

CHAPTER ONE

Who Goes Where to College?

Who goes where to college? This study examines the ways in which social class and high school guidance operations combine to shape a high school student's perception of her opportunities for a college education. It is also an analysis of the intersection of family, friends, and school network effects and how they create individual biography.

The late twentieth century is a time of rapid change in the college admissions world. Given the decline in the number of high school graduates, there should have been a buyer's market in college admissions, but in fact students face intense college access competition. Although it is easier to get into college now than it was twenty years ago, it is harder to get into what some people consider the "right" college (Winerip 1984) because of rising admissions standards and stratification of higher education opportunities. The Harvard Dean of Admissions reported that not only are today's median Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) test scores more than 100 points higher than they were in 1950s classes, but over that same time period, Harvard has gone from admitting over 60 percent of applicants to admitting only 15 percent to 20 percent (Fitzsimmons 1991).

Through a complex interactive process involving individual aspiration and institutional admissions, students connect with colleges. Potential students find out about and enroll in college through the encouragement of family, friends, high school advisors, teachers, private counselors, freeway signs, radio, television, newspaper, and direct mail advertising, and many other sources. Colleges, in their admissions processes, go through many stages: marketing assessments, recruitment, establishing admissibility criteria, selection, notification, and enrollment.

Approximately 62 percent of high school seniors (about 2.2 million first-time freshmen) find places annually in approximately 3,600 colleges in the highly stratified U. S. system of postsecondary education (Snyder and Hoffman 1995). This figure suggests an opportunity structure that is fair, open, and meritocratic. In fact, society's opportunity structure does not work equally well for all. The aggregate

college enrollment rate masks vast discrepancies in the access and retention rates between white students and students of color, as well as between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. These differentials in access and attrition in postsecondary education present empirical patterns that inform this research.

This study addresses three questions:

1. How does a high school senior in today's college admissions environment make decisions about where to go to college?
2. How does this decision-making process vary by the student's social class, the social class makeup of the student's high school, and the structure and context for guidance available in the high school?
3. Why, if there is a single opportunity structure for American higher education, do individuals perceive it differently?

Opportunity structures are "the pathways to success in American culture," (Marshall 1994), and I am specifically referring to the organizational arrangements and processes within institutions and the linkages between organizations that define and mediate individuals' achievements. Opportunity refers to prospects for mobility from the individual's present position to higher- and lower-level positions. For high school students who are choosing a college, their academic achievement, class background, and high school's perspective on desirable college destinations will shape how they perceive their higher education opportunities. No one student perceives the opportunity structure in its entirety, but instead, imagines schools that she deems "right" or "appropriate," or schools where she will feel comfortable. In the following section, I review the broad patterns in college access and retention found in prior research and suggest areas needing further inquiry.

Patterns of Educational Attainment

Across all achievement levels, students from the lowest socioeconomic (SES) groups are less likely to apply to or attend college than are the highest SES students. For example, among the highest-ability students, 60 percent of the lowest SES students attended college, while 86 percent of the highest SES students attended (Gardner 1987). Students of color and poor students are less likely to start or finish college (Levine and Nidiffer 1995) and are more likely to attend low prestige colleges or those with the highest dropout rates (Hearn 1984).

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, A college is not a college is not a college. Researchers and policy experts note the existing organizational stratification within the higher education sector (Trow 1984; Pascarella, Smart, and Stoecker 1989; Smart and Pascarella 1986). There are salient distinctions between two- and four-year colleges (Velez 1985), selective and nonselective universities (Karabel and Astin 1975; Kingston and Lewis 1990), and private and public institutions, which

produce important sources of inequality in adult life (Coleman, Rainwater, and McClelland 1978). Where one attends college influences one's eventual educational attainment (Alba and Lavin 1981; Presley 1980; Sewell 1971; Useem and Karabel 1986).

Research also shows that the college one attends significantly affects one's chances of completing the baccalaureate, and that the proportions of students who persist until they graduate vary widely across institutions, even after academic ability is controlled (Velez 1985). Elite institutions have graduation rates of between 85 percent and 95 percent. Four-year public institutions have much lower rates, approximately 45 percent (Snyder 1987). Community colleges, which enroll over half of first-time freshmen, have transfer rates of about 20 percent (Adelman 1988); baccalaureate degree completion rates for those students who begin at community colleges are even lower (Brint and Karabel 1989).

Research evidence indicates that observed college attendance patterns are as much an issue of *self-selection* processes as they are of college admissions decisions. Ninety percent of 1980 seniors included in the High School and Beyond longitudinal sample were admitted to their first-choice institution (Karen 1988). When students apply to college, most use their SAT scores as a self-screening device to identify colleges where they are likely to be accepted and where other students' have similar SAT scores (Manski and Wise 1983). I now review the major approaches to studying college choice.

College Choice Research

There have been three basic approaches to the study of college choice decision-making influences.

1. *social psychological studies*, which examine the impact of academic program, campus social climate, cost, location, and influence of others on students' choices; students' assessment of their fit with their chosen college; and the cognitive stages of college choice;
2. *economic studies*, which view college choice as an investment decision and assumes that students maximize perceived cost-benefits in their college choices; have perfect information; and are engaged in a process of rational choice; and
3. *sociological status attainment studies*, which analyze the impact of the individual's social status on the development of aspirations for educational attainment and measure inequalities in college access.

The literature tells us that the college-choice process can be a lengthy one that extends back to the earliest inculcation of college aspirations and begins with a broad overview of the postsecondary educational opportunities available

to students (Chapman 1981; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989). Passing through a variety of stages, each student narrow her options to a single set of institutions (Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Jackson 1982; Litten 1982). The Hossler model specifies those stages as predisposition, search, and choice. In the *predisposition phase*, a student first decides whether to attend college. The *search phase* occurs when the student searches for general information about colleges, forms a choice set, and begins to consider several specific colleges. In the final *choice phase*, the student winnows the choice set down to a single college and chooses to attend that college.

In students' search and choice phases, a number of factors have been found to be consistently influential: parents; the college's size, location, academic program, reputation, prestige, selectivity, and alumni; the student's peers, friends, and guidance counselor; and availability of financial aid (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Manski and Wise 1983; Zemsky and Oedel 1983). Most college choice research focuses on students' background and institutional characteristics. Although this is not a study of institutional influences on college choice, two collegiate institutional factors that affect the college choice process are the kind and amount of financial aid a student receives and the total cost of tuition and expenses (Leslie and Fife 1974; Manski and Wise 1983; St. John 1990), as student aid has been found to result in (1) increased consumption of higher education and (2) a redistribution of students to private, four-year, and smaller institutions.

One feature of college choice research is that it has nearly exclusively been the domain of quantitative analysts. This book will expand on the insights of three decades of college choice research by providing micro-level insights and a finer-grained analysis of how students proceed through their predisposition, search, and choice phases. Specifically, I will examine the processes and influences of students' everyday lived experiences in social class communities and schools and investigate how these influences shape students' college choices. Moreover, this study will integrate the investment, aspiration, and individual-institution fit perspectives of the existing college choice models in a new theoretical approach. Before presenting this approach, I will first review what insights we have gained on college attainment from the existing status attainment and high school context effects literature.

Status Attainment Literature

For all students, academic achievement remains the most important determinant of whether and where they go to college (Alexander and Eckland 1975; Hearn 1991; Karen 1988; and Thomas 1979). However, systematic relationships exist within achievement groupings between income and college selectivity (Hearn 1991). Independent of academic factors, upper-income youth are especially likely to enter America's elite colleges (Hearn 1987). African Americans, women, and

low-SES students are especially likely to attend less-selective institutions, even if their ability and achievements are high (Hearn 1984 and 1990).

Students' educational expectations play a major role in college placement (Hearn 1984) and oftentimes are the single strongest predictor of four-year college attendance (Thomas 1980). Long-standing college goals can be resources: intending to go to college increases the likelihood of going by 21 percent when that intention develops prior to tenth grade, compared to plans formulated during the senior year (Alexander and Cook 1979).

Hearn (1984) contends that students' and parents' perceptions, attitudes, and knowledgeable ability about college attendance may take on distinctive shapes for different social classes and races as early as the tenth grade and thus may produce differences in families' college planning. For example, high SES students tend to take more college preparatory courses.

However, students' educational plans are unstable predictors of actual behavior. Moreover, there are major differences in the application practices of students from different socioeconomic statuses (McDonough 1994): first-generation college-bound students tend to opt for the most competitive Ivy League institutions or less expensive state schools—while middle- and upper-income students apply everywhere (up to twenty-two applications), even though application fees begin at forty dollars.

Multivariate analyses suggest a hierarchy of effects of background characteristics on educational attainment. The order of effects, from strongest to weakest, is social class, race, and gender. Holding achievement constant, race appears to be more influential than gender in affecting the process of college entry (Thomas 1979). For example, survey data suggests that Asian Americans have a strong orientation to selective colleges and are twice as likely to apply to the best schools as white students (Karen 1988). One researcher contends that African Americans and Hispanics, as a group, are not as likely to try to get into highly selective colleges because of their subjective assessments of the impact of their lower grades, test scores, and levels of participation in extracurricular activities (Karen 1988).

The most stubborn barriers to parity in entrance to college, however, are in social class background rather than race, ethnicity, or gender (Hearn 1984 and 1991). Social class status exerts twice as much effect on the selectivity of a student's college choice as does ethnicity or gender (Karen 1988). However, gender seems to be significant largely in interaction with SES. Earlier research showed that the sorting of women into college destinations is much more strongly affected by status origins than it is for men (Alexander and Eckland 1977), while recent research has documented some lessening of gender impacts (Hearn 1991) but also the differential conversation capacity of women's educational assets (Persell, Catsambis, and Cookson 1992). Thus, working class women are more disadvantaged in educational attainment than are their male counterparts.

The substantial impact of class status on educational attainment operates directly through individual choice and indirectly through the impact of scholastic

aptitude on available options (Karen 1988). The ways in which SES affects students' choices is mediated, in part, by parents' knowledge of what it takes to prepare for college. For twenty years, large-scale quantitative studies have dominated the educational attainment field, repeatedly demonstrating that the mother's and father's educational attainment, proxy effects like the number of books in the home, and related variables affect a student's attainment. However, this research has been labelled atheoretical because it has not adequately explained *how* or *why* these factors are influential (Knottnerus 1987).

A number of differences exist between low SES, first-generation college-bound students and high SES students whose parents had completed college. Students who are first-generation college-bound begin to think about going to college much later than do students whose parents have gone to college, and those thoughts tend to be triggered by school personnel, specifically teachers and counselors (McDonough 1988). Students whose parents have attended college often get a head start on college preparations in elementary school by taking the right courses and maintaining good grades, and their families convey information to them about the different types of colleges and universities. Meanwhile, first-generation college-bound students do not get this information, oftentimes are not taking the right courses, and are struggling with the cultural conflicts between their new college-oriented world and the world of their friends, families, and communities.

The issue least well-understood about students' college destinations is the causal process—the web of opportunities, structural arrangements, contingencies, and timing—through which school context, SES, and family together shape the process of college planning and choices (Hearn 1990 and 1991). The existing studies of educational attainment emphasize individual attributes as the key determinants of inequalities, largely neglecting the role of educational institutions. In contrast, the broader stratification literature suggests organizational contexts as critical to understanding the empirical patterns of individual educational outcomes.

School Effects Literature

The high school environment has a powerful influence on the ways in which students choose colleges. Only two models of college choice, which are both considerably dated, incorporate high school context effects primarily through the shaping of aspirations. Boyle (1966) suggests that college aspirations are influenced not only by individual ability and motivation but also by the imposition of academic standards and the practices of a college-focused high school. Alwin and Otto (1977) offer further insights by differentially analyzing the individual's ability and socioeconomic status levels and the high school's average ability and socioeconomic status levels.

Yet, as seen in more recent research, public and private schools appear to differ in important ways regarding college enrollment decisions and culture. About half of the difference in the higher college attendance rates of private school students can be accounted for by socioeconomic status for non-Catholic, private school students and by differences in orientations and expectations of parents toward college attendance in Catholic school students (Coleman 1987). Researchers have attributed the balance of college attendance differences to:

- the organization and content of curriculum and extracurricular activities;
- higher academic standards and the value climate;
- formal and informal communication networks;
- orientation of school staff; and
- resources devoted to counseling and advising of college-bound students (Falsey and Heyns 1984; Alexander and Eckland 1977).

Seniors enrolled in private high schools are significantly more likely than public school seniors to enter college and enroll in four-year institutions, even when track, ability levels, aspirations, and SES are controlled (Falsey and Heyns 1984). On average, private schools are smaller, have different rules and expectations, and have larger percentages of students in the academic track than do public schools. Private schools also help students develop their college aspirations better than do public schools through a greater proportion of counselors per student, who encourage and influence a large proportion of their students in their college planning. (Falsey and Heyns 1984; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982).

Research on guidance and counseling indicates that a school, public or private, can affect college plans through an ethos of enabling students. This ethos should be held and acted upon by knowledgeable staff who affect students in daily interactions even without directly exposing students to specific college preparatory programs (Hotchkiss and Vetter 1987). The disparity of organizational mission and resources between public and private schools necessarily has an impact on students' planning for college. In summary, having college plans at least by the tenth grade, attending a college-focused high school, having parents who expect their children to go to college, and having assistance in negotiating an adequate financial aid package are the key determinants to college attendance and choice.

Educational sociologists now are studying how different populations' everyday experiences in and out of school foster recurrent patterns of educational attainment. This book asks *how* an individual's ascribed and achieved statuses influence her or his attainment. For some time now, researchers have shifted their attention to the growing realization that *where* a person attends college is critically important to understanding the links between social class and educational attainment, persistence, and occupational achievement (Useem and Karabel 1986). Differentials in access to particular kinds of institutions are an important aspect of

how the educational system contributes to intergenerational transmission of status, since high-status students are both more likely to attend college and more likely to attend a good college than are low-status students (Karabel and Astin 1975).

While an individual's academic achievement is clearly a key determinant of college attendance, the interplay of a student's social class background and the high school's organizational contexts and processes appear central to the question of *where* an individual attends college. And, since most students get into their first-choice college, the key issue addressed in this book is how a student's social-class background and the high school's social and organizational contexts shape a senior's choices about higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Why does the higher education opportunity structure work differently for different students? This study builds on Weberian theories of status groups and intergenerational status transmission, as well as on organizational theories of decision making to highlight the importance of diversity of organizational context and status culture background on individual decision making. Status group theories shed light on the differences in attainment rates of various socioeconomic status groups, while organizational theories provide insight into how and why a school context can influence individual behavior.

Three propositions guide this study:

1. a student's *cultural capital* will affect the level and quality of college education that student intends to acquire;
2. a student's choice of college will make sense in the context of that student's friends, family, and outlook, or *habitus*; and
3. through a process of *bounded rationality*, students will limit the number of alternatives actually considered.

Cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) is that property that middle and upper class families transmit to their offspring which substitutes for or supplements the transmission of economic capital as a means of maintaining class status and privilege across generations (Bourdieu 1977a). In other words, middle and upper class families highly value a college education and advanced degrees as a means of ensuring continuing economic security, in addition to whatever money or financial assets can be passed along to their offspring.

The cultural capital theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu has been important in many of the new sociological studies that focus on how and why class status plays a role in educational achievement. For this research I am situating high school students' college-choice processes in their social, cultural, and organiza-

tional contexts and am demonstrating the essential role of values, as they are embedded in everyday life, in decisions about where to go to college.

Status groups are social collectives that generate or appropriate distinctive cultural traits and styles as a means to monopolize scarce social and economic resources (Weber 1978). Elite status groups have appropriated educational credentials for the intergenerational transmission of social status and power (Bernstein 1977). Cultural capital is a symbolic good that is most useful when it is converted into economic capital. Although all classes have their own forms of cultural capital, the most socially and economically valued forms are those possessed by the middle and upper classes.

Cultural capital is precisely the knowledge that elites value yet schools do not teach. With the complexity of the types of college choices in mind, this study treats a college education as a status resource or symbolic good in our society. Cultural capital is of no intrinsic value. Its utility comes in using, manipulating, and investing it for socially valued and difficult-to-secure purposes and resources.

Bourdieu observes that those with high cultural capital have clear strategies of how much and what kind of schooling each generation should have. A student's disposition toward school is important because to maximize or conserve cultural capital one must be willing to consent to the investments in time, effort, and money that higher education requires. Parents transmit cultural capital by informing offspring about the value and process for securing a college education, and its potential for conversion in the occupational attainment contest.

DiMaggio (1982) found that cultural capital not only mediates the relationship between family background and school outcomes, but it also may have its greatest impact on educational attainment through affecting the quality of college attended. He also suggests that cultural capital possibly may play different roles in the mobility strategies of different classes and genders.

Bourdieu also uses the concept of habitus to refer to a deeply internalized, permanent system of outlooks, experiences, and beliefs about the social world that an individual gets from his or her immediate environment. According to Bourdieu (1977b), habitus is a common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual's expectations, attitudes, and aspirations. Those aspirations are both subjective assessments of the chances for mobility and objective probabilities. They are not rational analyses, but rather are the ways that children from different classes make sensible or reasonable choices for their own aspirations (Macleod 1987). They do so by looking at the people who surround them and observing what is considered good or appropriate across a variety of dimensions. To elaborate on Bourdieu's work, through proposing the concept of entitlement, students believe that they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family's habitus or class status.

This study will also extend theoretical notions of habitus and present evidence that it exists not only in families and communities but in organizational

contexts. Showing how organizational habitus exerts an influence on individual decisionmaking, I investigate the variety of organizational contexts and status cultures in high schools as they have an impact on seniors' college choices. This is not an assessment of an individual counselor's effectiveness, but rather an analytic description and assessment of the impact of the broader school climate on the creation of an organizational habitus that limits the universe of possible college choices into a smaller range of manageable considerations. I am looking at the school as the mediator of collective social class consciousness in regards to the processes and outcomes of college choice.

Bounded rationality refers to behavior that is rational but limited by the cognitive constraints on decision making. High school seniors cannot and do not consider all of the 3,000 possible collegiate choices (Simon 1957). Most people settle for satisfactory alternatives due to time and resource limitations. The alternatives people consider are influenced by their physical location, social networks, and environmental stimuli, as well as the anticipated goals and consequences for college.

Students face a complex decision when choosing a college. According to March and Simon (1958), individuals perceive their choices by scanning the environment around them, which often is limited by geography and their usual social contacts. The high school senior's frame of reference and perceptions are conditioned by the evoking mechanism—the high school context for college choice. Through this research I will demonstrate how this context can have a differential impact on students from different class backgrounds and I will use bounded rationality to frame the analyses of school habitus.

Just as Bourdieu's individual-level perspective includes objective probabilities and subjective assessments, an elaboration of the college-choice process as it takes place in high schools must account for both the cognitive and affective processes underlying the premises for decision making (March and Simon 1958). Individual student behavior will be influenced by the flow and content of information and the school's explicit expectations that highlight or downplay specific options (Perrow 1979). These information flows and expectations are, in turn, based on assumptions about how familiar students are with basic information, prerequisites, and specialized college choice vocabularies.

The high school is an intermediate institution in the educational system. Student continuation to college is voluntary, and in contrast to the elementary-secondary link, this transition is driven by individual achievement and motivation. The interinstitutional linkages between most high schools and colleges are, at best, loosely coupled (Weick 1976) and, at worst, there are no links whatsoever. Colleges are fairly autonomous and have individualized admissions rules despite some similarities of procedures and generalized norms. Some high school counselors help individuals manage and overcome loose coupling. A few schools (private preparatory, some Catholic, and some public schools) have tight coupling, which

includes ample college preparatory and advanced placement classes, institutional networks between the high school and specific colleges, and well-developed flows of information about the college admissions process.

In the late twentieth century, some upper-middle-class students view college as a major personal investment needing extensive, careful planning. The application process is increasingly pressurized and speeded up, guidebooks are omnipresent, seniors are preoccupied with choice, and some parents now start strategic planning for college in their child's elementary or preschool years. Many new phenomena from the public and private sectors influence the college choice process: independent counselors (McDonough 1994 and 1997); consortia which arrange for high school counselors to visit college campuses to become familiar with and recommend those campuses; self-help and SAT coaching guidebooks and software; statewide clearinghouses on college placement; and magazines devoted to extolling the benefits of private education, which are marketed to students stratified by SAT test scores and socioeconomic status.

Colleges and universities increasingly compete with each other for students, and admissions is more than just the composition of a student body, it is survival. Admissions policies reflect economic, political, and academic considerations. As competition increases, individuals and institutions resort to mimicking successful behavior to deal with uncertainty and to ensure success (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Skyrocketing competition for students has led to a rise in marketing by moderately selective institutions in response to enrollment declines predicted for the mid-1970s, and only now materializing in the 1990s. Fearing life-threatening enrollment declines, colleges have dramatically increased marketing budgets and spend \$1,700 on average to bring in each new student. All of the best marketing techniques have been brought to bear on college admissions: marketing and public relations consultants, focus groups for prospective students, institutional repositioning, and enrollment management (Schurenberg 1989). Along with this unrestrained media blitz, colleges make substantial efforts for providing educational equity and increased access to higher education by ethnically diverse students groups.

The heightened competition in college enrollments has left many students feeling uncertain about their ability to compete effectively, which has changed students' application practices as well as led to the rise in independent educational consultants and the SAT industry. The use of SAT coaching services for college application enhancement also has risen: revenues for Stanley Kaplan—one of the largest SAT preparation services—doubled between 1983 and 1988 (*Time* 1988). Various media feed this uncertainty with articles appearing regularly in national magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Money*; local newspapers across the United States; professional journals; and college alumni magazines, including all of the elite colleges.

The institutional structure of the college admissions environment creates and legitimates certain social actors—in this case, college applicants—and makes

cultural rules appear normative and universal, thus eliminating alternatives (Meyer et al. 1987). Within the organizational sector of college admissions, the actions of applicants represent more of an enactment of predetermined scripts than of internally directed, autonomous choice complete with motivation and purpose. College admissions environments shape the organizational structure and culture of high schools as they relate to college guidance. The low-SES students and schools in this study do not participate in these scripted college choice behaviors, but instead are shaped by a local opportunity structure and limited financial resources. Both of the high SES schools of this study are, however, shaped by a national, volatile, competitive college admissions environment that is further influenced by a local community culture focused on prestige.

Significance of the Study

This book illuminates the ways in which school context shapes student tastes for particular types of postsecondary institutions. I analyze class-based differences in family values and how they affect the way in which students organize their college-choice processes and how students think about the range of “acceptable” institutions. The empirical evidence in this book documents how these class-based differences in aspirations in turn affect the stratification of opportunity structures at the higher education level and beyond.

I identify status culture and organizational environment patterns. For example, working-class students see academic achievement as set, an inflexible fact of their admissions potential. For upper-middle class students, achievements are seen as somewhat manipulable through SAT coaching classes, the use of private counselors, and their presentation of self.

Students’ feelings about their college years as a time for breaking away from family, neighborhood, and friends combine with their perceptions of geographical constraints to delimit the area over which they cast their college choice net. All students seem constrained by the need to be able to get home quickly in an emergency or as a fix to bouts of loneliness, although families’ economic resources mean rich and poor students view those distance constraints differently. Furthermore, the values of community and loyalty held by working class students are quite different from those of the upper-middle class students, who view their community more as a geographically unbounded social class than a neighborhood.

Cost considerations of college vary greatly between rich and poor students. The role of “safeties”—schools that students apply to and are sure they can get into—varies for students from different social classes. The economically advantaged students are looking for good liberal arts schools and are desperate for safeties, but only safeties that will have prestige and will satisfy their status-

conscious fellow students, parents, and neighbors. Finally, most students also are looking for colleges from the context of their current habitus: colleges that match the same supportive environment in which they have been nurtured during high school, colleges that are consistent with their own personal values or personalities, or colleges that provide a needed contrast to the high school experience.

This book offers new and important questions for further research: When is the organizational context salient? At what points and for what types of students can the organization influence individual decision making? And, finally, what has changed or what is stable in the college admissions environment?

Organization of the Book

Chapter Two introduces all of the college-bound seniors through vignettes of how they made college choice decisions. I write about who the students are and where they actually ended up attending college and include profiles of their high school grades, SAT scores, and college choice processes. This introduction of each student focuses on two major elements: the range of how they went about deciding which colleges to consider and theoretical issues to be dealt with later.

Chapter Three provides a detailed introduction to each of the school's environments, offering information on when counseling begins, the counselor case-load and orientation to the college-choice process, and the school climate in general. Chapter Four is a cross-case analysis of the role of counselors and support services at each school and their impact on shaping the aspirations of that school's college-bound students, with a limited analysis, where relevant, of the impact of curriculum and teachers. I present evidence for organizational habitus as both a theoretical construct and a practical reality.

Chapter Five asks and answers the question How did family, friends, finances, and high school jobs influence how students arrived at their respective colleges? I provide insight into parents' precollege educational investment choices, notably the choice of a private high school and the use of a private counselor. I examine the role of social capital—family and friends—in shaping aspirations for “right” college choices. Chapter Five also focuses on excerpts from parents and students on how they view the college admissions process and on insights into the emotional and practical difficulties inherent in the college choice process. I also provide an analytic summary and integrative analyses of the role of the school with analyses of the role of family and friends.

Chapter Six summarizes how students' aspirations develop and vary across socioeconomic groups and school contexts, showing how structural and social processes influence college choice decision making. I summarize the evidence for how class-based differences in aspirations affect the stratification of opportunity structures at the higher education level and beyond.

Research Methodology

This book presents rich case studies of individual college choice processes and the organizational contexts that shapes those choices, as well as a cross-case analysis of the high schools. It also situates high school students' college choices in their social, organizational, and cultural contexts and demonstrates the essential use of values as they are embedded in a habitus of decisions about where to go to college. Because I only want to vary social class and the organization of guidance in these high schools, I am holding gender and race constant and only interviewed white females, the largest population of higher education enrollees in the United States today.

To arrive at issues of bounded rationality and school influences, I chose students from schools that had weak or strong guidance support systems, defined by counselor-to-student ratios, as were schools that had a majority high or low SES student population. Because this was a study of a student's cultural capital as it influenced her college choice decision making, SES was instrumentally and contextually defined for this study as a two-part, crude dichotomous variable. A student was classified as high SES if both parents had bachelor's degrees and were employed in professional occupations, while low SES was defined as both parents not having bachelor's degrees and not being professionally employed. The school was considered high SES if over two-thirds of the students were from high SES families, and low SES if over two-thirds of the students were from low SES families. Within each school I selected students who matched the SES of the school and one who did not, to see if these students were able to access the school's resources differently because of their own or their family's knowledge of college.

The students were drawn from four California high schools, which were a mix not only of high and low social class status contexts, but also high and low college guidance operations (Table 1.1). I defined a strong guidance operation by counselor-to-student ratios and looked for schools that fit the average student-to-counselor ratios across the four types of schools (see Chapter Four): a low SES and low guidance school (public), a low SES and high guidance (Catholic) school, a high SES and low guidance school (public), and a high SES and high guidance (private preparatory) school.

I explored the concept of habitus by interviewing a parent, best friend, and school advisor for each target student, and attempted to untangle the kind and amount of influence each of these people had on the students. Accordingly, some best friends came from a wider range of GPAs, ethnic groups, and parental educational and occupational backgrounds.

I conducted in-depth interviews with twelve white females who were middle-range academic performers (GPA range 2.7–3.4, SAT range 700–1250), specifically three college-bound seniors from each of four high schools ($N = 12$). I also interviewed those students' best friends ($N=12$), parents ($N=12$), and coun-

TABLE 1.1
Guidance Support/Socioeconomic Status

	<i>Lo/Lo</i>	<i>Lo/Hi</i>	<i>Hi/Lo</i>	<i>Hi/Hi</i>	<i>Total</i>
Seniors	3	3	3	3	12
Best Friends	3	3	3	3	12
Parents	3	3	3	3	12
Counselors	1	1	1	1	4
Total	10	10	10	10	40

selors ($N = 4$). Each interview ranged from one to three hours and was preceded and succeeded by several phone conversations.

Since this study's main intent is to understand the interaction of social class and the high school organizational context, I reluctantly controlled for ability, race, and gender. The model can later be tested for males, other racial and ethnic categories, and higher- and lower-ability students. I chose to focus on middle-range academic performers because in many ways the choices of the lowest-achieving students are constrained to community college options, until they can remediate their high school experiences; and the highest-achieving students follow more predictable patterns of applying to the most prestigious public and private schools that are available to them.

I collected transcript data on all students. I also administered questionnaires to the rest of the students in academic-track classrooms in each school to gather data on a broader group of the students' peers about: college plans, parental educations and occupations, first thoughts of college, when and how often standardized tests were taken, how many colleges students knew about, and how many applications were filed.

In my interviews with the college counselor at each school I collected information on the postsecondary destinations of all of the students at these schools, as well as information about the schools' total resources devoted to college preparation. I asked counselors about how college guidance was organized, the assumptions of the college assistance program, and what kind of course advisement was provided to college-bound students.

Interviews with counselors included asking questions about students' aspirations and their potential for college. I collected observational and written data from bulletin boards, college counseling centers, computer data sources, and other school, curricular, and guidance materials. All of this was used to assess the available resources for guidance and information on the background characteristics of the school's students.

I interviewed guidance counselors at each school and collected the names of three students who fit the study's criteria and those students who might be willing to be interviewed. Each counselor selected the study's subjects from a list of students who met the GPA and parental qualifications criteria. Table 1.2 shows the students, best friends, GPAs, and colleges.

TABLE 1.2
Interview Subjects, GPAs, and Colleges

	<i>Paloma School</i>	<i>Gate of Heaven High School</i>	<i>University High School</i>	<i>Mission Cerrito High School</i>
Target Student	Judy (3.2) DePauw	Karla (3.2) UC-Berkeley	Constance (2.9) CSU-Long Beach	Lucy (2.7) West Valley C.C.
Best Friend	Kimberley (3.2) So. Methodist	Laura (3.1) U Bologna	Cindy (3.4) CSU-Long Beach	Julie (3.0) West Valley C.C.
Target Student	Leah (3.2) Middlebury	Cathy (2.9) San Francisco State	Margaret (3.3) Mills College	Samantha (2.8) DeAnza Comm. C.
Best Friend	Sarani (3.0) U Oregon	Darla (3.3) San Francisco State	Marilyn (2.6) U Montana	Edie (4.3) UCLA
Target Student	Susan (3.2) Pomona College	Charlene (2.9) San Francisco State	Sara (3.2) Boston Univ.	Carol (2.7) San Diego State
Best Friend	Candy (3.3) UCLA	Jackie (3.5) San Francisco State	Rebecca (3.6) Brown Univ.	Kay (2.8) West Valley C.C.

*All names are pseudonyms.

After each phone call and interview, I wrote annotated field notes detailing overall environmental and contextual impressions. These included interview summaries, which noted the presence or absence of examples of conceptual categories or anything else particularly noteworthy about the interview. Periodically I wrote analytic memos which I used to explore issues related to developing understandings of the conceptual categories derived from the framework.

Interviews were conducted in a rolling sample format. I analyzed the collected data using the constant, comparative method: I analyzed each interview and specified, modified, affirmed, or rejected conceptual categories in an effort to build theoretical insights from the grounded data observations (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I refined the codes throughout data collection and analysis through the continuous comparisons of incidents, situations, categories, and typologies across students and schools.

Limitations

In searching for a California average of guidance counselors-to-students, a State Department of Education demographics researcher revealed that it was not available. Although the State Department of Education collects a lot of statistical information, there was no demand for counselor-to-student ratio information. The

best available estimate was that there were 5,229 full-time equivalent guidance counselors in the state and 4,488,398 students for a ratio of 1 counselor for 858 high school students. Guidance counselors were among the first educational positions to be cut after Proposition 13. This high ratio and lack of statewide data collection attention indicates the low level of priority given to guidance services and the potential policy significance of the need for understanding the role of school guidance for college planning. However dramatic California's counseling ratios are, nationally, the average counselor-to-student ratio is 1:323, which suggests that there is little individualized attention given to students by school counselors in any state.

On a more practical level, aside from the college preparatory school counselor, most counselors were not very familiar with their students or their families. The Catholic school counselor, after working with her students over their entire high school career, said: "It's hard for me to remember the kids, because I just see them in mass amounts for 20-minute periods." Even students who felt that they had a good rapport and visited their counselor often experienced that visit quite differently than the counselor. A student at the public high SES high school spoke of visiting with the counselors "three times a week" and thought she had a good relationship with her counselor; however, his impression of her visits was that he had "relatively little" contact with her.

With such a small sample, this study is meant to be both theoretical and exploratory. It has attempted to go beyond the quantitative studies' emphases on the what and how many kinds of questions, and instead focuses on why and how students make decisions about where to go to college. I chose a qualitative methodology to provide insight into the motivations and behaviors of students as they go through the college choice process and to find out why students make the choices they do. By understanding the meaning of students' choice processes, educators and policy makers can devise meaningful and effective policies to address culturally equal opportunity. Given the restrictions of race, gender, and the number and types of high schools, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to wider populations. However, the information and findings of this study can be used to design further research on influences in the college choice process.

Finally, there is a certain amount of randomness within each individual's consideration of colleges and, possibly, in the final choice. However, the specific choices are not as important as the process that the students go through and the set of outcomes they define as acceptable. The school, family, and community all influence college-bound seniors and shape their aspirations and sense of entitlement. Social class affects the resources that individuals have at their disposal to make choices about where to go to college. This study will show how high school seniors today make decisions about where to go to college and why that is an important issue of educational equity.