

## **How parents' education shapes college preparation: distinctions between pioneers and legacies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although many would-be first generation college-going students expect to attend college, they remain much less likely than would-be non-first college-going students to actually enroll. This study helps shed light on why this may be by investigating distinctions in what students know about the transition to college, as well as differences in what they have done to prepare for this transition. Using a mixed method analytic approach with data from students in a large central Texas school district, data include focus group interviews with 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders and survey data from 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the same schools. Findings suggest distinctions in the college planning process by social class status. Survey data from 12<sup>th</sup> graders illustrate that would-be first generation students are disadvantaged in multiple arenas relevant to making a successful transition to college such as having a poorer academic record, having spent less time thinking about college, and participating in fewer activities that might help them prepare to make the transition to college. Interview data with 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders may help explain why this is, revealing that would-be first generation college-going youth see their families as cautionary tales instead of guides to college and their planning for college involves less future orientation and less specific understanding about what steps are necessary to prepare for the transition to college. Implications for increasing college attendance for first generation college-going students are discussed.

Direct all correspondence to Amy G. Langenkamp ([alangenk@nd.edu](mailto:alangenk@nd.edu)). This research, part of the Unbundling Youth, Family, and Community Involvement in College Access project, was supported by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Time Warner, Inc. (PIs: Amy G. Langenkamp and Jim Walker). Opinions reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the granting agencies. Thanks to Mark Berends and Catherine Riegle-Crumb for critical feedback on this manuscript.

Keywords: college planning, parents' level of education

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## INTRODUCTION

Differential educational attainment by social class is one of the primary mechanisms whereby economic inequality in America is increasing (Noah, 2012). College enrollment is a key component to both increased economic opportunity as well as a place where first generation college-going youth are lagging behind (Perna, 2006; Wells & Lynch, 2012). Previous research has identified the significant structural barriers faced by first generation college-going students, such as the rising cost of college (Thelin, 2004), barriers to access of financial aid (Tierney, Venegas, & De La Rosa, Mari Luna, 2006), lack of academic preparation (Lucas, 2001; S. L. Morgan, 2005), and trouble navigating the college application process (McDonough, 1997). In addition to these important structural barriers, there are also ways social class informally shapes how students understand and approach college-going (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). Therefore, in order to understand why first generation students are less likely to make the transition to college, it is important to also identify differences in students' college planning during the high school years, and how social class shapes this planning.

This study considers how social class, measured as parents' level of education, shapes students' understanding of, support during, and planning for college when they are in high school. While much research and policy has been concerned with the postsecondary experiences of first generation college-going youth (Ovink & Veazey, 2011; Rondini, 2016; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2014), scholars know little about would-be first generation youth who do not make the transition to college. This is an important and overlooked group of high school students, and inclusion of these students is a specific strength of this study. Comparing would-be first generation college-going youth and would-be non-first generation college-going youth (hereafter, college pioneers and college legacies), the current study focuses on two specific research questions using a mixed methods approach. First, what are the main differences between college pioneers and college legacies in their planning and sources of social support as they prepare to make the transition to college? This question focuses on what students have done to prepare based on survey responses. Second, the current study investigates what students know about preparing for college, which come from interviews with high school students. Data come from students in a large school district in central Texas. The quantitative survey of 12<sup>th</sup> graders paints a picture of students' differences by social class as they are poised to make their transition to college in terms of their school context and their general sources of support and preparation. The qualitative focus group data from 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders provides a more nuanced understanding of the ways that social class shapes how students understand, prepare, and receive support about the transition to college. Together, these complementary data sources help disentangle why students who would be the first in their family struggle with the transition to college. Findings reveal distinctions between college pioneers and college legacies that help explain the persistent differences by parents' level of education in the transition to college. This study builds on prior research on social class differences in college readiness and college knowledge by investigating how social class shapes the way that students' view the planning process. Mixed methods are ideal for pairing what students think with what students do, and the subsequent consequences of these two components of the college planning process. Furthermore, the current study provides added context to what is known about structural challenges facing college pioneer students by identifying and elaborating how differences in their planning process helps create very different realities for college pioneers and college legacies at the moment when they are poised to make the transition to college.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Social Class Differences in Social Support for College Planning**

Families are influential in students' planning for college with youth with more educated parents benefitting from the intergenerational transmission of advantage (Jencks, Crouse, & Mueser, 1983). Previous research has relied on the concept of habitus to inform how families' social class influence college planning (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Perna, 2006). Habitus is an internalized set of thoughts and dispositions that are tied to individual's social class location (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu, 1985). Individuals from higher socioeconomic status groups generally have a habitus that translates into cultural capital favorable to success in schooling (Lareau, 2011). In this conceptualization, college pioneer students lack a college-going habitus (Grotsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Schleef, 2000). A college-going habitus has been conceptualized as the length of time spent planning for college, where students whose parents have lower levels of education are less likely to have always been planning on attending college (Grotsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010).

Parents' level of education may fundamentally shape whether youth apply to college by shaping their norms, aspirations, and expectations. Students whose parents have a lower level of education are also more likely to have educational expectations that fluctuate (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010). In addition, students from lower socioeconomic groups report less consistency in their significant others' expectations for their educational attainment (S. L. Morgan, 2002). At the same time, support from parents is often crucial for guiding students through all of the steps involved in preparing for the transition to college such as choosing rigorous coursework (Crosnoe & Muller, 2014) and navigating the college application and financial aid process (Grotsky & Jones, 2007). A consequence of less consistency in expectations and less guidance from parents is less overall social support as college pioneer students approach the transition to college, and therefore less social capital with which to draw upon in their social networks (Perez & McDonough, 2008).

### **How Do Students Plan for College?**

While there are known social class differences in how long students have been planning for college, research has pointed to other ways in which college pioneer students differ from college legacy students in the college-going process. Parents' level of education, which is a component of their social background, not only shapes their social support for the transition into college but also shapes their knowledge of and preparation for the transition into college. Students' likelihood of attending college is increased through certain behaviors and knowledge about college. Applying to college is facilitated by a series of smaller steps that can be considered college-going activities (e.g., taking the SAT, preparing applications). These activities are crucial interim steps that contribute to an individual's "preparatory commitment" (S. L. Morgan, 2002). Other activities are increasingly important for the college application process as well, such as involvement in extracurricular activities and evidence of leadership (Stevens, 2007). Other research focuses on the academic skills necessary for students to attain college readiness, which involves rigorous coursework across subject areas (Conley, 2007).

Lucas (2001) argues that students from low socioeconomic status groups are more likely to be myopic, or shortsighted, in their planning for the transition to higher education. Certainly

research has found differences by social class in preparatory commitment activities, extracurricular activity involvement, and choices of coursework (Crosnoe & Muller, 2014; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; S. L. Morgan, 2005). Though college pioneer students may have some information regarding a successful transition to college, students from lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to have information that is incomplete, which results in an approach to life after high school that lacks foresight and preparation (Lucas, 2001). This “myopia” may cause college pioneer students to participate at lower rates in the specific activities that increase likelihood of college enrollment such as taking standardized test preparation courses and becoming involved in extracurricular activities that build students’ high school resume. Similarly, research has found that college pioneer students’ lack of knowledge about financial aid predicts whether or not they will apply to college (Bell et al., 2009; Dynarski, 1999; Grodsky & Jones, 2007).

### **Role of Schools in Planning for College**

Beyond the family, scholars have argued the important role that schools play in creating a supportive college-going community (Hill, 2008; Schneider, 2007). Because of individual differences in expectations and planning, socially disadvantaged students may particularly benefit from targeted interventions provided by schools. In a study using national data to examine racial differences in likelihood of college enrollment, elements of social and cultural capital, measured as high school context, family support and guidance, and preparation for college admissions, were more important for African-American and Latino students than whites (Perna, 2000). Similarly, using the same data as Perna (2000), Kim & Schneider (2005) suggested that being involved in a postsecondary guidance program is especially helpful for the college enrollment of students whose parents have lower levels of educational attainment. In addition, evidence from public schools in Chicago indicates that the most economically disadvantaged students benefit from college-related guidance counseling more than other students (Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). In other words, college pioneer youths’ likelihood of applying to college may be particularly positively influenced by encouragement to engage in specific college-going preparatory activities. At the same time, it is likely that college pioneer students have less access to counseling and a college-oriented curriculum based on the schools that they attend (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997).

### **CURRENT STUDY**

Research suggests that participation in college-going activities and increased guidance from families and schools may be especially important for college pioneers. With few exceptions (Crosnoe & Muller, 2014; Perna, 2000) most of the studies involving the influence of social class on the transition to college focus on what adolescents from lower socioeconomic group’s lack, rather than investigating how these groups may conceptualize the transition to college in distinct ways. The current study argues that differences in social support and planning between college pioneer and college legacy students amount to two fundamentally distinct realities as they transition to college. The goal of this study is to better understand how parental education status shapes the planning process both in terms of what students have done in high school as well as their knowledge about making the transition to college. To achieve this goal, understanding the connection between student trends in college planning and students’ realities surrounding who

guides them and what they perceive to be important in making the transition to college, a mixed methods approach is ideal (Weisner, 2011), and is a specific contribution of this study. In addition, in an era where the normative framework for postsecondary education is “college-for-all” (Domina, Conley, & Farkas, 2011; Rosenbaum, Ahearn, Becker, & Rosenbaum, 2015; Rosenbaum, 2001), understanding how students’ ideas about college emerge may help identify specific policy interventions that target college pioneer students and increase postsecondary enrollment and persistence.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This study utilizes a mixed methods approach to investigate the process surrounding students’ planning for the transition to postsecondary schooling. The survey data illustrate differences by parental education status in adolescents’ average school context, ascriptive characteristics, family’s support of plans, participation in activities to prepare for college, high school academic record, and rates of applying to college. These data are taken from adolescents’ 12<sup>th</sup> grade exit survey, and provide a frame with which to understand the qualitative data. The qualitative data help uncover the different ways that students plan for college according to their parental education status, tapping into the relative vague or concrete nature of those plans. Taken together, the two data sources better uncover the complexity involved in the college planning process (Ream, 2005; Salomon, 1991).

The current study uses survey and focus group data from a large school district in central Texas. This district is comprised of 26% White, 58% Latino/a, 12% African-American, and 3% Asian-American students, with more than half qualifying for the federal free-lunch program. Focus group interviews were conducted in May of 2007. Survey data come from a school district exit survey administered to all district seniors; the study uses data from the graduating senior classes of 2007 and 2008. School-level measures were also obtained from the Texas Education Agency’s annual campus reports for the Academic Excellence Indicator System. The current survey data from graduating seniors reflects the experiences of students who have more or less completed their college planning, providing a picture for parental education differences in preparation at the end of high school.

### **Qualitative Data: Focus Group Interviews**

Interview data come from eleven focus groups at six high schools to investigate social class differences in how students’ view the transition to college. For more information on the demographic make-up of the focus groups, please see Table 3 (Appendix). At four of the high schools, there were enough participating students to conduct more than one focus group. Interviews were conducted during students’ study hall period and all students with parental consent were invited to participate and complete student assent forms.

The high school sampling was purposive; all non-specialized (e.g., magnet) district high schools were selected for participation and sent consent letters home to parents of all students. Within the school, nonprobability sampling was used. Focus groups were stratified by gender and grade level, with a goal of including the same number of boys and girls, and with similar representation across grade levels. Focus groups included a total of 29 girls and 27 boys. Across the grade levels, focus groups included 15 9<sup>th</sup> graders, 18 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 25 11<sup>th</sup> graders. The size of the focus groups averaged five students per group, with each interview lasting around

fifty minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol prompted students to discuss elements related to how students conceptualize college including college preparation, perceived challenges to following post-graduate ambitions, and students' support systems for postsecondary plans (e.g., family members, peers, and teachers). Focus group participants' social class is understood through their parents' level of education. Similar to previous research (Lareau, 2011), social class is treated as a categorical measure, dividing students analytically into would-be first generation college-goers (college pioneers) and would-be non-first generation college-goers (college legacies). Though not a perfect measure, parents' level of education is highly correlated with socioeconomic status (Sirin, 2005).

### **Quantitative Data: Twelfth Grader Survey**

Each year, all district seniors respond to a series of questions about their college and work plans after high school, academic and extracurricular experiences during high school, high school preparation for postsecondary activities, and family support in preparing for college and/or a career. The survey response rate averaged across the two school years is 84.4%. The research team provided input into the development of these survey questions. Students who were missing on the question of whether or not they applied to college (n=403) were eliminated from analyses (final analytic sample = 5,901). College pioneer students are those whose parents did not progress beyond high school (n = 1,840). To be consistent with our conceptualization in the focus group interviews, all other students are grouped as college legacy students (n = 4,061).

Survey data, shown in Table 1 (Appendix) and discussed in the results section, includes mean level differences for the sample and between students by parental education status.<sup>1</sup> First, Table 1 includes gender and race/ethnicity. In addition, previous research suggests that the rhetoric and support for college going that students experience at home are important aspects of college-going (Grotsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010). Therefore, the table shows a measure of the length of time the adolescent reported that they had been thinking about postsecondary schooling ("never," "in high school," "in middle school," "as a child," or "always") as well as a measure of students' report of the extent to which their family supports their plans for college and career ("not at all", "not very much", "somewhat," or "a great deal").

Table 1 also includes means of students' high school academic experiences: their cumulative GPA and whether or not they took any advanced placement courses during high school. In terms of their planning, students report who helped them in their college planning process (e.g., teachers, counselors, parents, friends, etc.) and the activities that students participated in related to planning for college (e.g., taking attending college fairs, completing the financial aid form, and/or taking entrance exams such as the SAT). Survey data include the rates of participation in separate activities as well as a measure of the proportion of college-going activities each student participated in. Finally, the survey shows rates of college applications for community colleges, universities, and "any" postsecondary application.

### **ANALYTIC APPROACH**

Qualitative analyses in this study identify the process of students' preparation for postsecondary schooling.<sup>1</sup> To begin, the two authors initially coded respondents' aspirations and parents' level of education, which were the two major theoretical delineations that informed the

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<sup>1</sup> All school names are pseudonyms.

research questions. The primary way this was done was to list aspirations, which was one of the questions explicitly asked as a part of the focus group interview protocol. For social class, students were asked whether or not their parents went to college. After coding the focus group interviews along the dimensions of aspirations and parental education, the two authors separately developed within-group themes of each separate focus group interview. After comparing these initial themes, subsequent coding was conducted that explored common themes across focus groups (Creswell 2006).

A theme was considered germane when represented by multiple respondents within a focus group and repeated across focus groups (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). For example, five general themes emerged that were coded as postsecondary education preparation: perceptions about the planning process, academics, activity involvement (which included extracurricular activities as well as taking standardized tests, filling out applications, working on college essays, etc.), after-school work, and personal characteristics necessary for success in college. These themes were then separated by generation status (college pioneers and college legacies) and similarities and differences in both the count of responses by theme as well as the content of responses by theme were analyzed.

Because the focus of this study was how adolescents conceptualize their postsecondary planning process relative to their peers, focus group interviews were ideal for allowing us to capture the emergent way that respondents constructed what college means to them (Kitzinger, 1994; D. L. Morgan, 1988). This is especially the case with questions pertaining to college planning, because the students often seemed to derive meaning about what is necessary to plan for college through interaction (Blumer, 1969). At one high school, this even led to a debate (with all college pioneer students) concerning what is necessary to get into college (e.g., grades, extracurricular activities, etc.). In addition, unlike other interview data, focus groups allow for respondents to reflect upon their individual accounts when not talking as well as allow for an interchange of contrasting opinions in areas of disagreement (Lofland & Lofland, 2005).

Though the focus group interview structure advantageously allowed for emergent meaning about college planning to occur, additional analyses were conducted to ensure that results and conclusions were not influenced by the possibility that focus groups may minimize differences across individuals and lead to false consensus among the group. For example, if the first respondent reported they were planning to attend college, their response might set college as the normative expectation for the group. Analyses suggest three instances where adolescents may have been influenced in terms of their expectations. First, in two focus groups all respondents reported expectation of college plus occupation. Second, in one focus group, three-quarters of the adolescents (three out of four respondents) reported a flexible expectation. Third, in one focus group, two-thirds of the respondents reported a specific college that they planned on attending. In each of these cases, the first adolescent respondent may have set a normative expectation, with the other adolescents following suit. After removing adolescent responses from the focus groups with evidence of potential bias, 70% of college pioneer respondents and 79% of college legacy respondents reported some type of college and/or occupation as their plan after high school while 28% of college pioneer and 11% of college legacy adolescents reported other expectations. The persistence of a class disparity in this sensitivity analysis gives confidence in the results of the main analyses.<sup>ii</sup>

## RESULTS

Using both quantitative and qualitative data sources, findings connect what students do with what students know about the transition to college, and how social class shapes both of these facets of the college planning process. First, quantitative data provide an illustration of what students have accomplished in preparation for the transition to college, as well as an idea about the sources of social support available to students. Interview data demonstrate what students actually know concerning the transition to college. Table 1 shows student characteristics from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade survey, which give a baseline idea of differences in preparation for the transition to college. Descriptive statistics from the survey data in Table 1 illustrate differences between college pioneers and college legacies in academic performance, how long students have thought about postsecondary schooling, family support of their plans, preparation for the transition to postsecondary school, and application rates.<sup>iii</sup> More girls than boys are college pioneers, and pioneer students are disproportionately Latino/a. Next, findings are presented that illustrate differences between college pioneers and college legacies along three important dimensions of college planning: family support, planning practices, and the school's role in college preparation.

### Family Support in College Preparation

Two measures in Table 1 capture the family's role in college preparation, which illustrate quantitative differences in social support by parents' level of education. The biggest difference between would-be college pioneers and would-be college legacies is in terms of how long they have been thinking about attending college. Over one-third of college legacies report "high school" as the first time they have thought about attending college compared to one-fifth of college pioneers. In addition, almost half of the college legacy students have always thought they would attend college, compared to only around one-quarter of the college pioneer students. Furthermore, almost two-thirds of college pioneers (63%) report beginning to think about college in middle school or high school. Concerning family support of their plans, most students report relatively high levels of support for their plans; 77% of students say their family supports their plans "a great deal." However, college pioneers report high levels of support at significantly lower rates (69% for pioneers versus 81% for legacies).

Survey data suggest two areas where college pioneers are disadvantaged in terms of their family support – length of time planning with their families for the transition to college and generally less strong family support. In addition, as shown in Table 1, only 39% of college pioneers asked parents for information, while 57% of college legacies turned to their parents. While survey data may initially suggest that families of college pioneers are less involved in the college planning process, interview data provide a more complex picture about parents' role. Specifically, both college pioneers and college legacies reported that their families were central in guiding them in their transition to college. However, families for college legacies represented guidance while families for college pioneers represented cautionary tales. Below, the college legacy students elaborated on the role that their parents play in their decision of whether or not to attend college, and on how parents are often the source of inspiration about what they will study in college.

James: I guess for me it would probably be my dad and my sister because in my family we have like a lot of artists and my dad, he's good with geography and



engineering and thought would be a good idea to get an engineering or science or math degree. (Grove High School)

Jon: Both my parents have [advanced degrees]. My dad has doctoral degree and my mom is a nurse practitioner and has a masters. So I've a lot of family support and I kind of, if I want to be successful I can follow them. (Jefferson High School)

Desire: My dad wants me to go to college because he's an orthodontist and he wants me to follow his career. (Grove High School)

Joe: All right I guess the most influential people in my life career wise are going to be my grandfather and my father. They're both engineers and so I think they've just kind of persuaded me that way. (McMurtry High School)

Ally: I think my parents just kind of like at least in my family and all the people I know, it's expected. So it's expected for you to finish high school and go to college and it's just everyone else in your family has done it and, you know, the way that supposed to be, I guess. Expected. (McMurtry High School)

Parents of college legacies provide implicit guidance, as illustrated in the above quotes, in several ways. Their own educational attainment offers a wealth of information about how to navigate the transition to college, of course. But more than that, there is the evidence that a college degree is attainable and will provide specific career opportunities.

Similarly, college pioneer students pointed to their parents as sources of guidance and inspiration when they were asked about who is helping them prepare for their postsecondary plans. However, as is evident from the quotes below of college pioneers, parents of college legacy students motivated them due to lack of opportunity and, at times, as example of who not to become.

Cedra: My dad [supports me]. He always tells me that he regrets dropping out of school and he tells me, he's like, "I don't want you to regret it later on. Just take the opportunity. You have many opportunities now that they didn't back then. So just take one of them." And I'm like I guess he just wants the best for me, like every parent does for their kid. (Jackson High School)

Leticia: My dad motivates me because he didn't go to college and he's not doing so good. (Thompson High School)

Tiffany: My parents want me to go to college 'cause they want me to do better than them. (Grove High School)

Maria: I was just going to say that just because my parents didn't get the opportunity to go to college so now they want me to have that opportunity. (Jackson High School)

Peter: My mom [and my grandma] because if I don't they said they're not going to like me no more. They want a house! (Thompson High School)

Ledra: Well the fact that I want to be a role model for my younger sisters is what actually drives me to do most of the stuff that I do. Even after like some of the encouragement from teachers, I still need an extra push so I look at my sisters and them. My sisters is really pushed me because I want to help, I want to be a better person for them and my younger cousins so they can look up. (Thompson High School)

Parents for college pioneers are a cautionary tale while at the same time are sources of motivation for pioneer students. There is also some evidence that pioneer students are shouldering expectations for their entire family as well. For example, Ledra feels pressure to be a role model for the rest of the family even without a blueprint for how to accomplish making a successful transition to college. For Peter, there is an implicit expectation of future financial support for his mother and grandmother after earning his degree.

For both college pioneer and college legacy students, parents are clearly an important part of their transition to college. However, the role that parents play manifests itself very differently depending on adolescents' social class. Taken together, quantitative data illustrate that would-be college pioneer students experience a deficit in their length of time thinking about attending college, their general family support of their postsecondary plans, and their sources of support both in terms of frequency with which they communicate about college as well as the number of people available to them to talk to about college. The quantitative differences begin to indicate the way that cumulative (dis)advantage by social class occurs in the preparation for college. In addition, qualitative differences give depth to understanding the role that parents play in terms of what their guidance represents—tangible examples that give a road map to college for college legacies compared to cautionary tales about how not to make the transition to adulthood coupled with limited capacity to engage with adolescents on a daily basis. While the family's role in the transition to college is a central part of making the transition, it is also important to understand the actions students take while in high school, which exemplifies their preparatory commitment to going to college (S. L. Morgan, 2002), and whether there are differences by parents' level of education.

### **Distinct Planning Practices by Parents' Level of Education**

Table 1 suggests that would-be college pioneers and would-be college legacies are poised for the transition to college quite differently not only in family support but also concerning their academic readiness and planning practices. First, college pioneers have lower average GPAs than college legacy students (2.36 vs. 2.88). In addition, college pioneer students take advanced courses (e.g., Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate) at lower rates.

Similarly, college pioneer students participate in fewer college-going activities. Overall, these students participate in every single one of the college preparatory activities asked as a part of the surveys at significantly lower rates than college legacy students except for attending a college fair. College pioneer students' participation in college preparatory activities is especially disadvantaged in terms of having significantly lower rates of taking both the PSAT and SAT standardized tests as well as having sent a transcript to a college to which they have applied. Taking a look at the proportion of activities, college legacy students participate, on average, in half of the available college-going activities while college pioneers only participate in 36% of

these activities. Differences in family guidance and college-going activities represent fundamental distinctions between college pioneers and their college legacy peers that underscore patterns found in focus group interviews. Finally, only 44% of college pioneers apply to a four-year college while almost 60% of college legacies apply to a four-year college. The pattern is the opposite for application to a community college, with college pioneer students disproportionately applying to community college.

Again, while the survey data show different patterns in the academic status and participation in college preparatory activities by 12<sup>th</sup> grade, focus group data may help understand how college pioneers and college legacies end up with such different records and preparation by the end of high school. Results from focus group interviews suggest that college pioneers students and college legacy students emphasized very different strategies about their transition to college.

Generally speaking, college legacy students tended to differ from college pioneer students in two ways. First, college pioneer students had less of a future orientation when asked about college plans. As shown in the quotes below, college pioneer students generally see just showing up at school as their preparation for college.

Interviewer: What are things that you're doing right now that you think will help prepare you for life after high school? Whether it be college or career?

Bobby: Passing classes.

Cedra: Keeping up in school. (Jackson High School)

Interviewer: What are things that are, that you're doing right now that you think will help prepare you for life after high school?

Jenny: Well I work and kind of come to school. (Jefferson High School)

Reggie: My family is supportive so I'm just trying to get through high school before I start trying to do anything else. (Jefferson High School)

James: The, I'm not really like planning anything. Next year I'll just start applying for colleges and taking it 1 day at a time. (Jefferson High School)

Morgan: No, [not planning anything], I just come to school. (Thompson High School)

Interviewer: What are the specific things you're doing right now to prepare yourself for college or whatever future you're thinking about after high school?

Chris: Just being here, period, at school. (Thompson High School)

Alberto: Me? I'm just taking it step by step and I'm taking a class to help me with like information and whatnot. So, it's pretty much what I'm doing. (Thompson High School)

Alberto is the only student among the college pioneers who shows some evidence of a future orientation. Importantly, he is taking a class at his high school that seems to guide students in making the transition to college. However, the specifics of what he is learning in this class are

vague. In contrast, college legacy students were quite specific about steps they had taken to prepare for the transition to college.

Joe: I doubled up on math this year so I'd be able to make it to calculus. I'm also taking the AP [Advanced Placement] tests for college credit. (McMurtry High School)

Desire: Next year I'm taking a bunch of like science and math classes so I can work towards being a doctor, like to be in sports medicine. (Grove High School)

Julia: I want to know like what I have to do to be able to get into different universities, like I have to have a high GPA. So I pretty much know what I have to do, even though I did like mess up this year, I didn't do really too good on grades but that's why I have to prove with the next few years, try to get my GPA higher. (Grove High School)

Comparing the two groups of students, college legacies were doing more than just showing up to school. Rather, they were focused on curricular requirements as well as academic performance in order to prepare for college.

The second way that college pioneer students differed from college legacy students in their planning strategies involved the amount and type of initiative they took gathering information. The quotes below illustrate the way that college pioneers actively sought information about college.

Gabrielle: Well the college board, like when you go online to sign up for the SAT, they ask you to look at schools and make a list of where they're going to send like scores and stuff. And they also send you a lot of stuff, too. (Jackson High School)

Laquisha: I go online and I look at the different colleges. (Thompson High School)

Interviewer: What are some things you're doing to prepare yourself for the future?  
David: Developing the habit of studying and taking advantage of things. (Jefferson High School)

Carlos: Some lady told me stuff to get like letter of recommendations and stuff. I haven't thought about it. (Grove High School)

Laticia: I'm in AVID. It helps you get a scholarship to, it helps you prepare for college of what's going to happen, get study habits. (Thompson High School)

The strategies of college pioneers involve their own online research, building self-directed study skills, and some guidance from teachers or counselors at their schools. However, these strategies are cursory at best, especially compared to the strategies employed by college legacies.

Jenny: I've been trying to take the hardest courses I can just trying to challenge myself in high school. I'm trying to take more classes at [the local community college] so I can have more of the college experience and get ready for that. (McMurtry High School)

Interviewer: What are, you guys have mentioned some things, but what are some specific things y'all are doing right now to prepare the future?

Justice: Me, I have like, we have essays written like 4 or 5 essays for applications. We're doing the Texas common application.

Brittany: Another thing is a resume. Like making sure you have your resume in order because I know a lot of seniors forget what they've done. (McMurtry High School)

Interviewer: What are some things you guys are doing specifically right now to prepare yourself for the future?

Wayne: I guess with me it's like just kind of getting ahead on writing my essays for different colleges and stuff like that. Kind of go on a find out what they, what you write about and go ahead and write about it. That way I'm actually applied at school and all I have to do is rearrange some of the words and just send it in and stuff like that. (McMurtry High School)

Reid: I think this summer I'm going to, my parents to do a tour of a few colleges maybe, Texas colleges, something like that. A&M, Baylor, UT probably. I mean Tech or something. (McMurtry High School)

Garrett: Well I'm really thinking about it a lot right now because my sister is a senior here and she's moving up to Bloomington to go to Southern Indiana University this summer so we've, you know, the entire family has been, we went on a trip to visit the campus last summer and so the entire family has pretty much been involved with this and we've been figuring out how we're going to finance all of this. We're taking out some loans; we had the Edward Jones investments. So, yeah. (Smith High School)

College legacies are much more detailed in their plans and have several strategies in place that are directly related to making the transition to college, from taking more rigorous classes and getting college credit while still in high school to preparing their application materials and visiting schools. Garrett even mentions knowledge of financial investments to pay for his college tuition.

Taken together, both qualitative and quantitative evidence suggest several areas where would-be college pioneers are disadvantaged. These disadvantages in terms of academic preparation, participation in college preparatory activities, orienting themselves for the future while still in high school, and differences in initiative related to preparing for the transition to college suggest very distinct planning practices depending on students' parents' level of education.

This does not mean that there are not exceptions; a few of the would-be college pioneers adopted strategies akin to their college legacy peers and vice versa. Below, Darlene, a college pioneer is juxtaposed with Aaron, a college legacy.

Darlene: And when I take classes at [the local community college] and like college classes, it's like not introductory anymore and I'm trying to just like research things on my own and just trying to get the full benefit of learning. (McMurtry High School)

Aaron: Yeah, I know what I need to do to get to college, get good grades all through high school but like I already have my college paid for by my great grandma so I just got to go. That's it. (Smith High School)

Aaron seems unconcerned with preparing for college, perhaps because he does not have financial considerations as a part of his transition to college. On the other hand, Darlene is proactive in some of the same ways that her college legacy peers are; she is taking community college classes for college credit and seems to have a sense that challenging herself academically is important. Notably, Darlene attends McMurtry High School, which is comprised of 79% college legacy students. Therefore, being surrounded by so many college legacy students may be part of the reason why Darlene is an exception among her college pioneer peers and account for her advantageous behavior in planning.

### **School's Role in College Preparation**

Thus far, evidence from this study has suggested a myriad of ways that would-be college pioneers are distinct from their would-be college legacy peers in their family support and planning strategies. These individual differences are compounded by the reality that college legacy students generally attend more socioeconomically advantaged schools. Table 2 (Appendix) shows some selected descriptive statistics of district high schools from the Texas Education Agency (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/>). These data provide some sense of the different social contexts that students experience at their respective schools. The high schools in this study are economically and racially segregated, like many other urban areas in the United States (Orfield, 2014). McMurtry and Smith have one-quarter or fewer college pioneer students, while Jefferson and Thompson High Schools are majority college pioneers. Grove and Jackson High Schools each have a student body that is just less than half college pioneer students. Finally, a marker for lower economic status, over three quarters of students at Jefferson and Thompson qualify for free or reduced lunch (FRPL), while over half of the student body qualify for FRPL at Grove and Jackson. In addition, schools with higher proportion college pioneer students also have a higher proportion FRPL.

As seen in Table 2, the schools in this study are generally stratified along race/ethnic and social class lines (with the exception, perhaps, of Grove high school). In addition, as shown in Table 2, college legacy students attend high schools that, on average, have a low proportion of college pioneer students (.112) while college pioneer students attend high schools that, on average, are over one-third college pioneers (.363). These patterns help frame the larger context within which students attend high school, and underscore some of the structural barriers college

pioneer students face as a part of their high school experience (e.g., lower SES composition in their high schools).

There are a few consequences of these different school contexts. First, there are differences by parents' level of education regarding the sources of support. As mentioned above, fewer college pioneers turn to their parents as a source that helped them plan for postsecondary schooling. However, survey data suggest that college pioneers are not getting information from other sources either. As shown in Table 1, fewer college pioneer students ask friends for information as well compared to college legacy students. College pioneers were also less independent in the college planning information search, with only 55% reporting that they sought out information independently compared to over two-thirds of college legacies. In addition, interviews with students revealed that fewer college pioneer students mentioned that they have more than one source of guidance compared to their college legacy peers. Fifty-five percent of the college legacy students remarked on two or more sources of guidance, while only thirty-four percent of college pioneer students have more than one source of guidance.

While there is some evidence that college pioneers are less independent in their college search, interview data suggest that these students often feel that they are on their own when it comes to planning their future. The quotes below indicate the realities college pioneers face when looking toward the transition to college.

Sally: I'm not really preparing. I'm kind of on my own. 'Cause my mom is always, always working. She works from 8 'til 10 so she's always gone. I do everything on my own. I don't have a job or anything but I take care of my nephew and I clean up around the house. (Jefferson High School)

Carolyn: Since I was young or little or whatever, I'd come home and [my parents] couldn't really help me with my homework. They didn't really know what was going on so I had to do it by myself or find tutoring, my own help. (Jefferson High School)

For Sally, her lack of support is a clear social class issue; her mother works long hours and simply cannot be present to provide support for her daughter. For Carolyn, her lack of support stems from having less educated immigrant parents who do not have the human capital to guide her with her studies. These quotes supplement quantitative data by providing context to the lived experiences of college pioneer students when they are in high school preparing to make the transition to college. As Sally and Carolyn suggest, their parents do not have the capacity to provide tangible forms of support. However, this does not necessarily mean that the parents of college pioneer students do not aspire college for their children or serve as sources of motivation, but rather that specific guidance is not occurring in the families of college pioneer students.

The importance of significant others in formulating future plans, especially parents and peers, is well-documented (Bozick et al., 2010). Therefore, without additional information, college pioneers simply have less capacity to be independent in their postsecondary plans. In these cases, school personnel have arguably a greater relative importance for college pioneer students. In survey data, there was no difference in the rates that college pioneers and college legacies turned to counselors, teachers, or college recruiters for information about college planning. However, differences emerged in the focus group interviews concerning the role that schools played in socialization about and preparation for college-going. Students at Thompson

(67% college pioneer), for example, reported involvement in formal programs such as Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID). The school's role in college preparation at high schools like McMurtry (20% college pioneer) and Smith (12% college pioneer), however, is more systemic.

Aaron: We filled out a bunch of surveys [in class] to find out what you're interested in and then it evaluated you on ability and interests and told you which majors might be good for you. That got me thinking a little bit about what kind of major I'd want and what job I wanted. (Smith High School)

Ally: In Ms. Averett's class [sophomore English], you had to apply for a scholarship and she submitted all of our applications, but she also kept a copy for herself and the graded them. [She showed us] the kind of information we should put on our applications. (McMurtry High School)

Rachel: It just seems like everything we do prepares us for college, like especially in 11<sup>th</sup> grade when you're in AP and stuff. (Jackson High School)

The specific type of support provided by schools towards the college preparation process was delineated by the proportion of students who were college pioneers. Support for college-going in schools with fewer college pioneer students was integrated into the curriculum of the school—taking place within classrooms and involved a pervasive rhetoric about what should happen after high school. These schools could be characterized as having a strong organizational habitus surrounding college-going (McDonough, 1997). In schools with a greater proportion of college pioneer students, support towards the college preparation process was more targeted—selected for the few chosen students who were high achieving and thought to be the ones to make it to college.

## DISCUSSION

A major goal of this study was to understand parental education differences in the preparation for the transition to college. Survey data, coming at the end of students' 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, illustrate what high school students have done to prepare for their transition to college and their differing school contexts, as well as distinctions by parents' level of education in these two arenas.

Results suggest that would-be college pioneer students have less family guidance, which is not surprising as parents rely on their own experiences of schooling to guide their own children. Furthermore, students who would be the first in their family to attend college are disadvantaged in some unexpected ways concerning their planning. For example, not only do college pioneer students reference their family less often when talking about sources of support and inspiration for their transition to college, they also lack support from more than one source. These findings are generally consistent with previous research, suggesting that parents' level of education influences the college-going process in informal ways, such as through length of time planning and sources of social and cultural capital (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001).



In addition to differences preparation and social support, college pioneers' high school educational experiences set them apart from college legacy students. College pioneers are, on average, less academically prepared for postsecondary schooling with lower GPAs, less advanced course taking, participation in fewer college preparatory activities, lower rates of application to college, and disproportionate application to community colleges. Within their schools, college pioneers rely on peers less often for information about college, turn to fewer sources for information about college, and are less independent in seeking out information about college.

Taken together, it is clear from survey data that among high school seniors in this study, college pioneers and college legacies are poised quite differently to make the transition to college. College pioneers are disadvantaged on a number of fronts that are associated with successful transitions to college, from academic performance to social support. Interviews with 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> graders at these same high schools provide insight about why college pioneer 12<sup>th</sup> graders are so disadvantaged despite having similar postsecondary ambitions as their college legacy peers. Interviews with college pioneers reveal that, like college legacies, their families are central actors in their ideas about postsecondary schooling. However, parents of college legacies act as guides while parents of college pioneers act as cautionary tales. In their planning, college pioneer students have less future orientation and less concrete actions related to academic and social preparation to make the transition to college. Finally, schools play a role as well, shaping the kinds of preparation that students undertake. The importance of schools is especially highlighted in the case of Darlene; though she is a college pioneer, she attends a school that is comprised predominantly of college legacy students and, therefore, is following a planning path more like other legacies in the sample. This planning is characterized not by a lack of future orientation but rather by gaining academic credits through community college courses and gathering information on her options.

While the current study focuses on connecting what students have done with what they know about college planning, it is not without limitations. Future research should build on the current study in three ways. First, research should attempt to pinpoint causal mechanisms based on the distinct realities of college pioneers and college legacies developed as a part of the findings of this study. In particular, future research would be well-served to connect gains in knowledge with different behaviors. For example, does classroom work involving preparation of college essays, as seen in McMurtry High School, increase application rates? Second, while this study focuses on one urban context, the importance of the school's socialization around college-going suggests that future research should investigate other contexts as well. Schools play an important role, perhaps especially for college pioneer students (McDonough, 1997; Schneider, 2007). Understanding how to best serve students in differing context requires expanding the current study into other contexts as well. For example, rural schools likely have different challenges regarding access to college preparation, such as a lack of opportunities for advanced academic courses and/or availability of community college courses for advanced high school students. Finally, while the current study focuses on parental education level as shaping college planning, future research should explore other facets of students' background as possibly shaping their postsecondary planning, such as gender, race/ethnicity and immigrant status.

Regardless of limitations, results suggest two important implications. First, taken together, findings from both survey and interview data create a picture of very distinct "jumping off" points, driven by parents' level of education, as students make the transition to college. Both college legacy students and college pioneer students perceive that they are preparing to make the

transition to college, but the substance of that preparation is very different and illustrates how disadvantage accumulates. While it may seem as if college pioneers are simply deficient in their planning because they lack knowledge, have lower GPAs, and participate in fewer college preparatory activities, reality is more complex and points to distinctions in the families' capacity for guidance and the availability of sources of guidance for college pioneers. These distinctions are likely part of the reason why research finds that social class often drives postsecondary choices (Beattie, 2002; Schleef, 2000). Furthermore, distinctions in the planning process are likely why social class differences are magnified as students move through their transition to college (Ovink & Veazey, 2011).

Relatedly, the second implication of the current study points to the importance of the high school context in preparing students for the transition to college. Without the benefit of family knowledge, college pioneers arguably rely more heavily on schools for information about their postsecondary preparation and options. Almost all of the activities that comprise college-going activities could be supported and encouraged within the context of schools. For example, visits to college fairs, preparing for and taking standardized tests, and getting information on financial aid and scholarships and filling out those applications can all be implemented in high schools as a way to support students. In addition, previous research has consistently noted the role of the schools in promoting a culture of college-going and influencing whether or not students choose to apply to college (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2008; Palardy, 2013; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Relatedly, Aaron's secure knowledge that he will make a successful transition to college despite not actively preparing suggests that college legacies like Aaron are steeped in safety nets and accumulated advantage such as the capacity to pay for college and parents who will guide every step of their transition to college. In other words, college legacies arguably need schools less than college pioneers in terms of preparing for the transition to college. Previous research suggests that programs like Upward Bound and Advancement Via Individual Determination, which target first generation college-going students for mentorship and additional preparation for college, increases postsecondary transition rates as well as persistence (Black et al. 2008; McLure and Child 1998). However, these programs are often limited in scope and availability. It may be a better approach to have college preparation integrated into schools' curriculum as suggested by students from Smith and McMurtry high school in this study.

Taken together, findings extend knowledge about how college pioneer youth's conceptualization about college are distinct from their college legacy peers. College pioneer students face significant obstacles in making the transition to college. Unlike college pioneer youth, college legacy students can rely on their families to guide them through the transition. Students in our study have internalized and express higher educational expectations, which is consistent with national trends (Goyette, 2008), but the evidence from our interview data suggests that college pioneer students do not know where to begin after they articulate their aspiration and expectation for college. Parents' level of education shapes how students prepare for college while still in high school, and the differences that emerged in our study may help explain the persistent differences by social class in the transition to college. This increased understanding of differences by parental education status in how students conceptualize the transition to college will help schools design programs and disseminate information that may help alleviate social class disparities in educational attainment.

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**Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics (means with SD in parentheses)**

	<b>Full sample</b>		<b>College legacies</b>			<b>College pioneers</b>		
First Generation	.312	(.463)						
Female	.517	(.500)	.499	(.500)	.555	*	(.497)	
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>								
Non-Latino/a white	.419		.553		.125	*		
Latino/a	.427		.289		.729	*		
African-American	.122		.121		.125			
Asian-American	.032		.037		.021	*		
<b>Social Support in College Preparation</b>								
<i>When start thinking about college</i>								
Never	.023		.014		.044	*		
High school	.261		.208		.377	*		
Middle school	.214		.198		.248	*		
Child	.100		.100		.101			
Always	.402		.480		.230	*		
<i>Extent family supports ps plans</i>								
Not at all	.021		.016		.033	*		
Not very much	.039		.031		.056	*		
Somewhat	.167		.141		.225	*		
A great deal	.772		.812		.686	*		
<i>Sources that helped plan for ps</i>								
Parent/relative	.513		.570		.387	*		
Counselor	.525		.533		.507			
Teacher	.531		.527		.539			
College recruiter	.308		.301		.323			
Friend	.533		.548		.499	*		
Independently	.638		.676		.554	*		
<b>N</b>	<b>5,901</b>		<b>4,061</b>		<b>1,840</b>			

**Table 1 Contd. Descriptive Characteristics (means with SD in parentheses)**

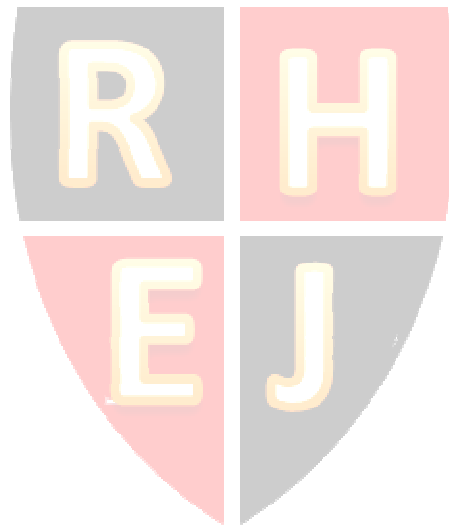
	Full sample		College legacies		College pioneers	
<b>Preparation for the Postsecondary Transition</b>						
<i>High school experiences</i>						
Cumulative GPA	2.713	(.794)	2.875	(.789)	2.355	* (.680)
Adv coursetaking (AP or IB)	.460		.534		.295	*
<i>College preparatory activities</i>						
Took PSAT	.625		.697		.466	*
Took standardized test prep class	.402		.436		.327	*
Took SAT	.688		.751		.547	*
Took PSAT and SAT	.544		.624		.367	*
College fair	.457		.462		.444	
College visit	.473		.516		.376	*
Filled out FAFSA	.445		.466		.399	*
Applied for scholarship	.356		.392		.275	*
Sent transcript	.447		.524		.277	*
Took courses at local comm coll	.255		.289		.179	*
Proportion activities	.461	(.299)	.504	(.291)	.366	* (.292)
<i>Application to college</i>						
Community college	.424		.380		.520	*
Four-year college	.551		.599		.446	*
<b>N</b>	<b>5,901</b>		<b>4,061</b>		<b>1,840</b>	

**Table 2. Selected School Characteristics**

High School Name	White	Latino/a	Black	Proportion Econ. Disadv.	Proportion First Gen. <sup>a</sup>
<b>Capital</b>	.52	.06	.40	.29	.25
<b>Grove</b>	.66	.12	.19	.56	.42
<b>Jackson</b>	.29	.60	.09	.51	.45
<b>Jefferson</b>	.06	.79	.14	.80	.66
<b>McMurtry</b>	.47	.30	.22	.36	.21
<b>Smith</b>	.64	.22	.08	.17	.12
<b>Thompson</b>	.02	.65	.33	.83	.67

Data source: Texas Education Agency (TEA)

<sup>a</sup>Data source: 12th grade survey





**Table 3. Demographic and Grade Level Make-Up of Focus Groups**

School Name	Male	Female	College pioneers	College legacies	9th gr	10th gr	11th gr	TOTAL
<b>Smith</b>	3	2	0	5	4	0	1	<b>5</b>
<b>McMurtry (a)</b>	2	5	4	3	0	5	2	<b>7</b>
<b>McMurtry (b)</b>	2	1	1	2	0	0	3	<b>3</b>
<b>Grove (a)</b>	2	2	2	2	0	3	1	<b>4</b>
<b>Grove (b)</b>	4	2	4	2	6	0	0	<b>6</b>
<b>Grove (c)</b>	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	<b>6</b>
<b>Jackson (a)</b>	2	4	5	1	2	1	3	<b>6</b>
<b>Jackson (b)</b>	2	2	3	1	0	0	4	<b>4</b>
<b>Jefferson</b>	2	2	3	1	1	2	1	<b>4</b>
<b>Thompson (a)</b>	3	5	8	2	0	5	5	<b>10</b>
<b>Thompson (b)</b>	2	1	3	0	0	0	3	<b>3</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>58</b>

<sup>i</sup> Out of the focus groups, nine students (eight college pioneers and one college legacy) reported that they did not want to attend college. In analyzing planning and family influence, these students were eliminated from analyses.

<sup>ii</sup> As a final note about the qualitative analyses, the individual was the unit of analysis for college planning even though the sampling unit was the focus group. For the sensitivity analyses, however, the focus group was the unit of analysis.

<sup>iii</sup> An asterisk next to the mean level for college pioneer students indicates that the mean level is statistically different from college legacy students using t-tests or chi-square tests at the  $p < .01$  or  $p < .001$  level.