted in a state that has a very mature community college system with over 48 community colleges. There are no technical colleges in this state system. In addition, their study included participants from only one high school. This study expanded the information about perceptions of community and technical college postsecondary education by including more high schools and added more explanatory data to this seeming oversight in the literature.

In order to have an understanding of high school counselors perceptions of community and technical colleges, it is important to examine the everyday experiences of this group of individuals and how they perceive and reason in their environment and with consideration to their customary surroundings of the high school campus. The data collected from in-depth, open-ended interviews with high school counselors within the natural high school campus setting yielded direct quotations about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge and provided rich information to the research (Patton, 2002).

Significance of the Study

If one of our country's secondary educational goals is to prepare high school students for their career aspirations, we must understand more about the high school counselor's role in precollege guidance. In order to understand this role we must have a better understanding of the knowledge base of high school counselors with respect to community and technical colleges and their perspectives of these institutions as viable options for their students. Determining high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges and exploring how their

perceptions of postsecondary education institutions influence their precollege guidance of students is significant for several reasons. The most important area of significance for this study is that it will provide insight into what information high school counselors have about community and technical colleges. This is a valuable consideration because the research outcomes could result in all postsecondary education options being presented to students and parents reliably and accurately. The significance of this information is that it will give insight to community and technical college leaders as to what their school's image is in the eyes of high school counselors. By providing current and accurate information about community and technical college offerings to high school counselors they in turn have reliable resources to share with their students. Students and parents could find this information to be beneficial in making plans for education and training after high school.

Another justification for the study is the significant gap in research about high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. Although much college choice research has been collected and reported on in regard to students' consideration of four year postsecondary institutions, little is known about community and technical colleges as considerations in the college choice process. More specifically, the function of school counselors in students' contemplation of community and technical colleges as a viable option for students is unexplored. Therefore due to the scarcity of current information on this topic, support for the significance and timeliness of this study was warranted.

The next reason that this topic is significant is that the study's results could potentially improve high school counselor preparation and training in regard to precollege advising. Important questions that this study addressed were how much do high school counselors know about the educational opportunities at community and technical colleges for students and what are the implications for improving counselor preparation.

In regard to counselor training and preparation, Krei and Rosenbaum (2001) indicated that counselor training was focused mostly on helping better students apply to four year colleges and that they have not received training about college and career issues for students that are not interested in pursuing four year degrees. The researchers reported that only a few of the high school counselors interviewed advised students to consider different kinds of postsecondary training other than four year institutions. As the Krei and Rosenbaum study reveals, additional topics to be emphasized in high school counselor training are other postsecondary options besides four year colleges. Results of this research could provide academic leadership information to consider in curricula components of counselor preparation programs.

In addition, this research could also provide counselors with information to assist them in validating the importance of incorporating a comprehensive model for precollege advising to campus and system administrators. It is important for the model to include equivalent dissemination of information and guidance on all forms of postsecondary education and training.

The assessment of the perceptions of high school counselors concerning community and technical colleges would also be significant in regard to the implementation of state educational master plans. Should there be voids in the high school counselor information about master plan community and technical college options, staff development and training could provide information for use with precollege planning. High school counselors would have adequate information to advise students of all postsecondary options.

Summary

Due to the fact that there has been limited attention given to the college choice process that results in students' selection of community and technical colleges and considering the nation's critical workforce needs for graduates completing this option of education, the information garnered from this research is very timely. The intent of this research was not to dissuade or discourage four year postsecondary attendance. The aim was to study high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges and thereby contribute to their knowledge base about information about all options. As a result, there could be greater likelihood for more students to realistically consider the opportunities at community and technical colleges and potentially have a greater likelihood of academic and economic postsecondary success.

I believe that each and every high school student is best served by high school counselors that are trained and knowledgeable about the complete range of postsecondary educational options. All postsecondary options include four year college/university, community college, and technical college information. Precollege

information should be presented so that students can discover the wealth of all postsecondary options with a realistic picture and always in the best interest of each individual student.

In addition to the practical impact of this research on precollege counseling, I believe the usefulness of this research will also extend to an abstract conceptual importance by expanding the current literature regarding community and technical colleges as a postsecondary option; broaden the college choice literature to include community and technical colleges; and increase the knowledge regarding the role of high school counselors in the preparation of students for a successful college experience.

Overview of the Research Project

This research project encompassed the pursuit of examining high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. With the inclusion of existing literature and a conceptual framework revolving around the models of McDonough, McClafferty, and the American School Counselor Association, a qualitative methodology was used to explore their perceptions of community and technical colleges. Chapter one is followed by a review of the current literature on classification of postsecondary institutions, how perception was used in this research, the college choice process and research grounded college choice models, descriptions of the role and training of the high school counselor and concludes with the counselor's influence in the college choice process. Chapter three describes the methodology utilized in this study including the rationale for qualitative research as the choice for the inquiry method. Chapter four provides an explanation of the

study's findings using the participants' own words as they portrayed their individual experiences. The final chapter presents a discussion of the findings and implications for policy and practice as well as recommendations for further research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This section presents an examination of the significant thinking and research that is relevant to this research project- rethinking counseling for college: high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. The goal of this review was to integrate, synthesize, and critique the important information and research that was used to establish the knowledge base for this study (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). Before beginning to explore an understanding of high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges it was important to seek out prior research in this subject area. The first avenue pursued was research that closely matched the topic of the project. After considerable exploration, a 1968 study that examined high school counselors' perceptions of postsecondary vocational and technical education was the only somewhat related research located. In addition, a recent study by Mitkos and Bragg released in 2008 is contemporary research that examined perceptions of the community college of high school counselors and advisors and added to the scant information on this subject. Therefore, the conclusion quickly realized was there is a definite information gap in the literature and the topic needed further research.

Continuous research examination revolved around the following questions: how do students find out about whether or not they would be interested in a community or technical college as a postsecondary choice; do high school counselors have a function in the college choice process and if so is their influence perceptible; and what do high school counselors know about community and

technical college education. This resulted in the development of three general categories for this summary of the literature reviewed. The three categories included outlining the postsecondary education options for high school students; an overview of the college choice process that high school students encounter; and an in-depth review of the high school counselor that examined both their roles and influences in precollege guidance and college choice.

The first section summarizes how postsecondary institutions are classified in the United States and explore some of the controversy that surrounds rankings, ratings, and reviews of the different types of postsecondary education. In addition, tones of elitism and institutional prestige of four year colleges and universities are highlighted in media communications and other resources that seem to overshadow other postsecondary options such as community and technical colleges. This section also includes a description of how perception was used in this research project.

The second section summarizes the college choice process and explores research grounded college choice models. The Hossler and Gallagher three-stage combined model of student college choice was used to frame this study and an explanation of the function of the high school counselor in this significant decision process for the high school student was included.

The third section of the chapter focuses on the school counselor. The general function of the school counselor is described and in addition the comprehensive role of the high school counselor is expanded. This is followed by a thorough description of the high school counselor function in precollege guidance

based on extensive research detailed in the chapter. Specific research that focuses on the high school counselor function in preparing students for the current and future workforce is also included in this section.

Research on the high school counselor's influence on the college choice process of students was explored along two research directions. The first direction examined research reflecting the views of students about the high school counselor influence on the college choice process and the second direction considered research reflecting the views of counselors.

After an extensive search of the current literature, there was a limited amount of information located specifically in regard to high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges and about how they incorporate information about these colleges in their precollege advising. Additionally, most literature reviewed had examined situations involving four year colleges and universities as their research settings. Therefore, there was a significant and timely need for this study.

Postsecondary Education Options

With over 4,400 postsecondary education options to choose from, high school students and their families face a daunting task of narrowing the selection to the most appropriate one. One way to bring order to the vast multitude of choices is to categorize them by type (Matthay, 1995b). Matthay cautioned that there will be numerous exceptions to general classifications of postsecondary institutions and yet it can bring some initial order to a high school student's selection process. Matthay's suggestion for general classification of postsecondary institutions included: four year universities and colleges; two year colleges- community, technical, and junior

colleges; and special types of two and four year colleges- professional colleges, historically black colleges, military colleges, religious affiliation colleges, and single-sex colleges.

Rankings, ratings, reviews, and classifications of postsecondary institutions in regard to America's "best" and "good" have been a contentious subject since the beginning of these establishments in our country. McCormick (2007) describes it in terms of a lot of ink spilled over the years about the best colleges in our country.

The challenges begin with how one distinguishes between a university and a college and continues with what information is used to compare similar institutions, such as differences in whether a campus has national or regional focus. It is a complicated, complex phenomenon that is wrought with controversy because no matter what the efforts are to remove the potential for interpretational ranking or rating, the challenge of postsecondary competition and biasness continues today (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994).

The establishment of the Carnegie Classification of postsecondary institutions in 1970 was a system created to provide unbiased information to both the research community and general public (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2007). The most current revision is the 2005 edition and is considered to be the foremost framework for describing higher education diversity in the United States. General descriptions of the Basic Classification categories include the following: associate's colleges- institutions that offer all degrees at the associate's level or bachelor's degrees are less than 10% of all undergraduate degrees; doctorate-granting universities- institutions that grant at a minimum 20 doctoral

degrees annually; master's colleges and universities- institutions that grant at a minimum 50 master's degrees and less than 20 doctoral degrees annually; baccalaureate colleges- institutions where baccalaureate degrees represent at least 10% of all undergraduate degrees and that grant fewer than 50 master's degrees or 20 doctoral degrees annually; special focus institutions- institutions that grant baccalaureate or higher degrees with a significant concentration in a single focus area or group of focus areas; and tribal colleges- institutions that are members of the American Indian Education Consortium. Sub classifications within each category are included based on distinguishing characteristics of included institutions.

With the goal of establishing credibility and accountability for the integral role that counselors have in the daily educational environment of schools, the ASCA created The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs. The model was established to provide structure for schools to use in their counseling programs with the following purposes: to establish counseling services as an integral part of the academic mission; to make sure that all students have equal access to counseling programs; to identify and provide the knowledge and skills every student should have; and to ensure that the counseling program is comprehensive and delivered systematically (ASCA, 2005).

The foundation for ASCA's model is outlined in competencies in ASCA's national standards. The standards are categorized in three areas and include: academic development, career development, and personal/social development. The specific competencies that are directly related to the focus of this study include:

- A. Students will complete school with the academic preparation essential to choose from a wide range of substantial postsecondary options, including college.
- B. Students will acquire the skills to investigate the world of work in relation to knowledge of self and to make informed career decisions.
- C. Students will employ strategies to achieve future career goals with success and satisfaction.
- D. Students will understand the relationship between personal qualities, education, training and the world of work (ASCA, 2005).

The intent of the comprehensive model is to establish a counseling program within a school that provides a structured framework that facilitates school counselors providing direct services to every student. The model offers an outline for states, school districts, and schools to assist in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive and systematic school counseling program that is intended to serve all students. The model calls for counselors to serve as the institutional agent in effecting systematic change in the school. In order to have systemic effect, a comprehensive model must be in place and implemented (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Herr & Cramer, 1996; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2008). Hoyt (2001) and Lapan, Gysbers, and Sun (1997) found that, among other benefits, with the implementation of comprehensive counseling programs schools were able to provide more college and career information to students.

In an effort to provide support and resources to students, parents, counselors, and community members, the National Association for College Admission

Counseling (NACAC) developed a manual entitled *Guiding the Way to Higher Education*. The manual describes postsecondary education options in the following way: colleges and universities- institutions that have divisions called schools or colleges that provide a wide array of majors and prepare students for a great variety of careers, length of study is usually four years leading to a bachelor's degree, provides a comprehensive education in the arts, sciences, and humanities; and community /junior/technical colleges- two year institutions located in local communities, specialize in college transfer programs, vocational programs or both, length of study ranges from six months to two years, typically lower tuition, flexible hours, open admission (with certain program exceptions), and convenient (NACAC, 2007).

Since the primary focus of this research was high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges, a system example of this postsecondary option was reviewed. The next section summarizes the history of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) and describes its mission as a framework for this research.

Louisiana Community and Technical Colleges

The LCTCS is a relatively new postsecondary unit established by the Louisiana legislature with the passage of ACT 151 and ACT 170 in 1998. This significant legislation was a response to an awareness of the need to supervise higher education more efficiently (LCTCS, 2009). The LCTCS Board of Supervisors was established to manage and direct the community and technical colleges of the

state. The system includes nine community colleges and the Louisiana Technical College (with its 40 campuses) located throughout the state of Louisiana.

The mission of the LCTCS is to “improve the quality of life of the citizens through educational programs offered through our colleges. The system strives to increase the opportunities for Louisiana’s workforce to succeed through skills training programs” (LCTCS, 2009). The LCTCS Carnegie Basic Classification is two year, public rural serving small, Associate’s, and exclusively undergraduate two year (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2007).

Because the primary focus of this research was to explore high school counselors’ perceptions of community and technical colleges, it is important to identify how the term perception was defined for the purpose of this project. In addition, the importance of perceptions especially in regard to how influential high school counselors’ perceptions of postsecondary education institutions may be reflected in their precollege guidance information was considered.

Perceptions

The crucial aim of this research was to understand the perceptions of high school counselors in regard to community and technical colleges as a postsecondary option for students. Important questions to clarify in regard to this research project were how was perception defined and why do perceptions matter in respect to high school counselors’ understanding of community and technical colleges?

Merriam-Webster (1995) defines perception as one’s “ability to understand; to have insight; to comprehend; to become aware of in one’s mind; or to become aware

of directly through any of the senses, especially to see or hear” (p. 385).

Psychologists and cognitive scientists have explored the term for decades. Maund (2003) postulates a view of perception to be the process by which one obtains knowledge of an objective world. An individual observes physical objects and happenings and through a process become their perceptions of their world. He highlights that important questions that must be considered are “whether we ever know what objects were really like, as opposed to how they appear, and indeed whether how they appeared had anything to do with what they are really like” (p. 1).

How an individual perceives the world, an environment, a circumstance or a situation is how they view it and understand it based on the knowledge they possess at that moment in time (Severin, 2000). This understanding may be true, real, and factual or it may also be false, unreal, or even somewhat factual (Hoerr, 2005). For the individual, information can be learned from training, experience, or possibly an assumption that is made from indirect or uninformed sources. The saying goes ‘perception is reality’ from the individual’s viewpoint. Whether factual, semi-factual, or non-factual, an individual’s perception of anything is important because it defines their view, understanding, and opinion about any subject. Rock (1975) deduced that all perception is the end result of occurrences in the brain and therefore, it “is at most a symbolic representation of objects in the real world” (p. 5). Perception is not an objective consideration of only factual data, “perception is subjective and inferential” (Mitkos & Bragg, 2008, p. 377). Therefore, understanding an individual’s perceptions is important because their perceptions define their views and beliefs at a point in time.

Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges

This research examined high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options for high school students. It was an important topic to explore because high school counselors have a significant function in the precollege guidance of students. The counselors' perceptions of postsecondary educational institutions can have an impact on the information they share with their students. A high school counselor will be able to communicate and provide information about what they know and understand.

For the purpose of this study, perception was defined as the mental image drawn and described (Maund, 2003) by each participant in regard to community and technical colleges. Their understanding or comprehension of a community and technical college as a postsecondary option was sought. This research provided information about a community and technical college's perceived image.

After defining the term perception, one must consider the question: "can perception be skewed by past experiences, prejudices, inaccurate information, undue influence of others, or emotions?" (Hughes, 2005, p. 3) It is important to understand high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges because they are the institutional agents in a high school that can create the culture of postsecondary education and guide students' and parents' perceptions of possible options (McDonough, 1997). McDonough cogently explains that the counselor:

creates an organizational worldview that serves to delimit the full universe of college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations. The

school and the counselor construct this worldview in response to their perceptions of the parents' and community's expectations for appropriate college destinations, combined with their own knowledge and experience base. (p. 89)

The high school counselor essentially summarizes his or her own perceptions and transmits them as an informational tool to the school's students, faculty, and administrators. The high school counselor is an important source of information and encouragement in regard to precollege guidance to both students and their families.

In their 1992 report on building a quality workforce, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) emphasized the importance of the high school counselor's role in career development and in addition revealed that there are concerns about their views concerning technical education postsecondary options. This research disclosed that historically counselors have viewed technical education programs as dumping grounds for students who are academically below skill level or have behavior problems. They do not perceive technical education as an option that can potentially lead to successful futures.

Mitkos and Bragg (2008) reported that high school counselors may lack awareness of community colleges or "they may hold perceptions of the diminished value of community colleges" (p. 367). They suggested that high school counselors' lack of knowledge and understanding about community colleges has the possibility of establishing an "unfavorable perception" (p. 367) of these colleges.

In contrast to the SHEEO report and the suggestions of Mitkos and Bragg, Hugo's (2004) qualitative study of high school counselors in California revealed

another view. She summarized that high school counselors are adamant about their mission to provide students with information about all postsecondary options. High school counselors in the study expressed the concern for those students that were not going to a four year university to get the services and information they need to get the access to training they want for their choices. This information would lead to the assumption that choices to attend an institution other than a four year institution have the potential for an individual making these choices to have a productive and meaningful life from the viewpoint of the high school counselors in the Hugo study.

With consideration to the facts that there are so many choices for postsecondary education and so many qualities and characteristics for high school students to consider when searching for the most appropriate postsecondary institution, is an institution's prestige or perceived quality a factor in the decision making? Do students and their parents base their choices on the institution's hierarchy in media rankings rather than on the suitability of the campus to meet the personal and educational goals of the student? Crane (2003) persuasively argues against the "flawed, limited, or simply fallacious" ranking of postsecondary institutions phenomenon in our country (p. 19). She emphasizes that when a student enters a college for the right reasons, life-changing experiences result. She encourages students and their families to view this choice as one with an eye to fit rather than status.

With years of experience in precollege advising of high school students, Elfers (2007) emphasized the importance of providing students with the facts and features of two year colleges along with four year college information. She identified

a challenge on her high school campus as prestige pressure. She reported that she must be careful to keep confidential where students are applying to college because they do not want their peers to know what their choices have been. Elfers shared,

not that it's anybody's business anyway, of course, but doesn't that give us a glimpse of student concern for the opinions of others-isn't prestige at the root of that concern? Given this complication, will the student who finds that a community college fits his or her needs risk feeling inferior? Isn't it sad that students think they have to make education choices that 'sound' good rather than those that 'feel' good? (p. 33)

She highlights the importance of respectfully discussing two-year institutions options with high school students and being supportive and enthusiastic when students show an interest in this education option.

In 2007, as part of the College Board's Center for Innovative Thought, the National Commission on Community Colleges was assembled. This commission was established as a result of the recognition that two-year institutions have an indispensable and overlooked role in American life. The commission released its January 2008 report entitled, *Winning the Skills Race and Strengthening America's Middle Class: An Action Agenda for Community Colleges*. The report summarizes obstacles and makes recommendations for highlighting two year institutions in the efforts to enrich American communities and guarantee national competitiveness. It persuasively pointed out that "the ingrained habit of ignoring the current and potential contributions of community colleges must be broken if the United States

hopes to respond effectively to several significant trends reshaping national and international life” (p. 5).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) made several observations about two year community colleges in a follow-up review of their extensive research between 1968 and 1988 entitled *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research*. They illuminated the fact that their research and significant amounts of similar studies were conducted on students enrolled in four year institutions with little or no attention to students enrolled in two year colleges.

Pascarella and Terenzini cogently observed the following:

A relatively small number of research universities and elite liberal colleges have set the academic and public standard for what most Americans believe higher education is or should be about...Significant numbers of people inside and outside higher education believe that such institutions provide the highest quality of undergraduate education possible; and the more an institution deviates from this set of standards, the lower it is ranked in terms of prestige or perceived education excellence, and the more invisible it becomes. By the time one gets to community colleges, with their open admissions policies, faculties rewarded essentially for teaching, and their disproportionate numbers of non-resident, part-timer, older, non-white, and working class students; they are virtually off the radar screen in terms of public recognition or concern. (p.155)

Pascarella and Terenzini observations continue to make the case for the need for additional research in regard to the perceptions of community and technical college education.

Additional and current information is needed to determine what high school counselors' perceptions are about community and technical college education. This study sought to gather information for which there is a significant gap in the existing research literature. The next section provides an overview of the concept of college knowledge and presents three strands of theoretical models of the high school student's college-decision making with a focus on the Hossler and Gallagher's model and the high school counselor's function in the model.

College Choice

Conley (2008) describes a student's college knowledge as their "contextual skills and awareness" (p.10) of college. He proposes that it is "the information students need to apply successfully to college, gain necessary financial aid, and then ...matriculate, and understand how college operates as a system and culture" (p.10). High school students that possess college knowledge are equipped with the skills necessary to effectively transition to postsecondary institutions (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2004). Conley's (2008) research suggests that college knowledge is not delivered equally in our systems and that students that are first in their families to attend college are particularly deficient in their college knowledge and this can result in feelings of frustration and discouragement.

An effective precollege guidance program has the potential to have a significant impact on high school students' postsecondary decisions (Hoyt & Maxey,

2001; Hugo, 2004; Johnson & Stewart, 1991; Matthay, 1989; McDonough, 2005; Orfield & Paul, 1993; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Ray, 1992; Rowe, 1989; Tinto, 1994). Therefore, it is important that high school counselors have an understanding of the college choice process that high school students journey through to reach the goal of selecting an appropriate postsecondary educational institution. In order for high school counselors to understand the factors that structure the college-decision making process and the stages that students move through as they make decisions, the college choice process must be included when planning and implementing precollege guidance activities and resources (Hossler & Palmer, 2008).

The college choice process for high school students is described as a multi-dimensional, complex phenomenon (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). It is a progressional development of decisions, not the result of a single decision, which starts at an early age for most students and ends in the choice of a postsecondary institution for additional education and training after high school. The factors that influence applicants when deciding which postsecondary institutions to apply and finally matriculate to are a description of the college choice process for high school students (Cyprian-Andrews, 2004).

Interest from institutional and public policy makers has resulted in much research in understanding the factors that are involved in how students decide on postsecondary education institutions. Most of the studies on college choice utilize one of three approaches or conceptual models:

- (1) economic models, which are rooted in econometric assumptions that prospective college students are rational actors and make careful cost-benefit

analyses (ex. Kotler and Fox's econometric model), (2) status-attainment models, which are rooted in sociology (ex. Alwin and Otto's model), and (3) information-processing models, which share the rational assumptions posited in economic models but also incorporate information seeking (ex. Hossler and Gallagher's model). (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999, p.141)

The three categories of college choice models are reviewed with an emphasis on the Hossler and Gallagher three-stage model of college choice that was considered most compatible to the focus of this research.

Economic models of college choice are based on the assumptions that potential college students are rational individuals that make decisions based on their analyses of the cost benefits of attending postsecondary institutions (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). In comparison, the status-attainment models of college choice are based in sociology and explain how various factors interact as students make choices about attending postsecondary institutions (Hossler et al.).

In response to suggestions that these models did not satisfactorily address the process of college choice, researchers began to propose models that combined both the economic and status attainment components. The information-processing models presented a framework that included both the economic and social aspects that influence the college selection process of high school students and are also referred to as combined models.

"Information-processing college choice models incorporate aspects of the sociological and economic models and divide the student's educational decision making plans into a sequential, progressive, multi-stage process" (Cyprian-Andrews,

2004, p.24). Hossler and Gallagher established a model of college choice that considered this process from the standpoint that college choice is an information-gathering, information-processing, and decision-making activity (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The researchers postulated that this model considers the college choice process from the student's perspective and not from that of the college. This model has been selected in order to establish an explanation of this process and situate the high school counselor's function in such.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) established a three-stage combined model of student college choice. It is a simple and yet conceptual model of college choice. The model has three stages in the transition to higher education for the high school student: predisposition, search, and choice. The period in which the student develops the goal or desire to pursue higher education is considered to be the predisposition stage. Examples of factors include socioeconomic status, student achievement, ethnicity, parental education expectations and encouragement, and high school quality. During the predisposition stage the student seeks and relies heavily on information sources from family, mentors, and peers (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989).

The next phase of the process, the search stage of the model involves all of the strategies involved with identifying postsecondary options (example- gathering and processing college information and options). The search phase of the college choice process for the high school student includes the accumulation and assimilation of information necessary to establish the potential college student's list of postsecondary institutions appropriate for their career plans (Cabrera & La Nasa,

2000b). Although there are many sources of information concerning postsecondary options for high school students that include parents, family members, friends, educators, mentors, postsecondary institutions, etc.; the high school counselor can be an influential resource during this stage of the college choice process. This is especially the case with African-American students, Latino students, low-income students, and students whose parents do not have direct experience with college (Borman & Schneider, 1998; Freeman, 1997; Johnson & Stewart, 1991; King, 1996; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2004). Hossler and Gallagher identify this stage as the “one most amenable to intervention” (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p.150). Equipped with accurate, reliable, and current data about all postsecondary education options, high school counselors have the potential to provide valuable counseling and information to students about their college choices during this search stage.

The third and final phase of the Hossler and Gallagher model- the choice stage- culminates with the student selecting and enrolling in a particular institution from among the available alternatives (example- enrollment verification). The high school student may use several resources for help with the final selection of a college choice. Information, advice, and guidance may be sought or communicated from several sources such as parents, relatives, peers, teachers, counselors, and postsecondary institutions. The high school counselor has the potential to play a key role in this stage of the college choice process. Hossler and Vesper (1993) found in their longitudinal study of Indiana high school students that those participants that

had access to more external resources of information about postsecondary education options had a greater chance for completing their college plans.

Ultimately, it is very important that high school counselors responsible for precollege guidance on the campus have an understanding of the college choice process. It is critical for these individuals to understand the factors that shape the college-decision making process and the phases the students' journey through as they make decisions that could potentially have an impact on their careers, livelihoods, and long term lifestyles (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). The comprehensive role of the high school counselor and their function in precollege guidance is discussed in the next section.

School Counselor

The American School Counselor Association explains the current role of the school counselor as being an essential team member of the educational process (ASCA, 2008a). As described by ASCA, school counselors are responsible for aiding all students in the arenas of academic achievement, personal/social development, and career development. The ultimate goal of the work of the school counselor is to help ensure that their students become adults that are productive and well-adjusted.

Preparation of School Counselor

School counselors are required to obtain specific training to be qualified for school counseling positions. All states require certification or licensure of school counselors and requirements vary from state to state. Counselor education programs that are considered reputable in the field are designed to include

coursework in counseling theory and skills training, human development theory, group procedures, assessment skills, career development theory and information, research, social and cultural foundation, and professional issues (Schmidt, 2008). With particular interest to this study, Schmidt emphasizes that a primary purpose of school counseling is to assist students with educational and career planning. He highlights the importance of counselor education programs including preparation in career development theories and information services in order to train counselors to assist students with educational and career planning.

An example of a graduate program in counselor education can be found at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL). The program is designed to prepare individuals to serve as school counselors, community counselors, rehabilitation counselors, and college counselors dependent on specific course work achieved. Those completing the program successfully will have met the educational requirements for several state and national certifications and licensures. This counselor education program requires a total of 48-54 credits to complete the degree depending on the area of emphasis (ULL, 2010).

State certification requirements for a school counselor in Louisiana necessitate that an individual have either a master's degree in guidance and counseling from a regionally accredited institution or a master's degree with the equivalent hours and courses in school counseling. The twenty-four graduate credit hour preparation requires the following coursework: (1) principles and administration of school counseling; (2) career and lifestyle development; (3) individual appraisal;

(4) counseling theory and practice; (5) group processes; (6) human growth and development; and (7) social and cultural foundations in counseling (ASCA, 2009)

High School Counselor

The high school counselor works in collaboration with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community to help young people make decisions about transitioning into adulthood and the world of work (ASCA, 2008a). These students are in the process of evaluating their strengths, skills, and abilities and deciding who they are, what they do well, and what their choices are after graduating from high school.

High school counselors are professional educators that have received specialized training. ASCA has national standards for a comprehensive, developmental, and systematic school counseling program established to equip counselors with the resources needed to support the “academic achievement of all students as they prepare for the ever-changing world of the 21st century” (2008b, ¶ 3). The ASCA recommended ratio of students to counselor is 250-to-1. High school counselors are crucial members of the educational leadership team within a school and provide invaluable support to students on their campuses.

High School Counselor’s Role in Precollege Guidance

The U. S. Department of Labor (2006) describes the educational, vocational, and school counselor as an individual that is an advocate for students and responsible for promoting their academic, career, personal, and social development. Of particular interest to this research topic is their role in helping students achieve their academic and career goals. The nature of the work of the school counselor is

explained as helping students evaluate their abilities, interests, talents, and personality characteristics in an effort to develop reasonable and practical career goals. High school counselors provide advice and direction to students about college majors, admission requirements, financial aid, etc. Accordingly, the Department of Labor's description of the responsibilities of high school counselors indicates that they are charged with a significant role in the college/career planning of high school students.

In the late 1980's in response to a recognized need to improve and extend the precollege guidance and counseling programs that help students think about and plan for all possibilities of postsecondary educational opportunities, the College Board Commission on Precollege Guidance and Counseling, the National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC) sponsored National College Counseling Project, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Report on Secondary Education in America joined efforts to initiate advancement in this area. In 1990, NACAC presented guidelines for effective precollege counseling programs and identified functions that counselors should implement in their schools (NACAC, 2007). The guidelines are comprehensive and all-inclusive of the precollege guidance and counseling needs of high school students as they consider and plan for a full range of postsecondary opportunities.

A final aspect of the role of the high school counselor in precollege guidance to be considered is the important function they provide in facilitating a quality future workforce. Staley and Carey (1997) emphasized that high school counselors are in an ideal position to organize activities and information to effectively prepare today's

high school students for future workforce projections. They stressed that the high school counselor has the potential to take the lead in preparing a quality twenty-first century workforce by providing critical information to students. Their recommendations included the importance of counselors being informed about the current and future job projections and the postsecondary education and training that is necessary.

Hughey & Hughey (1999) argued for the importance of helping all students through the high school counseling program to effectively prepare for the changes in the workplace. They called attention to the increasing significance of preparing students for their future responsibilities in the world of work and how this function has become more and more important for school counselors and educators. A significant suggestion was that high school counselors be charged with helping students become familiar with all of the various education options after high school to aid students in matching their career goals with after high school plans.

Using data from the Aspen Institute and Employment Policy Foundation, Carnevale and Desrochers (2003) argued for the importance of preparing students for the knowledge economy and suggested what high school counselors need to know in order to help students. They highlighted three primary tenets that high school counselors should be informed about the future workplace environment that their students will be facing. The first tenet was that those high school graduates who do not receive at least some postsecondary education and training will encounter more and more limited economic options. Students exiting high school and not bound for postsecondary education and with minimal job skills will have

limited opportunities. The wage gap between those with a high school diploma or less and those with at least some postsecondary education is expanding. In addition, young adults choosing not to pursue postsecondary education are more likely to have higher unemployment periods (O'Neil, 1992).

The next tenet (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003) was that the only thing that will cost more than going to college is not going to college at all. And finally they logically argued that the demand for individuals with education and training beyond high school will only increase in the future due to the complexity of skill requirements and the expansive retirement of baby boomers. As baby boomers retire and their average life span increases, there will be an increased need for educated and trained workers in all aspects of the medical field (i.e. geriatric caretakers) to areas that provide more products and services to aging adults. Education and training for many of these job opportunities are available in community and technical college programs.

In their 1992 report, the State Higher Education Executive Officers suggested that higher education must expand its traditional emphasis on achieving baccalaureate and advanced degrees and include other options for the preparation of the future workforce. They stressed the importance of the high school counselor's function in career development and yet caution that there are some concerns. One concern was that historically counselors have viewed technical education programs as dumping grounds for students who are academically below skill level or have behavior problems. They do not perceive technical education as an option that can potentially lead to successful futures. The report emphasized that it is imperative

that this nation begin to value education for work as a vital component to economic stability and that these workers are respected as national assets.

Community and technical college education and training provides skilled workers in areas such as licensed practical nursing (LPN), automotive mechanics, drafting technicians, air conditioning (AC) technicians, computer technicians, and others. These program areas require academic and technical skills of students in order to succeed in these professions. The careers provide family-sustaining wages and services to our communities that are essential to everyday life. Hospitals would not function without LPN's and when the air conditioning in our homes malfunctions a desperate search for an AC technician takes place many times without the consideration of what it may cost.

This research is timely because it is important to understand high school counselors' perceptions concerning community and technical college education and the resulting careers. If counselors view community and technical colleges as not leading to viable and successful careers, it would be important to implement educational and leadership strategies to modify their views with training and establish plans for improved informational support to high school students and their parents.

High School Counselor Influence on College Choice- Student Views

In a quantitative study conducted by Ray (1992), a majority of the high school seniors (90%) responded in regard to their college search process that they were satisfied or more than satisfied with the services provided by their counselor. A questionnaire was used to survey 57 members of an advanced placement English

class. Middle-income, small city describes the high school used for the study. The purpose of the study was to determine the perceptions of the students about which strategies used by counselors were most helpful and to determine the satisfaction of services of the counselor. It is important to note that the racial makeup of the class included 85% Caucasian and 15% African American individuals. Ray reported that 91% (n=49) had used the counselor as a resource about college choice. Overall, the data indicated that college bound students perceived that their needs in terms of the college choice process were being met by the high school counselor. The most helpful resource ranked by this group was the college visit with an individual conference with the high school counselor ranked second in a list of 18 choices for students.

Ray's (1992) findings indicated that high school students frequently rely on the high school counselor for information and advice in the search process for college choice. It must be pointed out that her research is based on a very narrow student population from a small city, middle income high school that included a predominantly Caucasian group. In addition, the students surveyed were in an advanced placement course which does not incorporate the lower and middle academic levels of the total student population.

In a somewhat similar quantitative study, Johnson and Stewart (1991) questioned 3,708 freshmen at a large Midwestern university about three focus areas concerning college choice which included what information resources they used as a high school student. Sex, race, and ACT scores were included in the data analysis. Students were asked to rank nine sources of information concerning the college

choice process they used in their decision making. Almost 70% (males and females) indicated that the most often used resources were college students, friends, and high school counselors. When race was considered, African-American students (78%) were more likely to use the high school counselor than Caucasian students (70%). The high school counselor was the most frequent source of college information for African-American students. Johnson and Stewart's findings indicate that the high school counselor is an important information source in the college choice process, especially for African-American and low ACT scoring students.

It must be noted that Johnson and Stewart's study was conducted with college students enrolled in a four year university and therefore was limited to this one postsecondary education level. The students surveyed had matriculated to a university from the high school and therefore the data collected does not reflect the information from students that may have chosen another postsecondary option (community or technical college) nor those that did not matriculate.

In her qualitative study, Freeman (1997) argued for the importance of interviewing African American high school students in order to capture a richer understanding of their perceptions of barriers to participating in higher education and their ideas about how to plan for more effective ways to increase participation. Seventy students from five major cities that have large African American populations participated in this significant study. The two broad categories of obstacles that emerged from the students contributing to the study were economic and psychological barriers. The students identified economic barriers as either not having the funds to attend college or the fear of completing higher education and not

getting a job that pays equivalent to their level of education. The psychological barriers revealed by the participants included college never being an option, feelings of hopelessness, and the intimidation factor.

In the area of ways to increase African-American student participation in higher education, one of the solutions repeatedly suggested in the Freeman (1997) study by the high school students was to provide active high school counselors. The descriptions of their perceived needs included not only information about the college choice process from counselors but more importantly elimination of the counselor mentality that due to their social and cultural background they cannot aspire to attend higher education after high school. Among other significant recommendations from her findings, Freeman advocated for the essential need for interested and information-disseminating counselors concerning the college choice process. She posited that there is a recognizable and justifiable call for attention to African American students to receive precollege information due to the understanding that they do not have other knowledgeable sources available to them.

A key finding of Freeman's (1997) study of African American students was their identified fear of attending and even completing a four year postsecondary education and not being able to find a job that would pay an equivalent amount to a job that might be available without attending college for four years. This finding gives credence to the concept of providing students with information about other postsecondary options such as community and technical college education that provide program offerings that potentially prepare individuals for jobs that have substantial wage opportunities.

In addition to highlighting that Freeman's (1997) study points out the critical role that high school counselors have in providing information to students about the college choice process, it must be noted that the research is devoted to students pursuing higher education (four year colleges). This draws attention to the awareness that more research is needed to examine ways in which students are provided information about all options for postsecondary education including community and technical colleges.

McDonough is a respected researcher and writer in the area of counseling and college counseling in America's high schools. One of her research projects focused on examining the ways in which high school counseling strategies and social class combine to form the perceptions of high school students about their opportunities for a college education (McDonough, 1997). She used four California high schools that provided a combination of both low and high social class and varying degrees of college counseling activities. Twelve Caucasian females, their best friends, parents, and high school counselors were interviewed in order to capture the information McDonough sought. Her study's intent was to hold gender and race constant in an effort to analyze both the effects of social class and high school guidance support systems.

Qualitative methodology was used by McDonough (1997) in an effort to examine the motivations and behaviors of high school students as they proceed through the college choice process and to determine why the participants made the choices they did. Her research findings revealed numerous ways in which students move through the college choice process. She emphasized that students make

these choices as they experience implicit and explicit messages from both their organizational and social networks. An important finding was in regard to the high school counselor involvement in the college choice process. She concluded that within the high school, there is no other professional that is more important than the high school counselor in improving college enrollments. McDonough stated,

...individual guidance counselors have a direct impact on students, and more importantly, that the counselor is critical in constructing the school's expectations and formal planning for college. The counselor creates and implements the school's organizational response to college planning and, as such, creates an organization worldview that serves to delimit the full universe of possible college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations. The school and the counselor construct this worldview in response to their perceptions of the parents' and community's expectations for appropriate college destinations, combined with their own knowledge and experience base. (1997, p. 89)

In a 2005 report to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, McDonough argued further that due to their vast amount of job responsibilities (from clerical to recess duties) high school counselors are prevented from performing the job they know and do best. That job is actively supporting high school students and their families in the college choice process as opposed to merely disseminating college choice information for improving chances for enrollment in a four year college.

Although McDonough's research and writings are significant in regard to the impact and role that the high school counselor has in the college choice process for young adults, it must be noted that the focus is on enrollment in a four year college. There also exists a research need to devote time and attention to those students that are best suited and interested in other options for postsecondary education such as community and technical colleges.

Rowe's (1989) study of incoming Brigham Young University freshmen pursued the topic of examining how high school seniors sought advice from counselors and other important individuals in regard to their college choice process. The questionnaire used sought the student's self-reported frequencies of contact with counselors concerning such issues as college plans and career information. The participants reported that the most often contacted source of information for post-high school plans were mothers, friends, and fathers. Additionally, most of the high school seniors surveyed reported two or fewer contacts with counselors or other educators about their college plans. At least 20% of the participants acknowledged that they had not discussed their postsecondary plans with their high school counselor.

As a result of his findings, Rowe (1989) questioned whether or not high school students are receiving sufficient college choice information in order to make appropriate career plans. He emphasized the fact that almost all information that is used to plan for college choice (admissions requirements, academic programs, financial aid, etc.) is usually housed in the counselor's office and they serve as an important resource for college information. Rowe made several suggestions as to

why high school students do not rely on their high school counselor for college choice information; one of which was that the counselors focus on their function as psychological therapists. This conclusion was based on the indication that a great emphasis is placed on the psychological counseling component of their graduate program curriculum and this particular focus in their training.

Rowe (1989) concluded that high school counselors can be very powerful in directing students toward colleges that meet their career goals. His research was limited in the fact that it considered the self-reported information from students that were entering a four year private Christian university and did not include opinions from students that had chosen other postsecondary plans or those that had not pursued postsecondary education.

Corwin, Venegas, Oliveriez, and Colyar (2004) used focus group and individual interviews with high school counselors, teachers, assistant principals, principals, and students to examine the role of appropriate guidance for college going. It was a three year study of 12 northern and southern California schools that was conducted to evaluate the productive parameters of high school cultures that prepared students for college. They described their most significant finding as the situations in which high school counselors actually served as detriments to students' college success. Students related the counselors' functions as serving to schedule classes, not to encourage college-going. The student participants had negative perceptions of their high school counselor, especially in regard to college counseling and sought information from other sources. Therefore, diminishing the possibility for counselors to be a resource for college going information and support.

After an extensive literature search for studies that incorporated how high school students became aware of all of the postsecondary options available to them, a study was located that is indirectly related to this research topic. Ireh, Savage, and Hatch (1995) targeted technical college students and used a set of pre-determined factors to find out their degree of influence on their career decisions. The research instrument used was designed to assess three major areas: (a) individuals that may have influenced or aided students with their career decision, (b) experiences both within school and external to school that may have influenced career decisions, and (c) additional factors related to making career decisions. There were twenty-three factors used to study the technical college students. The factors included such items as income or wage of the occupation, friends, previous work experience, high school counselor, etc. The six factors participants revealed in the study to have had an influence on their career decisions in order of importance, included: (a) income or wages expected in the occupation, (b) technical college course interest, (c) prior work experience, (d) role models, (e) friends, and (f) member of family.

The Ireh et al. (1995) study revealed that influence from the high school counselor was the lowest rated factor of the twenty-three factors identified by the technical college students. The question that could be raised from the study of technical college students in regard to this research project is what could high school counselors could have done differently for these students to have had an impact or influence in their college choice process in high school and additionally could added efforts assist non-college bound to become technical college bound.

Somers, Haines, Keene, Bauer, Pfeiffer, McCluskey et al. (2006) examined why community college students chose to attend a two year college. By means of focus group interviews involving over 200 students, the researchers reported six reoccurring themes that included: they said I couldn't do it; life happens; educational aspirations; influence of peers and family; price and location; and institutional characteristics. Of particular interest to this research, the study's participants expressed experiences with high school counselors and teachers that were for the most part not supportive of students' aspirations to attend college. "While these individuals may be paid to make supportive gestures, students perceived an overriding message- you are not college material" (p.64). This communication was just as much nonverbal as it was verbally transmitted. "There was some suggestion that students may have been singled out for negative advice based on their neighborhood, ethnicity, native language, parental status, or socioeconomic status" (p. 64).

As a result of significant and comprehensive research involving nearly 40,000 students in occupational programs in 361 postsecondary institutions, Hoyt and Maxey (2001) published *Counseling for High Skills: Responding to the Career Needs of All Students*. One of nine recommendations for changing the role of the school counselor was guiding students and parents in identifying postsecondary education options in addition to four year colleges and university. Hoyt and Maxey emphasized:

This is particularly important for those who have never been made aware of any other kinds of postsecondary educational opportunities. It is crucial that

this information be provided without demeaning or playing down the multiplicity of educational purposes that four year colleges and universities seek to meet. It is equally important that these comparisons not be made under an assumption that the four year college is the best with all other alternative kinds of educational institutions being classified as second class. Instead, the goal is to seek the best institution for each person. (p. 92)

In summary, data from the existing research has provided information for understanding that high school counselors can have a significant impact in the college choice process of high school students. Much attention has been given to this important decision in regard to information about the consideration of four year postsecondary institutions. Little is known about how students discover the complete range of postsecondary educational opportunities such as the community and technical college options. Therefore, the goal of this research project was to investigate the perceptions high school counselors about community and technical colleges and the role high school counselors have in providing information about these postsecondary options.

High School Counselor Influence on College Choice- Counselor View

This section begins with research that examined high school counselors' views of their roles and influence in precollege guidance. In addition, research that evaluated the accuracy and availability of postsecondary institution information for high school students is reviewed.

In a qualitative study conducted by Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei (1996), 27 counselors from eight high schools located in the Chicago-metropolitan-area were

interviewed. The research focus was to determine how counselors viewed their effect on the college choice process and to identify strategies they used to advise and guide students' college plans. Some of the questions counselors were asked to respond to included how they recognized and gave advice to high school students that might have unrealistic plans; what advice did they give regarding vocational technical education; and to identify what types of responses parents and others had in regard to their advice. Rosenbaum et al. reported that the counselors downplayed their roles as having little influence and only a very minor role in their ability to aid students in making wise college choice decisions. The researchers reported that when asked about the job of advising students with potentially unrealistic college plans, "counselors report that they do not want to do it, they cannot make students accept their advice, parents will not let them do it, and they do not have the authority" (p. 263).

Another finding from the Rosenbaum et al. (1996) study was the recognition that perhaps the greatest barrier to counselors giving students realistic advice is the negative parental feedback that can result if the advice conflicts with parental expectations. Counselors are leery about providing information and counseling to students whose parent's expectations are unrealistic in light of their academic records or interests and desires. Based on the information that the researchers gathered from the participants, they suggested that high school counselors have embraced two strategies in their precollege guidance strategies: they encourage college for all, and they emphasize personal counseling. Unfortunately, the college

for all message usually does not necessarily incorporate all available options for postsecondary education.

Examining the perceptions of the high school principals and counselor roles in providing programs and services established to increase enrollment in four year colleges and universities was the focus of Hugo's (2004) qualitative study. The data was garnered from structured interviews with the principal and counselors from four public high schools in California. The high schools were chosen based on the fact that they sent significant numbers of students to four year colleges and universities. Notable findings about all schools in Hugo's study included having a strong college preparatory curriculum; test preparation; strong faculty and family involvement and college partnerships. The counselors believed that a key component to effective college counseling was determining the balance between both high-quality individual and mass communication with students and their parents. There was a strong message from both administrators and counselors that the school-wide philosophy was to prepare all students for college.

Hugo's study adds to the knowledge base that the high school counselor has an instrumental role in the college choice process of high school students. It is important to note that the focus of her study was to examine programs and services established to increase enrollment at four year colleges and universities. This notation is highlighted in an effort to point out that there is a significant research gap that exists in understanding the college choice process and the comprehensiveness of the postsecondary institutional information disseminated to all high school students.

In addition to considering students consulting with or communicating with high school counselors about advice concerning the college choice process, it is also important to examine the accuracy and availability of information counselors have about postsecondary institutions. Chapman and De Masi (1985) in a national survey of high school counselors and principals asked about their job responsibilities, allocation of time, and employment perceptions. The study's purpose was two fold and included: (a) identifying how counselors distributed their time and how closely this aligned with what they believed they should be doing and (b) determining the importance counselors and principals gave to each job responsibility and their effectiveness. The researchers gave special attention to the college advising function within the total set of counseling activities. The participants included 963 counselors and 738 principals.

The high school counselors responded that they spent 20% of their attention to college advising (17%-personal/interpersonal counseling; 18% academic counseling; 17%-paperwork; 38% other) and when asked about what amount of their time would be more effective in college advising they responded 22% (Chapman & De Masi, 1985). When questioned about what the greatest challenges they faced in providing college choice information to high school students, they indicated that it was very difficult to maintain accurate information about various college programs including such factors as admission requirements and financial aid information.

The high school counselor responsibility of providing accurate, reliable, and current information about postsecondary education options to high school students is a difficult and challenging job. It is important for education administrators and

leaders to recognize this complex task and help to provide the direction, time, and professional development to continually equip high school counselors with the information for this significant function in the college choice process.

In an important and comprehensive study by Orfield and Paul (1993), they found high school counseling programs deficient in providing college access information to high school students and their parents. They identified college access information as an understanding of the high school curriculum, college admission requirements, and college cost and financial aid resources. The research participants included statewide representation with a particular emphasis to assure appropriate inclusion of minority members. The response rate of the survey yielded results that were the highest ever recorded for this type of study. Participation from students (8th, 9th, and 12th graders-N=5,187) was 91%. The parental response rate was 88% and included 4,736 replies. Counselors were also surveyed and yielded 389 responses at a 93% response rate.

The Orfield and Paul (1993) study included a variety of topics affecting Indiana teenagers and their families such as: decisions about high school academic programs, the dissemination of information from school to students and parents, and roadblocks both students and parents perceived as challenges to students reaching their goals for the future. Some of the results of the study revealed data such as more than 20% of surveyed seniors indicated that they had no college choice planning sessions with their counselor and 17% of surveyed counselors reported that they were unable to help all the students in need of their assistance in college choice planning. Another sector of the findings reported that fewer than half of the

counselors indicated that they had current job market information and one-fifth indicated they had no information at all.

Two important results of the study lend particular credence to the justification for this research project-the issues of endorsing community and technical education and employer information. Orfield and Paul's (1993) research shows that 80% of the high school counselors indicated that employers do not come to the high school and talk about job opportunities. When counselors were asked if they endorse postsecondary vocational training for any student that is interested, the majority of participants (81%) indicated they would. And yet based on the study's results, in reality they recommend technical college to college-prep students with poor grades and vocational and general track students with good grades. I believe that the focus of this study is important in that it examines the high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges and how this information can be used to help assure all high school students receive comprehensive college choice information.

In another key study, Matthay (1989) examined the perceptions of college freshman about their decision making for college choice. Her goal was to gather information to suggest ways to improve the high school counseling of students in the college choice process and in addition make recommendations about how to improve the preparation of counselors in the area of precollege planning. The survey was completed by a heterogeneous group of college students required to take freshman English classes at a diverse range of postsecondary institutions. In addition to the four year public and private colleges and universities, this unique study also included students enrolled in public community and technical colleges.

Matthay's (1989) research indicated that the most helpful resource to the college students combined had been the college visit. The high school counselor was ranked fourth by the combined group as the most helpful overall resource and the second most supportive human resource by the college freshman. As a result of the information generated from her research, some of Matthay's recommendations for improving the counseling of high school students in the college-decision making process included: regularly seeking feedback from students and their parents about the efficacy of the college counseling programs; providing training for high school counselors that includes college choice counseling methods and references; and for counselors to establish college choice strategies that ensure a student has an initial good match with the college selected.

Gray and Herr have analyzed research and written extensively about their passion and concern about high school students that fall into the category of the 'academic middle'. Their research focus is not on the top 25-30% of high school students that are academically sound and most often receive adequate information about the college choice process. They adamantly assert that all young people, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses, have been told that there is only 'one way to win' in the college choice process and that is to prepare for the professional ranks by going to a four year college (Gray & Herr, 2000). The authors soundly argued that the country is faced with rescuing a generation adrift in regard to preparing for a productive and satisfying career. They suggested that it is unlikely that many of these young people will 'win' due to the fact that we have failed to prepare them for legitimate substitutions to the four year college choice. The

students Gray and Herr described as adrift are “students whose aspirations and postsecondary plans are inconsistent with both their high school academic record and labor market projections” (p. 4). Among their recommendations for improving the college choice process for all high school students was the implementation of career development systematic counseling programs. They explained the importance of a program such as this in order to provide for clarity and realistic expectations for all students- “both the academically blessed and the less blessed” (p.113).

Social Forces Behind ‘One Way to Win’

In response to what students have been taught in the American dream (Gray & Herr, 2000), most (69%) identify their postsecondary plans to include four year college and many (35% of 69%) want professional jobs based on their expectation of complete a post-baccalaureate graduate or professional degree (Ingels, Planty, & Bozick, 2005). Gray and Herr argue that these goals are ‘fantasy’ especially for those in the academic middle since they are not likely to possess the skills necessary to complete a baccalaureate degree and the labor market would have to double its need for professional workers to accommodate this volume.

As suggested by Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college choice model, the predisposition stage describes the student’s primary decision making for college as a response to parental and peer pressure in addition to the individual’s academic ability. Gray and Herr (2000) suggest that parental and peer messages are a direct reflection of social and moral messages. As a result of their research, they argue that an all-encompassing pressure from parents, friends, the education system, and

the media exists that sends both a direct and subtle message that “there is one way to win- go to a four year college and pursue a career in the professions” (p. 18). An additional important factor they highlight is that “academic skills are conspicuously missing” (p. 18) from the ‘one way to win’ discussions.

Gray and Herr (2000) propose that the second most powerful source of pressure (after parents) to attend a four year college is the high school. There exists a significant focus of performance measure in the community in regard to a high school’s graduate four year college attendance rate. Often times as part of a high school’s graduation ceremony, key attention is given to graduate plans for university enrollment. As part of precollege planning activities, high schools offer college fairs, financial aid workshops, college visits, and host college recruiters.

The preference of counselors toward the higher academic college bound achievers is not new. Gray and Herr (2000) propose what is new is the accelerated interest for counselors and teachers to advise students to pursue four year colleges. The concern highlighted by the researchers is that this push includes students in the lower three quarters of academic achievement. In addition to pressure from parents and the educational system, the media seems to be constantly highlighting that four year college graduates earn more. This message is relayed to all students and fails to consider academic ability (Gray & Herr, 2000).

The relationship of social class and/or status and college attendance is also not new. “Academicians are fond of portraying the benefits of higher education in terms of a more fulfilling and rewarding life” (Gray & Herr, 2000, p. 28). This ideal was established in British life as a perfect status symbol and it continues in

American culture. Although higher education is becoming more and more available to all, having a four year college degree is equated with middle and upper classes. Therefore, Gray and Herr conclude that social class, status, and college is the impetus for the college mania message.

Although our society “may support the platitude that there is dignity in all work, the only work given much status is professional work- the doctor, the lawyer, the engineer, the professor” (Gray & Herr, 2000, p.29). The status in society of professions such as these drives students to disregard other careers which may better suit them. The inadvertent message given and received by students is that these professionals are valued and those that perform nonprofessional work are not very smart and generally not sophisticated. Careers in such areas as plumbing, drafting, paramedics, and paralegals are perceived with less value and social status.

Somers et al. (2006) study of reasons community college students choose to attend college added to the limited data on this topic. Focus group results revealed findings that are significant to this study. Students shared that they had been told by teachers and counselors that they were not college material and had not been supported about their desire to attend college. They also shared that this message was both verbal and nonverbal.

In extensive data collection by Linnehan (2006), high school counselor surveys were obtained asking participants to identify factors that might influence the information they share with students about precollege planning. The findings revealed that counselors were more likely to recommend community college attendance to students with weaker academic performance than those with stronger

academic skills. Students with stronger academic performance were more likely to be recommended to four year colleges as compared to those with low academic skills.

Summary

In review, research gathered from high school students and their parents, high school counselors, and college students argue for the need to examine the comprehensiveness of the postsecondary information presented to all high school students for their consideration in the college choice process by examining high school counselor's perceptions of community and technical colleges. Many factors must be considered in searching for ways to improve this important life decision high school students face. Incorporated in the literature review were the knowledge and experience of leaders in the field of the study of the high school counselor and their function in the college choice process to justify the value of exploring high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. The literature offered evidence that there is a profound need and justification for exploring this subject.

Chapter Three Methodology

Introduction

This study was conducted to generate a deeper understanding of high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical college education. The purpose of this research project was to explore, describe, and evaluate high school counselors' views of community and technical colleges as viable and valuable options for any high school student's postsecondary education and examined how counselors' perceptions influence their precollege guidance of students.

The research questions that were used as the stimulus for this investigation are identified in this chapter. The justification for using qualitative phenomenological research is provided in addition to the research based models that served as the foundation for constructing the conceptual framework for this study. The methods for data collection and data analysis are described. A final section includes the strategies incorporated in order to ensure that this research plan was conducted with thorough ethical considerations.

Research Questions

The principal question pursued in this research was:

What are high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options for high school students?

To deepen the understanding of the experiences of high school counselors with community and technical colleges the following secondary research questions further guided the study:

- (1) How are high school counselors' perceptions formed about community and technical colleges?
- (2) What information do high school counselors have about community and technical colleges and how did they obtain this information?
- (3) How are perceptions of community and technical colleges reflected in high school counselor information to students?
- (4) How do high school counselors determine what information and counseling to share with individual students in regard to precollege planning?

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research design format was used to explore this topic because I believe it is the most suitable method for investigating and explicating high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options for high school students. Because the focus of this study was high school counselors, it was important to capture their voices and words directly from the high school setting.

Qualitative data and its ensuing written representation can disclose the complexities and richness of the topic being explored (Marx, 2008). This study probed into the unique experiences of the high school counselor and examined how their perceptions of community and technical colleges were informed and shaped. Research on community and technical colleges is limited and studies on this specific topic are scarce. Additionally, much of the research that is related to the topic has been gathered using quantitative methods. Approaching the topic from a qualitative

perspective should enhance not only the subject but also community and technical college research.

As Creswell (2002) pointed out, qualitative research is pursued when there is a need to provide additional information on the topic and to better understand the complexity of an issue. Although much research is available that examined college choice and the high school counselor in this process especially resulting in matriculation to four year institutions; there has been limited focus on the specific topic of high school counselors and their understanding of community and technical colleges. This is a multi-layered issue and in order to understand what high school counselors' perceptions are about community and technical colleges it was important to understand why and/or how their perceptions were established.

Because qualitative research seeks to understand what is being investigated as deeply as possible and position the data gathering not in isolation but more soundly within the context of time and space of the participants, yet another justification for employing this methodology for this study. By spending extended time with high school counselors in their natural setting of the high school campus, this enabled collection of information that provided a sense of the complexity of their perceptions of community and technical colleges. The commitment to learn about and understand the high school counselor's perspective rather than imposing the researcher's views and biases is a cornerstone of qualitative research (Schensul, 2008).

Huberman and Miles (1994) reveal three strengths that provide additional support for using qualitative research design to explore this topic. The strengths

include being able to provide a look at real life, the fact that the data is collected in close proximity to the specific situation, and the potential to reveal the complexity of an issue. By gathering information in one-on-one conversations with high school counselors within the setting of the campus, details were exposed that began to simplify this complex issue. These strengths of qualitative design were beneficial in examining the data gathered from the high school counselors and provided additional information to the knowledge on this topic.

Another significant explanation for pursuing this research utilizing qualitative methodology is pointed out by Merriam and Simpson (1995). They considered the qualitative approach the best fit for research in applied fields such as training and adult education in that the overall goal is to use the information collected to improve educational strategies. Since one of the goals of this research project was to examine information gathered from high school counselors and make recommendations for improved practice, the qualitative framework serves this topic suitably.

Qualitative research seeks to understand people's beliefs and behaviors, no matter how different from the researcher, and that their beliefs and behaviors are understandable and make sense in the situations in which they occur.

"Sensemaking through the eyes and lived experiences of the people is at the heart of good qualitative research" (Schensul, 2008, p.522). The goal of this research was to make sense of high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical college education and qualitative design provided the structure to accomplish this and yield a richly descriptive result (Merriam, 2002).

Phenomenological Strategy

In order to have an understanding of high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges, it was important to examine the everyday experiences of this group of individuals and how they perceive and reason in their environment and with consideration to their customary surroundings. "The value of phenomenology is that it prioritizes and investigates how the human being experiences the world" (Adams & van Manen, 2008, p. 616): in this case, how the high school counselor within the high school campus setting experiences the college choice process with students.

Phenomenology was the ideal strategy to examine this topic because it allowed greater understanding of the lived experiences of high school counselors from their viewpoint (Schram, 2006); events and interactions of ordinary people in specific situations (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). The focus of the research was on understanding the experiences of high school counselors and their comprehensive descriptions of what their experiences mean to them. A phenomenological study focuses on demonstrating how complex meanings are created by simple units of direct experience (Merriam, 2002). This study probed into the unique experiences of each high school counselor and examined how their perceptions of community and technical colleges were shaped.

Another basic assumption of phenomenology that Schram (2006) explicated is that the reality of everything is not just there in an objective or removed sense but it is very connected to one's consciousness of the issue. This study will incorporate the qualitative phenomenological strategy to capture a meaningful description of

high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges in their words and voices. It was important to present this research topic by describing the specific experiences of high school counselors within their individual situations on high school campuses.

Role of the Researcher

The primary instrument for information collection and analysis in the qualitative research process is the researcher (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). The researcher must go into the situation under investigation with the goal of discovering the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved with the topic. The data collected and uncovered is described through the researcher's perspective which results in an interpretation, an account, or an explanation of the phenomenon being studied. The qualitative researcher is positioned very closely to the raw words and real life of the participants and the "researcher as a 'person' plays an obvious and profound role in all stages of the research" (Brodsky, 2008b, p. 766).

The analysis, interpretation and result significance come from the qualitative researcher. The researcher must incorporate all personal and professional skills, training, knowledge, and experience as a tool to "produce a coherent authentic view of the research as the researcher saw and experienced it" (Brodsky, 2008b, p. 766). By means of interviewing high school counselors; collating demographic data; collecting field notes; journaling; making observations; and analyzing and interpreting the data collected, I served as the research instrument for this research study.

Researcher's Position

Creswell (2002) emphasized that the qualitative researcher must constantly consider and evaluate who he or she is in the research journey and must be cognizant of his or her personal story and what role that may have in the shape of the research. The process of self-reflection allows for clarification to the reader to facilitate understanding of how the researcher might have made the determinations and interpretations of the data (Merriam, 2002).

My journey in technical college education began as an instructor of a clinical laboratory technician program. I received my baccalaureate degree in medical laboratory technology and soon realized that teaching the subject was a more desirable match for me. It was not long before I recognized that my students were approximately 27-37 years old, the program was very difficult and condensed, and graduates returned with grateful stories of how their education had significantly impacted their lives. I began to reflect on why there were almost no students matriculating directly from high school and heard students questioning why had they not learned about this avenue of postsecondary education in high school. In pursuit of solutions, I returned to school and completed my credentials for secondary school counseling and after was hired as a counselor in a tech prep program for the technical college. This position brought me into 8th grade and high school classrooms discussing career and postsecondary options. When asked about their plans for after high school, 95% to 100% would indicate to me that four year college was their destination. I returned to the technical college as an administrator still reflecting on why there were so few high school students matriculating to community

and technical colleges realizing that there are many students graduating from high school that could benefit from this postsecondary education option.

Counseling is in my heart and I am passionate about helping young people reach a well-suited, satisfying career. Additionally, I also witness many days in my life the seemingly large number of adults that are so dissatisfied with their career choices. I believe that the high school counselor is an extremely important member of the educational team and I am committed to having more information about their perceptions of community and technical colleges.

I have been involved in technical college education for almost 32 years. As a result of my involvement, there are some biases that I must recognize before starting this study. I believe that community and technical college education is not understood and is misperceived by many that are not aware of its benefits. My thinking is that high school students and their parents are not provided with all encompassing information about postsecondary education opportunities in an equal and unbiased way. I postulate that our society has developed a predisposition that the only road to career happiness and success begins with a four year baccalaureate degree. I am concerned that many think that those who choose to take a different road (community and technical college education) are seen as second class citizens. And in addition, I believe that too often, by expressed and insinuating messages, the guidance and directions of 'the only way to become successful in this world' is to attend a four year institution has been a disservice to our youth. Therefore, I am a passionate advocate of community and technical colleges and believe that it is an underutilized and undervalued avenue for both

individual career success and fulfillment and additionally an answer to workforce development issues facing our nation.

In order to prevent my personal biases from affecting or influencing the process of collecting and analyzing the information from the high school counselors and their experiences, it will be important for me to begin by identifying what my predispositions are in regard to high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. I began my research journal with notes concerning my thoughts and assumptions about what I believed many high school counselors' opinions are in regard to community and technical colleges. I continued to use the journal to add notes and questions and used this format to express my biases and consciously tried to not interject my perceptions and views into the interview procedures, data collection, or data analysis (Brodsky, 2008a; Flick, 2002).

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) emphasized that a phenomenological study should begin with a "silence." This "silence" indicates that the researcher should not assume that they are aware of what things mean to the individuals they are studying. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this research project, it was important to silence my biases and opinions about the phenomenon in an effort to capture and understand the essence or structure of the experiences of the high school counselors (Merriam, 2002). With my personal biases and preconceived notions laid aside, I strived to have a heightened sense or increased consciousness about the participant's perceptions. Careful consideration of the interview questions was also used as a strategy to safeguard against exposing my biases during the data collection phase of this research project.

Conceptual Framework

McDonough's (1997) theoretical model of building a comprehensive college culture in the high school was used as the primary component of the conceptual framework to guide this study. McDonough's research emphasized the importance of high schools creating a school culture in which students have access to information and counseling that foster college enrollment and described how the counselor serves as the institutional agent in this effort.

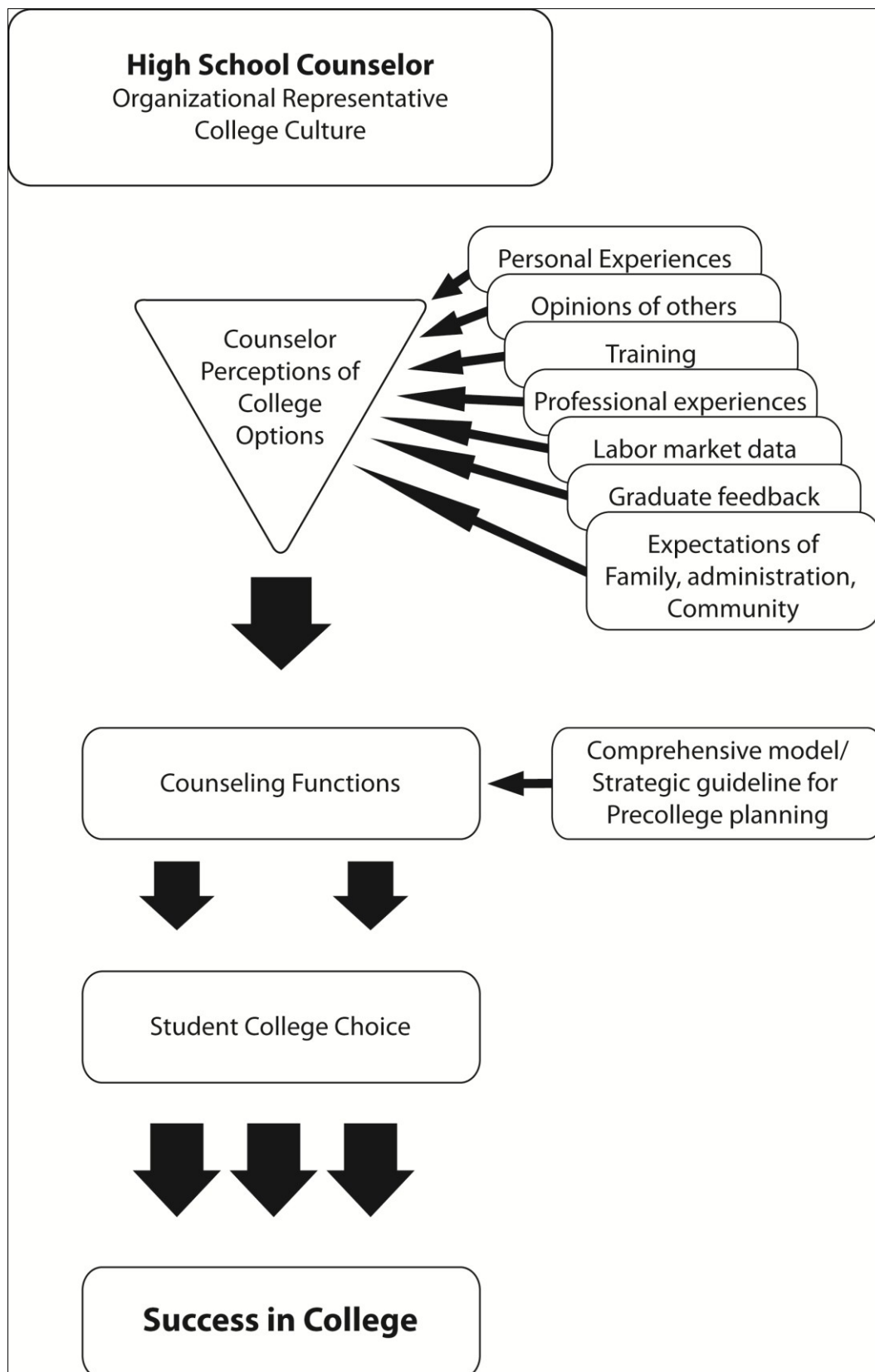
McClafferty and McDonough (2002) proposed a model for establishing a school environment in which the goal is to get all students ready to choose from all possible postsecondary options. The researchers included structural, motivational, and experiential college preparatory activities to reach this goal.

The American School Counselor Association National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs is also incorporated in the conceptual framework because it is essential to have a plan in order to achieve the desired results in any environment. The model provides a structure for a school to aid in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of a comprehensive, systematic school counseling program intended to serve all students. The postsecondary education benefits that can be a result of implementing the ASCA national model in a school's counseling program include: enhancing transition of students to postsecondary institutions, preparing every student for advanced educational opportunities, motivating every student to seek a wide range of substantial, postsecondary options, and promoting equity and access to postsecondary education for every student (ASCA, 2005). Research has revealed the critical

importance of schools incorporating comprehensive and systematic strategic plans as a part of their counseling programs (Gray, 2009; Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Hoyt & Maxey, 2001). This research incorporated a comprehensive model for precollege planning in regard to postsecondary preparation and the college choice process and highlights the high school counselor as the institutional agent in the model's implementation.

The model of the conceptual framework for this study, the high school counselor's function in postsecondary planning, includes various elements of the three models described above and is shown in Figure 1. The conceptual framework demonstrated in Figure 1 captures the dynamics of the high school counselor's functions in postsecondary education planning for high school students, situates the relevance of awareness of postsecondary options and emphasizes the critical value of the implementation of a comprehensive model for precollege planning. The comprehensive counseling model for precollege planning was situated as a guiding strategy for counseling functions. The high school counselor's function as the institutional agent in the high school student's postsecondary planning is the key component of the model. As the institutional agent, the counselor's perceptions (views, understandings, opinions) about postsecondary educational options are integrated into the information that they use to guide students in the college choice process. These perceptions are grounded in the information that they have about postsecondary options. Information and opinions that the high school counselor has about postsecondary options can originate from various sources such as personal experiences; opinions of others; training; professional experiences; labor market

Figure 1. High school counselor's role in postsecondary planning



data; graduate feedback; expectations of family, administration, and community; and others.

The high school counselor's functions in precollege counseling should be guided and directed by a comprehensive, systematic program that is designed and developed to meet the career goals of all students. The ASCA model is used as a general guide for the key competencies in order to establish a successful counseling program. The precollege counseling program can be implemented in an equitable and efficient process within the school setting. Some of the counseling functions could include assisting the student with academic preparation and realistic planning; providing information on all postsecondary options, financial aid, and job/labor market projections grounded in the student's career goals, interest areas, ability/skill levels, and labor market opportunities.

The high school counselor serves as the institutional agent in the postsecondary planning conceptual framework (McDonough, 1997). The counselor is an individual with perceptions of postsecondary institutions that are established as a result of personal experiences, opinions of others, training, etc. The high school counselor directs counseling activities and strategies that serve to provide information and services to students as they develop their postsecondary plans (ASCA, 2008b). Students must consider their interests, abilities, career goals, and labor market opportunities when deciding on their postsecondary plans (Herr & Cramer, 1996). Family members, friends, teachers, and other resources also have a significant role in the development of a student's postsecondary plan. The counselor is responsible for counseling functions and as such is to provide information and

counseling activities and strategies in order to help students in the college choice process. The ultimate goal is for all students to have postsecondary education plans that are realistic and have significant potential for success upon their departure from high school.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling emphasizes the importance of establishing the appropriate postsecondary institution fit for students. This fit should be based on student preferences, their response to different environments and stimuli, and their individual scale of quality. “Fit is particularly important considering that future success- social, personal, and financial- depends not so much on where a student goes to college, but what he or she does while enrolled” (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2007, p. v). The counselor’s function is not to make decisions for the student, but to provide the kind of information and encouragement that will allow them to decide on the most suitable and appropriate postsecondary option and how to successfully complete the option (White, 2008; Zuker, 1995).

The high school counselor by means of their counseling functions incorporates programmatic strategies of the comprehensive precollege plan to inform and guide students in the college choice process. Students accumulate college knowledge (Conley, 2008) that facilitates an appropriate college choice for postsecondary education.

Meaningful high school student postsecondary plans have the potential to result in a satisfactory student-institution fit such that fulfillment of the plan is possible. Appropriate postsecondary plans should include a well suited match of the goals and personality of the student; education and training that provides

opportunities for a long-term career with a family sustaining wage in an area of great interest to the student; and an opportunity for program completion. Additionally, such details as the student's satisfaction with the campus social life; campus buildings and grounds; opportunities for physical fitness; alumni association benefits; and other personal benefits also factor into qualities the student considers appropriate (Tinto, 1994).

Success in college can be dependent upon a satisfactory college and student match. Williams (1986) proposed that a good student-institution fit will ultimately result in students who are satisfied with their postsecondary experience and will persist to graduation.

The ultimate goal of the postsecondary planning model is for each and every student to have appropriate and well-suited postsecondary plans as a result of their high school experience. The implementation of the student's postsecondary plans would ideally result in an adult that is satisfied with their career, livelihood, and lifestyle.

Data Collection

McMillan and Wergin (2002) identified several characteristics of qualitative studies that were incorporated in the techniques and strategies of this study to best understand high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges. Their list of characteristics include searching for meaning, constructing reality, using natural settings, collecting rich narrative description, direct data collection, concern with process, inductive data analysis, revealing participant perspectives and establishing emergent research design. The research site was

chosen in order to provide data that best suited the research design. The majority of the data collected for this research was derived from one-on-one interviews. In addition, several sessions were held with school system administrators and an adjunct university faculty member to obtain information and perspectives that served to complement the participant experiences and provide better descriptions of the research settings and deepen the meaningfulness of the research.

Selection of Research Site

This study was conducted in a public school system located in Louisiana. The school system used for the study was the fictitious Branch Public School System (BPSS). A fictitious name was chosen in order to provide anonymity to the participants. The system has a total enrollment of almost thirty thousand students with the following racial composition: 51.4% white, 43.1% black and 5.5% other. BPSS was chosen as it provides representation of a comprehensive school system with a diverse student population. Another important consideration for the chosen research site was that the system is located in an area that includes a four year university, a community college, and a technical college within a close geographic distance. There are five comprehensive high schools in the BPSS. Data collection from all five high schools was included in this study. Fictitious names were given to the high schools of the system and specific system data references used for this study. General demographic information on each of the high schools is located in Table 1. Information was collected from high school counselors at each of the comprehensive high schools in the system by means of individual interviews.

Table 1

High School Demographic Information

High School	Ash High	Burch High	Myrtle High	Pine High	Oak High
Total Students	1,654	1,844	1,365	2,356	890
% White	61.6	72.7	45.8	60.3	6.6
% Black	33.9	22.2	52.5	30.1	92.5
% Other	4.5	5.0	1.8	9.6	0.9
% Free/Reduced Lunch	48.1	27.3	58.1	28.8	78.1
Counselors	4	4	4	5	3
Residential Type	Rural	Suburban	Rural	Urban	Urban
Grades	9-12	9-12	9-12	9-12	9-12

Source: BPSS. 1-B and 11-B Hinds County Report. October, 2009

Interview Technique

In order to describe, interpret, and understand the experiences of high school counselors, the data collection method used was the standardized open-ended interview as described by Patton (1990). The standardized open-ended interview technique encompasses using an interview guide that includes unstructured questions that are carefully worded and consistently used for each participant. As indicated by Patton, this technique helps to reduce the bias that can potentially take place in the process of interviewing various participants. In addition to the interview questions on the interview guide, supplementary depth-probing questions may be asked by the interviewer. Glesne (1999) suggested that these additional questions are a follow-up to interview questions that seek further information from the participant. The depth-probing questions can begin with such phrases as “tell me more” or “please explain what you meant when you said” Creswell (2002)

explained that by using an unstructured interview technique a participant can best voice their experiences. Participants are uninhibited by any perspectives of the researcher or any historical research findings.

A standardized open-ended interview that was facilitated with a consistent interview guide was used in this study. Additional probing questions were used when necessary during the interviews for clarification and verification.

Selection of Participants

The participants in the study were selected by purposeful sampling. This allowed me to intentionally select individuals within the research site to comprehend this phenomenon. Purposeful sampling is defined as a technique used in qualitative research to select participants that are individuals, sites, or documents that will provide the most information to the study (McMillan & Wergin, 2002). To ensure variation in high school counselor characteristics and perspectives, my goal was to solicit and select participants from each of the high schools within the selected school system. Criteria for participant selection included willingness to participate in a recorded interview and a possible follow-up interview if necessary. Participants had to have at least two years of experience in precollege advising of students in a high school environment and current employment in a BPSS high school. Additionally, I sought to have as much diversity in race, gender, and counselor training location as I could possibly incorporate. In an effort to capture these characteristics in the participants I attended a system-wide counselor meeting. At the meeting, I conducted informal interviews with the counselors and gathered this data. This selection process allowed me to gather necessary high school counselor

information in order for me to identify individuals that would potentially represent the greatest diversity I could possibly achieve. I intentionally sought participants with variations in gender, race, experience, and counselor education programs and had participant representation from each of the five high schools within the school system.

The participants were volunteers and were not paid for any component of their involvement in the research project. I gave each participant a small gift in appreciation for their time and attention. The geographic and demographic diversity provided a perspective of high school counselors' views of community and technical colleges that was used to reveal research results for this topic.

Before I proceeded with this research project, I had endorsement from my academic chair and committee members. After receiving their approval to move forward with the research, I was granted authorization from the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board to proceed. As part of the approval process for the review board, I completed the "Protecting Human Research Participants" course by the National Institutes of Health Office of Human Subjects Research (see Appendix D). Once these steps were satisfactorily completed, I began data collection for this research project.

I initiated the official protocol of gaining permission and access to the high school counselors. The first step involved submitting my application requesting permission to conduct research in the BPSS. My application was approved by the system's deputy superintendent. I followed this step with written and verbal correspondence with the BPSS director of student services. I explained my

research agenda and obtained her approval to contact high school counselors in the system that met the criteria to ask them to participate in this project. She also granted my request and offered any assistance during the project. In addition, she agreed to an informal interview session concerning the system's precollege counseling at a later date.

Using the individual information I collected at the counselor meeting, I established a preliminary list of fifteen potential high school counselors to ask to participate in the study that represented the established criteria. There are a total of twenty-two high school counselors that are employed by the system to serve at the five high school campuses. My list included counselors from each of the five high schools in the system that had at least two years experience in precollege advising, were currently employed and represented diverse backgrounds as previously identified.

I began contacting the potential participants via two forms of communication. Both electronic mail and hard copy letters were sent to 10 high school counselors. I sent requests to participate to the 10 counselors that reflected the best representation of my selected study criteria. This included at least two years of experience in precollege advising; representatives of each high school campus; and as much diversity in race, gender, years of counseling experience, and counselor training location as I could possible incorporate in the sample. The correspondence explained that I was a student at the University of New Orleans conducting a study on their role in the college choice process and that I would appreciate the opportunity to ask them questions about their experiences (see Appendix A). I

offered them the opportunity to contact me if they were interested in participating. I received five return responses agreeing to participate. I followed up with phone calls to the other potential participants. Four phone calls resulted in additional volunteers and one was unsuccessful due to an extended sick leave situation. I returned to my list for an additional high school counselor and sent out a participation request and a follow-up phone call several days later resulted in the tenth volunteer. By means of phone and electronic communication, we coordinated schedules and established interview dates. Ten high school counselors were scheduled for interviews and 10 interviews were conducted.

Interview Protocol

An interview guide had been developed incorporating the conceptual framework of the study, the principal and secondary research questions, and the review of information known from the literature in order to establish pertinent questions. I used the same interview guide for all of the individual interviews conducted with the counselors (see Appendix C).

Each individual interview was digitally recorded. Preparation for each of the interviews included ensuring that the two recorders I used had both battery and electrical operational functions. For each interview, I made sure to check the recorders to guarantee that they were functioning properly and that I had the appropriate consent letters and the interview guide for note taking. I sought to establish a quiet location for the interview sessions and allowed myself sufficient time in order to prepare the setting. After arriving for the interviews at the high school locations, I followed the appropriate protocol for signing in; I made general

observations of the campuses and counseling departments, and then set up the recorders in the designated locations. I ensured that arrangements were made to not be disturbed during the interview sessions.

At the beginning of all the interviews it was very important for me to establish a rapport with each participant to create a trusting relationship in order to yield information that is rich with content. Glesne (1999) highlighted the importance of rapport and its fundamental value to establishing trust. She pointed out that trust forms the framework for creating an environment that results in full and detailed responses to questions. I acknowledged my sincere appreciation for their participation and also clarified the confidentiality of their responses. At the beginning of each interview, the consent letter was reviewed (see Appendix B), a participant signature obtained, and a copy was given to the participant. I explained the need for documenting the session and asked permission for the interview to be recorded. All participants agreed that the interview could be recorded. The interview guide was used with all of the participants and I asked the same questions of each individual. There were some varying probing questions that I asked in addition to the guide questions that resulted from responses that the participants gave. In addition, I made field notes of each of the interview environments and included this descriptive information in the research summary. Field notes were recorded in my reflective journal. These on-going and reflective notes included both descriptive material and my pondering thoughts. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) emphasize the importance of field notes as a method of capturing what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks during the research process.

During the interview sessions I focused my attention on careful listening to the participant's responses and also made additional observation notes on the interview guide for later use. I made ancillary field notes immediately after each interview session in an effort to recall notable body language or other significant signals that the participant demonstrated during the session. After each session, I asked the participants for any feedback they might share with me about the comfort level of the interview or with my interview techniques. All indicated that they felt comfortable and had no concerns about any aspect of the interview.

The interviews with the high school counselors ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes. The one-on-one sessions took place in the counselor's office at each of the high schools. All of the interviews proceeded without interruption. Fictitious names have been assigned to all high school counselors.

In addition to interviewing the high school counselors, I also included supplementary discussions with three other resources in order to gather further pertinent data to incorporate in the study. Auxiliary sessions were held with two BPSS administrators with knowledge of the system's precollege counseling for high school students. The Director of Student Services (T. Smith) and the Director of Career and Technical Education (K. Allen) of the BPSS provided complementary information to the study. I also spent time with Shirley who was recently an adjunct instructor in a university masters' degree counseling educator program. Fictitious names have been assigned to the three additional resources.

Data Preparation

In an effort to capitalize on my memory and timing, I transcribed each tape soon after each interview session. By using this process, I believe I was better able to incorporate and interpret body language and facial expression notations, reasons for voice emphasis, and pausing moments. This allowed me to make additional notes in the margins of the transcripts based on my recollections during the interview. I transcribed each tape recording verbatim and added supplemental notes and symbols to the text based on my recall of each interview. Although this was a very time consuming process, I know it helped me improve my interviewing skills as I continued to conduct the next sessions. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for me to begin reflecting on the information being revealed by the participants. This technique used during the process of transcribing the interview tapes begins the note taking and idea stimulation and is regarded as the first phase of data analysis (Ezzy, 2002).

After the first interview, I began to make additional notes in my reflective journal in regard to any thoughts, ideas, and suggestions about the information I was gathering. The 'old-fashioned' spiral bound composition notebook I used for my journal became my constant companion during the data collection, analysis, and reporting phase of the study. The journal served as an additional resource in that it helped me to gather my thoughts about feelings, speculations, ideas, and hunches. These notes were incorporated into the descriptions of the interview sessions and participants and served to enhance the data analysis.

Each transcript and accompanying field notes were reviewed, read at least six times and some read additional times in preparation for the data analysis phase. Creswell (2002) emphasized that in the qualitative research process that the data collected must be read thoroughly multiple times and that an analysis is conducted each and every time. The next phase of data organization included assigning a pseudonym to each of the participants. I used the hand analysis of qualitative data which included reading the data, marking it by hand, and locating similar experiences (Creswell).

Data Analysis

As described by Creswell (2002), the general goal of qualitative data analysis is to transform particular information into general information. The data analysis objective is to take the detailed information that the participants share, transform it into broad themes and categories, and finally merge it all into an overall image. Janesick (2003) summarized the end goal of qualitative research design as “the process of reduction of data into a compelling, authentic, and meaningful statement” (p. 61). The data analysis method used was the developing themes method.

Developing Themes

I began the coding process by reading each transcript and identifying text segments, placed a bracket around segments, and then labeled with a code word or phrase (Creswell, 2002). After coding all of the transcripts, I identified the different code words or phrases and separated them into groups. From the code words and phrases I established the general themes from the transcription information. The data was grouped by the interview guide questions and developing themes were

described. To aid in this process, the participants' transcripts were each copied on a different color paper in order to facilitate identifying each high school counselor's words. The different colored transcription quotes from each participant were organized and coded. The themes and sub-themes were then identified from these groupings.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring that qualitative research is believable and plausible is an essential requirement for the researcher. Merriam (2002) defines what constitutes 'good' or 'quality' research as that which can be trusted. The trustworthiness of the information generated from the research can then be used by others to continue the research process. Establishing trustworthiness is considered to be a means of making certain the findings and interpretations of the research are convincing and realistic (Given & Saumure, 2008; Glesne, 1999). The idea of trustworthiness in regard to qualitative research was first put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985). They offered four measures to establish this important aspect of qualitative research and they include: transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. By ensuring that these four criteria are reflected in this research, the essence of trustworthiness can be established. By establishing trustworthiness within this qualitative study, I can illustrate the value of my research (Given & Saumure, 2008).

Transferability was the first criterion to be considered. It refers to the need to be aware of and describe the scope of the qualitative study so that the research can be germane to different contexts (Given & Saumure, 2008). There are two components of this research that were used to incorporate transferability into the

study. One included the use of 'rich, thick descriptions' (Merriam, 2002) of participant responses in order to portray a meaningful context to research readers that possibly have an interest in making judgments about similarities to their own settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Another component used was the diversity of participants selected for the study. This aided in establishing a broader application and therefore the potential of transferability.

The second criterion, credibility, relates to the researcher's commitment to accurately and richly describing the phenomenon explored in the research (Given & Saumure, 2008). The researcher's efforts to ensure that the data collected during the process is an accurate representation of the information, is the goal of presenting a credible study. In order to accomplish this component of trustworthiness, I transcribed each digital recording verbatim. During the interview sessions, as the researcher, there were a couple of occasions that I asked participants to repeat their responses or asked a question again in order to confirm that I comprehended their answers. Additionally, I secured the support of a peer reviewer that had no involvement in this research to review the study's transcripts and findings. This method was used to ensure that participant descriptions and experiences were revealed without depicting my biases (Flick, 2002; Merriam, 2000).

Confirmability was the third criterion used to establish trustworthiness. It reflects the necessity to make sure that the data collected in the research matches the interpretations and findings determined by the researcher (Given & Saumure, 2008). For this study, careful attention and details were given to describing the

methods and procedures used to select, collect, analyze, and report the research data. These steps were incorporated in order to provide an audit trail that could be followed by other researchers (Flick 2002; Merriam, 2000).

The final criterion incorporated to create trustworthiness was dependability. This component included providing an explanation of the data collection procedures and research instruments used in the research in a descriptive way. This would facilitate others interested in collecting data under similar conditions to obtain a similar account of the topic (Given & Saumure, 2008). To insure dependability in this study, several data collection methods were used. This included individual interviews at five high school campuses, information from system administrators and a reflection journal.

Ethical Considerations

The role of ethics was considered throughout the planning, implementation, and findings of all aspects of this qualitative research process (Glesne, 1999). I adhered to ethical codes and procedures at all times and incorporated such into this research study. The following strategies guided my research to guarantee adherence to ethical codes: provided participants with sufficient information about the purpose of the study; informed participants of their ability to withdraw from the study at any point; constantly assessed the data collection process for any unnecessary risks; assured participants of confidentiality; and respected the interviewer/participant relationship in each interview situation.

Delimitations and Limitations

I studied 10 high school counselors in a school system that had experiences with providing students with precollege counseling. A delimitation of this study was the inclusion of counselors within a single school system. Another delimitation in this research project was the omission of high school counselors in private school systems.

A possible limitation is that the study was limited to high school counselors' views of community and technical colleges and does not include other educators' views of the topic. Further research could focus on other educators on high school campuses and their perceptions of community and technical colleges. An additional limitation pointed out by Galvan (2006) must also be considered, I am a single individual that analyzed and interpreted the data collected from the high school counselors. Ideally, data collection and analysis with more than one researcher could possibly yield better results.

Summary

The purpose of incorporating qualitative phenomenological research in exploring high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges was reviewed in this chapter. The research questions, conceptual framework, data collection, and data analysis were described. The chapter concluded with a review of the means for ensuring that this research was conducted in a trustworthy manner and with ethical considerations that reflected the standards of the University of New Orleans and the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter outlines the findings that were assembled from 10 individual interviews with high school counselors in a high school setting. The principal purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of high school counselors of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options. The phenomenon of the high school counselor's experiences with community and technical colleges and how their perceptions were informed and shaped guided and directed the research thus allowing the essence and nature of the phenomenon to be disclosed. The findings discussion includes two sections. The first section provides an overview of the student services department of BPSS, the district studied, introduces the participants and provides basic demographic information that was obtained during the interview process. Situational information about the high school counselors such as current school, grade level, counselor training and a basic description about the setting as gleaned from the interview are provided to further set the context of the study.

The second section includes responses of the high school counselors in their own words categorized and reflecting their "lived experiences." Information discovered from participants was organized and coded into elements of perceptions and experiences which reflect the interview guide and research framework. Using the findings, an analysis revealed emergent themes that structure the high school counselors' perceptions and experiences. Generous quotes from the counselors were integrated into the manuscript so that the participants own voices emerged.

BPSS Department of Student Services

The Director of Student Services of BPSS is in charge of overseeing the administrative and functional responsibilities of the high school counselors in the system. The high school counselors report to the Director of Student Services and the school principal (T.Smith, personal communication, February 9, 2010).

The qualifications for a high school counselor in the BPSS include having a valid Louisiana Teaching Certificate with proper state school counselor certification, a master's degree or higher and three years of teaching experience. The job goal for counselors in the system incorporates providing a comprehensive developmental program at the assigned school and assisting students in developing academic ability, social and emotional well-being, career interest, decision making ability, coping skills, and personal goals (T. Smith, personal communication, February 9, 2010).

The system's counseling services use the ASCA national model and Louisiana model for comprehensive guidance and counseling for their framework for comprehensive counseling. The Louisiana Department of Education is set to release a revised model in late 2010 (T. Lewis, personal communication, July 15, 2010). The BPSS is also working on its own comprehensive model for counseling services for the system. System administrators strive to achieve a counselor to student ratio ranging from 1:300 to 1:400 in each of its high schools. There is no designated 'college' counselor at any of the system's high schools that is specifically assigned to provide precollege planning and information. In most cases, high school counselors are appointed a certain grade level and each counselor follows the

students as they progress through each year. The only exception is the smallest high school (Oak High School) that has three counselors where each is responsible for a grade and in addition has a third of the ninth grade class. Therefore, each high school counselor is responsible for the precollege counseling activities for their appropriate grade level (T. Smith, personal communication, February 9, 2010).

According to a system administrator, the BPSS does not have a data collection method or system to compile information in regard to the self-reported plans for senior/graduates about their goals for after graduation (i.e. four year college, community college, technical college, work, etc.). In addition, the system does not collect data that captures actual matriculation information specifically identifying where each campus' students transition to postsecondary institutions nor what their specific retention rates are for completing college (K. Allen, personal communication, February 11, 2010).

High School Counselor Participants

The high school counselor participants included in this study were engaged in postsecondary advising of high school students in a school system that serves approximately 30,000 students. For the purposes of this study, high school counselors with a minimum of two years postsecondary advising were included in the research. Table 2 portrays a graphic picture of the individual information on each of the research participants. A brief narrative introduction of each of the 10 high school counselors follows in addition to important interview session details.

The first six interviews with the high school counselors were conducted in mid-December 2009 and the final four interviews were held in the second week of

January 2010. The time separation was due to the holiday break for school system employees. All interviews sessions took place on the counselor's high school campus thus providing a natural setting. The counselors are presented in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 2

General Demographic Information on Participants

High School Counselor	High School	Gender	Race	Institution Completed Counseling Ed.	Year Completed	Years High School Counseling	Student Load
Samantha	Ash	F	W	ULL	2001	2	406
Carol	Pine	F	W	ULL	2006	3	650
Susan	Pine	F	W	ULL	1994	13	507
Betsy	Burch	F	W	ULL	2007	2	399
Judy	Oak	F	W	McNeese	1973	16	305
Arlene	Oak	F	B	UNO	2000	8	298
Tom	Myrtle	M	W	ULL	1996	13	321
Ben	Myrtle	M	W	ULL	1978	17	420
Paula	Myrtle	F	W	ULL	1992	6	340
Connie	Myrtle	F	W	ULL	2004	3	370

ULL-University of Louisiana at Lafayette, UNO-University of New Orleans
Note. Names used are fictitious

Judy was the first high school counselor to be interviewed. When initially approached for participation, she was enthusiastic and eager to be involved in the study. Her counseling master's education was completed at McNeese University. She is currently the eleventh grade and partial ninth grade counselor at Oak High School (OHS). OHS has a total student enrollment of 890 students. Judy is a white female with 36 years of experience in education that includes 16 years of high school counseling. All of her high school experience has been at OHS. Her current

load is approximately 300 eleventh graders and 100 ninth graders. In addition to her counseling education training, she is also a licensed professional mental health counselor. Judy is a veteran educator that described her school as a “tremendously at risk” school using the criterion that over 80% of the student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch eligibility. She is obviously passionate about her students that she described as her “children” since she has no children of her own. Judy explained her relationship with students as being part of their family. In many cases she has been at this school long enough to have had several siblings in the same family and therefore believes that she becomes a part of their life. Her office was very neat and well organized and she talked about how this quality was important for her in order to maintain a schedule that would allow her to see as many students as possible and complete the other tasks required of her by the school’s administration. She described how her educational experience has brought her to a place of comfort in speaking out about what she believes is in the best interests of her students and how this is sometimes seen as threatening in the politics of the school system. The interview lasted for almost an hour and a half and the environment was pleasant and comfortable. My only concern was the time I was taking up in her schedule and yet she never gave me that impression during our time.

I had set up my next session with another counselor at OHS to follow immediately after my interview with Judy. Arlene had agreed to participate on the phone and we had scheduled a time. I believed it was important to include Arlene in my participants based on her unique personal information considering all the counselors in the school system. I was as determined as possible to try whatever

was feasible and comfortable to include Arlene in the study. At the very end of my interview with Judy she informed me that she really did not think that Arlene was going to be in her office when we opened the door because she had told Judy earlier that she was too busy to spend the time with me. I slumped back in the chair after the devastating news and yet immediately realized I had tried everything. We proceeded to walk out of Judy's office and Arlene's office was directly across the hallway. She was in her office and not realizing what Judy would do next, all of sudden Judy was pulling me into Arlene's office. She introduced me and described how I was the doctoral student at University of New Orleans that would like to ask me a few questions. At first moment's glance there was a little distance in her eyes and as I reflected after the session I think it was because she was a UNO alumna that the ice melted and she welcomed me in and I began the interview.

Arlene was the second counselor interviewed and she is a black female serving as the senior counselor at OHS. She accomplished her counselor education at the University of New Orleans. Additionally, she has also completed a second master's degree in K-12 administration. Her eight total years in high school counseling include four in the current position at OHS. She has approximately 300 senior level students and a third of the ninth grade class (100 students). Arlene described herself as active in the state's counseling association and serving as a member of the task force involved in developing the state's comprehensive counseling model. The interview session was professional and proceeded in a business like atmosphere. It lasted for approximately 40 minutes. I expressed my appreciation for her time and as I returned to my car I literally sighed with relief that I

was able to interview this participant. The circumstances had come so close to this interview not happening.

The third interview took place two days later with Paula at Myrtle High School (MHS). Upon arriving, I checked in with the department's secretary and as soon I said my name she called from her office nearby- 'come on in Desiree before another student comes in'. We closed the door and settled in to a very comfortable and relaxed atmosphere. Paula received her counseling training at University of Louisiana at Lafayette and also has completed her administration certification. She has a total of 23 years in education that includes 13 years in middle school counseling and six years at MHS. The students that she is assigned to this year are approximately 324 juniors. Paula was enthusiastic about her role at MHS and her "children." She talked often about her on-going connectivity with her senior class from last year. She was very proud of bulletin boards in her office that displayed senior pictures of her classes. The interview session lasted about an hour and fifteen minutes and Paula appeared to be very at ease and passionate during the uninterrupted conversation.

As I had scheduled the next interview to follow immediately with a co-worker at MHS, I moved back into the department's waiting room to get myself in order for the next interview. The next thing I know there is a policeman arriving and asking to see Connie my next counselor to interview. I got a quick sense of concern in the room with tone of voice and body language from the policeman. He is immediately shown into Connie's office. After a very short time they both come out obviously heading out to handle something. She sees me and of course realizes we have an

appointment scheduled. She immediately asks the officer to wait a moment and calls me into her office. She apologizes that she will not be able to meet with me and explains that she must go with the officer and handle a very likely rape situation with a female student. Needless to say, I try and hurry her on her way and indicate I would contact her to reschedule. She insisted that I come back after lunch that day so that I could get my information and went on to emphasize that the time would never be 'right'. I told her that I would return and gave her my phone number to call me if for the slightest reason she needed to cancel. I returned at the designated time, she apologized again, and we proceeded with the interview. Connie completed her counseling education at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Connie has 23 years of educational experience. She has three years experience as a middle school counselor and has been at MHS for three years. The 10th grade class is her current assignment and there are approximately 370 students in the class. The interview session lasted for almost one hour. I extended my sincere appreciation for her time especially considering the extreme conditions her day had included. She responded that it had indeed been a challenging day.

The fifth participant interviewed was Ben. He is a white male with 32.5 years of experience in education. His years include 9 in counseling and 17 in a high school setting. Ben was the senior counselor at MHS until a very recent move to the Options Program within the BPSS system. Due to the fact that he was only one of two males within the school system it was important to this research to include his knowledge and experience in the study. His responsibilities continue to include advising students for postsecondary education. The University of Louisiana at

Lafayette is where he completed his guidance and counseling master's program. Ben was eager to meet with me and enthusiastic about sharing his many experiences with me. In addition to his longevity in education he also brought a unique perspective to the research in that nine years of his counseling experience had been in a technical college setting. The interview atmosphere was comfortable and lasted for an hour and twenty minutes.

Tom was the sixth high school counselor interviewed. He received his counseling master's degree from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He is a white male with 33 years of education experience. Tom has 13 years experience as a high school counselor in the school system. He has also been transferred recently to the Options Program for the system and continues to provide postsecondary education advising to students. I asked Tom to participate in the study because it was important to include a male perspective and he was one of only two males in the system counseling group. Tom was a somewhat challenging participant in that he is very comfortable about expressing his views and experiences in education. Because I have had a working relationship with Tom for several years and was aware of his willingness to express his views liberally, I made a mental note to be cautious about keeping him on subject and yet not create a barrier for him to express himself freely. The interview lasted about one hour and ten minutes and proceeded smoothly and uninterrupted. I noted to myself afterward that he managed our time together very thoughtfully, he even commented one time "but I digress let me get back to your question."

Samantha was the seventh high school counselor interviewed and is a white female. She completed her master's degree in counseling and guidance at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her education experience includes three years as a teacher, six years as a middle school counselor, and two years as a high school counselor. She is currently serving as the tenth grade counselor at Ash High School (AHS). Samantha is responsible for 406 tenth graders at her campus. One of the reasons that Samantha was requested to participate in this study was due to her minimum years of experience with postsecondary advising. She was an enthusiastic and willing interviewee. She is a speedy talker and I had to ask her to repeat her comments at least twice so that I could make sure that I understood what she had said. She apologized for her rapid words and attempted to slow down. The one hour interview was comfortable and uninterrupted.

The eighth interview captured the high school counselor perspective of Carol. She is a white female with two years of teaching experience and three years of high school counseling experience. She has been at Pine High School for all of her high school time and is currently serving as the 9th grade counselor with a load of 650 students. She had served as the senior counselor the prior school year. Her counseling master's degree was completed at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She was an eager and enthusiastic study participant. Carol brought a unique perspective to the study in that she was the only participant who had undergraduate experience in a community college. She had completed core courses at a community college and then transferred to a four year institution to

finish her undergraduate degree in another state. The interview lasted for 55 minutes and was uninterrupted.

When I arrived at Burch High School (BHS) for the ninth interview I had a strong feeling that the interview might not take place as scheduled because the students were standing outside around the school. As I drove up all of the students and faculty were outside and I knew based on the time of day it was not a scheduled lunch time. I sat in my car for about 15 minutes observing and then heard a bell sound and students soon began moving back into the building. I knew at that point one of two things had happened. It was either a regularly scheduled fire drill or the alarm had been pulled for some other reason. I waited in the car until most students had reentered the building and then proceeded to the counseling department to check-in. A student worker announced to Betsy that I had arrived. She came back and informed me that she was with a parent and would be with me as soon as possible. I remained in the waiting area for about 20 minutes. At this point I decided that it would probably be in everybody's best interest if I would reschedule. I was in the process of giving the student worker that message when Betsy came out of her office and apologized for the confusion. She noted that she had been with this parent prior to a student pulling the fire alarm and that the administration had just announced an unexpected faculty and staff meeting. I assured her that I understood and asked if I should call her to reschedule. She insisted that we schedule for the next day at the same time. The interview proceeded with no interruptions the following day and lasted for one hour and five minutes. Betsy completed her counseling degree at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and has eight years of

experience in education. She has six years teaching experience and two years experience as a high school counselor. She is currently serving as the junior counselor and has a student load of 399 eleventh graders. Betsy is a white female. She appeared to be a serious and dedicated counselor.

The tenth and final interview was conducted with Susan. She is a white female with 33 years of experience in education. She taught for 15 years and has spent the remaining years in counseling. Susan has a unique perspective in that most of her high school counseling and postsecondary guidance has been in a private school environment. This is her first year at Pine High School and she is currently serving as the senior counselor. She shared her story of initially applying for and getting the freshmen level job, going on vacation, and returning to find out she had been moved to the seniors due to a resignation. She was an entertaining and articulate participant that was obviously very experienced. And yet Susan acknowledged that her experiences in the private school environment were quite different from the public school environment. She was excited and enthusiastic about helping students. The interview concluded after 50 minutes and was uninterrupted.

Research Study Findings

The findings from the research study are presented in the next section. The interview guide questions, developed from the study's research questions, and themes discovered in the research findings serve as organizers for this component of the chapter. An explanation of the high school counselor's lived experiences is provided in order to interpret meanings and understanding of their perceptions of

community and technical colleges. In addition, this analysis and discussion results in a description of the themes that emerged from the participants' responses to the interview guide questions. The summary incorporates interpretations and examination of the data obtained from individual interviews with the high school counselors and the emergent themes that surfaced. The participant statements included are in the high school counselors' own words and do not include any textual or grammatical changes. All references to specific students in the counselors' descriptions are reflected with fictitious names.

Emerging Themes

Interview questions were used to gather information from high school counselors in order to capture their perceptions of community and technical colleges. Each high school counselor brought their personal history, training experiences, and past and current experiences with high school students to this study. This section includes a discussion of themes revealed as a result of the analysis of their responses to the interview questions. Through my analysis of transcripts, I searched for common experiences and meanings between participants when discussing their perspectives on community and technical colleges. After diligent and thoughtful analysis of the high school counselors' responses, I determined the following five themes: experiences with university bound students; experiences with community and technical college bound students; pathway of awareness of community and technical colleges; precollege counseling; and perceptions of community and technical colleges. These overarching themes will be used to analyze high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical

colleges. The interview questions used in the study will guide the discussion of the findings.

Experiences with University Bound Students

Would you be able to recall the name of a student that chose to attend a 4 year university after graduating and tell me the story of your counseling relationship with that student?

They all provided responses to this question, although a few were not able to recall specific names from their immediate memory, counseling relationships were described about students that had plans to pursue a four year university after graduation. The counselors seemed comfortable and spoke without hesitation about their familiarity with high school students bound for a university setting after graduation. The theme of experiences with university bound students will be demonstrated in the following reflections from the high school counselors.

When the participants responded to this question several of their initial reactions began with 'only one – there have been so many'. Betsy immediately responded, "there are so many, I'll just have to try and think of a particular one" and Carol reacted with laughter and said, "just one, OK, I will try and chose one, there have been so many." Judy looked back at me like I was asking her a ridiculous question and responded, "I have so many of them, OK, let me look at my bulletin board that will help me recall just one name (she looked across the office), OK, I'll talk about K. L." Paula had a similar facial expression when I asked her this question and replied with "OK, um, oh God I've got so many. OK, you are only

asking for one story, OK, one that I counseled all the way through. I'll give you a really good one, her name is Sally."

Betsy described her counseling relationship with a student bound for a university as a student planning on graduating early and "she is just a higher achiever type student." She explained that the student had come to her asking questions like, am I on track with getting into college and am I on track with scholarship information. She described the student as being nervous about doing the necessary steps for enrollment. Betsy explained her counseling relationship with this student as:

...keeping her informed, making sure that she knew every step of the way.

So we went through everything and she realized that she was actually on time, on top of things, she was ahead of the game. So, um, just, um I eased her nerves and eased her mind and – gave her information but then at the same time just encouraging. ... with her everything lined up, so, I just encouraged her that this was a good route.

Carol indicated that the easiest example of a student bound for a university for her to recall was her experiences with her former student worker. She described the student as a very responsible individual. She explained that it was a significant benefit that the girl worked with her everyday which provided the student an opportunity to ask questions while they were working. She talked about how she made sure that the student had taken the ACT on time, gotten her admission and scholarship applications submitted at the appropriate time and had intervened when the student had a transcript problem. It had become necessary for Carol to

communicate directly with a university representative to make sure that a high school course was reflected on the admission's transcript.

Arlene and Paula shared their experiences with students bound for universities and described their students as very focused, knowing exactly what they wanted and grade point averages of 4.0. They described how the students had come to them with questions and how they in turn had provided them with information, encouragement, and some additional important resources.

Patty was the student Arlene portrayed as coming to her with a well-focused and well-planned research plan. She described her as very active in the high school and with very, very high self-esteem. Her role in the counseling relationship with Patty was explained by Arlene as, "she knew exactly what she wanted and it was more or less me giving her guidance in the right direction as to making her choices and her goals, ah, more effective. And pretty much had a good head on her shoulders as to what her choices and careers, um, and what her future was going to be." Arlene talked about on-going communication with both Patty and her mother and that she was doing well in college.

Paula shared her experiences with Sally. She explained that this student had made it very clear to her upon her arrival on campus in the ninth grade that she wanted to go into pre-med in college. Paula talked about knowing that Sally's family was economically disadvantaged and how getting into and paying for her dream of studying pre-med at Tulane was going to take some time and attention. Paula explained all that she did to help Sally.

“So we kind of worked since the time she was a freshman. We put her goals up high. She started looking, we started researching universities, she ended up picking Tulane. And she started going to the Tulane, ah, pre-registration party thing they had every year where they would go over there and kind of talk to the kids about Tulane. Giving them a pep talk. She went every year on campus. When she was a junior they almost knew her by name. OK, so we started, I started doing some research and at that time I was very fortunate, ah, J. B. who was a state legislator around in this area, called me and asked me if I had students to recommend for legislative scholarship. We worked to get ACT, she had like a 29 on her ACT. She did her essay. She applied early to Tulane. She had the 4.0 thing. They gave her a little scholarship, basically for just like \$25,000, which is nothing at Tulane, OK. So I got in with J. B. and we talked about the, you know, who, I made her write an essay and presented it to him. And on why she wanted to go to Tulane and whatever. And she kind of focused on her dreams from the time she was a freshman and all the way up. And what ended up happening was because she had started out so early, we had started since the beginning of time doing this, whatever. He recommended her for the legislative scholarship. So she got full tuition every year and she is still at Tulane. And she is doing awesome. She has like a 3.6 and ah she's still pursuing the medicine. Got her involved in the forum for medicine. She went to, um, Baylor to go to ah, medical program. She went to the day as a doctor [job shadowing event at medical school]. She went to everything that I could find as we went

along. And then she ended up at Tulane, exactly where she wanted to go. So it took four years, you know, planning, getting her to do this, to do that, whatever. And she's successful."

Susan's experiences with counseling relationships with students bound for four year universities were quite unique. This was her first year at Pine High School and she was responsible for the senior class. Her distinction in the participant group is that she has 15 years of experience with counseling high school students in a private school. Susan shared that,

...the expectations of the private sector were, the parents, that they were all going to a four year university. But the reality was, 60% of them could attain that, but the other 40 could aspire but they never did reach that goal. So if they went into the four year university they were not successful. Then they backed up and felt... their self-esteem was deflated. So then what did we accomplish? Not much, cause we had not taught that student a skill. We have not taught them anything. So that was really a frustrating part for me. Then when I look at this environment and I'm looking at 70-80% of our clients going to a university setting or a two year setting, something. Then I think, you know, not bad. So it's been an eye-opening experience for me and I'm very, very pleased.

Samantha's description of her counseling relationship with Belva was interesting in that she did not have the specific information that the student was seeking and yet she shared her story of solutions. She talked about how Belva had

come to her knowing exactly what she wanted to study and that she wanted to go to the University of Texas. Samantha revealed:

So she came in and I had no idea, I knew what the University of Texas was but I had no idea of graduation requirements. So we went online, she told me what she wanted to study, we, um, we went to see if they offered it, which they did. We printed out what she was going to be required to take. And we also went into, to um what their admissions requirements were. What she had to have on her ACT, graduation, ah, GPA, and any courses she needed in high school to make sure that when we were scheduling her for her junior and senior year that she was taking the correct classes. And we also went into tuition, room and board and that kind of thing, so she knew what she was looking at going to an out-of-state school.

My intent with the initial question of having the high school counselors describe a counseling experience with a university bound student had three purposes. First of all, I believed that it would be a question that they would be comfortable with and easily answered and thought that it would be an opportunity to begin a rapport with the participant. Second, this question would provide a platform for the next question I would ask about a community or technical college bound student. I wanted to create an environment in which the counselors would not believe that by the topic of my research that I was insinuating any negative associations with community and technical colleges. The final intent of the question was to explore the specific counseling experiences these participants have had with high school students bound for four year universities after graduation.

After thorough analysis of the participants' responses to this question, several important similarities were noticed in the stories shared by the high school counselors in their descriptions of their experiences. One of the significant things that I heard consistently was that there were so many students that were in this category that it was going to be difficult to just pick one to talk about. This was evidenced by Judy's response of "I have so many", Carol's exclamation of "just one!" and Connie's reaction of "how I am going to pick just one." These responses lead me to believe that there are many students that the participants have had a counseling relationship with that are bound for four year universities and therefore it was easy for them to remember some of these experiences.

Other similarities that were noted across the stories of the participants were the descriptions of the characteristics of the students that they identified. Consistently the high school counselors described their students as coming to them to ask questions, as being high achievers, very responsible, well-focused, in excellent academic standing, and knowing what they wanted to do after high school. In addition, the high school counselors consistently explained that they were the information givers, encouragers and in some cases provided additional resources to their four year university bound students. I was surprised that although almost every counselor mentioned in some way that they were sources of information and/or affirmation for these students; it was never mentioned that the students were deficient in information resources from other valuable sources. The students that presented themselves as university bound with their related goals and preferences seemed to drive the counseling process as opposed to the counselor directing the

counseling services with the guidance of a comprehensive strategic plan for precollege planning. They all seemed very comfortable, often excited, and relaxed to share their experience with four year college bound students. A question that could be raised is- does this student directed flow of information make the counseling process easier for the overburdened and overscheduled counselors. It could be concluded that the counselors are comforted in knowing that they have helped the university bound students seeking information and have had an impact on their choices and decisions.

After exploring their counseling relationships with university bound students the next question was asked to move the discussion towards the high school counselors' perceptions and experiences with community and technical college bound students. The next major theme is introduced in the next section.

Experiences with Community and Technical College Bound Students

Would you be able to recall the name of a student that chose to attend a community or technical college after graduating and tell me the story of your counseling relationship with that student?

This question was particularly important to this research in that I wanted to learn of the experiences of the counselors and yet I did not want it to seem in any way intimidating or accusatory. Since the response was likely to be the core of the research, I mentally prepared myself to not give it increased emphasis and to pay particular attention in mental notes to as many of the details of their responses as possible. In my field journal note taking after each session, details of the counselors' body language and the general atmosphere of the discussion were noted. The

words that best describe nine out of the 10 counselor's initial response to this question are signs of angst and being perplexed. The body language change that was most noticeable in many of the counselors was a look away and most of the time it was a look downward. Eight of the 10 counselors responses began with several um's, hm's, ah's, and ok's. Ben's immediate response was "I can't really." Carol's initial response was, "I know we have 'em- nothing's coming to me right now." Many of the moments after this question included long pauses. Several of the interview transcriptions have noted pauses, two long pauses, and one includes an extra long pause. I did my best to remain silent as the participants reflected and would usually proceed with a response and yet there was once that I felt I must intervene. I did try to give suggestions as to a possible answer in order to eliminate the discomfort the question was presenting. Only one counselor did not pause and she replied to this question, "that's even better" than discussing an example of a student planning on attending a four year institution.

One of the descriptive terms for experiences with community and technical college bounds students was students who really wanted to attend four year universities but due to inadequate grades and/or required course work were not able to. Betsy explained her experiences,

I've had a few students who really wanted to go to UL and/or LSU or somewhere like that, and it just did not look like it was going to work out. At least not for their first or second year of college. Did not have their grades and their requirements for courses. So, um, basically just helping them see that a community college is not a terrible route. Because sometimes, and I've

noticed that most of the students that I'm telling this to, it's like they just can't even (pause) think about that. They are going to UL- why are you telling me any different is kind of the attitude. And so just educating them on what it means to go to a community college. And I guess "reeducating", because they have a false view of what that means.

Betsy continued to explain an experience she had with Paul and his parents.

Um, just, ah, a stigma. Yea, yea, the stigma and maybe parents. Parents pushing them to go to a university. A specific university. One example that I can think of isn't exactly the same but in some ways similar to the extent that the parents were pushing and pushing for the student to go to LSU or Ohio State. And he doesn't have the requirements nor the GPA. And he was going to graduate this year and so we had to find a way for him to meet those requirements or at least meet the requirements for UL. And they were not, were not happy at all and not happy at all- they wouldn't even consider (laughing) a community college. And so um, so just finding out what he needed to do it. It turned out he needed to stay another year. To come back for a senior year to try to see if he could get his GPA up and add one more class. It's a possibility if he applies himself, um, you know, is focused, very focused.

After a considerably long pause, Arlene recalled the name of a young man and described him as in need of a bit more guidance and as someone that did not receive any help from his home environment. She described her experiences with Reggie in this way,

He knew what he wanted to do as far as skills. He wanted to go into like welding. So we made sure that all the courses, we have a strong welding, agriculture science department here and so he took all the courses that he needed in that area, um. We introduced him to a few new like job shadowing type, companies that are willing to work with the students and that's mostly through the instructor here who teaches welding. Reggie, ah, Reggie he had a little struggle sometime. Tolerance, I guess with standardized tests and making sure that his grades – but his enthusiasm was also and his personality – is like you want to make sure that he succeeds. And that's the type of person, ah, that he was.

Two counselors responded by describing their experiences with 'country boys.' Tom began his response by describing his school as incorporating a rural population that had a good work ethic and yet most were below the poverty level. He talked about Josh and how he wanted to pursue welding at the technical college after high school.

I remember that he rode his horse to school the last day, they were chasing him around school while he was riding his horse through the buildings. But the kid got into welding and he was very successful as a welder. And, uh, they had a lot of alcoholism and abuse in the home, what not and uh he got a DWI as a senior and he was kicked out of the home. I helped him get some additional help. And, uh, and he came back to tell all the teachers, you see this, you thought I'd end up in jail, look I made it. And he says I'm making double what y'all are making. I helped him, I provided the

information, disseminated the information. They make the decisions, they make the choices. But I provided, most of your kids are like me, I was a first-generation bound student to college. They don't have the knowledge. They don't have the parental support. Ah, they don't have the information base in order to make an informed decision, an objective decision. Consequently, I provide as much information as I possibly can. I show them what all the options are out there.

Another 'country boy' experience was shared by Paula and she said this about Van, Alright, he's actually was one of these kids that comes to school, he's smart, got ability, but he's not the four year college bound [sic]. He's kind of, more or less, the country boy that comes, that knows he needs to do something with his life, but he is not sure what he wants to do. So he started out wanting to do, um, auto mechanics or whatever. He thought this is where I want to go. Well, his English teacher, Ms. D, who's retired from here, decided he is so smart, so gifted in writing, very bright in English, GPA was probably, I think it was a 2.75, something like right at the top, he had a 20 on his TOPS exactly, you know whatever. We knew that he wouldn't get any help from home. So after talking to him and, and kind of discussing with him – we started looking at the Industrial Technology Program over at Southwest community .., ah, ah, southwest Louisiana ah, college, and started looking at this might be a better option for him to do. Because we felt he had, (laugh), a little bit more, I don't want to say intelligence, but, that he could do something a little bit better. You know, a little bit higher up. So we started looking at the programs at SLCC

and Industrial Technology stood out for him. And after going over there and viewing the program, he decided this was the best thing for him to do. And he is in his last year there as an Associate Degree and he is going to transfer over to the UL industrial engineering program. Which I feel that's probably where he should have been to start out with, but he wanted to do quick money. And what it is, is with the associate degree program he has gotten a job right now working with Baker Tools. So he's got that industrial technology knowledge and he's got that AD program after this year so if something doesn't work out, he's good to go with a career and a job. But he's now thinking about you know it might not be a bad idea to go on to UL [local four year institution]. So I'm really excited about that one.

Two observations about Paula's descriptions of Van's country boy experience in high school are important to highlight. She described his GPA as about a 2.75 and then noted that it was "something like right at the top." Considering that the top of a GPA is 4.0 and he was considerably shy of that number, I observed that possibly based on a perception of Van as a "country boy", Paula perceived the 2.75 as being at a top level for him. In Paula's previous description of Sally, a university-bound student, she had shared that this student had "the 4.0 thing." Another observation made was Paula's struggle with remembering the name of the community college- "southwest community, southwest Louisiana." The name of the college is South Louisiana Community College. The college has been operational since 1999. Paula was a middle school counselor for 13 years prior to her six years

as a high school counselor. Her challenge to correctly name the community college is a notable observation.

There were two interesting perspectives that were described by two counselors as their reasons why they were not able to recall any particular student that had decided to pursue a community or technical college education after high school. Carol was not able to recall any student, situation, or program area for a student going to a technical college. Her thoughts on the technical college bound student were that they did not need much attention because the college took care of most of the process. She shared,

Um, ah, (pause). I know I have some, I'm not coming up with any off the top of my head. Ummmm, (long pause). Nothing's coming to me right now- (laughing). I know we have em. Um, but the thing is, like a lot of times, the community college and technical college, and things like that, the application process that we're involved in is very minimal. Because they take care of students there and they do a lot of the leg work and everything. And we just have to send the required paperwork over.

Ben described the reason why he could not recall a specific student bound for community and technical college as because time was not spent with this type of student. He points out that most time and effort is spent with students that are four year bound and yet also suggests some improvement of information on other options giving credit for this to the institutions themselves. He explained his answer with this reply,

I can't really, because most of those students, I'm not going to say you didn't spend time with em. But the situation is, everyone's going to college. When I say that I mean college not a vo-tech. Yea, everyone's going to college. And so you're really not focusing on these students. And that's just the way it is. I'm not saying it's right. You offer them information but that was pretty much the extent of it. As compared to the time that you spend, you know, with the cliché 'college-bound.' So it isn't something that's really dealt with to be quite honest with you, unfortunately. It's because of the requirements in the school setting. In other words, you know you – what you're looking at, is you're looking at all the credits they need and the curriculum they're taking and the four-year plans – not many students are going to tell you right off that they plan on, ah, looking at a technical college or wherever, that type of school. Most of 'em, even the poorer students, academically poorer, I've got to say, say they're going to college. You know, I mean and that's the reality. It is still true today. Although, they are probably given a better idea and more information, not necessarily thru the guidance procedures but I think their being more available through, ah, people from those systems that are getting involved more with the students in the schools. I think that's happening a lot better, too.

Although Susan was also not able to share any specific experience with a community or technical college bound student, her reason was that until now she had not been in a school that this was an option. Her experiences were in a private school that focused solely on providing information and guidance about four year

institutions. She expressed her excitement and enlightenment about the options of community and technical colleges for her seniors. Susan shared,

Actually, the expectations of the private sector were, the parents, that they were all going to a four year university. But the reality was, 60% of them could attain that, but the other 40 could aspire but they never did reach that goal. So if they went into the four year university they were not successful. Then they backed up and felt, their self-esteem was deflated. So then what did we accomplish? Not much, cause we had not taught that student a skill. We have not taught them anything. So that was really a frustrating part for me. Then when I look at this environment and I'm looking at 70-80% of our clients going to a university setting or a two year setting. Then I think, you know, not bad. So it's been an eye-opening experience for me and I'm very, very pleased. Ah, I'm very happy to know what the community and technical colleges has for our students. Just a wealth, because when I think of all the private school students that, that were frustrated and unsuccessful and did not get any sort of degree. And I have students here that can get pharmacy technical certification and work their way through whatever they need at 11 or 12 dollars an hour and I'm like, wow! wow!

My expectations for the high school counselors' experiences with community and technical college bound students were not high. Especially when I considered the relatively low numbers of direct-from-high-school students at my campus, I did not expect an abundance of stories about students seeking high school counselor attention to get information about community or technical colleges. Although my

expectations were not high for abundant information, I was still surprised by the responses of the participants. I would not have predicted that there would be some counselors that would not be able to recall an individual or a circumstance that they could share about community and technical college bound students.

The previous analysis and discussion of particular experiences of the high school counselors with community and technical college bound students will provide the backdrop for the next theme that emerged from the information shared by the participants.

Pathway of Awareness of Community and Technical Colleges

How do you believe you formed your knowledge of community and technical colleges? Personal or family experiences? Counseling education or professional development?

One of the reasons I chose this topic for my research was that I knew that the community and technical college system had little resources (financial and personnel) for outreach and recruiting as compared to the efforts of the four year universities. I have been interested in learning how high school counselors receive information about community and technical colleges. I did not expect to learn that they relied so heavily on the information they receive from these institutions directly. It was actually alarming to me, especially since I am aware of the fact that such little effort is made from the technical college side and that this is sometimes the only reference point for most of the high school counselors.

Only two of the counselors described their personal experience with a community college. Betsy stated that her husband had completed a paramedic

program at a community college and that she had learned some things about this institution from him. The only counselor that had actual community college experience as a student was Carol. She clarified that she was from another state and that she believed it was much more commonplace and acceptable for students to go to community college first and then transfer to a four year in that state. Carol explained how she uses her personal experiences with a community college to guide her students. She shared,

...that's one thing that I stress to the kids that, that who kind of, maybe look down their noses a little bit at the community college and think well -- those are just for kids that don't plan on getting a degree or whatever. I explain to them, well I went to a community college and I have a master's degree.

As I read and reread Carol's transcription, because she was the only counselor to have a personal experience with a community college and because she expressed her encouragement for students to pursue this avenue, I sensed a dissonance in her message. As I continued to analyze her words, I determined that she believes that the community college is a good transition into higher education and yet did not speak of it as a valuable educational endpoint. This point will be elaborated on in further discussion later in the chapter. I believed asking the counselors about their training program was an important specific question to include in the study.

Did your counseling education program include any courses that provided information about postsecondary options for students?

In response to this question, six of the counselors indicated that it had not been a part of their counseling education program. Their replies ranged in

magnitude from no absolutely not to I don't think so. Paula was quick to react to the question with a somewhat shout of "no, absolutely not, none." I followed with an additional question as to whether or not she believed the program she had completed had changed any since her training and she replied,

Actually no. No, because I really feel they don't hit the community and technical college ed at all. They don't look at careers and how to get kids into colleges, you have to learn that on your own. So I had no knowledge of, and I can tell you that and with all the experience I have had even with teaching- even with my own kids, what opportunities are out there for kids. So in high school, those counselors need to be exposed to everything it takes to prepare a child from the time they enter the school to the time they graduate as to what postsecondary education is going to fit them. Because you know everybody is geared to college, four year college, four year college, whereas 65% of the jobs are not four year colleges. So that is misinformation that is given to counselors, that you have to college-bound them, college-bound them, college-bound them.

Most of Paula's comments were congruent with what I believed going into this research in that counselor education programs were not including adequate information about community and technical colleges as a postsecondary option and what information was covered emphasized four year college placement. And then she concludes her remarks to this question with the following;

Because basically, you know, 65% of the kids are not gonna go to college.

They're not gonna go to a four year college. They don't have the GPA. They

don't have the ACT. They don't have the jobs, they don't have the skills and they don't have the finances.

These comments reflect her opinion that an understanding about community and technical colleges is important in order to help students that do not have the GPA or appropriate ACT score, necessary jobs skills or finances to get into a four year university. Her message indicates that students with these 'deficiencies' should attend a community or technical college.

Four of the participants responded that their counseling education training had provided information about community and technical colleges as postsecondary options. Their somewhat vague replies varied from a small amount of information in the career counseling class to a lot about postsecondary education options. Betsy provided information about a unique situation that she had experienced in that her career counseling course had been taught by an adjunct instructor that was also employed at the community college. She stated that,

In as much depth as they could in one semester. Ah, ah, it was, um informative. I got a lot from that class that I still use now, but it was limited. And so then ah, I did learn a lot more in another class but again it was just one aspect of the class. And actually one of my classes in my last semester was taught at the community college because our adjunct teacher is Shirley, who is there. So she decided to help to understand more about SLCC it would be good to have our class there and it made it easier for her.

Carol described her counseling education training as "for the most part adequate" and Arlene explained that her education "covered a lot about postsecondary."

Samantha began her response by saying that “we did have some information” and ended her answer with the following,

That was a long time ago. So I don't remember a lot from it but I don't, you know, what I am trying to recall I don't remember any real training. But a lot of the training that we had doesn't have anything to do with what we do on a daily basis. And that is on your tape now- (laughing)—That's fine. No, I've told our professor that, that what we do on a daily basis is not what we're taught in our program. And that's a shame because we need to know what actually goes on.

In an effort to have a better sense of counselor education courses that a high school counselor may have experienced, I conducted a supplementary interview with Shirley. She was as an adjunct faculty member in a university counselor training program. She had been recruited by the department head to teach the university's lifestyle and career development course that is a required course for all in the master's program for counselor education. She described her initial enthusiasm about instructing the course and her interest in researching what should be taught. The response to her many questions about what to teach for this course and what other universities could she contact to get more details was, “nobody wants to teach that course- it's usually given to the low man on the totem pole.” Shirley was told to do the best she could and she proceeded to do so. She shared that very limited, if any, information was given in the course about community and technical colleges as options for postsecondary education (Shirley, personal

communication, July 30, 2010). Shirley informed me that she taught the course for one semester.

As I noted in my reflective journal, one of several reasons that I chose this topic is my determination that information about community and technical college education as an option for students after high school be included in counselor education training. I was not surprised to learn from most of the counselors that, just like my personal experiences, they had also not become aware of the possibilities concerning these options through their counselor training.

Several of the participants identified another avenue by which they believed that they obtained information about community and technical colleges. They described this avenue as experiential learning. The two male counselors used this terminology specifically. I believe that it directly relates to their number of years in the profession. Tom has 13 years experience and Ben has 17 years as a counselor. Tom described his experiential learning as a process over time and paying attention to student feedback along the way. Ben summed it up as “just being in the system for as long as I have been.” He explained that you just get to know what’s going on around you after you have been around for this long.

The final and most significant way that high school counselors became aware of community and technical college education was by workshops and visits conducted by the community and technical colleges. Seven of the 10 participants explained, without a doubt, that if it would not have been for the efforts of these institutions that they would not be aware of the opportunities for their high school students. Betsy had an interesting explanation of her experience in that she thought

that she had adequate knowledge about the community college especially since her husband had graduated from one. She acknowledged pride in the fact that she had taken it upon herself to learn as much as she could about this option for students after high school and then she shared this after her recent visit to the community college,

...that's why I said like when I went to that workshop, I was disappointed at how little I really did know. I was so happy to have that information, that was the greatest thing that they could have done--was to give us that information.

Paula explained that it's going to every workshop at the community and technical colleges and being able to talk to personnel and instructors at the campuses that provide all the information that she has. In addition, seeing the programs, experiencing the educational environment and talking to students especially former students was extremely beneficial. Susan's description of her awareness of community and technical colleges was in its beginning stages since the majority of counseling had been in a private school. She credits her contacts and visits with these institutions as her resources and said that "every time I go, I get another gift." And she concluded her comments with an observation that made me feel like any anxiousness about the value and usefulness of my research could disappear when she observed, "actually most of it's being formulated even as I'm speaking because--look you have come from this area and you are doing research on that, so it's an evolution."

As related in their stories, the participants' personal experiences with community and technical colleges were very limited. One shared her family

experience and another described her enrollment in a community college in another state. The majority of the high school counselors did not think that their counseling education program had included information about community and technical colleges as an option for students to pursue after high school completion. All of the counselors discussed, in varying degrees, how the information directly from the community and technical colleges, in particular tours and workshops held on the campuses, had impacted their awareness of community and technical college opportunities. The next section explains the fourth theme that developed from the information gathered from the high school counselors.

Precollege Planning- Established Programs

Does the school system have an established precollege program for guiding and providing information to students about postsecondary education options? Does your high school have an established program?

It is difficult and in many cases impossible to accomplish meaningful goals, especially in large scale situations, without a plan or procedure set in place to use as a guide or tool. This question was used to establish an understanding of the environment and conditions of the high school counselors in regard to their precollege guidance for students. I was not surprised by the answers given by the participants to this question.

Nine of the 10 counselors responded to this question with a no. Their “no’s” ranged in degrees from Judy’s, “no, no”; Connie’s, “no, not really”, and Betsy’s, “I don’t think so.” There was not much discussion added by the participants beyond their negative responses. Carol added that she believed that each school kind of

has their own procedure. Connie also said that what she has learned has come from her fellow counselors.

There was one counselor that responded yes to the question and then added that it was evolving. Susan's perspective is different in that she is coming directly from a private school and revealed that there she felt like she was a "lone duck." In her response she revealed her appreciation for having the network of a support group within her building should she have any questions. I believe that due to the fact that she was relatively new in the system, she was not aware of the fact that the system does not have a procedure or model for precollege planning for the high school counselors to use in their schools.

In my conversation with the director of student services, she explained that the system does not have established guidelines for precollege planning that is being implemented in the high schools at the current time. She described how the system is in the beginning stages of providing uniform procedures to high school counselors as well as explaining that the state is currently revising its comprehensive counseling model. She revealed that she is in the process of developing a manual for high school counselors to use and "to put things in counselor's hands that are consistent." In addition, she referenced the ASCA Model and indicated that the system would include and "implement as much as we can possibly do" (T. Smith, personal communication, February 9, 2010).

The majority of the participants did not think that there were established precollege guidelines for counseling and providing information to students about postsecondary education options. Six of the 10 counselors responded in varying

no's. Responses included Betsy's "no (with laughter)", Samantha's "not to my knowledge", and Judy's "I don't think so." The remainder of the counselors' answers to this question were in the 'maybe' and 'sort of' category. None of the counselors responded with the answer 'yes.' Carol suggested "in a sense", then talked about how the senior counselor from the previous year kind of guides the current one, and later stated that "there's not anything that's really established." Susan responded that "we're working on that", talked about how it's such a vast amount of information, and how it seems like a "river of information."

I was not surprised by the counselors' responses in that the majority did not believe that there was an established system or high school model for precollege counseling. I was unaware of their significant dependence on other high school counselors as their resources for delivering precollege guidance and information. Carol's explanation sums up the reliance and variance that was also shared by others,

...so we kind of pass down the information that we have. But when it comes to the actual process, it varies from school to school. And it varies from counselor to counselor. Because Ms. S doesn't do everything that I do. And you know I didn't do everything that Ms C. did before me, so there's not anything that's established, that this is what you do, you know.

Precollege Planning- Activities and Strategies

What are the activities and strategies you use to help students identify postsecondary options that are consistent with their interests, achievements, aptitude, and abilities?

When the high school counselors were asked to share their experiences with providing activities and strategies they used to inform students about postsecondary options they described two categories. One category included strategies that involved groups such as classroom and cafeteria presentations and the other category involved students coming to their offices seeking information. In the presentation category the complete summary of the activities described by the high school counselors included: classroom presentations (planning for college days, transcript review, financial aid and scholarship information, college entrance assessments; parent workshops (postsecondary information- “parent university”) and senior bulletins.

The majority of the participants elaborated more on the second category of students coming to their offices seeking information. Carol emphasized that she did her best to “make herself available” to students requesting information. She added that she stressed to students that if they did not know something that they should come and see her. Samantha talked about when students come to her office and some of the questions she asks students and information she gives students. She gave this example of a possible individual conversation with a student in reviewing their transcript and assessment scores,

... if you fall in a certain area then maybe you should look into going to an open university or a community college to begin with. Um, and we go from there and ...when we do scheduling that’s when our next step kind of comes in. The students are asked to pick a track. At this point are you going to college? If you’re going to college this is the track you stay on. If you’re going

to a community college or technical college this is the track you are going to go on.

I found the counselors description of the activities and strategies to be limited and varied significantly from counselor to counselor. Most of the counselors seemed more comfortable describing their experiences with students on a one-on-one basis than the difficult scheduling and timing of classroom and cafeteria presentations. Unfortunately, the difficulty is that it is not possible to meet individually with all of their students and therefore classroom presentations are the only means by which they can reach the majority of students.

Also to be noted are Samantha's comments about students taking a certain track if going to college and another if going to a community or technical college. It is important to examine these comments. There is a call to attention to the use of the word 'track' or establishing a certain pathway for a student based on certain qualities or characteristics. In addition, she uses the word college with the assumption that it means only a four year institution. I propose that this is a prevalent thought process within our society in that there is a false perception that the 'best' kind of postsecondary education is the four year and therefore the reason the term college is used in this context.

Precollege Planning- Equality and Impact

Do you provide the same information to all students in regard to precollege planning and do you believe that your efforts have an impact on their planning?

The responses to whether or not they provided the same information to all students in regard to precollege planning were simple and uniform across all of the participants. Every counselor emphatically replied 'yes' and several added an additional 'of course.' Tom exclaimed that "without hesitation I would tell you that I give equal information to all students". Judy was just as emphatic in her response when she said, "I absolutely feel like I provide the same information to each and every student that I discuss college with." In some cases, just based on their response forcefulness, I sensed that I might be on the fringes of possibly insulting them by asking them this question. Due to the fact that there is such a justifiable focus on equality in education, I propose that their adamant responses were a mechanism to defend any implication of inequality. Although I recognize the significant counseling and advising the participants provide to those seeking their help with the college choice process and by means of intermittent group activities, I suggest that an unintentional inequality exists. The indirect inequality can be recognized in the students that do not possess college knowledge, are not tuned in to the college choice process, are not involved in precollege counseling activities, and those that do not seek the counselor as a resource. For these students, outside of the high school environment, they do not have the resources to obtain college knowledge.

The participants' responses to the question about their belief that their counseling and information had an impact on students were also unanimous. All of the counselors replied with determination that they believed that they influenced their students precollege planning and decision making. Judy responded with passionate

emphasis, “yes, that’s all I can say is yes. I absolutely believe and I feel a very strong responsibility.” Connie commented, “yes, absolutely. ...cause I mean I’m like their cheerleader and momma together.” Tom was very definite about his answer and said, “yes, otherwise I wouldn’t remain in the profession.” The counselors described their invaluable help to students seeking their expertise with applications, referral letters and transcript issues. In addition, several shared how they had assisted students in obtaining financial aid and exploring various options at four year institutions. It was obvious that all of the participants were dedicated and passionate about helping their students.

The primary research question for this study was: what are high school counselors’ perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary options? The final set of findings focus on this theme. There were two sub-themes revealed in the information shared by the high school counselors in this study. The first sub-theme was their disclosed explanations of how they describe community and technical colleges to high school students. The second sub-theme identified was the high school counselors’ account of the role of community and technical colleges.

Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges- Descriptions to Students

How would you describe community and technical colleges to your students?

The terminology used most frequently to describe community and technical colleges to students were “a good bridge” and “a good transition.” Most of the counselors either used these words or something very similar in meaning. Other terms used were the “next step”, “next level of high school”, “smaller step after high

school”, “smaller community”, “stepping stone” and “in-between.” Many of the counselors said they described community and technical colleges to students as “being environments that had smaller classes”, “more interaction with teachers”, “close knit like high school”, and “a slower atmosphere.” Betsy explained that she thought that the community college was an environment for students to “gradually move into the college environment and a lot of students want to go straight into a university. And for some students it’s not an ‘in-between.’ They just need to realize that it’s not, it’s not a bad option.” Carol believed that it provided a slower transition for those students who might be overwhelmed by the four year university experience. Arlene responded that these options bridged the gap “until they open the door to higher education.” Samantha said it was a smaller step after high school and “it’s kind of a transition in-between, a high school experience and college.”

Another description of community and technical colleges to students used by several of the participants was the reference to their being places where students could get academic development, improve strengths, could have access and hands-on learning. Arlene suggested that these colleges are where students can get academic development before going into higher education. Of note is Arlene’s inference that community and technical colleges are not higher education. Paula shared, “I think one thing that hits us is that our kids don’t have the math and reading background to go into the college programs. And the technical programs are more geared toward what they want to do for life.” Connie explained that she tells students that, “it’s an accessible place where you can go if you don’t have the GPA or the exact resume built up for a four year.” Samantha replied that she tells

students they are institutions that students could get hands-on learning, “you know, for students who don’t do well in that classroom setting most of the time.” The counselors seemed to reveal that students that do not have strong academic skills (low GPA), therefore are not successful in the classroom, should consider community and technical colleges due to the “hands-on” environment. It is important to note that there is an assumption that “hands-on learning” does not require strong academic skills as well as application skills.

Two unique descriptions were mentioned by Susan and Ben. Ben felt strongly that the technical colleges should not be called colleges. He agreed with the term technical but does not like college attached to the name. His view is that they have become too academic in nature and that this has a tendency to discourage students that “don’t want to read.” And Susan’s perspective, not surprising considering her time in the private sector of education, was that she informs students that these institutions are the “best buy in town- it’s such a great opportunity for our students.” Both participants seemed to indicate that a community or technical college would be an option for a student that does not “want to read” or students that do not possess the skills required for a university, therefore would be better suited pursuing these options. The question that could be raised is, are the high school counselors classifying students based on what they assume they can or cannot do or be. Tom’s comments about if a student’s light bulb goes off, having good ACT scores, and how he would then match them up with a university instead of a community or technical colleges possibly suggests tracking of students. The next

sub-theme to be summarized is the role of community and technical colleges as described by the participants.

Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges- Role

What do you think is the role of community and technical colleges in postsecondary education?

The participants' response to this question yielded expanded thoughts and experiences in regard to community and technical colleges as compared to the previous interview question in regard to their description to students. In particular, I noticed that every participant's response always made a comparison to a four year institution.

Eight of the 10 high school counselors explained that the primary role of community and technical colleges was to educate those students that are not ready for a four year university; students interested in a four year program which is not available at a four year college; or students not interested in a four year university. Most emphasized it was an option for students that are not ready to enroll directly in a four year and can use enrollment in community college or technical college as "a transition" or "bridge" to a four year. The counselors used these terms to reference students they believed were in need of both academic skills building and social skills building. They revealed that these students were in need of a "transition" environment that would help them transfer from the comfortable atmosphere of the high school campus to some place with a similar environment.

In regard to students that are not ready for a four year university, the participants described several reasons that students would not be prepared for this

postsecondary option. The primary rationale counselors used for students not being ready for four year institutions was that they did not have the academic skills and/or required standardized test scores necessary to enroll in these colleges. Betsy described their role as being “for students who aren’t ready for a university but are hoping to be. To be able to go there and get some remedial classes to be able to move on to UL or somewhere like that.” Arlene explained that she thought their role was to provide opportunities for students “who are low performers, especially on standardized tests.” They can get academic development before, ah, going into higher education [four year institution].” Like ah, improve your strengths in areas that you’re weak in. That it makes a good transition into your higher postsecondary. Carol pointed out that she thought their role included being a place to “give students a chance to get a lot of their basics behind them in a smaller setting, um, for a cheaper price. And then go on and finish their four year degree at a university.” Susan described their roles as an opportunity for students when they are denied entry into a university and realize that that door is closed, “it causes them to rethink and look for an open door at the community or technical college.” Tom explained that he believed that the role of community and technical college was to help match student’s test scores, abilities, and interests. They were institutions that,

...if a student wants to procure or obtain a particular occupation then this is the educational training that they need to look at. And then if the light bulb goes off, and you have good ACT scores then I’d match you up with a college, a four year institution rather than a community college.

Most of the counselors explained that the primary role of community and technical

colleges was to provide an educational opportunity for high school graduates that were not prepared academically to meet the requirements of the admission standards of four year universities. They revealed that these institutions offered students another opportunity to participate in postsecondary education with the hope of reaching their ultimate interest of enrolling in a four year institution.

Another role expressed by the participants was for students that were not interested in pursuing a four year education after high school. Counselors shared perspectives on this view of the role of community and technical colleges. Connie explained that the role might be for those students and their families that do not appreciate education. She shares,

Well, not everybody's a four year person, you know, and ...there's a lot of people that don't value education. You know, I was lucky enough to have parents that valued an education and, and a four year college was always mentioned to me – as you're going to college. But not all these kids, so many of these kids are on their own coming to high school. So it helps give them a focus and a goal of, you know I don't have to look far, far down the road. And plus this can be a stepping stone for me. If I want to go to a four year college, I can still do that, but right now I can get something that could possibly even support me. Like they could get an LPN or phlebotomist or you know just something if they want to work in the medical field, let's work for something you can have right now. Then you can work while you go to a four year college.

Samantha describes her view of the role of community and technical colleges as a place for students who do not have as a goal to attend a four year campus and “for students, if plumbing is their family business and that is what they know they are going to do then there’s the technical college for them to go and earn their certification and move on into the workforce.” She continues to explain that, she believes that students are going to attend a four year because they really have to like school. And she elaborates,

I think if they are a hands on student, ...if they like to work with their hands that they need that more interaction, then a technical college might be a better place for them. Cause I’m partial to a four year university. I think that there’s, um, nothing like a college experience... if they are a student that, that thrives or loves education, you know, because if they are going to go into a um a four year university situation, they have to really like school. You know because they are going to be there for awhile and they’re going to be exposed to different um, different situations that they may not know. I think if they are a hands on student, if they like to work with their hands that they need that more interaction then a technical college might be a better place for them. But I think ultimately it’s what they want to do with their life. You know, if they want to be a plumber, and if they know that they want to be a plumber then there’s no need for four years in college. It’s not going to prepare them for what they want to do. So I think first and foremost what kind of student they are.

Another role shared by Betsy was to serve students that were interested in a four year college experience but due to the fact that the program they were interested in was not available at such an institution; a community or technical college was where they would pursue their postsecondary education.

The final role category for community and technical college included by four participants was the function of workforce training. Paula sums it up by saying, “technical programs are more geared toward what they want to do for life. It’s to get ‘em into a career that is going to give ‘em a livable salary, and a career that they are going to enjoy.” Susan’s response was simply to “educate the workforce. Those are excellent ways to make a living.” She added that “with our saturation of having so many professionals we just have to develop the workforce.” Ben talked about the role being the place to go and get training for the workforce. He emphasized that individuals with this training were able to make a living within a shorter amount of time and were able to do well for themselves and have the potential to provide for their families in the future. In addition, he reflected, “but, it’s really a hard sell in education because the focus is still on everybody’s [sic] going to a four year college.”

Summary

This study’s findings were examined based on research questions that revolved around exploring and understanding high school counselors’ perceptions of community and technical colleges. Precollege counseling practices as described by the high school counselors emerged based on their experiences related to those students planning on attending four year universities and those student planning on attending community and technical colleges. The counselors’ pathways of

awareness in regard to community and technical colleges were categorized and grouped as an additional theme. The participants' precollege counseling strategies and activities were grouped as a theme and described. The final theme of high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges in regard to how they described these institutions to students and what they believed is the role of these institutions in postsecondary education was revealed. The significance of these findings as it relates to precollege planning of students, the high school counselor's purpose as an institutional agent in this counseling function, and the impact on community and technical colleges is provided in the next chapter in addition to implications for stakeholders and suggestions for further study.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview of the Study

This study began as Louisiana continued to expand the implementation of the Master Plan for Public Postsecondary Education: 2001 and as postsecondary educational leaders and state legislators analyzed the impact of the findings of the Postsecondary Education Review Commission (PERC) report. The state's Board of Regents has published the final phase of minimum admissions standards for first-time freshmen at four year institutions. The standards went into effect in the Fall 2010 semester and include 19 units of courses from Core 4 curriculum; a minimum overall high school GPA of 2.0; minimum of ACT subscore-English \geq 18 and math \geq 19; and GPA on core courses 3.0 (flagship), 2.5 (statewide), 2.0 (regional) (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2010). High school graduates and their parents will face the reality of a student's GPA, assessment scores, necessary high school courses and the effect of all these factors in postsecondary admission in the upcoming years. As the Master Plan (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2001) and PERC (2010) report indicate, community and technical colleges have been recognized as a feasible and effective postsecondary pathway for students in Louisiana. Providing accurate, reliable, and meaningful information to students and their parents about the options at community and technical colleges is an important component to the successful implementation of the state's Master Plan for Postsecondary Education and the recommendations of PERC.

On a national level, National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) has been instrumental in writing and calling for national support for the

Pathways to College Act which is a congressional bill designed to help low-income and first generation students by stressing the significance of high school counseling in the college and career planning process. Competitive funds are included in the bill to be used in needy school districts to invest in hiring, training, and equipping high school counselors with the information needed to establish a college going culture within their high school campuses (NACAC, 2010). Ensuring that students receive college and career planning information in high school has received both state and national attention. The role of the college counselor in secondary settings thus becomes of critical importance in addressing these issues.

Investigating and describing high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options was the purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study. While much research has been accomplished with regard to precollege planning of high school students considering four year postsecondary institutions, scant information is known about how students discover information about other postsecondary options. In particular, the community and technical college options have received minimal attention (Mitkos & Bragg, 2007; Pascarella, 1997). Although they are only one of several resources, providing precollege information and counseling to students is considered a function of the high school counselor. Therefore, their perceptions and knowledge of postsecondary educational institutions are important in understanding the information they relate to their students.

There were three respected models found in the current literature that were integrated to establish the framework that guided this study. The first was

McDonough's model of building a comprehensive college-going culture in the high school. The second was McClafferty and McDonough's model of establishing a school environment with the goal of preparing all students with the information needed to matriculate to any postsecondary option of their choice. The third component incorporated was the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) framework for school counseling model.

The focus of the study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of high school counselors themselves in order to find out what their perceptions are about community and technical colleges. The participants included 10 high school counselors currently working in high school settings and providing precollege information and counseling to high school students.

The principal question that guided this study was: what are high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary education options for high school students? The following four secondary questions provided topical focus for the study: (1) How are high school counselors' perceptions formed about community and technical colleges?; (2) What information do high school counselors have about community and technical colleges and how did they obtain this information?; (3) How are perceptions of community and technical colleges reflected in high school counselors' information to students? and (4) How do high school counselors determine what information and counseling to share with individual students in regard to precollege planning?

These questions were established to gain an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of these high school counselors and were grounded in

the conceptual framework that guided this study. The literature on the high school counselor's function as an institutional agent in precollege counseling, as well as the college choice process and the high school counselor's influence in this process, contributed to the development of the framework used to direct the study.

This chapter provides a discussion and analysis of the findings of the study in regard to each of the themes that emerged from the interviews with 10 high school counselors in five high school settings. The themes are included in the discussion of each research question. The themes revealed were significantly centered on the participants' responses to the interview questions which, in conjunction with the conceptual framework, were used to direct this research. The implications of this study in regard to high school students' postsecondary plans, community and technical college leadership development strategies, and future workforce growth are also explored. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Study Findings

Using the participants' transcribed information, I compared and analyzed their stories to identify themes and sub-themes in order to provide a description of their experiences with community and technical colleges related in the previous chapter. This chapter focuses on an analysis and discussion of the study findings as they relate and contrast to prior research on similar topics. Five major themes emerged from the high school counselors' shared stories: experiences with university bound students, experiences with community and technical college bound students, pathways of awareness of community and technical colleges, precollege counseling, and perceptions of community and technical colleges. Additionally,

three themes had sub-themes that expanded the descriptions of experiences of the high school counselors in regard to community and technical colleges. An overview is presented initially with a summary of the findings for each research question and then followed by detailed sections on all questions.

The principal question asked was, what are high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges as viable and valued postsecondary options for high school students? Based on the participants' responses, I found that most of the high school counselors perceived community and technical colleges to be institutions that offered students "a bridge" or "transition" to four year institutions. Many counselors were not able to share specific stories in regard to helping students matriculate to these options as their descriptions of time and attention seemed to be predominantly with aiding students in search of information about four year institutions. I believe that with consideration to their very limited pathways of awareness about community and technical college benefits that their perceptions of them as viable, valued, and desirable options are not equal to their perceptions of four year institutions.

The first secondary question was how are high school counselors' perceptions formed about community and technical colleges? Based on the participants' responses, I found that most of their perceptions about community and technical colleges were formed from information that they were provided by community and technical colleges. Two of the counselors had personal experiences with a community college. Most of the counselors related that that their perceptions

had not been formed by their counselor education programs since it had not been included in their training.

The second secondary question was what information do high school counselors have about community and technical colleges? Based on the participants' responses, I found that for most of the counselors the information they have about community and technical colleges are the resources they are given by these institutions. Several of the counselors described information about the community and technical colleges that was not accurate.

The third secondary question was how are perceptions of community and technical colleges reflected in high school counselors' information to students? Based on the participants' responses, I found that most of the counselors described how they presented community and technical colleges to students by explaining them as a "bridge" or "transition" place for students that were not ready for various reasons for a four year postsecondary institution. In addition, several of the counselors indicated that these would be appropriate institutions for students who were in need of academic remediation because they were leaving high school with low GPA's and weak ACT scores.

The fourth secondary question was how do high school counselors determine what information and counseling to share with individual students in regard to precollege planning. Based on the participants' responses, I found that all of the counselors believed that they provided equal and the same precollege counseling information to all students. Most of the counselors indicated that there was no system or campus comprehensive model for precollege planning used to design and

implement college knowledge activities and resources. Most of the participants described how they relied on previous or fellow counselors to structure their own precollege counseling activities for their assigned students. In addition, most of the counselors indicated that there was a predominant situation of students seeking their one-on-one assistance as compared to group or session activities that might include all students. The following offers a comprehensive description, analysis, and comparison to current research of the information discovered from the interviews with the high school counselors in this study.

Discussion

What are High School Counselors Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges as Viable and Valued Postsecondary Education Options for High School Students?

Before reviewing the data that emerged on what high school counselors' perceptions are about community and technical colleges, it was important to consider and reflect on why their perceptions are important. This answer can be found in the core of the study's conceptual framework with the high school counselor's function as the institutional representative in establishing the college culture for the high school campus. McDonough (1997) described the counselor as the agent that directs counseling activities and strategies that serve to provide information and services to students as they develop their postsecondary plans. Her model illuminates the counselor's role in creating and implementing the school's

worldview of incorporating the perceptions of parents and community expectations for appropriate postsecondary destinations along with their own perceptions of possible college choices based on their personal knowledge and experiences.

McClafferty and McDonough's (2002) model expands the role of the high school counselor as the institutional agent by adding the goal of preparing all students with information in order to be ready to choose from all possible postsecondary options. The counselor's perceptions (views, understandings, opinions) about postsecondary opportunities are integrated into the information they use to counsel students in the college choice process.

After the data were coded, themes and sub-themes emerged on what the high school counselors' perceptions were in regard to community and technical colleges. The findings revealed that the participants' perceived community and technical colleges to be good bridges or transitions for high school graduates that are not ready or prepared for four year institutions. Some of the various reasons that counselors used to describe students that were not prepared for the four year option included: GPA deficiencies; high school course deficiencies; low standardized test scores and students in need of smaller learning environments.

Indeed, a function and design of the community and technical college system is to provide access and transfer to four year institutions (Bailey, 2002). It is a postsecondary environment that can provide open access and academic development to students that are in need of additional support to succeed. A concern is that the perception of many of the study's participants is that this is a primary reason that one would consider this option of education and the overall

impression based on all the comparisons to the four year options is that community and technical college education is of lesser value and status.

Grounded in the models of McDonough (1997) and McClafferty and McDonough (2002) is that the high school counselor serves as the institutional representative of the college culture and their perceptions of postsecondary education options is important. It is important to note that the participants of this study perceive the option of community and technical college as a postsecondary choice as less valuable than the four year option. The counselors' discussions in this study suggest to me that community and technical college postsecondary education is not being presented as a viable and valued postsecondary education option to all students.

Experiences with University Bound Students as a Major Theme

Counselors were relaxed and enthusiastic when explaining their many stories of students who had pursued university education after high school and effortlessly described an example in the interview session. Some of the terms used to illustrate high school students that they had counseled included: information seekers, high achievers, responsible, very focused, high GPA's, great ACT scores, and strong academic skills. Most of the counselors shared that these students had sought their attention by, in most cases, coming in to their offices or actually had worked in the counseling department. This result was consistent with Cooper and Liou's (2007) research on the role of the high school counselor as distributors of information and influencing student success. Their findings indicate that when students are provided with the appropriate level of support and information they have a greater probability

to have success in their pursuit of academic and career aspirations. Prior research by Hutchinson and Bottorff (1986) also indicated that over 75% of university bound students in their study had sought information from their high school counselor in their planning process. In addition, King's (1996) extensive study of over 900 high school seniors revealed that students who saw their high school counselor were more likely to attend a four year university.

I noted that this information delivery to students that were interested in four year options was consistent with the models of McDonough (1997) and McClafferty and McDonough (2002) with one observed exception. None of the participants mentioned that although the high school students had sought information about four year institutions that they would also take the opportunity to review other options for postsecondary education to ensure that students had comprehensive information upon which to base their decisions. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Krei and Rosenbaum (2001) that described that few counselors in their study reported advising students to consider an alternative to a four year university.

Gray and Herr (2000) argue that based on their research, high school students receive the 'only way to win' message in the precollege counseling, and that is, in order to prepare for the professional ranks one must attend a four year college. Susan stood out for me during the interviews in that I noted that her background and experiences were very different from the other participants. She was a seasoned counselor with most of her precollege counseling knowledge obtained in a private school setting. I find that Susan's responses are interesting

and unique. Susan shared stories of her former experiences in a private high school and revealed how 'all' of their graduates would attempt to attend a four year institution and that many were unsuccessful and frustrated in their pursuits. Because of her past experiences, I found Susan to be open about postsecondary options other than four year universities. This finding aligns with the extensive research of Herr and Cramer (1996) in the career guidance field and that an individual cannot make choices about something one does not have knowledge about, know how to prepare for or know how to obtain access to. It was important to comprehend the participants' relationships, information giving, and descriptions of students that matriculate to four year institutions in order to begin to understand the same about community and technical colleges.

Experiences with Community and Technical College Bound Students as a Major Theme

When asked to describe an example of a counseling relationship with a student considering a community or technical college, the participants were noticeably delayed in their responses with one exception. Their pauses and angst in responding to this question were noteworthy. As I reflected and analyzed what the difference was between their responses to the previous question about relationships with four year bound students and this question, I realized that their hesitation and struggle to identify a community or technical college bound student was the result of counseling few students that are bound for this postsecondary choice. This was an important finding in the study and paralleled the findings of Ireh et al. (1995) in their unique research of two year college students. Their study reported that of the

twenty-three self-reported influential factors in regard to their matriculation that the high school counselor was identified as the least or twenty-third significant factor. More questions began to take shape for me and included: was it because students that are community or technical college bound do not go to the high school counselor for information and counseling; are they students that leave high school believing they are four year university bound and then due to some sort of deficiency end up at a community or technical college; or did the high school counselor not discuss community or technical college education because they did not think they had adequate information to share with students about this postsecondary option. In research collected from students and counselors in Georgia, Illinois, Oregon, and Texas; Kirst, Venezia, and Antonio (2004) found that only the most motivated students had discussions with their counselors about college and many students revealed they felt college counseling was only for honors students.

Seven of the 10 participants explained their counseling relationships with community and technical college students by providing the descriptions of students that either came to them for some other reason and then discussed postsecondary plans or those that came seeking this information specifically. Three of the counselors were not able to recall names or situations in order to provide examples for the question. It should be noted that one of these counselors was Susan. This was her first year in a public school and although she had not had any graduates attending a community or technical college yet; she spoke of the ways that she had provided information to current students about such. The descriptions of the students by counselors included three students that had found out they could not

attend a four year (academic or financial deficiencies) and counselors had to re-educate due to the 'stigma' or false view of a community college; a black pregnant female with financial issues; two 'country' boys; and a young man that had a low GPA and ACT and was in need of a little more help. These characteristics of high school students mirror the findings of many researchers and include such as the College Board (2006); Freeman (1997); Johnson and Stewart (1991) and King (1996). Their research has noted that students with low socio-economic status; with low academic skills; that are the first in their family to attend postsecondary; and are African American and Latino are in need of the most attention and information from the high school counselor.

Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges as a Major Theme

In order to understand the participants' understanding and knowledge about community and technical colleges I used their description of what they believed the role of these institutions are to elucidate this information. The role of community and technical colleges was identified as a sub-theme in the analysis of the data.

McDonough's (1997) model of college culture emphasizes the significant role the high school counselor has in establishing the framework for college options on the campus and that their perceptions of these institutions are important factors in their information and counseling functions.

Based on the findings from the participants in their discussions about what they believed was the role of community and technical colleges, I noted that they thought the primary role was three-fold and included: to educate those students who were not ready for entry into a four year option; to educate those students interested

in a four year option and yet program was not available; and to educate those students that were not interested in the four year option. This finding has similarities to Dougherty's (1994) research on community colleges and reflects his argument that these institutions are perceived as weak. He emphasizes that public two year colleges play a critical function in American postsecondary learning and "indeed American life. Yet both scholars and laypeople often know little about them, believing they are only a peripheral part of the collegiate system, a catch basin for those few students unable or unwilling to enter 'regular' college" (p. 3).

In contrast to Pascarella's (1997) extensive research arguing for the need to rethink and expand views of what the desirable outcomes are of college in that a community or technical college degree can be a desirable and satisfactory goal for a student, most of the high school counselors did not recognize this mission. Most of the counselors did not indicate that the community or technical college serves a primary function as a degree-seeking opportunity or as an educational end-point for students. This is an important issue in understanding the high school counselors' perceptions of community and technical colleges and one of their significant roles to provide degree education. As part of their functions as counselors, they support students in obtaining college knowledge (Conley, 2008). Ensuring that information about community and technical colleges is presented as a positive or viable option could potentially have an impact on students that may not have considered these options. Much of the prior research has focused on transfer to, retention, and degree completion at four year institutions. Future research focusing on

matriculation to, retention, and degree completion at community and technical colleges would enhance the literature concerning these postsecondary options.

In examining the described role of community and technical colleges, it was found that four participants identified workforce training and preparation as a function. This finding aligns with the published missions of community and technical colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; College Board, 2008). In addition, Hughey and Hughey (1999) emphasized in their research the increasing importance of high school counselors being informed about current and future workforce needs and the various pathways that students can take in order to prepare for the workforce. They direct attention to the high school counselor's responsibility for staying current with both the changing workforce needs and with community and technical college offerings that have the potential to achieve these goals. Their research indicated a deficiency in high school counselor awareness of current and future workforce trends and training options other than four year postsecondary institutions. Although the workforce preparation role was recognized by four participants, I believe that it was a significant finding in that more of the counselors could have recognized this role. It is an area that could potentially benefit from additional research in the future.

Although my interview question about the role of community and technical colleges was open-ended and I did not offer any answer options, I suggest that their answers and emphasis on how these institutions serve as "a bridge" or "transition" to four year institutions and very few references to their potential as an educational end-point should be noted. I believe that most of their general perceptions are based on the fact that many do not have any personal experiences with these colleges; did

not receive training or have had few professional development opportunities; and rely totally on information from these institutions for what they share with their students. This finding aligns with the College Board's (2008) research that emphasizes that despite the evidence of success and productivity from community colleges that they are consistently overlooked at local, state, and national levels. I believe that this was a significant finding in that if high school counselors are not aware of these postsecondary institutions as valuable end-point education and training places they cannot share or transfer this information to students and their parents.

Secondary Question #1: How are High School Counselors Perceptions Formed About Community and Technical Colleges?

Pathways of Awareness as a Major Theme

Perceptions are formed based on the awareness and knowledge possessed at that moment in time (Severin, 2000). It was important to this research to determine not only what high school counselor perceptions are about community and technical colleges but to also find out how they obtained their awareness and knowledge. In their responses, the participants made it very clear that their post-baccalaureate counseling education had not provided information or experience with community and technical college options. I realized that I had not received this information in my training and therefore expected to hear the same from counselors that had obtained their counseling training in approximately the same time frame as I had, but I was hopeful that I would find changes in counselors that had more

recently been through programs. This was not the case in my findings. One participant, Arlene, shared that her program had covered a lot about postsecondary education and yet she was not able to provide any specific information about what she had learned from courses. The participants' responses were consistent with the research of Matthay (1989), McDonough (2004), and Orfield and Paul (1993) that found that counseling education training programs do not provide adequate training or information in precollege planning.

In addition to this significant finding, only two of the counselors had any personal or family experiences with a community or technical college. Betsy described her experiences with her husband's education at a community college and Carol described her enrollment at a community college and ultimate transfer to a four year institution. This finding was also surprising to me. Although I did not necessarily expect all to have a personal or family experience with a community or technical college, I anticipated more would have had a family member, friend, or even acquaintance that would have been enrolled or completed their education at a community or technical college.

The most unexpected finding of this study was the participants' description of how most became aware of and gained their knowledge of community and technical colleges. Most of the high school counselors shared that they had learned about and relied almost totally on information that was provided by staff of community and technical colleges at a once a year workshop. They emphasized their dependence on these visits to the campuses and outreach from these colleges. The results of research by Kirst, Venezia, and Antonio (2004) highlight the uniqueness of my study.

Their research that included counselors in Georgia, Illinois, Oregon, and Texas indicated that “the information they receive from postsecondary institutions is not helpful” (p. 299). This conclusion was an important finding and it is why I believe that this research study is original and unique because high school counselors’ experiences revealed the significant need for expanded avenues of information about community and technical colleges. This finding exposes not only the importance of adequate, appropriate and on-going outreach on the part of community and technical college staff but also highlights the necessity to include this information in counseling education programs. This also must be considered in light of the fact that counselors may not be exposed to these options through personal or family experiences.

There were two sub-themes that emerged from the transcript analysis. Personal experience was identified as one sub-theme and describes participants with personal experience and also those participants that have not had personal experience with a community or technical college as a contributing factor to their perceptions about these institutions.

Two participants had personal experiences with a community college. Betsy’s husband had completed a community college program and Carol had attended a community college in another state and then transferred to a four year university. Of note at this time is a dissonance that I detected in Carol’s perceptions of community and technical college education. Carol talked about her personal experience with a community college and how she believed that she had a different perspective than other counselors because of this. She felt that she had the

background and knowledge to counsel students to enroll in community and technical colleges and yet in her descriptions of experiences with community and technical college students she included only students that had not met the criteria to get into a four year institution. I would have expected that her descriptions might have been different considering her personal experiences and she would have had stories of students that were academically successful and enrolled in community or technical colleges similar to her own story.

As I reflected on these findings, I was challenged to relate them to the Mitkos and Bragg (2008) results that describe personal experiences with a community college as a major influence on perceptions of a community college. In their study, all of the participants had revealed varying degrees of personal experience with community colleges. The researchers reported that this pathway of awareness had resulted in a favorable perception of the community college. Based on this information, a relationship could be made that for those high school counselors that had no personal experiences with community and technical colleges that their perceptions of them could potentially be unfavorable.

The second sub-theme that emerged from the participants' experiences was professional education as a means of gaining knowledge about community and technical colleges. Professional education was described in two categories by the high school counselors. The first was their post-baccalaureate counseling training as required by the position in the high school setting. Nine of the ten counselors shared that their counseling education programs had not, as they remembered it, provided information and experiences about community and technical colleges as a

postsecondary option for them to share with students. This study finding aligns with several studies that examined the information that high school counselors have about postsecondary education and how this information is obtained. The Rosenbaum and Person (2003), Hart and Jacobi (1992), and McDonough (2005b) studies found that counselor effectiveness in precollege counseling was directly related to their training and experiences with postsecondary options. This comparison leads me to conclude that this study's participants' effectiveness is weakened by their lack of training in this area.

In addition, my conversation with Shirley, the university counseling program adjunct instructor, corroborated information that the high school counselors had discussed. She explained how very little to no attention had been given to precollege counseling and that the "last man on the totem pole" is assigned to teach these types of courses (Shirley, personal communication, July 30, 2010). Burnett's (1989) research of counseling education programs supports the finding in this study in that he concluded that there is a great need for specific courses in precollege advising and counseling.

The second category of professional education that emerged as a significant finding was the fact that based on the counselors' explanations of how they were informed, had knowledge of, became aware of community and technical colleges was by means of these institutions providing information and resources to them. The majority of the participants described that this was their only source of information that they had and used such to share with their high school students. As revealed earlier, I consider this a uniqueness of this study and one that merits additional

consideration for more research on this particular topic. As an administrator of a technical college and with consideration to the financial and time constraints of our college, I have a great concern that this is an almost exclusive source for high school counselors to garner information about these postsecondary options. This finding suggests to me the important role community and technical colleges have in informing high school counselors of options available for their students at our campuses. The finding also leads me to assert that community and technical colleges have an urgency to figure out how to accomplish this task within their financial and time-limited means in order to provide counselors with accurate and current information on an on-going basis. I also consider this a finding that needs additional time and attention in future research studies.

It is also important to acknowledge the finding that the participants were appreciative of the resources that the community and technical colleges provided to them. This finding is consistent with the Mitkos and Bragg (2008) study that revealed high school counselors' description of their relationship with the community college was as a partnership.

Secondary Question #2: What Information Do High School Counselors Have About Community and Technical Colleges?

Precollege Counseling as a Major Theme- Existing Program

Because of my experiences in the study's high schools, I was not surprised by the finding that the individual schools nor the system have an operational strategic plan for delivering precollege counseling. This is the first sub-theme that

emerged from the major theme of precollege counseling. Nine of the ten high school counselors shared that they were not aware of specific guidelines for their counseling functions in preparing students for college choice in either their individual schools or at the system level. Many described their counseling efforts as a result of learning from the prior counselor who had the same level of students the year before. This finding from participants was corroborated in my discussion with the system counseling supervisor who indicated that she was currently working on developing a comprehensive model for the system (T. Smith, personal communication, February 9, 2010). She also explained that the state was also soon to release a revised state-wide model that would be used in the system plan development.

This is a significant finding in that it contradicts the conceptual framework's reliance on a comprehensive school counseling program for precollege planning. ASCA (2005), Herr and Cramer (1996), McDonough (2005a), Myrick (2003), NACAC (2008), and Schmidt (2008) accentuate the importance of having an established and fully implemented structural support for precollege counseling at the school level in order to provide helpful information to students to continue their educational journey after high school. The current study's finding of counselors not having an established comprehensive school counseling model for precollege planning does not correspond with significant research that emphasizes the value and benefits of having such an established program in place. Hoyt (2001) and Lapan et al. (1997) found that, among other benefits, with the implementation of

comprehensive guidance programs; schools were able to provide more college and career information to students.

This finding suggests to me that the timing is critical for the system to have a comprehensive model developed and an operational structural support in place in order for counselors to have direction and consistency in their precollege counseling. After this has taken place, it would be an important opportunity to conduct follow-up research to determine the impact of the comprehensive model on precollege counseling and the possible effect on graduate success rates in postsecondary education.

Precollege Counseling as a Major Theme- Activities

The second sub-theme that emerged from the major theme of precollege planning was activities used in precollege counseling. The two types of activities participants described were classroom or cafeteria-style presentations and one-on-one interactions with students. The presentations described by the counselors revolved around transcript review, financial aid and scholarship information, and college entrance assessments. Although this is important information, none of the participants mentioned presentations in which they outlined and described the various options of postsecondary education to include community and technical colleges. This was an important finding because the high school counselor is considered to be the school's institutional agent (McDonough, 1997; McClafferty & McDonough, 2002) in the delivery of information about all options for college after high school. There are students that who do not have access to information outside of the high school environment nor are they likely to plan to attend college if they are

not given information (Herr, 2002; King, 1996; Kirst & Bracco, 2004; McDonough, 2004; Orfield & Paul, 1993).

Although King's (1996) research was limited to four year college enrollment, the study provides strong evidence that if high school students are exposed to college information from high school counselors they are more likely to plan for college. This highlights the point that if more students would be exposed to 'college knowledge' (i.e. the types of postsecondary education available, the benefits of community and technical college education, etc.) there could be more successful matriculation and completion of college for those students not aware of these options (Conley, 2008; Mintrop, Milton, Schmidlein, & MacLellan, 2004).

One of the counselors explained an activity that was conducted for parents on her campus. She described that the counselors on the campus provided a series of presentations called "parent university." I was immediately distracted when she mentioned it in the interview and continued to be as I listened to the recording and read and re-read it in the transcription. My observation and question is: how are we going to make sure that we are not giving students and their parents a biased message that the university pathway is the 'best way-only way' if we name our outreach program "parent university?" This single finding calls attention to Gray's (2009) research about the importance of helping all students achieve postsecondary success by sending the message that society values all postsecondary options, not just baccalaureate education which is a message he finds prevalent in his research. Also to be considered is Krei and Rosenbaum's (2001) research that found that few

counselors reported that they advised their students to consider alternatives to four years, like technical colleges or apprenticeships.

Another category of activities described by the participants was one-on-one interaction with students. In their explanations of experiences with students, they talked most often about this type of communication throughout the interviews and in many cases described how the student had come to them seeking information.

Although this is certainly an effective counseling technique for those particular students, I believe that this is a significant finding in that there is a concern for those that do not come and are still in need of information. This finding parallels with the research of Krei and Rosenbaum (2001) that focused on the college and career advice given to the 'forgotten half'. They use the term to describe students that are unlikely to seek a four year college degree. In addition to the finding that most counselors tend to encourage all students to attend four year colleges, they also found that the 'forgotten half' are much less likely to seek one-on-one advice from the high school counselor. The concern with this finding is that if a student's information is limited or non-existent how can they make plans or achieve success with limited resources (Conley, 2008; Kirst, Venezia, & Antonio, 2004; McDonough, 2004b).

The prevalence of one-on-one precollege counseling is an important study finding. Based on my awareness of the counselors' student loads, I did not expect to hear from most counselors that individual sessions in regard to precollege planning were held more predominately than group activities. I expected to hear about more group activities or sessions. Krei and Rosenbaum (2001) describe this

approach as 'pop-in' advising. They emphasize that because of the increasing scope of high school counselor responsibilities on the campus and the growing number of student assigned to them, it will be necessary to focus on group precollege counseling presentations in order to effectively serve all students. The researchers suggest that 'pop-in' advising should be eliminated and proactive systematic strategies should be used instead to ensure that all students receive precollege counseling information. This aligns with the research justification for the implementation of a comprehensive model for precollege planning. With the practice of such a model in the setting of a high school campus, activities and strategies are planned and conducted in order to include most students as compared to the limited number of students that one-on-one counseling can accommodate (ASCA, 2005; Matthay, 1995a; Myrick, 2003; Schmidt, 2008).

Several of the participants emphasized that their doors were always open and that they tried to be available for students with questions about college planning. They believed it to be a positive and effective counseling function for students choosing to come for questions. This finding can be compared to Hart and Jacobi's (1992) research that revealed that most counselors assume that students who want to go to college will visit their offices to ask for assistance. As described in research cited previously, the questions remain to be what informational services are being provided to students who are not aware of the questions to ask, are not aware of the postsecondary options available to them or are not aware that the high school counselor could be a resource if they approached them in their office. I believe that this system's approach to precollege counseling is geared toward those students

that possess at least some 'college knowledge', are predominately university bound, and take the initiative to seek additional information from the high school counselor. In addition, the current system provides limited and often times random information to students that do not have 'college knowledge', may be bound for community or technical colleges, or are leery of seeking the counselor's advice. These issues highlight the importance for future research on this important topic.

Precollege Counseling as a Major Theme- Impact

The third sub-theme of the precollege planning major theme was the participants' beliefs about whether or not their precollege counseling efforts had an impact on students' decisions about postsecondary education. All of the participants expressed absolute confidence that they had a significant positive impact on their students' precollege planning. This finding aligns with the conceptual framework of this study in that McDonough (1997) and McClafferty and McDonough (2002) describe the instrumental role that the high school counselor has as the institutional agent for establishing the college culture of the campus. The high school counselor shapes the culture with their counseling functions in helping students in their precollege planning, enrollment in college, and ultimately success in college and career.

The participants of the present study's responses about their belief regarding their impact on student precollege planning were consistent with the findings of Freeman (1997), Hamrick and Hossler (1996), Hugo (2004), and King (1996). These researchers conclude that the high school counselor and good counseling are the key to the successful matriculation of students to postsecondary education. In

contrast to these findings, research conducted by Chapman et al. (1987) and Corwin et al. (2004) found that although counselors make a difference and are competent and caring, sometimes their influence is as negative as it is positive. Specifically, findings in the Corwin et al. study revealed that many students believed that the primary role of counselors was scheduling classes and not to encourage college attendance. The researchers summarized their finding by highlighting that “counselors must recognize how their perceptions and attitudes influence student perception, and ultimately, student success” (p. 455). I believe that the counselors in my study have a significant impact on the students that they are able to serve based on their descriptions of ‘pop-in’ advising and occasional classroom presentations. I suggest that, with the implementation of a comprehensive model for precollege planning and inclusion of all postsecondary options, counselors in this system could have an even greater impact. This could result in more students possessing the ‘college knowledge’ needed to pursue all options of postsecondary education. An important topic for future research would be to ask all students exiting these high schools about how their high school counselor impacted their decision to attend college and their college choice.

Pathways of Awareness as a Major Theme

Throughout the interviews in the study, the high school counselors spoke of community and technical colleges in their responses to various interview questions. Because of my familiarity with the program offerings at both the community college and technical college, I recognized in the interview sessions and the transcription documents that many instances of incorrect information about these institutions were

given by the participants. Judy's described a nursing program at the community college and there is no nursing program (SLCC, 2010). Carol described the possibility of articulated business courses with the community college and this is not the case (SLCC College & Career Coordinator, personal communication, March 3, 2010). Paula's misnaming of the community college and Betsy's description of an automotive program at the community college (SLCC, 2010) that is not offered at this college are additional instances of misinformation. These examples and others were not accurate information in regard to the community and technical colleges referred to by the participants. This finding is consistent with the Mitkos and Bragg (2008) and Orfield and Paul (1993) results that indicated that the high school counselor's lack of awareness and information about community and technical colleges has the potential to create an unfavorable perception of these options for postsecondary education. This finding is of concern in that consideration must be given to the possibility that high school counselors are providing incorrect information to students and this could result in frustration or discouragement on the part of students and could ultimately result in the student not attending a postsecondary institution due to the misinformation.

In conclusion, the pathway by which high school counselors become aware of community and technical colleges is predominantly by way of information provided by these institutions. Of note are the inconsistencies and misinformation shared by the participants about community and technical colleges. Only two of the participants had personal or family experiences with a community college. Most of the counselors did not believe that they had received any information, awareness, or

training about community and technical colleges in their counseling education programs. This concurs with the research that suggests that in order to improve precollege counseling and counselor awareness of postsecondary options greater emphasis must be placed on this topic in counselor education programs (McDonough, 2005b), on-going professional development on this topic must occur (Hugo, 2004), and there should be accelerated strategies by community and technical colleges to provide continuous resources to high school counselors (Mitkos & Bragg, 2008).

Secondary Question #3: How are Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges Reflected in High School Counselors' Information to Students?

Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges as a Major Theme

One of the sub-themes that emerged from this study's findings was the participants' descriptions of community and technical colleges to their high school students. When explaining their descriptions of community and technical colleges, the high school counselors clearly reflected their belief that these institutions serve as a transition or bridge. They described these postsecondary institutions as 'stepping stones', an 'in-between', and 'next level of high school'. Most references to transition were in regard to the students' ultimate movement from the high school through a community or technical college with the final goal of completion at a four year campus. This finding aligns with one of the identified missions of community and technical colleges which is to provide preparation for students to transfer to four year institutions where they can complete bachelor's degrees (College Board, 2008).

It also parallels the Mitkos and Bragg (2008) finding that counselors perceived the community college as serving a significant function in helping students transfer to four year campuses and that they encouraged students to attend the community college in pursuit of transfer.

While this finding is in alignment with one of the goals of these colleges, I believe there are challenges that should also be addressed. In most of the descriptions about who should attend community and technical colleges, students were described as those needing an in-between place and a slower environment. Several participants talked about how, in one-on-one sessions with students that had learned that they had not been admitted to four year institutions, they had to counsel students about how community and technical colleges were not a 'bad option.' This finding aligns with Crane (2003) and Elfer's (2007) argument that community and technical colleges are viewed as of less value due to flawed and limited perceptions of these institutions. They emphasized the important need to provide comprehensive postsecondary information to students presented in such a way that all postsecondary options are described with equal value which can result in students making confident choices and feeling satisfied with their college destination. They add that the high school counselor's demonstrated support and enthusiasm to students about community and technical college matriculation is a significant contributing factor to their success in college.

Since most of the counselors spoke almost exclusively about how community and technical colleges function to provide a transition to a four year there was only one participant that indicated that this type of education could potentially be a

valuable degree education for a student to achieve their career goal. This finding suggests to me that most of the participants did not view community and technical colleges as viable options for students to consider for obtaining degrees that do not result in a four year credential. Examples of such programs that have such an end point would include automotive technology, practical nursing, drafting and design technology, and clinical laboratory technician. Gray and Herr (2000) and Hoyt and Maxey (2001) found that most educators in secondary systems give direct and indirect messages to students that the four year college option is the 'only way' to be successful and by doing so fail to recognize and legitimize other valuable postsecondary options for their students such as community and technical colleges. The researchers highlight that these institutions offer degree options to students that can provide for meaningful and beneficial careers. Additionally, Hamilton and Hamilton's (1994) and Kirst and Bracco (2004) findings also offer that reasonably clear career paths are provided for the quarter of students who earn baccalaureate degrees and little aid is provided to the remaining three-quarters of young people that complete their formal education without a bachelor's degree.

Other questions must be considered in regard to the finding that most of the counselors described the role of community and technical colleges as transition places to get to four year institutions. One question would be, what if students interested in a community or technical college were given comprehensive and desirable information about this option; would this result in more students successfully matriculating to these colleges? Another question I offer is, what if students believing four year college is not a possibility for them would be presented

with the college knowledge (Conley, 2008) that would motivate them to pursue community or technical college education; would this result in more students successfully matriculating to these colleges? I suggest that the unique Ireh et al. (1995) study of technical college students begins to answer this question with the finding that participants revealed that their high school counselor had minimal influence in their decision to attend. The study's findings suggest to me that there exists a significant potential for more students to enroll in community and technical colleges with the confidence that these institutions are valuable and viable options for them to achieve career success with the added support and encouragement of counselors. Additionally, I suggest that professional development for counselors on this topic would help to achieve this goal.

Another significant finding about the particular descriptions to students about community and technical colleges made by participants was how they believed that these institutions were a place for students to get help with their academic deficiencies. This finding aligns with the Mitkos and Bragg (2008) study that described counselors as perceiving community colleges as a provider of developmental and remedial education. And yet a significant difference in their study and this study must be recognized. In the Mitkos and Bragg study developmental education was identified as a function of community colleges but was considered to be the least recognized function. In comparison to this study, developmental education was recognized as one of the primary functions of community and technical colleges.

In addition, this study's findings also parallel with SHEEO (1992) findings that disclosed high school counselors historically have viewed technical education as dumping grounds for students who are academically below skill level and do not perceive it as an option that can potentially lead to successful futures. While recognizing the function of developmental education as an important role for community and technical colleges, this finding suggests to me that the other values of community and technical colleges are not acknowledged by high school counselors in their precollege advising. These findings also suggest that high school counselors, acting as the institutional agents for precollege planning, should work with their schools to elevate performance in basic skills for all students to be better prepared to make successful postsecondary plans. In addition to continuing to try and improve students' academic achievement, the four year college-for-all philosophy should be revised to acknowledge those students that are given a mistaken impression that low high school achievement is not an obstacle to their plans (Rosenbaum & Person, 2003).

A unique perspective of one of the participants was shared by Susan. She was the only participant that had experience with precollege counseling in a private school setting. Although her experience in a public school was only six months, I believe that she was the most enthusiastic about the potential that community and technical colleges had to offer in her descriptions of what she told students. She illustrated herself, "I'm like a kid in a candy store" as she continued to learn about community and technical college offerings. Susan confessed that her background and experiences had not provided her with information about these options and she

was just beginning to become aware of them. I believe that the significance in her unique story is the information that she shared about her private school students. She explained that in her experience there that she could say with certainty that every student planned and aspired to attend a four year college and yet only about sixty percent would be successful. She questioned the dilemma for the other forty percent and described how frustrated and deflated these students must have been and then she questioned- “what happened to them”?

Susan’s testimony aligns with Krei and Rosenbaum’s (2001) study of high school counselors that revealed most schools push four year college attendance and “that if they don’t go, they’re not as worthy as somebody else” (p. 828). I believe that Susan’s perspective, although recognized as information from a single participant, is an important finding. It highlights her awareness of the significant amount of students that were encouraged to attend four year institutions and her realization that this direction most likely did not fit or match their individual characteristics or interests and resulted in their initial postsecondary failure direct from high school. These negative experiences and resources enlightened Susan’s view of the value and viability of community and technical college programs for all students. This result suggests to me that should high school counselors be provided with meaningful data about retention and completion information in regard to their high school students they could be better informed about what really happens to their students after graduation. This specific data on their graduates is not currently available to high school counselors in this system according to the Director of Career and Technical Education (K. Allen, personal communication, February 11, 2010).

Future research about this topic would provide high school counselors and the school system with information that could be incorporated in their precollege counseling strategies.

Secondary Question #4: How Do High School Counselors Determine What Information and Counseling to Share with Individual Students in Regard to Precollege Planning?

Precollege Counseling as a Major Theme

The 10 participants unanimously asserted that they provided equal and the same information to all students in regard to their precollege counseling. The high school counselors also revealed that there are no systematic or campus guidelines for precollege counseling. Participants' descriptions of activities used included college days, transcript reviews, financial aid and scholarship information, and college assessment information. Not described by any participant were sessions that included information about all postsecondary options available to students. Many counselors revealed that they relied on other counselor strategies to plan their own precollege activities. Therefore, I suggest that this finding conflicts with the counselors' views that they provide equal information. The assumption can be made that, because there is no systematic structure for precollege counseling and that these high school counselors essentially 'do their own thing'; students do not receive equal and the same information. This finding aligns with the Venezia and Kirst (2005) research that determined that many students, their parents, and educators are confused or misinformed about precollege planning. They also found that there

was information inequality between students in honors versus non-honors in regard to the amount and quality of precollege counseling.

I also suggest that because there is no comprehensive precollege counseling model, students who are assigned to a newer and less informed high school counselor are at a disadvantage. There is also the concern of incorrect information given by some high school counselors in regard to community and technical colleges. These findings emphasize the importance of the system and individual campuses having and implementing a systematic structure for delivering this information to all students on an equal basis as suggested in the conceptual framework of this study.

Experiences with Community and Technical College Bound Students as a Major Theme

As revealed in participant experiences, there was a distinct difference in their descriptions of students that planned to attend four year institutions as compared to those planning on a community or technical college. The high school counselors generally described their community and technical college students as difficult to remember, in need of a slower transition, having GPA and assessment score deficiencies, and as not doing well in a classroom most of the time. This finding leads me to conclude that these characteristics about students are what determined whether a counselor provided a student with information about a community or technical college. Most participants seemed to recall students that needed extra help, had insufficient academic standing, or were high school course deficient in their experiences with community or technical college planners. I suggest that this

finding aligns with Linnehan's (2006) research on high school counselors as institutional agents and exploration of the relationship between student race, class, and academic performance. He analyzed the counselor's role in reinforcing or preempting social class structure. Although it is not possible to directly correlate the research and this study due to the fact that detailed data were not collected in regard to students, limited comparisons can be made. Linnehan found that high school counselors were more likely to recommend students with weaker academic standing than those with higher academic standing to community colleges. Students with stronger academic performance were more likely to receive recommendations to pursue four year colleges as compared to students with weaker performances.

Other descriptive terms used several times by participants when referring to community or technical college planners were 'country boy' or 'hands-on' student. I suggest that this finding aligns with several studies found in the literature. In the Somers et al. (2006) study of community college students, they found that high school counselors were generally not supportive of student desires to attend a community college and that students believed they provided gestures of support but sent underlying messages of 'they were not college material'. The Ireh et al. (1995) study of technical college student participants revealed that the high school counselor had been the least influential factor in making their decision to attend college. These findings also parallel Hart and Jacobi's (1992) suggestions that high school counselors may disseminate information selectively, such as providing admission and financial aid resources to those student with higher academic

standing whereas those with lower standing may not receive the same advice and information.

Although none of the participants specifically expressed a belief in the ‘only way to win-college mania’ philosophy, I believe that there were inconspicuous and subtle ways that the participants expressed this mindset. Samantha mentioned toward the end of the interview session, “you know, I’m gonna tell you that I encourage most to attend a university because that’s what I did and it worked out well for me.” Indirect messages were described by participants in such things as the precollege activities conducted (parent university), Susan’s experiences with private school graduates, college fairs, counseling waiting areas, university pendants, etc. Several counselors did reveal experiences with parents that expected four year college enrollment although their student’s academic performance did not parallel with this expectation. In line with this finding, Brooks (2001) argues that there is a new class structure in America, no longer defined by family background or income but defined by four year college degrees, especially if high in the college rankings. Additionally, these findings parallel the research of Gray and Herr (2000) that determined that the high school is a powerful source of pressure to attend a four year college and that there is a significant need to address providing information to students in an unbiased way about other postsecondary options such as community and technical colleges. They also highlighted the importance of the high school counselor serving as a resource and encourager of valuing work in all professions.

Summary

Ten high school counselors from a school system in Louisiana were interviewed to explore their perspectives and experiences with community and technical colleges. In my search for common experiences and meaning between participants when discussing their perceptions of community and technical colleges the following themes were revealed: experiences with university bound students; experiences with community and technical college bound students; pathways of awareness of community and technical colleges; precollege counseling; and perceptions of community and technical colleges.

The findings of this study suggest that high school counselors for several reasons perceive community and technical colleges as postsecondary institutions that are primarily for weak or deficient students and not as a college that can provide valuable end-point career education. It was my belief, at the beginning of the study, that accurate and reliable information about community and technical colleges was important for high school counselors to have. I believe the most important finding of this study and indeed one that can make a contribution to the existing literature is the fact that the study's participants relied exclusively on the community and technical colleges as their resources for information about these institutions. In addition, this research revealed that best practices in high school counseling related to presenting all postsecondary options to all student is not being facilitated in Branch Public School System (BPSS) and training in counselor education programs that incorporate competencies for precollege counseling and all postsecondary options could be very beneficial to high school counselors.

Implications of Findings for Policy and Practice

The results of this study could have the following implications for high school students, parents, secondary educators, postsecondary educators and employers:

- Through information, parents and high school students might be aware of the assets of community and technical college postsecondary education.
- High school counselors might have a better understanding of community and technical college postsecondary education.
- Secondary school systems could include community and technical college postsecondary education in their precollege advising policy considerations.
- Counselor education programs could provide training and information about community and technical college education as a valuable postsecondary option.
- Through increased community and technical college education participation, additional workforce and employment needs might be addressed.
- Community and technical college education could be considered as meaningful components in college choice theoretical models.
- Community and technical college educators might become aware of the information needs of secondary school systems and develop strategies to collaborate with high schools.

Recommendations for Further Study

Several topic ideas for future research have been generated as a result of exploring the subject of high school counselors' perceptions about community and technical colleges. One concept for future research would be to expand the focus of this study to a larger group of high school counselors and include more school systems. Such a study would yield results from a greater number of participants that would incorporate a broader range of experiences in precollege counseling and various system strategies, enhance the richness of the data on this topic, and add to the significance of this topic in ways that could generate system policies and procedures to fully implement comprehensive models for precollege planning.

Another suggestion for future research would be to include other educators on the high school campus with a similar research focus. Gathering comparable information from teachers and other administrators would provide perspectives on this topic from other important members of the high school campus that also have a shared responsibility in the future of the campus' high school students.

As a result of this study, I believe that an important focus for future research would be to examine the college choice experiences of all high school students in an effort to determine what all high school students' needs and expectations are in regard to their precollege advising. Since most studies have focused on the college choice experiences of high school students considering four year postsecondary options I think that research on students considering options other than four year would be beneficial. The focus of future research in this area could be directed on

the high school counselor's function in their decision-making and what activities and what kind of information would provide the greatest assistance to these students.

Specifically in regard to the Branch Public School System studied here, important follow-up research could be conducted in several areas. If the school district were to incorporate a systemic comprehensive precollege counseling model, follow-up research analogous to this study could be conducted and results compared. Studies generating comprehensive data on specific postsecondary plans for students and specific postsecondary retention and completion information on high school graduates in this system's high schools could provide invaluable resources for staff and administrators.

Concluding Research Remarks

I visualized and created a plan for this study as a result of my passion and belief in the value of community and technical college education. I believe these colleges are misunderstood and misperceived pathways of postsecondary education. It is disheartening for me to witness, in both direct and obscure ways, deprecation of individuals that are considering, achieving, or have completed community and technical college education. The intent of my research was never to dissuade or discourage four year postsecondary attendance. It was to examine other suitable options. My personal goal is simply to do everything I can to make sure that all high school students are given the opportunity and information that they need to make the appropriate personal choices for long-term satisfaction with their educational and career choices.

My time with the high school counselors was enlightening, insightful and revealing. I firmly believe that they are hard-working, caring, and well-intentioned individuals who are important sources of information and encouragement. I heard responses that I expected and some that were unexpected. Upon much reflection about their responses, I believe there is much work to do in regard to precollege counseling for all high school students and I hope to have the opportunity to share the results of this research in an effort to get information to high school students and their parents. My recommended first step would be to change the name of the high school counseling department to counseling and postgraduate planning services (College Board, 2006). In conclusion, I wholeheartedly concur with Comer's (1995) remarks that the timeliness of empowering high school students with postsecondary options information is critical- we do not want to lose the assets of those that are either uninformed or misinformed. And because many of their families do not understand the college choice process or possess college knowledge, they will require the assistance of highly competent and informed counselors.

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Appendix A

Potential Research Participant
Address
City/State/Zip

Dear Potential Research Participant:

I am currently a student in an Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations Cohort at the University of New Orleans. As part of the program requirements, I am conducting my dissertation research on high school counselors and their role in students' college choice process. I hope to contribute to the professional knowledge base about this topic. This information may be used to foster the training/development of future high school and community and technical college administrators and leaders.

One of the goals of the project is to provide an account of your experiences as a high school counselor and advisor of high school students transitioning from high school to their next step in your own words. If you are interested in participating, I would like to conduct an interview with you within the next few weeks. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. I understand if you wish to decline or if you are simply too busy to participate.

I hope that you will choose to be a part of this important endeavor. Its impact on future high school and postsecondary administrators and leaders may be far reaching. Your input is crucial to the success of this research. I will be contacting you by telephone within the upcoming week to ascertain whether or not you are interested in participating. If you agree to share your experiences, we can schedule a convenient time for our initial interview. You are welcome to contact me at any time should you have any questions or concerns regarding this project. Thank you very much for your time and consideration and I am looking forward to the opportunity to visit with you.

Respectfully,

Desiree Huggins
University of New Orleans
Daytime: 337-262-5962 Evenings: 337-981-6626
E-Mail: dhuggins@luc.edu

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

1. **Title of Research Study**

Rethinking Counseling for College: High School Counselors' Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges

2. **Project Director**

Desiree D. Huggins, Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana, 70148. Daytime: (337) 262-5962. Evening: (337) 981-6626. E-Mail: dhuggins@lrc.edu

This research project is in partial fulfillment of course requirements, and under the supervision of Dr. Marietta DeFavero, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148.

Telephone: (504)280-6449.

3. **Purpose of this Research**

The purpose of this research study is to explore, describe, and evaluate high school counselors' views of community and technical colleges. A goal is to conceptualize high school counselors' degree of understanding about community and technical college education. An additional purpose is to determine what some of the factors are that contribute to their perceptions of community and technical colleges.

4. **Procedures for this Research**

Participants will voluntarily participate in interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes (individual interview). All interviews will be conducted in person by the project director and will be audiotaped for transcription purposes. Tapes will be erased upon completion of this research project.

5. **Potential Risks or Discomforts**

Participants may experience slight discomfort talking with an unknown interviewer. There is also the possibility that participant may become fatigued during the interview. Participants will be allowed to take breaks if needed and will be offered an opportunity to debrief issues brought up over the course of interviewing. All aspects of participation are voluntary and the participant may choose to conclude the interview at any time. Participants who would like to discuss these or other potential discomforts may contact the Project Director listed in #2 of this form.

6. Potential Benefits to You or Others

The results of this study may be used to:

- a. Contribute to the training and development of high school counselors.
- b. Contribute to the training and development of community and technical college administrators and counseling staff.

7. Alternative Procedures

Participation is entirely voluntary and individuals may withdraw consent and terminate participation at any time without consequence.

8. Protection of Confidentiality

Participants' names, specific school site, and identifying information will be kept confidential at all times. Names will not be identified on audiotapes or transcripts. The interview tapes will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist or by the project director. The signed consent forms, audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other material related to this project will be maintained in a secure and confidential manner by the Project Director. If the results of this study are published, participants' names and identifying information will be disguised.

9. Signatures and Consent to Participate

I have been informed of all procedures, possible benefits, and potential risks involved in this investigation. By signing this form, I give my permission to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant

Name of Participant (print)

Date

Signature of Project Director

Name of Project Director (print)

Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Participant:

Date of Interview:

Time of interview:

High School:

Counseling Education Program:

Year Completed:

Years of Precollege Experience:

Current student load:

Gender:

Race:

Interview Questions:

(1) Would you be able to recall a student that chose to attend a four year university after graduating and then tell me the story of your counseling relationship with that student?

(2) Would you be able to recall a student that chose to attend a community or technical college after graduating and then tell me the story of your counseling relationship with that student?

(3) How would you describe community and technical colleges to your students?

(4) What do you think is the role of community and technical colleges in postsecondary education?

(5) How do you believe you formed your knowledge/understanding of community and technical colleges?

(a) Do you have any personal experiences/family experiences with a community or technical college?

(b) Did your counseling education training program at _____ include any courses that provided you with information about how to guide and counsel students in regard to their precollege planning and postsecondary education options?

(6A) Does the BPSS have an established precollege program or model for you to use in guiding and providing information to students about postsecondary education planning and their options? (6B) Does _____ High School have an established precollege program or model for you to use in guiding and providing information to students about postsecondary education planning and their options?

(7) Tell me about the activities/strategies you use to help students identify postsecondary options that are consistent with their interests, achievements, aptitude, and abilities.

(8) Do you provide the same information to all students in regard to their precollege planning?

(9) Do you believe that your efforts have an impact on their precollege planning?

Appendix D

National Institutes of Health Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The NIH Office of Human Subjects Research certifies the **Desiree Huggins** successfully completed the National Institutes of Health Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date: 03/30/2008

Certification Number: 15569

Appendix E: IRB Approval 28Dec09

UNO Institutional Review Board

Sent: Thursday, December 10, 2009 9:44 AM

To: Desiree Delhomme Huggins

Cc: Marietta Del Favero

***University Committee for the
Protection of Human
Subjects in Research***

University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Marietta Del Favero
Co-Investigator: Desiree Huggins
Date: December 10, 2009
Protocol Title: "Rethinking Counseling for College: High School Counselors' Perceptions of Community and Technical Colleges"
IRB#: 28Dec09

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2 due to fact that any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.
Best wishes on your project.

Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

VITA

Desiree Delhomme Huggins resides in Lafayette, Louisiana. She completed her Bachelor of Science degree in Medical Technology at Louisiana Tech University in 1976 and Science Education degree in 1985 from the University of Southwestern Louisiana. Desiree obtained a Health Care Education Masters from Central Michigan University in 1983. In December 2010 she completed the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans. With 32 years of service, Desiree is currently an assistant dean for Acadiana Technical College, Lafayette Campus. She is married and is extremely proud of two successful daughters and the blessings of three beautiful grandchildren.