# The role of the school library in college access and choice

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## ARTICLE INFO

## 1. Introduction

Higher education researchers have developed several models to explain how students choose whether to attend college Past research on college access has been theoretically grounded in economic and sociological arguments, but both theoretical models acknowledge the importance of information. Human capital investment theory explains college choice by assuming that people are rational actors who decide whether and where to attend college, with the intention of maximizing their expected benefits and minimizing their anticipated costs. These rational actors are expected to make the best decision given the information they have; however, "differential access to information" affects their abilities to make the best decision for themselves (Perna, 2006, p. 108). Theories of social and cultural capital suggest that the predisposition to attend college is mediated through social networks that support college attendance and access to cultural knowledge that is derived from class or cultural statuses. Structural barriers make it harder for people outside the designated social network to access resources that support college attendance, including information resources and supports (Perna, 2006, p.112).

Most research on college access has focused on the topics of college aspiration (the motive to attend college at all) and college choice (deciding which college to attend), but not on the college information search process. When research does focus on the college search process, it does not look specifically on searching for information about colleges. Search is operationalized "in terms of the sources of college-related information that students and parents use… and/or the number of colleges that students consider or to which they apply" (Perna, 2006, p.102). While information use may be defined as information search (Kari, 2010), this operationalization of information use is dependent upon information-seeking, and so ignores the information seeking process and the sources of information available to the student.

## 2. Problem statement

Both economic and sociological approaches assume that information about college is present, but that it is not equally accessible to all students, creating an information asymmetry in which some students have better access to college information than others. The premise that increased information about college will help students make better decisions underpins even the United States Department of Education's decision to develop a college ratings system (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Theoretical models of college access and choice present an economic information problem, but researchers in this area ignore a fundamental information resource available to high school students: the school library. The school library is a specific venue where students might access multiple sources of college information, but no studies explore whether students actually use those sources. This study attempts to remedy that gap in scholarship. What role does the high school library play in college access and choice? Specifically, does the school library serve as an information resource for college-bound students?

The library and information science (LIS) literature presents the role of the school library as being primarily focused on teaching information literacy skills, providing resources to support the school's curriculum, and providing leisure resources for students' entertainment purposes. High school libraries are documented as providing study and leisure materials. Considering the provision of study and leisure materials, which are expected services of a high school library, is there a difference between a high school library's role in providing college information and its role in providing general study and leisure materials and services? In an ideal world, poor and rich students alike would have access to school libraries with equivalent resources and services. In the real world, poor and underrepresented students have fewer school library resources and services in their school libraries than rich students do. If the high school library does play a role in college access and choice, does that role differ based on students' ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status? A better understanding of the role of school libraries in this process would be beneficial to school librarians, school administrators, and above all, high school students.

## 3. Literature review

Educational policy and LIS literature take different perspectives on college access and choice and the role of high school personnel in helping students make decisions about college. LIS literature focuses on the role of school librarians in preparing students for the information tasks they will face in college, specifically by ensuring they have the specific information literacy skills needed for college-level coursework. Only a few articles acknowledge that students' needs will differ based on their socioeconomic or racial/ethnic status.

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Educational policy literature posits college access and choice as an economic information problem. Going to college presents an immediate cost and an uncertain payoff, and those who have fewer material resources can afford less to invest those resources in an uncertain venture. Students have limited information about college options and the quality of those options (i.e., graduation rate and post-graduation employment rates). High socioeconomic status (SES) students have more access to information about college quality than low SES students, through their social capital (e.g., asking for advice from other graduates) and their financial capital (e.g., ability to visit several colleges). Low SES and aspiring first-generation college students are more at risk. For instance they often have to take out large student loans to pay for unaccredited or less well regarded degree programs. At the same time, few educational policy studies focus on the skills students need in order to succeed in college or how those skills are transmitted through the formal institution of schooling.

### 3.1. College access and choice

Dolinsky (2010) posits a three-stage process, "predisposition, search, and choice," in which during the search stage students "acquire information about different colleges" (p. 762). Each stage in the college access and choice process is affected by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include background characteristics and academic preparation. External factors include high school characteristics, information seeking resources, public policy, and college characteristics (Plank & Jordan, 2001, p. 953). High school GPA, class ranking, and standardized test scores also relate to college application (Long & Riley, 2007; Perna, 2006). Students from low-income families are less likely to be well prepared for college. They are less likely to take the ACT/SAT and more likely to have a lower high school GPA (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2010).

The phenomenon of college access and choice is recognized as hierarchical and layered. Perna's (2006) conceptual framework of college access uses a four-layer design made up of 1) habitus, that is, "demographic characteristics … as well as cultural and social capital" (p. 117), 2) school and community context, 3) higher education context, and 4) social, economic, and policy context. All of these elements contribute to the college access and choice decision, which is itself predicated on the student's predisposition towards higher education, supply of resources, expected benefits, and expected costs. Nuñez and Kim (2012) developed a multicontextual model that uses characteristics of the students, their schools, and their state of residence to demonstrate factors that affect Latino college access.

These layered models indicate that some factors which influence college access are beyond the control of aspiring college students and their families. For instance, poor state education funding has an impact on students' ability to attend college. However, an individual 17-year-old high school student has relatively little control over state education funding, as those decisions are made by legislators and reinforced or challenged by adult voters. Information alone is not sufficient to influence the college-going decision of low-income or racially diverse students. Beyond mere knowledge of an option, students need to trust that the option is available to them, trust the people who are promoting the option, and have support throughout the college application process. Hands-on support and the creation of a support network help students navigate the college process, such as when tax preparers assist students and families in filling out the Federal Application for Student Financial Aid (Nuñez & Kim, 2012, p. 252), or when empowerment agents defy schools' organizational norms to provide low-income students with individualized support (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

### 3.2. College information sought and information sources

Dolinsky (2010) asked current college freshmen about college information in order to determine whether institutions' marketing messages

needed to change. Information factors noted by Dolinsky included college catalogs, campus visits, guidance counselors, friends, and students enrolled in college. Information sought included academic quality, majors and programs of study, tuition costs, location, financial aid, and career prospects. Men were more interested than women in knowing about college athletics, while women were interested in campus safety. Tsai (2012) looked at first-generation college students during their first year, examining their information source preferences when selecting courses and determining majors or programs of study. These first-year students preferred consulting information sources over human sources, and used course catalogs, university or department web resources, and personal collections. The information needs of these first-year college students are likely to be shared to some degree by high school students seeking information about college. Both these studies recognized that college information needs are multifaceted, and students require not only information but also advice and moral support.

Literature about student information seeking shows that low-income students have less knowledge of the college application process and general college information than wealthier students (Long & Riley, 2007). Differences in knowledge of college information are exacerbated by the need for additional support for low-income and first-generation students (Nuñez & Kim, 2012, pp. 251–252).

### 3.3. High school to college transition and college choice

Research on the role of high school libraries in facilitating college access and college transition has not focused on libraries' provision of college information to high school students in the college access and choice process. Instead, LIS research has been focused on information literacy training, addressing the concern that high school students are not prepared for college-level research and study. Some studies use college requirements to determine high school curricula. Oakleaf and Owen (2010) describe using a review of first-year college syllabi to determine what information literacy skills are necessary for graduating high school seniors. The purpose was to ease students' college transition by increasing their command of higher-level information skills. Smith, Given, Julien, Ouellette, and DeLong (2013) reviewed high school students' performance on an academic-level information literacy test in relation to Canadian university information literacy requirements. Other studies examined high school information literacy curricula to determine whether new college freshmen are likely to have specific information literacy skills (Islam & Murno, 2006; Nix, Hageman, & Kragness, 2011). Julien and Barker (2009) examined the development of high school students' information literacy skills and found that schools, teachers and curricula play important roles in providing information literacy instruction. Fabbi (2015) looked at first-year students' scores on a standardized test in relation to student variables (race, gender, GPA, and number of honors courses taken), and found that the main predictor of high test scores was honors courses. In addition, the information literacy skills students learned in high school have been shown to have a positive impact on high school college transition and first-year college experience (Fitzgerald, 2004).

Some information literacy projects have acknowledged the broader information and support needs of students in the high school to college transition. Martin, Garcia, and McPhee (2012) detailed a partnership between a highly diverse, low SES high school and an academic library. The academic librarians provided information literacy training and helped students with major research projects. This partnership has also had the effect of fostering relationships between students and university personnel and allowing students to become familiar with the university environment. Regalado (2003) described a project at Brooklyn College designed to provide underprepared first-year students with foundational knowledge about the library and information literacy (p. 90). While the information literacy element was intended to help students develop information literacy skills, another goal of the larger program was to let students know "where to go for student supports