Disadvantaged Students’ Perceptions on College-Readiness

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**Introduction**

**Statement of Problem**

Our research group set out to answer the following: How experiences of low-income students on college readiness can impact their decision to enter college. Even among high-ability students, low socioeconomic status (SES) students attend college at lower rates than their affluent counterparts (Cates and Schaefle, 2011). According to Cates and Schaefle (2011) low SES students applied to four-year colleges at a significant rate lower than the national average. The vast majority of high school graduates hope to earn a college degree, but the amount of graduates actually enrolled in a two or four-year postsecondary institution after completing high school is only 68% (ACT, 2013). Since low SES students are more incline to face challenges when preparing for college, it is imperative for institutions to understand how students think and feel about their ability to succeed once they enter college.

**Goals**

The purpose of the study was to determine what factors influenced low socioeconomic status (SES) teens to delay higher education and whether preparatory factors, such as technology, communication and relationship quality, and immigrant status played a role in delaying entrance into post-secondary institutions.

**Significance**

High school students already face an abundance of challenges in school, relationships, and day-to-day living. With low SES students already on the outskirts of the dominant discourse, entering college under prepared complicates the situation for many. The state of the current economy has forced many districts to layoff counselors, overcrowd classrooms, and cut programs and services to some of our most needy populations. Because there is a shortage of resources, many students are falling through the cracks and students are not getting resources they need quickly enough. Schools do offer some on-site programs and support; however, there seems to be a disconnect between administrative policies and the students. Rather than assume there is a lack of will on the students’ part, schedule conflicts or practicalities, such as not having transportation or technology may be prohibiting students from participating in school support services. Another significant find in this study is that many students desire to pursue post-secondary institutions; however, they lack the funds and do not know how to apply for financial aid or scholarships. Communication needs to be improved between all parties so students are aware of the avenues available to them. This paper will first examine further experiences of low SES students from previous studies, provide qualitative and quantitative data from the survey used in this study, and analyze the responses.

**Literature review**

It has been shown that college driven students in urban and low socioeconomic areas may have the resources they need, but there are several psychological, emotional, and physical factors that can stop the students from reaching their goal of attending college after high school. This literature review intends to discuss and examine all the different factors that students in low socioeconomic areas must deal with on a daily basis in relation to their experiences discussed throughout this paper.

McCray and Mora (2011) documented how perceptions of safety of teenagers in a low socioeconomic city shaped their activity patterns. This relates to the research question used in this paper perceived safety can alter the activity of teenagers and decide what activities they find most important in their lives. The three research questions used in the study were: 1) What do high school students do in their free time, and what spaces do they use for social interaction, 2) Are there gender differences in how activity spaces are perceived and used depending on the time of day an activity is performed, and 3) To what degree do students’ perceptions of safety reflect actual crime rates in public spaces?

Additionally, McCray and Mora (2011) noted previous researchers discovered that “the types of activities teens choose to engage in affects them psychologically, emotionally, and physically, (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Larson, 2001; Jordan & Murray Nettles, 1999). For the McCray and Mora study 122 high school students participated, and out of those students most were first-generation immigrants and with 63% female and 37% male. The students that were used attended Feinstein High School in Rhode Island and were a part of the Teen Activity and Transportation Enterprise (TATE) Project.

To conduct the research, the students were divided in groups and given maps with a 1/8th mile grid on it and were asked to label areas where they felt safe or unsafe. They also recorded their perceptions of safety where they told researchers whether the time of day affected their labeling and basically why they chose to label it safe or unsafe. From this, McCray was able to form a rating of -10 as very unsafe and +14 as very safe. It was also important for the researchers to note that typically low socioeconomic areas tend to have more crime or gang activities which help determines where teens choose to hang out in their neighborhoods. The next part of the research was to develop a crime score and they did this by having the students list at least “15 activities in which they participated on a regular basis” (McCray & Mora, 2011). Perception of safety affects which activities teens choose to engage in which in turn can cause emotional or psychological stress. A safe environment is so important for teenagers’ academic success and that should be noted.

The results showed that the students were frequenting a lot of convenience stores and fast food restaurants and the narrative data revealed this is because the teens found these locations to be safest to visit friends and family (McCray & Mora, 2001). It also showed that more male students found their neighborhoods safe even though they had high crime rates. The female students reported the same areas as unsafe. However, the results as a whole showed that the further away from their homes, the higher the perception of safety they reported.

Myrin & Lagerstrom (2008) examined whether or not there was a relationship between sense of coherence and psychological factors among adolescents, because this making life decisions during this development period can be very confusing and difficult time for most teenagers. This study can shed a little light on reasons adolescence may or may not really fully prepared to enter college life after high school.

The researchers conducted a cross-sectional study with 8th grades from six different school, 3 of which were in the low socioeconomic areas. The researchers wanted to measure the students’ sense of cohesion. This measured the “overall capacity to cope with stressful life situations” (Myrin & Langerstron, 2008), which unfortunately can be common when living in a low socioeconomic area. The students were given a survey and asked to mark on a 7-point scale. The students were then given a questionnaire to create the health profile scale.

The information shows that teenagers in low socioeconomic areas have multiple factors to deal with that other students might not have. These extra factors of safety, concern for family members, and dealing with stress all can be associated with experiences that the students face every day.

This next study dealt with students in urban areas in developing countries and their ability to cope with issues. Specifically the researchers used 927 students from China. The researchers acknowledged that coping methods play significant roles in adolescents’ mental health and three hypotheses were tested: 1) Rural school students would have more mental health problems than urban student. Low SES rural students would have more mental health problems than both High-SES rural students and urban students, and 2) Active coping (e.g., problem-solving, help seeking, and emotional expression) would be inversely related to mental health problems. Passive coping (avoidance, fantasizing, and tolerance) would be positively related to mental health problem, and 3) Urban-rural and SES-related differences in mental health problems would be accounted for by the demographic variables and cooing strategies.

The study used students from five schools with two of them from low socioeconomic areas. The students were given a questionnaire and used the MHI-A self-report scale which assesses the general mental health of adolescents. For this study, however, the students used a CSSMSS scale that measures the coping styles of Chinese adolescents (Zhang, H., Zhang, F., Greenberger, E., Chen, C., & Chang, K, 2011). The results showed that the students in the low socioeconomic areas scored higher on the on the CSSMSS. They were more likely to experience paranoia, hostility, depression, and academic stress. Interestingly, there were no gender differences in the mental health problems identified. The low socioeconomic area students were found to have better coping mechanisms by venting and fantasizing.

It is clear that relationships with adolescents can either positively or negatively affect them. Students in low socioeconomic areas where gang violence and crime rates are high are especially in need of this counseling. A study by Miller-Loessi & Nieri examined the relationship between adults and school personnel to students and the effect it had on substance use, gang involvement, and perceived threats to safety at school. The researchers began their study by acknowledging that relationships between adolescents and significant adults in their life were considered “critical variables in predicting both healthy and problematic outcomes in adolescents (Miller-Loessi & Nieri, 2007).

Two hypotheses were tested: 1) Self-disclosure to parents, parental warmth and supportiveness, parent-initiated monitoring, and school personnel’s supportiveness are all independently and inversely related to substance use, gang involvement, and threats to safety at school, for disadvantaged urban high-school adolescents, and 2) Self-disclosure to parents is related to substance use, gang involvement, and threats to safety more strongly among high-risk than among low-risk youth. The individual results of the survey showed that the students were significantly higher in all three factors than compared to the national average. Then the researchers factored in adult relationships and how these relationships led to positive outcomes towards receiving help when faced with challenges that might prevent them from entering college, such as, substance use, gang affiliation, etc.

Most educators agree that health can be a factor when analyzing a student’s academic achievement. This concept is examined in Charles E. Basch’s research article *Healthier Students are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap.* He used 7 health disparities that exist in urban area youth, vision, asthma, teen pregnancy, aggression and violence, physical activity, breakfast, and inattention and hyperactivity.

Basch began by explaining that it is not the sole responsibility of the schools to close this education gap. However, they do have the most powerful effect on the students since the students spend most of their time in class. After proving that the health disparities are helping cause the academic achievement gap, Basch recommend that the schools implement programs to help close the gap. After analyzing the data he concluded “health problems and the causal pathways they influence have interactive and a synergistic effect, which is why they must be addressed collectively using a coordinated approach” (Basch, 2011).

The relationship between urban youth and their academic success is examined in *Family Belongingness, Gang Friendships, and Psychological Distress in Adolescent Achievement.* Baskin et al. (2014) reasoned that there is a need to better understand which factors are related to low academic achievement in racially and ethnically diverse urban middle school students. From this the researchers examined relationships amongst social, psychological, and academic functioning of the students.

Basin et al. (2014) began by referencing a previous study by Dixon, Schneider, and McWhirter and how they discovered that urban youth who feel they don’t matter have much higher levels of depression. Several hypotheses were used in the study. The researchers hypothesized that specific aspects of social connections would be associated with psychological distress, including symptoms of depression and anger. The next hypothesis by Baskin et al. states that youth who experience a sense of belongingness to their families would be at low risk for psychological distress and would demonstrate higher academic achievement and vice versa concerning youth who don’t experience a sense of belongingness to their families. They also expected psychological stress to have a direct correlation to academic achievement.

The sample used was a group of 310 seventh-grade students from the San Francisco area. The researchers administered a packet of questions to fill out during their regular class time. Several measures were used to analyze the answers they received. First was the Beck Depression Inventory Youth which measures depressive symptoms, second was the Beck Anger Inventory-Youth which was used to assess symptoms of anger, psychological distress, family belongingness scale, academic achievement, and friendships with gang members scale, which was specifically developed for Baskin’s et al. study.

The important findings in the study showed that psychological distress mediates the effects of social and familial dynamics on academic performance of urban youth. This proved the hypothesis that “youth with lower levels of distress will be more able to benefit from positive family belongingness supporting their academic achievement” (Baskin et al., 2014). The second important finding shows Baskin et al. discovered that with higher distress, the negative impact of gang friendships is more strongly related to academic outcomes. The researchers also note that there were limitations that future research should explore.

This last study examines street smarts vs. book smarts and what youth find more important to them. Also, the researchers discuss how schools define smart and how that leads to academic achievement or failure. Researcher Beth Hatt studied teens in in an urban youth program beginning in 2005 to study the smartness of the students who were no longer attending school. The instrument used to collect he data was an interview that focused on “schooling experiences along with their perceptions of smartness” (Hatt, 2007). The two interviews took place over a 7-month period.

It was found that when Hatt asked the participants how being smart in school was defined, they connected smartness in school to artifacts. Many of the answers included test scores, diplomas, and honors classes as examples that a person is smart. Hatt (2007) explains that each of these artifacts are manifestations of gatekeeping mechanisms in our educational system and that our current system is set up so that not everyone will succeed in school. Through other interview questions some of the students identified street smarts as more important than book smarts because they saw important adults in their lives use street smarts to maneuver and overcome obstacles in their lives. Hatt (2007) also pointed out that smartness is an aspect of identity that can tell people who you are.

**Methodology**

**Research questions/inquiry**

Our research group set out to answer the following questions: What are the experiences of college bound low socioeconomic status (SES) teens? Which preparatory factors, such as technology, communication and relationship quality, and immigrant status played a role in delaying entrance into post-secondary institutions? Most importantly, how these factors impact low SES students with their decision to enter college?

**Subjects**

The participants in this study attend a high school located in an urban city of Southern California. A total of 98 students volunteered to participant in the study, and considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. Participants invited were allowed to omit any question he/she did not want to answer, and guided through confidentiality and instruction sections of the survey.

**Data collection**

Our research team wanted our survey and short answer questionnaire (see Appendix A) to reflect our research question: What are the experiences of college bound students in low socioeconomic areas? We needed to determine what was important to these students in regards to their goals and what they would consider obstacles to achieving such goals. It was essential for us to provide questions that would cover all dimensions of life. We began brainstorming our survey questions by coming up with specific subcategories for obstacles and goals or visions based on our past experiences as high school students.

**Analysis**

For qualitative analysis, algorithms were used to help identify and distinguish important factors based on the data collected.   In the study, the mean, median, and mode were used to distinguish common replies from students and help determine students’ positions on college and its importance.  The mean for each response was the most telling of the three because it showed how students’ answers were related and it gave a good snapshot of the overall data.  We also used percentages to help us get a feel for how different students’ responses are and how commonality of the extremes relates to that of the mode.

        For quantitative analysis, coding was used in order to group answers into similar and connected categories.  This helped with narrowing down such complex and varied answers.  After coding the students’ responses, it became easier to determine what influenced them and their beliefs.  It also helped reduce and focus the results into more useful and data that could be more easily analyzed to get the most out of our data.  We grouped key words in responses to determine what categories they would be a part of, with a number responses belonging to multiple categories.

**Results**

Based on students’ responses to the survey questions, going to college is significantly important to them.  53% of students responded that going to college is “very important” to and another 31% stated that it is “important” to them.  Of the students that stated that college is significantly important to them, the majority of them claimed future success and career goals as their main driving forces.

According to our findings, the majority of students were introduced and influenced to want to attend college by a family member or multiple family members.  Teachers and administrators were a close second source for students.  Students’ biggest motivator for attending college is to generate a higher income in the future and to develop skills that will help them in their careers. Many of the students who participated in the survey stated that they have been preparing for college.  The majority of those students have begun by generally planning (attending presentations from various universities at school, maintaining grades, researching different institutions and the requirements, etc.).  Based on a five-point scale, with 1 being very prepared and 5 being unprepared, most students stated that they were at a level 3 of preparedness with the mean being 2.98.  Students stated that they would recommend planning for college early to future high school students.  They would also encourage students to talk to teachers and administrators about what they should be doing in order to be accepted into a college/university and tips for being successful in college.

Based on survey findings, the vast majority of students stated that their current school provides adequate resources for them to complete assignments and/or college applications, such as, a library and the career center.  Students also stated that they feel safe and comfortable in these environments. The majority of students stated that they would not be the first in their families to complete high school. As for what students plan to do after high school, 61 out of 98 plan on attending a four-year college/university, 24 out of 98 plan on attending a community college, and 13 out of 98 plan on entering the workforce immediately after high school.

**Conclusions**

        The purpose of this study was to examine the goals and perceptions of low SES students that interfere with their goals. All participant survey responses showed students' desire to graduate high school and attend college; they clearly believe that post-secondary education is the way to a better life for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the participants admitted to not having a way to pay for post-secondary education, nor did they know how to begin the process of seeking financial assistance. The students’ lack of knowledge of the financial aid process is a serious concern. At the time of this study, the school is nearing the end of a semester term, four-year college/university applications are being finalized, and the financial aid process is about to commence nationally. Although there are resources on campus to assist students in the college application process, such as the Career Center and a part-time college counselor, the students are still unclear about the financial aid process. Hence, schools should thoroughly articulate the matriculation process to high school students, so they can meet application deadlines and apply for financial assistance. If in the case students are unaware of the process, like our participants, then they have a step-by-step guide to follow that will explain the process in text and illustrations. Additionally, schools must be able to accommodate students that would rather focus on searching for a job or career instead of continuing their education.

        As educators we must be aware that our expectations of our students can assist us in promoting growth or at the same time it can hinder and or blind us in recognizing where students need most guidance. At times, the focus is in the disappointment as to where students need and should be. We believe due to student’s age and life’s circumstances they should know better, if they have never been taught or shown it is difficult, but not impossible. In many cases, people live in a survival mode.  It is about today and not tomorrow. Instead of complaining or judging the student, one needs to guide them most in the ways and areas they lack. One must attempt to learn and or discover what is interfering in the students’ life that has resulted in a lack of knowledge or understanding when taking action. It is vital to teach the tools necessary to improve their quality life and of their families.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

Based on the limitations of this research, it is recommended that more high schools are surveyed, and researchers learn about the subjects’ demographics and unique issues so that assumptions are not made about the population. It would also benefit to survey the school administration, faculty and staff to discover available resources and also to learn how many students take advantage of said resources. It would then behoove the researchers to investigate the students’ attitudes and perceptions of the resources the institutions offer, the difficulty of college courses, college life in general, and the cost of going to college; most importantly, if they would be the first in their families to attend college if that was their plan.

The implications of this study may be limited to low socioeconomic population; however, the results of this study are important for district and school administration, counselors, support staff and teachers to know so that they can consider the goals, visions and obstacles of college bound students when creating and offering services to this population. This study encourages future research into more feasible and affordable solutions to meet disadvantaged students’ needs. Rather than simply cutting programs that appear to be ineffective or costly, school districts and secondary institutions must consider students’ unique situations and needs so that they can refine and tailor these services so they are effective and accessible.

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**Appendix A**

**ETEC 543 College Questionnaire**

To the students of this class: Thank you for taking the time and effort to respond to this questionnaire. Please give your most candid and thorough response to the questions below. Rest assured that the information you share here is confidential.

Personal (Questions 1-4)

**How important is going to college?**

* Very Important
* Important
* Somewhat Important
* Not Important

**Why is going to college important (or not important) to you?**

**How have you started planning for college?**

**What recommendations could you make to other students who are planning for college?**

Atmosphere (Questions 5-6)

**How were you first introduced to the idea of college?**

* Family
* Teacher, administrator and/or school
* Friends
* Media
* Other

**What is the most important goal for you in attending college?**(Check all that apply)

* To learn to enjoy life
* To develop my mind and intellectual abilities
* To earn a higher income
* To develop moral standards
* To develop my personality
* To develop on-the-job or professional training

## Other Considerations (Questions 7-21)

**What can be improved about applying for college?\***

**What things really frustrate you about trying to plan for the future?**

**How prepared do you feel for college?\***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Very Prepared |  |  |  |  |  | Not Prepared |

**Are you the first generation to complete high school?\*d**

* Yes
* No

**I feel that I have access to an adequate library to complete assignments\***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Poor Access |  |  |  |  |  | Exceptional Access |

**I feel that I have a safe environment to complete assignments\***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Not Safe |  |  |  |  |  | Very Safe |

**Is there a Career Center on campus that helps with college applications, requirements, etc?\***

* Yes
* No

**If you answered "yes" describe your experience in the Career Center\***

**If you answered "no" explain reasons why you believe your campus needs a Career Center\***

**I feel confident when using the technology at my school to complete an assignment\*Required**Computers, laptops, iPads, iPods, tablets, Apple TV, etc

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Not Confident |  |  |  |  |  | Extremely Confident |

**I regularly operate technology when not in school\*Required**Computers, laptops, iPads, iPods, Tablets, Apple Tv, etc

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Never |  |  |  |  |  | Always |

**I feel frustrated when required to use technology to complete an assignment\***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| Very Frustrated |  |  |  |  |  | Not Frustrated at All |

**I am given sufficient help when learning new technology in my classroom\***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |  |
| No Help |  |  |  |  |  | A Lot of Help |

**What is one question you would like answered before attending college?\***

**Who or what has influenced you to want to attend (or not attend) college?**

**Do you use technology (i.e. computers, laptops, iPads, Chromebooks, etc.) at home to help you complete assignments?**

* Yes
* No

**How often do you use technology at home to help you complete assignments?**

* Once a week
* Twice a week
* Three times a week
* More than three times a week

**Complete the sentence: After High School, I plan on \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

* attending a four year college/university.
* attending a community college.
* joining the workforce immediately.