

The Summer Flood: The Gap between College Admission  
and Matriculation Among Low-income Students

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Presented March 27, 2008 at the Annual Meeting of the  
American Educational Research Association, New York City

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### Abstract

The first phase of a longitudinal study of innovative urban high schools reveals a gap in the literature on college access. For low-income, first generation high school seniors who have been admitted to four-year colleges, the period between spring admission confirmation and fall matriculation often features a continuation of fundamental decision-making about where—and even whether—to attend college. This qualitative study of low-income, urban high school graduates and their school-based counselors explicates the immediate post-graduation decision process. In addition to identifying the existence and nature of this previously unnamed stage of college access among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, the paper covers implications for high school and postsecondary policy and practice.

### Introduction

Inequitable postsecondary access across social groups is a growing concern in the United States (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Kahlbenberg, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Scholarly and policy efforts have focused on college access in the form of postsecondary preparation and admission into a college or university (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2004). Increasingly, college access is being more broadly defined in terms of access to the college degree: retention (American Council on Education, 2003). An important gap in these two conceptions of access concerns the period between being accepted into college and beginning the degree. College choice theory and research end with the individual's decision to attend a particular institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Retention theory and practice begin with the student's initial enrollment at the chosen college or university (Tinto, 1993). Despite national calls to conceptualize education as a continuous K-16 system (Hodgkinson, 1999; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003), high schools typically cease to serve their students at the point of graduation. For their part, colleges provide relatively few students with formal bridge programs during the summer transition between secondary and post-secondary education.

The loose hand-off between secondary school and postsecondary institution has varied consequences for students from different social class origins. Middle class high school seniors who plan to move directly into college follow a standardized path of college applications, notification of acceptances and financial aid, and confirmation of college choice in the form of a financial deposit. A few such students change their minds over the summer, forfeiting their deposits and matriculating at a different college in the fall. Admission offices plan for this “summer melt,” in the understanding that a small percentage of their successful applicants will be accepted from other schools' waiting

lists or simply change their minds (How to Talk Like an Admissions Dean, 2001). Summer melt can be annoying and costly for small colleges or those without a viable waiting list of their own. For the most part however, parents, students, colleges, and researchers assume that the high school senior who sends a financial deposit to College X on May 15 will matriculate at College X (or at least at College Y) the following autumn.

The first phase of a longitudinal study of innovative urban high schools shows that this linear pattern of application-acceptance-choice-matriculation does not hold for a substantial proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged high school graduates. Even among students who are accepted into college with financial aid, the period between spring admission confirmation and fall matriculation features a continuation of fundamental decision-making about where—and even whether—to attend college.

### College Access for Low-income and First-generation Students

The economic and social benefits of a college degree are substantial (Baum & Payea, 2004; Mumper, 1996; Porter, 2002), yet enrollment rates of low-income students continue to lag behind the college-going rates of middle- and upper-income students. Among 1992 high school seniors, 54% of students in the bottom economic quintile enrolled in college, compared with 94% of students from the top economic quintile (Adelman, 2004). Socioeconomic gaps in college-going are particularly pronounced among four-year college participants and students who start college immediately after high school (Thomas & Perna, 2004). Even among students of similar achievement levels, low-income students enroll at lower rates than their middle- and upper-income peers (Ellwood & Kane, 2000). By age 26, only 7% of low-income youth attain a college degree, compared with 51% of students from the highest SES quartile (U.S. Department of Education, cited in Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).

As mentioned, there is a significant gap in the literature between college access and retention theory and research. Even the writing on college access programs (Swail & Perna, 2002; Tierney, 2002), which commonly take place during the summer, does not explicitly consider the summer before students attend college. Typically, there is a push to “start early,” (Perna & Swail, 2002, p. 30; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996, p. 141) for example, by reaching out to students in elementary and middle schools, but not necessarily to “stay late,” by continuing to work with students between the time when they graduate from high school and when they enroll in college. The literature most related to the unexplored time period between when high school seniors receive their acceptances and the start of fall semester concerns the college choice process and student enrollment decisions.

#### *College Choice Theory*

The college choice process—deciding which college to attend as well as whether to attend at all—is complicated for the demographic population this study addresses. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) widely cited theory identifies three distinct periods of college choice: predisposition, when students develop post-high school plans for work or education; search, when students consider and evaluate colleges in which they might possibly enroll; and choice, when students choose the schools that they will attend. The model assumes that students engage in one phase at a time, follow the stages in order, and

complete the entire process at the point of formal acceptance of an admission offer. None of these assumptions hold for the population under study.

Attinasi's (1989) study of Mexican-American students and their college-going experiences may offer a better theoretical explanation of the college choice process for the students represented in this study. Attinasi describes the college choice process in terms of a period of time, as opposed to Hossler and Gallagher's sequence of specific actions. Attinasi identifies two schemes for understanding college-going behavior—"getting ready," which describes the period of pre-matriculation and "getting in," which describes the period of post-matriculation. Students who are getting ready engage in activities that encourage a college-going frame of mind or model college-going behavior. Chief among these activities is anticipatory socialization, in which students take on the behaviors and attitudes of college students in order to "rehearse" their future role (Attinasi, 1989, p. 266). Attinasi's model emphasizes students' perceptions of what college will be like, rather than the choice of whether or where to attend.

Throughout the literature on college access and retention, academic preparation remains the most significant indicator of success. Completing a college-ready high school curriculum is the primary indicator of whether a student will graduate from high school and go on to earn a college degree (Adelman, 2006; Bedsworth et al., 2006). While sufficient academic preparation is necessary for college access, it is not the sole factor that influences whether a student will enroll (Bedsworth et al., 2006). For this study, the fact that all students had completed a college preparatory high school, already held college acceptances, and were not yet engaged in college academics reduced the importance of the academic factor in explaining pre-matriculation decisions. In contrast, summer experiences relate closely to family, peer, and financial effects featured in the literature on college access.

#### *Family Effects*

Parental encouragement and support constitute two forces that play a significant role in access to college for students from working class and poor backgrounds. Researchers have commonly defined parent encouragement in terms of frequent discussion about students' post high school plans and expression of parents' hopes, dreams, and expectations for their children (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Hossler, Schmidt & Vesper, 1999). Parental support includes such actions as saving money for college, visiting college campuses, attending financial aid workshops, and so forth (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Bedsworth et al., 2006).

Ultimately, parents' education and income levels may not be as important to the formulation of college plans as parental encouragement and support of their children (Hossler, et al., 1999). The literature indicates that combined factors of parental encouragement and support have a significant influence on college plans. Hossler and Stage (1992) found parental encouragement, together with forms of parental support, to be the best predictors of educational aspirations. However, it is unclear which factor, parental encouragement or parent support, has more influence on students' decision-making. For example, Stage and Hossler (1989) conclude that encouragement is the single most important predictor of postsecondary educational plans. In contrast, a study on college access for the Bridgespan Group (Bedsworth et al., 2006) found only one factor of parental support—parent and student visiting at least one college together—made a statistically significant contribution to college-going behavior. Other forms of

parental encouragement and support did not make a difference in enrollment or retention, once academic preparation and other variables were taken into account.

Even if parents encourage and support their postsecondary aspirations, upwardly mobile students experience tension as they anticipate and move into their new roles. First-generation college students are making a “longer jump” from the social status of their parents than second-generation college students (Billson & Terry, 1982, p. 71). According to London (1989), one of the biggest challenges for first-generation students is reconciling the strain that emerges between competing requirements of family membership and upward mobility. Parents’ conflicting messages both to stay at home and to achieve in the outside world can cause internal struggle for their children (London, 1989). Because of this tension, first-generation college students may internalize feelings of shame, or move to minimize change, rather than taking pride in their upward mobility (Duffy, 2007).

Culture may also play a role in the relationship between students of color and their parents in the period between high school and college. For example, Latinos can be broadly characterized as family-oriented and collectively identified (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997). This may impact Latino students’ decision to live away from home or the role of parents in their day-to-day lives (Terry, Dukes, Valdez & Wilson, 2005).

Social capital is another vital family-related correlate of college outcomes. Social capital refers to the possession of valuable relationships that aid in gaining other kinds of tangible and symbolic resources, such as human capital (education) (Coleman, 1988). According to Coleman (1988), one key aspect of social capital in the education context is intergenerational closure, or the effective sharing of shared norms and values. Social capital is primarily passed from parents to children but students can also gain social capital from non-family sources such as school personnel (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). According to Stanton-Salazar (1997), students from low-status groups need additional institutional support to make up for sparse or unhelpful family social resources.

### *Peer Influences*

Considerable research has been devoted to understanding how peer groups influence students’ college aspirations and enrollment patterns. A number of studies have documented the tension students of color may feel between maintaining strong peer connections and advancing their education. The fear of being accused of “acting white” can contribute to decreased academic effort among black students, and can lead to underachievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Black and Latino students can find it difficult to leave old peer groups and to believe that they can be successful in school (Kaplan, 1999; Steele and Aaronson, 1995). Some African American students attribute a lack of belief in the benefits of a college degree to the influence of their peers (Freeman, 1997). Without access to a network of college-bound peers, Latino urban high school students can lack important perspective on the college experience, and may not view enrolling as a realistic possibility (Venegas & Tierney, 2005).

While peer effects can exert a downward impact on students’ college aspirations, studies have also shown the positive influence that peer groups can have on college-going behavior. Having a significant number of friends planning to attend college can increase the likelihood that a student will graduate from college (Bedsworth et al., 2006).

Analyzing a sample of low-income students of color from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988, Sokatch (2006) found that friends' plans are the best predictor of four-year college enrollment, even after controlling for other variables that influence college-going behavior.

### *Finances*

In describing her observations of the college decision-making process of both lower and middle socioeconomic status groups, Bloom (2007) concluded that middle class students worry about “laundry,” and “making friends,” while poor kids worry about “money, money money” (p. 350). A substantial body of research has documented an association between the lack of college affordability and persistent gaps in enrollment by family income (ACSFA, 2001; Kane, 1999; St. John, 2002). During the past four decades, the cost of college has escalated at a far more rapid rate than household income, particularly for low-income families (Baum, 2001). Over the same time period, a general shift in U.S. financial aid policy from need-based grants to loans, merit-based aid, and educational tax breaks has resulted in greater unmet need for low-income students (Long & Riley, 2007).

The purchasing power of federal Pell grants, the primary source of need-based aid, has declined considerably. In 1975 the Pell grant covered nearly 80% of the costs at a public 4-year institution for low/moderate income families; by 2001 the Pell grant only covered 40% of the costs at public colleges (Mercer, 2005). Low-income students in particular appear responsive to changes in the net cost of college (Kane, 1995). Increases in grant aid, both at the state and institutional level, are associated with increases in enrollment among students from low-income families (Kane, 2003; Linsenmeier, Rosen, & Rouse, 2001). Low-income students may be more averse to taking out loans, which could serve as an additional barrier to college access (Burdman, 2005). Uncertainty about the likelihood of graduating from college and future job prospects may contribute to students' caution about borrowing for college (Burdman, 2005).

The quality of college-related information that students receive is widely cited as having an important impact on college access for low-income students. The complexity of the financial aid application process may create barriers to higher education for underrepresented populations (ACSFA, 2005; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006). Low-income students may lack important information about the admissions process, and may have insufficient knowledge about the actual cost of college (Avery & Kane, 2004; Conley, 2005). A study in southern California found that one in five dependent low-income students do not receive government/institutional financial aid programs because they do not file a federal financial aid form (FAFSA). A lack of information about financial aid, and misperceptions about the student aid process, may contribute to students missing the opportunity to go to college (King, 2004).

### *Summer Bridge Programs*

Some higher education institutions recognize the importance of formally assisting in the transition of low-income (and other marginal) students from high school into college. Summer bridge programs have emerged over the last thirty years as an intervention to address the needs of underrepresented students prior to matriculation (Kezar, 2000). Programs provide a range of services, including academic remediation, counseling, and orientation to campus life. The available research suggests that summer bridge programs exert positive effects on students' academic performance and persistence

rates at individual colleges and universities (Buck, 1985; Ackermann, 1990; Garcia, 1991; Gold, 1992).

### Research Site and Methods

The Big Picture longitudinal study began in 2006 with funding from the Lumina and Irvine Foundations. The study follows graduates of Big Picture schools, a national network of over 50 innovative high schools that has gained national attention for success in graduating socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color and working in partnership with students to assure their admission to college (Levine, 2002; McDonald, 2003/2004; Sarason, 1998). The student population of Big Picture schools is predominantly low-income, urban, and non-white.<sup>1</sup> Many students speak a first language other than English; some are undocumented immigrants. Few of their parents have attended college. In short, Big Picture graduates are members of the U.S. demographic groups who are the least likely to complete high school, enroll in college, or attain postsecondary degrees.

Big Picture graduates are highly unusual among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, however, in having experienced a positive, personalized, real-world-based high school experience that supported them in aspiring to higher education and helped them succeed in gaining admission to a four-year college. Hallmarks of the Big Picture model include small schools, close relationships with a four-year peer group and advisor (teacher), and individualized curricula that arise from student interests and tie to extensive internships under expert mentors (The Big Picture Company Philosophy, n.d.; Levine, 2002). Every Big Picture student takes college entrance examinations, applies to colleges, and completes financial aid applications. With slight variations across schools, 95-100% of Big Picture students are accepted into college. Along with a school culture of college-going, adult mentorship, and student self-determination, Big Picture high schools achieve their notable college acceptance rate partly through a staff structure of college transition counselors employed specifically to work with individual students and families to facilitate the college and financial aid application process. College transition counselors are also responsible for ongoing support of alumni.

Even under this best-case scenario, a substantial proportion of Big Picture students question their college plans or change their intended college over the summer following high school graduation. A few decide not to attend college at all. This unexpected discovery came during the initial year of the longitudinal research in the form of data from student surveys and from systematic summer checks of graduates' plans conducted by college transition counselors. The finding led to the design of a qualitative study with a specific focus on summer college planning among socioeconomically disadvantaged high school graduates who have already been accepted to college.

Qualitative study is appropriate for exploring a previously unresearched phenomenon and identifying its parameters (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The "summer flood" study consisted of two qualitative data sources: 1) focus group interviews with

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<sup>1</sup> There are approximately 5000 Big Picture students in a growing network of high schools now located in 13 states. Of these students, 78% are students of color and 56% are considered economically disadvantaged. Virtually all of the students graduate from high school. Over 95% apply to college.

college transition counselors and with school principals 2) in-depth interviews with Big Picture graduates of 2006 and 2007.

Focus groups were made up of high school staff who had worked with at least one Big Picture class through their senior year and post-graduation summer. Principal focus groups on the topic of the summer flood occurred as part of the October 2007 national convening of the Alternative High Schools Initiative<sup>2</sup>. The two focus groups each comprised four principals from the flagship Big Picture high schools in Providence, Rhode Island. Principals discussed and compared advisory (class) and school-level data about the post-graduation transitions of the class of 2007.

The most informative staff input about the summer flood came from the college transition counselors who facilitate students' transition to higher education. Unlike typical high school guidance counselors, Big Picture transition counselors have small case loads devoted to college planning and alumni support. Their strong relationships with students over time give the college transition staff access to candid, in-depth information about students' academic and personal lives. Early in 2008, the first author conducted college transition counselor focus groups in California and Rhode Island. The first focus group included 5 college transition counselors from Big Picture schools in the Midwest and the West Coast. The second included 3 counselors and the Director of College Access and Transition from the Providence, Rhode Island schools. Focus group members were diverse in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, geographic base, and socioeconomic background. Transition counselors were asked to comment on the frequency and content of summer interactions with alumni who were questioning their college plans.

The core of the study comes from case studies of a maximum variation sample (Patton, 2002) of 13 high school graduates chosen to represent the major patterns of post-high school decision-making that emerged from college transition counselor summer alumni reports. As high school seniors, each of these students was accepted to a four-year college. Students who graduated from Big Picture schools in 2006 or 2007 were included in each of the following categories: 1) students who retained their original college choice without summer reconsideration; 2) students who retained their original college choice, but with substantial summer second-guessing; 3) students who changed planned four-year college matriculation to community college enrollment; 4) students who changed their choice of four-year postsecondary institution; 5) students who decided during the summer not to go to college in the fall; 6) students who increased their aspirations from a two-year to a four-year college.

College transition counselors from four different Big Picture schools provided names of Big Picture alumni from the classes of 2006 and 2007 who fell into each category. All of these categories were represented in the final sample, although scheduling challenges and changing plans among the students meant that some categories had more or fewer than two students. As Table 1 shows, the sample was diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and geography, although more women than men agreed to be interviewed. All of the students came from urban high schools, including four alumni from the East Coast, five from the Midwest, and five from the West Coast. Eleven of the 13 were the first in their family to attend college. Of the two graduates with college-educated parents, one student's mother had earned a degree as an adult while rearing her

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<sup>2</sup> More information about the Alternative High Schools Initiative is available at [222.ahsi.info](http://222.ahsi.info)

children. Six respondents were 2006 alumni of Big Picture high schools; the remaining seven graduated from Big Picture high schools in 2007. At the time of their interviews, students were between 18 and 20 years old.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N=13)

Gender	3 Male 10 Female
Race/Ethnicity	6 Latino/a (including 2 undocumented immigrants) 6 African-American 1 White
Schools	4 Providence, Rhode Island 5 Oakland, California 2 Chicago (School 1) 2 Chicago (School 2)
Post-graduate Summer Categories	4 Kept original 4-year plan without wavering 2 Kept original 4-year plan, but with serious reconsideration 3 Changed over summer between 4-year colleges 2 Changed from 4-year to no college 1 Changed from 4-year to community college 1 Changed from no college to 2-year to 4-year

Four of the six 2006 alumni were interviewed in the summer of 2006 during the baseline interview for an in-depth longitudinal case study of the transition process. The remainder of the interviews were conducted expressly for this study and took place in early 2008. Semi-structured interviews of 1-2 hours were conducted by the four members of the longitudinal study research team who are employed by the Big Picture Company or specific Big Picture schools. Interviews followed a narrative approach in which the high school graduates were asked to tell the story of their college decision-making between the point of placing a deposit, declaring their intention to attend a particular institution (May of senior year), and the point of acting on a decision to attend a particular institution or not to enroll anywhere (September following high school graduation). Interviewers prompted students for details about any issues they considered in summer decision-making, the people who influenced them, and the affective experience of the ongoing choice about where and whether to attend college.

Focus group information provided context for the intensive case studies of individual students, including information about the validity of the sampling categories and the summer college issues that arose in student and parent interviews. Focus groups were audio-taped and analyzed inductively through the development of themes that emerged from the data.<sup>3</sup> The twelve themes that resulted from focus group analysis were then used as the basis for student case analysis. After grouping focus group findings into themes, analysis of student interviews commenced with a case profile. Each case profile included demographic and college information about the student, a narrative account of

<sup>3</sup> The 12 themes that emerged from focus group interviews were: Financial Aid and College Bureaucracy; Motivation; Family and Significant Others; Tacit Knowledge and Consumerism; Vocational Focus; Peer Effects; Self-concept; Personal Issues; Autonomy; Academic Preparation; Fear; and Interacting/clusters of Issues.

the student's transition, and the placement of interview data into the previously constructed themes. Verbatim quotations from audiotaped interviews were included throughout the case profiles. A cross-case analysis followed, in which the constant comparative method was used to compare patterns of themes across students (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Case profiles enabled the exploration of the richness of individual experience over time, while cross-case analysis provided information about the central themes and the differences that characterized students' summer decision process and fall matriculation outcomes.

### Findings

All of the 13 Big Picture graduates interviewed for this study were accepted to four-year colleges during their senior year of high school. The following September, 10 of the 13 alumni attended four-year colleges, one matriculated at a community college, and two students chose not to enter postsecondary education. This level of college admission and college entrance is typical of Big Picture college-going rates, but is remarkably high among U.S. low-income students.

The Big Picture's exemplary college-going figures mask a phenomenon of ongoing deliberation about enrolling in college over the summer immediately following secondary school. Results from interviews with Big Picture high school graduates and focus groups of college transition counselors and principals confirmed that the summer following high school graduation was a turbulent period for most alumni. For instance, counselor summer check-ins with alumni showed substantial shifting in students' fall postsecondary plans during the post-high school summer. Of the 13 students interviewed for this study, only four kept their original four-year college plan without significant wavering over the summer. Two others enrolled at their planned college only after serious reconsideration. Among the remaining students, three made summer changes from one baccalaureate institution to another, one chose to attend community college, two decided against fall enrollment, and the last changed from a two-year to a four-year institution. (Table 2 presents basic demographic and college information for each of the interview participants by pseudonym.) Several of the graduates continued to apply to colleges over the summer after having been accepted elsewhere. Nearly all continued to work over the summer on finalizing financial aid. Clearly Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) classic theory of serial stages of college predisposition, search, and choice fails to fit many first-generation college students. Big Picture staff guided students through these phases during high school. Despite attending high schools with strong college-going expectations and supports, this group of low-income students engaged in all three college choice stages again, and simultaneously, after formally accepting an offer of college admission.

The process of coding and clustering codes from alumni interviews and transition counselor/principal focus groups yielded three core themes having to do with relationships, resources, and tacit knowledge. Students' struggles within these cumulative, interrelated themes appears to explain the "summer flood" among low-income students; the misalignment of these factors necessitates an explicit hand-off between high schools and colleges.

Table 2: Summer Flood Study Interview Participants

<b>Pseudonym, School</b>	<b>Gender, Ethnicity</b>	<b>May-Sept. Change</b>	<b>September Status</b>	<b>Parents education</b>	<b>Other background</b>
Carlos Oakland '07	Male, Latino	From 2-year to 4-year	Full time in 4-year college	F: 8 <sup>th</sup> grade; M: HS grad (in Mexico)	
Christina Providence '07	Female, Latina	Kept 4-year plan	Full time in 4-year college	M: BA and MA as adult	Learning disability
Claudia Oakland '07	Female, Latina	Wavered but kept 4-year plan	Full time in 4-year college	F: 6 <sup>th</sup> grade M: Some HS	Undocumented immigrant
Erica Chicago '07	Female, African-American	Changed 4-year college	Full time in 4-year college	M: < HS grad (Unemployed)	
Iris Oakland '06	Female, Latina	Kept 4-year plan	Full time in 4-year college	M; F: < HS grad	Engaged senior year
Jennifer Providence '06	Female, Latina	Changed from 4-year to no college	Not enrolled	M: F: HS grads in home country	
Jonas Oakland '06	Male, African-American	Kept 4-year plan	Full time in 4-year college	M: MA F: some h.ed. Sibs: ≥ BA	
Kina Chicago '07	Female, African-American	Changed from 4-year to no college	Not enrolled	Mom: HS grad (as teen mother)	Pregnant senior year
Maria Chicago '07	Female, Latina	Changed 4-year college	Full time in 4-year college	M: F: HS grads in home country	Undocumented immigrant
Michelle Oakland '06	Female, African-American	Kept 4-year plan	Full time in 4-year college	M: GED F: HS grad Aunt: MA	
Tammy Providence '06	Female, African-American	Changed from 4-year to 2-year college	Part time in 2-year college	M: HS Grad Aunts, uncle: BA	Living w/24-yr-old, non-college boyfriend
Tricia Chicago '07	Female, African-American	Changed 4-year college		M:F: HS Grad	College prep. summer prgs since 6 <sup>th</sup> grade
Walter Providence '06	Male, White	Wavered but kept 4-year plan	Full time in 4-year college	M: HS Grad	

### *Keepers of the Dream*

The fragility of students' belief in the future surfaced for many during the summer. "Even when their name is on the wall for their college acceptances, it is still not certain," concluded one of the researchers, remarking on a student's muted reaction to the good news that she had been accepted into her first choice college. Predisposition, as Hossler and Gallagher (1987) name it, is the plan to go to college. Such a plan requires a leap of faith for first-generation, low-income high school graduates—a dream. Incomplete faith in the likelihood of achieving the dream leads some students to hedge their bets, reduce the stakes, or opt out altogether. "Transferring is part of their plan," a transition counselor said of Big Picture students in general. "They figure they'll try someplace close to home and then maybe go away." An accepted senior: "Maybe it would be cool to go to college for a few years. Not like promising myself anything but maybe give it a try." Teachers, transition counselors, internship mentors, and principals build the vision of attending college for Big Picture students, but the dream can fade over the summer without ongoing support.

Maintaining an internalized dream that requires self-sacrifice for a distant goal is undoubtedly a challenge for any 17 or 18-year old, and more so for a student without a family history of higher education. In middle-class families, parents hold the expectation that their children will attend college, graduate, and take their place in existing social networks of college-educated professionals. In such families, students do not need to own the dream of college for themselves any more than they need consciously to decide to attend high school beyond the legal age for dropping out. The only middle class student in our interview study, Jonas, exemplified the easy adoption of the college dream held by his parents and siblings. "Both my parents went to college. My dad did some college. It's kind of like you have to do it. I was the last kid; I'm the youngest. So it's like you definitely have to go to college. It's nothing that I wanted to resist. I always wanted to go to college. It just sounded good, you know. It didn't cross my mind to not go." Jonas conducted a sophisticated college search, settling on a historically Black university where his sister was a law student. He was reassured by the knowledge that his sister would make sure he kept on track: "I'm pretty sure that she is going to be riding me."

The only White student in the study, Walter, was more typical of the students we interviewed in coming from a low-income family with no history of higher education. His family relationships were troubled: "Growing up, I didn't really have the family I ever wanted. I was kind of tattered and torn. Not to say I had the crappiest family, because everyone has family problems in one way or another. But it was, like, really tough." Walter saw three distinct possible directions during the summer after high school. First was the path of building the family he had always wanted by marrying his girlfriend and becoming "a great dad." This path seemed to Walter to rule out pursuing his passion for science in an out-of-state four-year college.

If I go to college I'm going to lose Rachel. And that's just how it's going to happen. Everyone was like 'oh, that's not how it's going to happen!' Yes it will. Don't tell me otherwise. I'm not dumb. If I were to go away, it would be tough and we'd end up not seeing...we wouldn't be together any more. And it

influenced a lot because I wasn't going to go to college—because I had found what was going to make me—I had found happiness. And I didn't want that to go away.

The second path was remaining home with his friends and keeping the job he had held for 3 years. Walter's friends, whom he described as "family," predated his Big Picture school and all were high school dropouts. Walter worried about who he would be if he left his home city and how he could abandon friends who needed him. It was also difficult to give up his steady paycheck. The third possible path was college. Walter's closest relationships with adults were with his high school advisor (teacher) of 4 years and the scientist who was his internship mentor. These adults constantly told him he was academically talented and should go to college. They set up opportunities for him, such as college classes and laboratory research, in which Walter increasingly saw himself as a college student and scientist. Still he wavered.

So you see there's a difference between wanting to go to college and someone telling you they want you to go to college. Because when you go to college for reasons you don't know why, then you drop out. Because you don't know why you're there. You're going for someone else. It's like a promise you're keeping that's not yours. It's not your own promise. And I didn't want to go to college for that reason. I didn't want to go for them.

In the end, Walter chose college because his girlfriend broke up with him and because he didn't see a future in joining his friends. He relied on his advisor and his mentor to hold the dream of college as he struggled to make it his own. "Because it was either you're going down one path or the other path and both ways would end up in a whole different life. And it was hard to make a choice. It was hard to pick one and go with it... Like, I still have my doubts and all."

Walter only partially internalized the dream of college held for him by adults in his high school. Making college "your own promise" was equally tenuous for other students in the study, even those who explicitly claimed a debt to their high school supporters. "That's what it was," said Erica, "pure love from [the high school principal] and everybody that pushed people and carried people to where they needed to be. And I didn't even want to say they carried us. They taught us to walk on our own." Despite the support she claimed from the high school staff and her family, Erica spent the entire summer deciding where to go to college, ending up staying close to home to attend a different college than the eight out-of-state institutions to which she had applied during senior year. In a different set of circumstances, highly-motivated Claudia came close to being derailed by pressure from her parents to remain at home following a family emergency. "I don't know if I am going to be able to do this. What's the point?"

For students like Jonas, parents held the expectation of college so firmly that their children never saw college as one choice among many. Other students' successful four-year college enrollment rested on strong family encouragement and active support. Christina's mother had earned a degree while rearing her children; she and Christina's father were willing to take second jobs to meet the gap between her financial aid and the costs of college. Michelle's educated aunt was a consistent role model and supporter of the dream of college. Even Maria, who was so ambivalent about attending college that she failed to follow through with registration and financial aid at her original college,

ended up enrolling in a different four-year institution because her parents insisted she attend and took out loans to support her studies.

Although some students experienced clear parental support, Big Picture graduates and their college transition counselors told story after story of parental ambivalence, lack of understanding, and even hostility to their child's college plans. Iris: "They want me to go, but their priority is how am going to pay for it financially? So they're, like, 'why don't you go to a community college and transfer? They don't see the importance, I guess, of going to a four-year. Going to a very nice school.'" Culture can play a role, as with Jennifer's Dominican father who would not let his daughter accept her admission at a New York City university. "They thought New York was too far, too dangerous, too expensive. [Dad] was really strict. He didn't want me to go." Jennifer spent a year out of school rather than attending a local college that lacked the major she desired or use her financial aid award for a community college. Every college transition counselor had a story of a parent who would not drive their student to college. One student's parents refused to come outside to say goodbye, as the transition counselor drove their son to his first day of college. Even positive messages can imply possible failure, as in the words of Erica's grandmother: "If you don't do anything else, go to college. If you don't make it, at least you can say you went."

Somebody has to be the keeper of the dream of college. For Big Picture students, the high school advisor, college transition counselor, and school community hold the vision of college through the ups and downs of students' adolescent motivation. When these supports weaken after graduation, many students have not yet internalized the goal of higher education or the belief that they will actually graduate from college. Students' family and neighborhood supporters deliver much less consistent messages than school-year mentors. "A month without you, and they lose motivation, talking to parents and friends," a transition counselor summarized. Some parents provide the needed bridge from high school support to college matriculation. Even when students themselves are ambivalent about postsecondary education, strong parental expectations and active support make a difference. In a few cases, recent high school graduates appear to hold fast to their own dream in the face of parental ambivalence about college. It is unclear how this ownership evolves, but Claudia and Iris show evidence of acting as their own dream holders through self-advocacy with college staff, pushing through obstacles, and refusing to follow their parents' less ambitious college plans. Even in these cases, however, pre-matriculation support from the college helped keep their plans on track.

### *Financial Resources*

The majority of Big Picture students live in low-income households. They are keenly aware that paying for college is uncertain and perhaps unachievable. Students face the realities of college financing during the summer, as they face loan applications and their first college bills. All Big Picture seniors are required to apply for financial aid. Staff in these high schools provide considerable assistance to students and their parents in researching sources of aid and filling out the complicated paperwork for federal, state, institutional, and private scholarships. Despite this thorough preparation, unmet need is the rule for this group whether or not the federal aid formula considers the family able to contribute to college costs. Even if college were free, the family's loss of a college student child's time and income is an issue. "Some of the students act as second parent in

the house,” transition counselors described. Sons and daughters of immigrants act as intermediaries for their non-English speaking parents. Many students contribute significant portions or even the majority of their family’s income. Big Picture high school students sometimes have household utility bills in their names when a parent or guardian cannot.

Students are consumed with worry about paying for college and consider their acceptances provisional on financial aid. Iris, for example, could not qualify for a Gates Scholarship grant because the combination of her parent’s income and her own savings from a 25 hour-a-week job put her over the income qualification. “My family is not going to support me financially. So it’s on me.” Having lost her chance at the Gates, Iris worked directly with administrators at the private college that had accepted her to have them recalculate her aid based on the forthcoming year without this job. Even after she graduated and the summer began, Iris was unsure whether the financial aid award would reflect her high school or future job status. Four-year college hinged on the answer.

My financial aid package for me is going to tell me you go to [X college] or you don’t go to [X]. I’ve told every one in my family that I want to go to a four-year college. And that I don’t think it’s fair, that because I don’t have the money I can’t do so. Because I’m like everyone else. I’m smart and I’m motivated. Why can’t I? Just because I don’t have money? So, it’s been emotionally hard. And just deciding—because I’m very organized. And I need to know what I’m going to do. And I don’t. I’m still waiting on my financial aid package.

Iris dreamed of being a full time, residential student with a part time job. “And not having so much money to pay that I’ll be having nightmares about it. That I’ll be fine financially. I think that would be the best thing in the world.” Claudia, an undocumented immigrant, knew that she needed “a school that had private funds.” Her entire college search revolved around finding places that might fund her.

Although worries about academic readiness almost never surfaced in the focus groups or interviews as reasons for changing college plans, students are nonetheless keenly aware that they might not achieve the degree. Walter was typically eloquent in voicing the realistic fear of taking on huge debt without ever achieving the degree.

For most of your childhood they send you through school and they push education so hard. And then, when you finally get--when it’s time to go to college, they hit you with a big, fat bill. Okay, we want you to go to college. You live in a society where you can’t survive unless you got to college, but let’s charge you millions of dollars and kind of set you up to fail. And I think: that’s retarded. So another reason I was, like, I don’t think I want to go to college and be in debt the rest of my life. I don’t want to go to college where, yeah! I’ll get so excited. Be there for a month, have all these loans and then I drop out. And then I have to—I don’t have that fancy job. I don’t have all that money coming in and I’m kind of screwed. I’m not in school and I have a huge bill to pay off. Really, it’s scary.

Many students and their families cannot cope with the reality of the gap between their financial aid package and their unmet need. During the summer, the careful spring choice of where to go to college collapses in the panic of how to pay for any college. “It’s just expensive and I’m just going to community college,” is a common student refrain according to a West Coast college transition counselor.

Willingness to take on debt and make other family sacrifices is a stumbling block for many low-income students and their families. An East Coast counselor said the top student in a 2006 advisory “was all set to go to college. She balked at taking out a loan and she’s still working at the mall 2 years later.” The counselor continued: “For them, \$4000 a year of loans is huge. Some parents and kids can’t see debt as an investment. Even if they understand it, they don’t believe it.” Other families are able to make the calculation that taking on debt, or even working second (or third) jobs is a reasonable investment in their child’s higher education. Michelle’s mother, unusually, forbid her daughter to take a part time job so she can concentrate fully on her college academics. Erica’s mother is unemployed but continues her struggles to pay the \$2000 a year she pledged for her daughter’s education. Middle-class Jonas was matter of fact about taking out loans. “I didn’t get a Pell grant but it said that I could get other aid, which sounds like other loans to me. So that’s that.” During their focus group, principals commented that some families are willing to take out loans but have no sufficiently credit-worthy member to sign a loan document. Summer is the season in which families take out loans, which means decisions and crises about loans take place when students lack ongoing contact with their college transition counselor. During the high school college choice process, principals and counselors noted, students don’t share (or sometimes even know) vital information like the credit status of their parent or even their own immigration status.

Big Picture college transition counselors guide students and parents through the complicated paperwork to fill out the FAFSA and other state, institutional, and scholarship aid applications. Financial aid offers—indeed, sometimes college acceptances themselves—are difficult to decipher by families making decisions over the summer. A California transition counselor complained about the state college system: “Some financial aid isn’t complete until the first weeks of the semester, or later!” She spent hours working with one of her graduates who “had a big crisis the first week of college because his financial aid wasn’t complete. It took a lot of scrambling. This could crash the whole system.” In addition to bureaucratic delays, financial aid award documents can be confusing, even for transition counselors. “All that stuff drives me crazy. Our job is hard enough.” Students themselves are poorly equipped to deal with glitches in institutional systems. For example, Kina found herself in limbo during the summer, after waiting patiently for her financial aid award letter while negotiating with university administrators for child care and family housing to accommodate her soon-to-be-born child. “I did apply but I never heard anything, [then] I thought there was no hope for me... When I didn’t receive financial aid, I decided I can’t go. I know there are loans, but how can I pay a loan back?” Kina blamed herself for not trying harder, despite her self-advocacy to arrange college as a single mother. By this point in the summer, it might not have been clear to her transition counselor that Kina was in trouble. “At the end of the school year, they just seemed they were fine,” said one counselor of a group of her students who appeared to have solid plans and financial aid but then floundered during the summer.

Students and transition counselors report that some students also receive mixed, confusing, or unfriendly summer signals from colleges about admission, housing, and other non-financial aid matters. According to transition counselors, some acceptances are conditional, confusing students about whether they are really in or not and sending the

message that they are not really being welcomed or invited to join the campus community. Another focus group member concurred: “They receive horrible letters from colleges about what they have to do to regularize their status.” The worst tale of feeling unwanted came from Tricia, even though the college was not directly at fault. Tricia had participated in various college preparation programs since the sixth grade, including a program in which she spent six weeks on a college campus after her junior year. She was accepted at 10 colleges, and chose an out-of-state college where she took part in a summer bridge program. In order to buy a plane ticket and computer, Tricia supplemented her minority scholarship with money she raised by selling raffle tickets and hosting bake sales. Toward the end of the summer program, Tricia became aware that a petition was circulating around the college and community protesting that the college minority scholarship was unfairly admitting students of color over more qualified white students. Tricia did not consider herself a “politically aware” person and found herself overwhelmed by the conversations taking place around her. She began to worry and felt that the pressure would affect her grades. After talking to her family and high school transition counselor, Tricia left the university after the first week of the fall semester.

Like Tricia, Claudia also took part in a summer bridge program. Claudia’s case shows that colleges can use conditional acceptances in positive ways. Required to enroll during the summer as a condition of admission, Claudia developed such strong social connections through the bridge program that these new friends helped her resist her parents’ push to return home. College administrators supported Claudia when she needed to return home for a family emergency, making it possible for her to complete her assignments and sending a strong message that they cared about her and wanted her to stay and be successful.

Financial aid plays a leading role in the Big Picture student stories. Uncertainty about how to pay for college, uneasiness about taking out loans, and inability or unwillingness to making financial sacrifices all interacted with students’ concerns about finishing the degree to make financial resources a major cause of the summer flood from one college to another (or to none). Students were also deeply sensitive to signals from colleges about whether or not they were really wanted.

### *Tacit Knowledge*

Even having a dream and feeling worthy, competent, and confident of achieving it does not mean students necessarily understand the steps to make it happen. Tacit knowledge is an aspect of practical intelligence (Sternberg, 1985) that includes an understanding of the way the world works and the ability to use this understanding to set and reach realistic goals. The world of postsecondary education and professional careers is a new one for low-income, first-generation college students. Big Picture students are unusual in having received a high school education featuring real-world immersion in their areas of interest. They come to the college transition with a history of independent learning around personal interests, developed through extensive internship experiences under professional mentors. Similarly, information about higher education and comprehensive assistance with the college admission process are woven throughout the secondary curriculum. High school staff who know students well guide them individually through the college search and application process. Even with these substantial advantages, this study shows, low-income high school graduates lack mastery of the body

of largely unwritten knowledge about colleges, admissions, financial aid, and career paths that middle class students possess by virtue of their social networks and family cultural capital (Conley, 2005). The summer behaviors of low-income students reflect incomplete practical knowledge of the college transition (Attinasi, 1989). Summer is also the period when students face the consequences of their sometimes naive consumer behavior during the senior-year admission period.

Students in our study sample expressed frustration at their limited tacit knowledge about the college admission process. Iris, for example, acknowledged the vital support of her college transition counselor, Kathy, but understood clearly that she faced a bigger challenge than students with a family history of higher education.

My family doesn't know that much about college. Doesn't know how it works. And all, or most of the things they say is 'How are you going to pay for college? Go to a community college.' And I have done all the paperwork by myself and with the help of Kathy. I only asked them their income, the taxes. But they have been very supportive of when I have a question to answer and provide me with the papers. But it has been hard because it almost seems that with me and my family, it's only me that can do it. And it's extra hard because there is no one telling me, 'Oh look here, this is how you do it.' I have Kathy and she has helped me a lot. But [I don't have] a sister to say 'This is how I did it. This is what you can do.' So everything is first try.

College transition counselors confirmed that students seek knowledge from sources beyond the school that may be unhelpful or even wrong in their advice. "Students are gathering bits and pieces of information from people who don't really know anything," one transition counselor concluded. In one case, a student decided over the summer to apply to Northwestern University because he assumed it was the California branch of Northeastern University. Kina assumed her financial aid award was in process and never thought to inquire until the middle of the summer. Not all of these mistaken assumptions are cleared up in the application process; indeed, many are never expressed verbally.

Unable to gauge the realism of their aspirations against a network of knowledgeable connections, Big Picture students can be naive consumers. The advantages of developing strong interests through internships can be attenuated if students are single-mindedly passionate about low-odds, highly competitive professions like fashion design, medicine, or veterinary science. College transition counselors told of students drawn to glamorous locations and institutions for superficial reasons like the size of dorm rooms, the availability of a pool, or the appearance of the campus. Like any student, Big Picture seniors choose colleges based on having some personal knowledge of the institution. Peer effects loom large. One advisor had a student who was very strong in her decision to go to beauty school, but her best friend was just following her there with no personal interest in cosmetology. Another school's seniors had a rush on massage school. A California transition counselor had to intervene with a group of seniors who all wanted to go to a particular fashion school to become designers. None of them was particularly fashion-creative, but they were all wooed by the pink campus! "There is a power of commercial appeal; it seems more real to them," said one transition counselor. Students favor their advisor's college, somewhere they have done a site visit, any place they know through personal or vicarious experience. Middle class students

also rely on their social networks and personal experiences to choose colleges, of course, but with larger, better-informed networks of strong and weak ties (Lin, 2001).

With a small personal network of college connections, students make judgments based on limited information. For example, Tammy rejected all public institutions because one of her aunts had a racist professor at a state university. None of the students in one West Coast advisory would apply to the closest California state university, because a student from the previous year had left there in his first week. Conversely, one transition counselor said, seniors consider a “safety school” any college where someone from the school had ever been accepted. Students can follow classmates, applying to colleges that are a good fit for the original applicant but not for the follower.

In the absence of nuanced knowledge of colleges, students sometimes make counter-intuitive decisions based on excitement and panic around deadlines, poor choice criteria, or failure to see themselves as consumers with the power of choice. Transition counselors find that seniors apply to too many colleges because of the mistaken belief that their chances will improve with additional applications and because it is so easy to add institutions on a whim via the common application. (Application fees are frequently waived for low-income students, removing any financial consequence to multiple applications.) Many students apply to new colleges over the summer. Transition counselors also remarked on the importance that students attribute to personal interactions with someone at the college. Christina, for example, talked to academic support staff at her first choice college to make sure she would receive the help she needed for her learning disability. When she was accepted: “I cried. I was so happy. But then I saw that I wasn’t in the pre-veterinarian program—that I had to complete my [pre-requisite] courses first, and I cried again.” She enrolled in this college, which was the first to accept her, even though a different college subsequently offered her more financial aid and the chance to enter directly into her chosen major. Another student had to be dissuaded from applying to a college she had no intention of attending because a representative at a college fair had spoken warmly to her and offered her a voucher to waive the admission fee. A third student resisted changing allegiance to a college that she admitted was a better fit for her interests because her original choice was so longstanding and the admission staff so welcoming.

Big Picture school staff and internship mentors work hard to help students research colleges and make informed choices. School-sponsored campus site visits are common, along with visits from college admissions officers and high school alumni who are currently in college. Still, the naiveté of students and the thinness of their college social networks leaves them prone during the summer to unsophisticated choices and vulnerable to scams. Transition counselors told stories of students receiving repeated phone calls from for-profit school recruiters pressing them to sign binding financial agreements. Students do not always share their plans and sometimes conceal problems or intentions from adults. This was fortunately not the case for a student who excitedly phoned his transition counselor over the summer with a question. “I found a scholarship on E-bay. Should I buy it?” After all, he said, it was a \$1000 scholarship on offer for only \$500. Wasn’t that a good deal?

The combination of naive consumer behavior during the college choice process and missing sources of practical higher education knowledge outside the high school can come to a head during the post-high school summer. Erica, for instance, decided as a

senior that she wanted to attend a well-known college somewhere new, exciting, and warm. Erica's mother had not graduated high school and could not help her daughter form a college choice set or decide among the half-dozen schools where she was accepted. Over the summer, Erica's grandfather died and her mother lost her job. Erica turned down all her acceptances and enrolled at the last minute in a local, less selective institution. Without having visited the southern campuses, weighed the reality of leaving home, or untangled her mother's problems, Erica was unable to follow through on her ambitious aspirations.

### Case Studies

So why do some students persist while others do not? Even for those low-income youth who manage to hurdle over teen pregnancy, poverty, a cumbersome and costly college admissions process, and other obstacles that often plague many poor, urban school communities, the summer hurdle exposes them to weaknesses in the system that often escape their more traditional, wealthier counterparts. The case studies that follow reveal a complex interconnected system consisting of relationships, resources, and tacit knowledge that is particularly important for low-income youth to navigate in order to make a successful transition to college. They also point to the need for students to be "holders of the dream" and the consequential role that institutions play in the summer transition process. Both Claudia and Kina were predisposed to pursuing a college degree, and both faced serious obstacles. Yet, only one of the two went on to enroll in college following the summer after high school.

In the case of Claudia, a low-income and undocumented youth residing in California, her ability to persist during the summer months following high school graduation relied heavily on a strong support system that included personal relationships and favorable institutional and state policies. At the core of her persistence, however, were her astute awareness of the process and her dream of becoming a college graduate. Claudia became predisposed to pursuing a college degree during her Big Picture high school experience. It was in her first year of high school that she first began to explore her passions and interests and, for the first time, faced the question of what steps she would take to get ready for college. By the spring term of her senior year, Claudia had identified, applied, and been admitted to the four-year college of her choice.

Claudia had been concerned about financial aid as an undocumented student. While California's AB 540<sup>4</sup> had opened her eyes to the possibility of a college education, she understood her limitations in procuring resources to pay for college. AB 540 would allow her to enroll at any California public college or university and pay resident tuition rates. Yet, without access to state or federal funds, she understood that she "needed a school with private funds." She opted for a four-year private institution, instead. Claudia's thorough understanding of the process and research of private institutions paid off. By the spring of her senior year, not only had she prevailed in getting accepted to the college of her choice, she had also been awarded an institutional scholarship that would allow her to afford tuition costs. Although her admission to the college was contingent

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<sup>4</sup> California Assembly Bill (AB) 540 passed into law in 2001. AB 540 exempts any student, other than a nonimmigrant alien, who meets a set of criteria, from paying nonresident tuition at any California public college or university.

on her successfully completing a five-week summer program for first-generation college youth, her dream of going to college was becoming a reality.

The traditional student would have spent the next three summer months enjoying friendships, vacationing with family, chatting with future classmates on Facebook, and shopping for essentials before leaving for college. For Claudia, however, what ensued during the summer months was not something that any teenager is prepared to handle. Claudia enrolled in the summer program at her prospective college. Her participation was interrupted halfway into the program when she was summoned by her mother to attend to a critical family matter. A family member had been charged and imprisoned for illegally residing in the country and risked deportation. Claudia, as the eldest child in the family and fluent in English, was needed at home. She approached the director of the program who was very understanding and granted her a temporary leave. She returned home for several days to help secure the family member's conditional release from prison and spent the next week working with attorneys and the court system to obtain a one-year stay for the family member. After an emotionally and physically exhausting period, she returned to the summer program. The director and the staff, who had been supportive during the ordeal, made accommodations for Claudia to complete the assignments she had missed. She graduated from the summer program and gained full admission to the college for the fall term.

Claudia returned home to prepare for college. Her family had been supportive of her plan to go to college, but when the reality set in that she would leave home, that support deteriorated. Claudia's family relied heavily on her. She explains that her "family was not ready to see her leave." She sensed a growing rift with her mother who wanted no part in helping her leave home. Claudia turned to her peers from the summer program, many of whom as first-generation college students were also dealing with similar circumstances, for moral support. She also turned to her high school teacher for advice. She found the strength to continue in their encouragement. In the end, however, it was her dream of graduating from college that kept her from faltering. All along, Claudia knew that "education is the only key; the only way out of this type of lifestyle. And as a woman, it is the only way not to depend on somebody, depend on a man."

Kina, a low-income youth from Chicago, began her senior year much like her peers, researching and applying to colleges and universities. She did not feel that she needed help with the college and financial aid processes and conducted her search independent of peer and adult support. She was successful in gaining admission to two four-year institutions, opting for a four-year public institution in Illinois. In March of her senior year, the news that she was pregnant temporarily distracted Kina from her dream of going to college. After a difficult decision process and assurances from her mother that she could manage college with a baby, she decided to go through with the pregnancy and her dream of going to college. Kina began researching childcare services and housing options. She learned that the college offered childcare services and would assist her in locating housing. The pressures of juggling schoolwork and making plans for motherhood, however, soon consumed her time, and Kina relegated her plans for college to the background of her concerns.

By late May of her senior year, Kina had not received information from the college regarding her FAFSA eligibility. She became concerned about paying for college. Devastated by the news that she had not been selected for a prestigious private

scholarship, she began to waver on the idea of going to college. She spent the early part of the summer researching ways to afford college and support her child in the absence of scholarship support. By mid-summer, however, Kina still had not heard anything from the university about financial aid. She became disillusioned with the prospect of college and “just gave up.” In retrospect, Kina regrets not applying herself more throughout the financial aid process and not seeking help with the college application process. Her mother continues to support and encourage her to pursue a college degree. Kina feels that she “should be in school” and plans to reapply for the fall of 2008. This time, however, she intends to ask for help with the college and financial aid application processes, she told her interviewer.

Many low-income students without a family history of higher education have a myopic view of the factors that unfold during the summer months after high school. Although Claudia held steadfast to her dream of attending college, her thorough understanding of the financial aid process and her ability to distinguish between public and private institutions allowed her to secure the resources needed for college and select a college that met her needs. She was also able to turn to her network of peers and adults for support during a time of uncertainty. It is also important for institutions to recognize and commit to the role that they share in supporting students during the summer transition phase. Despite having recruited Kina, the institution never communicated a financial aid decision to her and failed to follow through on her plans to enroll. In contrast, Claudia’s college afforded her the opportunity to engage in campus life during the summer and extended its support during her family’s ordeal. Claudia’s and Kina’s cases demonstrate that efforts to taper the summer flood must encompass and address both individual and institutional factors.

### Discussion

Brand new Big Picture high school graduates begin the summer as the beneficiaries of extensive support and college information from adult teachers, college transition counselors, and internship mentors. They have researched colleges, submitted applications, filled out financial aid forms, visited campuses, and received notices of admission. Their classmates have followed the same pre-college path; their parents have been involved in college preparation activities at the high school. Even with this exemplary socialization for higher education—even after being accepted to college—many low-income secondary school graduates waver or fall off the college path in the three months between graduating from high school and beginning their first year of college. Seen against the backdrop of the literature on higher education access and retention, the summer flood points to the inadequacy of college choice theory for explaining the post-acceptance fluctuations in the postsecondary plans of low-income students. Should students who fail to take up their offers of college admission be classified as having “access” to higher education? Should they be classified as failures in retention at the institutions where they have been admitted and indicated they planned to matriculate?

What is clear is that this group of college-admitted high school graduates continues to experience during the post-high school summer the range of challenges that the research literature identifies as obstacles to college entrance for low-income students,

and that these challenges keep students from making a smooth transition into higher education. Belief in the future, supportive relationships, tacit knowledge and savvy consumerism, and sufficient financial resources are all essential elements in successful paths to higher education. Students and their families need to put together a sophisticated sense of college as an investment, understand the relative risks in financial and personal terms, and be willing to work hard, make sacrifices, delay gratification, and have faith in their ability to succeed. This is the case for middle class students, like Jonas, whose family complemented his high school in providing him with solid postsecondary aspirations and expectations, tacit knowledge about college choice and the rules of the higher education game, and the willingness and ability to make financial sacrifices. When all of these factors are aligned positively, it takes a lot to knock a student off a college path. Jonas spent his pre-college summer anticipating “starting it off with my backpack, going to my first class. Knowing the students in the class. Getting to know the professor... Maybe starting a study group.” Carlos and Michelle also managed seamless transitions to college by virtue of the correspondence among their self-views, family support, college financial and bureaucratic support, and pre-entry understanding of the campus experience.

As wrap-around support from the high school fades, many students enter a summer period of mixed or negative messages about college from parents and peers. They struggle to put together money for the first year of college, even as they receive few--or even negative--signals from the institution about what it will be like to attend or whether the college really wants them there. Personal and family unfamiliarity with college interferes with a smooth college transition for many students in this group. Conditions associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, such as family instability (Claudia, Erica, Walter), pregnancy (Kina), undocumented immigrant status (Claudia and Maria), encounters with racism (Tricia), and pressure to remain home with non-college boyfriends or girlfriends (Tammy, Claudia, Iris, Walter) can shatter the fragile correspondence between knowledge, support, and will. Perhaps a student can overcome one hurdle to implementing their college plan, but they typically face several, and the challenges interact. When parents are ambivalent about a four-year college, for instance, they might be unwilling to co-sign a loan to help meet college expenses. When a first-generation student lacks a deep understanding of how colleges operate, she might fail to tap available support. When a summer crisis occurs, a student might reach the end of his already-stretched resilience. In sum, when one or more of the college factors slip out of alignment, as was the case for nearly all of the students over the summer, it is easy to fall off course. Unlike Jonas, these students do not spend the pre-college summer planning to enter particular college community and rehearsing what it will be like to attend. Instead, they revisit the very premise of whether and where to go to college.

Alignment can be regained through exceptionally strong support in one area that counteracts persisting problems in another. For instance, wavering students were brought back onto the college path by the insistence of parents on enrollment, the resolution of financial aid gaps, the provision of a college bridge program, and the communication of being wanted by the college. Of course students bring their own psychological traits to the college process, including varying degrees of motivation, resourcefulness, persistence, and directive beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Such individual level factors influence students' responses to the interacting effects of college support, finances, and

practical knowledge. Even exceptional resilience and motivation can fail to overcome pervasive, intersecting challenges however. “All types of things come up over the summer,” said one transition counselor, while another said of a prize student: “This is a motivated kid, and if her plan falls apart, what about the others?”

A careful hand-off between high school and college becomes essential in the absence of steady summer alignment among student self-view, supports, resources, and practical knowledge. The summer must feature a support system that is relevant to entering college. A continuation of intensive high school involvement would enable connected adults and effective structures to “stay late” after graduation, to make sure the student can follow through on senior year plans. For their part, colleges can “start early” by taking responsibility for working with their admitted low-income students in the summer before initial matriculation. This conception of starting early differs from the literature’s usual definition of early college awareness and exposure and instead refers specifically to a college or university beginning to work with its newly admitted students over the summer before the first year.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

As this and other studies have indicated, first-generation college-ready students are a particularly vulnerable population to serve. Just as this study corroborates other research findings about the unique characteristics of these young people, it echoes the literature’s recommendations for practice. New here is an emphasis on policy and practice for the period between college acceptance and matriculation. Before discussing how to support students who have arrived at the border between secondary and higher education, it is important to acknowledge the larger context of social and economic inequality in which this work takes place. Difficulty in actualizing the hard-won invitation to enter higher education relates to these wider social problems. Neither high schools nor colleges, for instance, can remedy the utter insufficiency of parents’ wages and government grants to meet the costs of higher education. Undocumented students, similarly, face problems that are intimately related to global economic patterns and national immigration policies. The credit crunch from the sub-prime mortgage lending crisis affects students’ ability to qualify for loans.

Having acknowledged the intractability of such structural problems and broad social policy issues, K-16 educators and policy-makers can still take action to reduce “drop-out” and enrollment plan changes during the summer before college. In brief, it is apparent that students who will be the first in their families to attend college need summer support in the following areas:

1. Continuing availability of expert guidance and support with the college admissions and application process from both high school and college staff.
2. Continuing assistance for students in finding the best possible pathway for their skills, interests, and post-secondary goals.
3. Ongoing social and emotional support for students and their families so that alumni can acquire skills for coping with current barriers, overcome unforeseen challenges as they arise, and engage in appropriate anticipatory socialization for the college experience.

4. Intensive and consistent financial guidance as students and their families interpret financial documents and contracts, make decisions among funding alternatives, and take actions within the complex world of grants, loans, scholarships and other financial aid options.

Programs designed to support these students must take these needs into account during the summer, as well as in high school and into the fall as students make the transition to new learning environments. Simply addressing one of the listed areas or covering all for a brief period of time, such as the second semester of senior year, will not address the multiple, interconnected, and persisting needs of first-generation college-bound students.

#### *The Importance of Transition Support from High School to College*

Once the music of graduation celebration fades and the summer after high school begins, new graduates enter a vulnerable time in their educational career when no institution “owns them” as students. College-accepted students have graduated from high school, so they are technically alumni living on their own. As such, most colleges do not consider these admitted students to be their responsibility until the fall. New graduates face months without the close guidance and support that they have become accustomed to at Big Picture Schools, and a lot can happen in these young people’s lives from mid-June to mid-August. As this study reveals, many students respond to the withdrawal of high school supports and the emergence of post-high school challenges by re-opening the entire college decision-making process. The loss of momentum in the ensuing “summer flood” of confused and lowered aspirations makes it crucial that high schools and colleges find ways to support the student during this transitional phase.

#### *Summer Support from the High School: Staying Late*

Although the Big Picture high schools have developed a college-going culture complete with sophisticated college preparatory curricula and advising, this study suggests more work needs to be done in developing best strategies for supporting the transition of students from high school to college. Highlighting the summer as an especially precarious time for recent graduates, our research findings show that even students who have benefited from considerable high school attention and support are confronted with decisions ranging from last minute college applications, to financial aid concerns, personal issues, and the campus transition itself. Left to confront these issues alone, students experience anxiety and concerns that make them vulnerable to abandoning their post secondary plans. The main implication of these findings suggests that students need to have someone available to assist them throughout the summer. The high school, in short, needs to “stay late” in order to assure the transition to college that has been so carefully nurtured by the high school actually occurs. It is imperative that these support systems be present to guide, support, and intervene throughout the summer as planning (preparation) and negotiating (financial aid and college choice) continues. Given the nature of the work, the logical decision would be to extend the contract of the high school transition counselor to include summer months. However, study findings suggest an alternative approach.

While the high school college transition counselor is the person responsible for sharing information and guidance on college entrance requirements and financial aid, it is

the advisor (teacher) whom students consistently cite as the closest non-family adult and the most significant person who has influenced their decision-making process. This discovery is not surprising given that students develop close and trusting relationships with their multiple-year advisors and advisory peers. Given this longstanding close relationship, best practice would be to extend the contract of the advisor through the summer for the purpose of ongoing support of advisory alumni. Naturally, the advisor would need to have a firm understanding of how college plans develop and the complexity of issues with which students are confronted in order to advise and coach students effectively through the “re-decision” phase. Findings also suggest that recent alumni could benefit from ongoing contact with peers from their advisory, who share their college socialization and four years of personal connections. Whether the advisor or transition counselor takes primary responsibility for following students through the summer, this population of students ideally needs considerable time and attention from someone with whom they already have a relationship. As a transition counselor said of her students: “They have bottomless need, and they want help from the person they know.”

The longitudinal study has already shown the benefits of a high school staying late with graduated students. After discovering the existence of the summer flood in the initial data collection in 2006, one principal extended the contract of the school college transition counselor over the summer of 2007. Working intensively with 24 graduated seniors and their families, this counselor cites extensive summer contact as the reason for her success in delivering 19 of the students to college in the fall and an additional 3 in January. (The only non-attenders were both new mothers.)

Of course most low-income, first generation students of color attend high schools without the Big Picture model of four-year advisories and focused college transition support. For these high schools, supports for college-bound graduates can be informed by the principles for practice that emerged from the summer flood study findings, including: ongoing interaction of recent graduates with high school staff; summer work with families; facilitated connections with other college-going peers; assistance with summer financial decisions; college anticipatory socialization activities, and so on.

### *Summer Support from the College: Starting Early*

The hand-off from high school to college is a critical component to ensuring a smooth student transition from high school to college. In an effort to acclimate students to college, many institutions of higher education have implemented academic enrichment or pre-collegiate programs to serve as a “bridge” between high school and college. Aspects of these early college programs appear to be making a positive difference in the lives of first-generation college-bound students by helping them connect with and navigate through college. Transition programs, such as TRIO’s Upward Bound program and GEAR UP, are valuable and necessary because they allow students to envision themselves in college, establish bonds with peers of similar backgrounds, and reaffirm their ambitions. However, such college awareness and preparation programs normally cease once the students have graduated from high school and been accepted into college. One implication of this study’s findings is that early college outreach programs could improve their ultimate effectiveness by continuing to serve students through the post-acceptance summer.

Some individual colleges and universities offer summer bridge programs on their campuses for selected students who have been admitted for the fall. Bridge programs normally target students who have one or more risk factors for college completion. This study shows that such bridge programs are relatively rare among low-income, first-generation students, especially those who attend less selective institutions. When present, campus bridge experiences appear to be quite successful in helping students acclimate to the university, understand its academic demands, and make important social connections to college peers. In Claudia's case, the bridge program made the difference between taking up her offer of four-year college admission and returning home to attend community college. Colleges and universities should consider broader adoption of summer bridge programs, structured specifically to address the issues that often derail students' summer plans.

Higher education institutions also need to continue reaching out to admitted first-generation students over the summer. True collaborative partnerships must include college enrollment management staff involvement before and beyond the application process. As a beginning step, the overall marketing of colleges must be more open and inviting to first-generation students and their families. Official communications over the summer must be timely, easily understandable, informative, and welcoming. Institutions must be more transparent in letting students know that they are wanted, valued and supported (Williams, 2002). Summer contacts also raise the probability that admitted students will communicate difficulties and concerns, enabling timely and targeted intervention by college staff. Summer outreach can also provide early warnings of issues that might require attention during the initial transition to college. For instance, one small college found that difficulty reaching incoming students over the summer was a significant predictor of college drop-out in the first year (Elling, VanDerLinden, Cicala, & Almost, 2008).

Study results suggest the important of college efforts over the summer to help students and their families anticipate what college will be like, plan for what they will do there, and make contacts with other students. Summer orientations, Facebook communities of incoming first-year students, outreach by resident assistants and other current students, and roommate contact information and pre-enrollment conversation guidance are just a few examples of pre-entry summer college interventions that would focus admitted students on anticipatory socialization activities and increase their store of tacit knowledge about managing the college transition.

Colleges could also effectively "start early" by involving admitted students' families in the transition to college and beyond. Colleges need to approach their relationships with the parents of low-income students differently than they do the relationships with highly involved middle-class parents. Institutions that actively reach out to parents to allay concerns they have about their child going to college could go a long way to improving enrollment and persistence rates among this population.

### *Conclusions on Summer Support for Students*

The summer is a pivotal time for low-income college-bound students, who need a variety of support in order to navigate these few months successfully. It is vital that the college transition support that high school offers continue after graduation. This support must be both technical (i.e. provide assistance with financial aid, etc.) and relational (i.e. help the

student manage anxiety). High schools must play a larger role, but colleges also need to start early with their new students by offering summer orientations, and/or bridge programs to help their first-generation college-bound students build a support system for the years to come. In this way each institution can support and guide the student through this vulnerable and uncertain time. It is also desirable for colleges and high schools to develop partnerships in which they work together over the summer transition to higher education.

### *Implications for Policy*

Policy makers must reduce the structural barriers to college attendance and develop new pathways to higher education that fit the needs of underrepresented groups. Like high schools and colleges, policy bodies need to become more familiar with and attentive to the nuances and needs of this population of students.

In addition to more available and consistent support for students and parents, it is clear that understanding and navigating through the financial aid process needs to be addressed. Students and parents spend considerable time trying to understand how to complete financial aid forms, the difference between aid (grants and scholarships versus loans), and deciphering the estimated costs of college. While colleges and policy makers debate the issue of who should pay for college, students and their parents are left trying to make sense of college financing. Now more than ever federal, state and higher education institutions need to take shared responsibility for developing funding strategies. Given that funding for first-generation low-income students, especially at a time of major budget cuts, is a low-level priority many institutions tend to provide financial aid packages overloaded with loans. This study shows that for students who are already unsure and uncertain about college, the challenge of trying to understand and navigate through financial aid compounds anxiety in an already tenuous situation. Ultimately the accrued stress decreases the chance of students matriculating to college. The significance of financial aid as a deal-breaker for students and their families is very real and has damaging consequences for everyone.

The implications of this study for creating a deliberate hand-off between high school and college have so far assumed that the task at hand is improved movement of high school seniors to traditional four-year college experiences. However, it could be that it is not the transition process that needs scrutiny, but rather the appropriateness of standard higher education pathways for many low-income high school graduates of color. Given that so few such students nationally follow the traditional college track of a four-year residential baccalaureate immediately after high school (Horn, Cataldi & Sikora, 2005), it is important to pay special attention to promising non-traditional programs that help young people earn degrees.

For instance, Big Picture schools are exploring partnerships between local employers and high schools in which high school graduates are employed by companies who wish to develop their future professional workforce and increase the ethnic diversity of their managerial ranks. In addition to placing recent high school graduates in internships or entry-level positions that lead to professional positions, employing organizations pay for part-time college attendance at two- and four-year colleges.

Non-traditional partnerships like this one are vital for first-generation college-bound students and their families because they provide financial support from an

internship salary and career placement support so that students and families can see the tangible result of their investment in time and money. Obviously the business community has an incentive to do this kind of programming in order to attract, train and retain highly qualified people of color. These kinds of mutually beneficial relationships warrant considerable exploration by policy makers and researchers in the years to come given their potential to provide an effective path for first-generation college-ready students to earn their degrees and enter the professional workforce.

### *Future research*

An obvious area for future research is empirical study of the extent of the summer flood among low-income students nationally. Given the competitive nature of selective higher education, no scholarly research has been published on national trends in the “summer melt” experienced by institutions. Colleges and universities that enroll significant numbers of low-income students might be more willing to share these figures, especially because no-shows do not currently figure in retention figures.

Further research is needed in identifying institutions with proven successful transition strategies. For example, it would be helpful to investigate those partnerships between high schools and colleges that have demonstrated successful practices on increasing financial literacy with students and parents. Best case examples would clearly identify how and through what methods financial aid information is provided early and made accessible to students and parents. There is a need for more research on how policy leaders, in the public and private sectors, plan to increase their efforts of developing more transparent and attainable funding sources for first-generation college-bound students.

It could be quite valuable to follow students’ real-time decision making over a summer (or summers) through repeated interviews, student blogging, and perhaps participant observations. Now that this study has surfaced salient summer themes, a repeated-measures summer study will enable a deeper understanding of how these themes play out for students in the Big Picture network and for other college-ready youth from similar communities. The research on college access could also benefit from experimental studies that investigate what kinds and sources of active monitoring and intervention really lead to improved college enrollment and persistence. The Big Picture longitudinal study team plans to initiate both of these studies as part of our ongoing research.

### Conclusion

College admission is not equivalent to college access. The same factors that reduce college aspirations in the national population of low-income students of color continue to operate in the summer after students’ admission. Researchers, policy-makers, and higher education institutions need to redefine college access and retention to account for pre-matriculation “drop-out” of students who have actually been admitted to college and who very much wish to attend. The Big Picture data suggest a new stage of college choice, the re-decision about where and whether to attend college at the point that existing theory and policy presume that the access process is formally completed. According to this study, the summer flood is not about academic preparation but rather

about aligning aspirations, knowledge, relationships, and resources so that students receive a necessary escort into the opportunity they have won.

The exemplary college preparation and transition support model of the Big Picture school network suggests that its students' post-graduation turbulence would be much more severe in less well-served populations of socioeconomically disadvantaged high school graduates. In fact, the Big Picture Company has already begun responding to these findings by stepping up alumni gatherings, extending college transition counselor contracts through the summer, and committing to the long-term continuation of this longitudinal study. Comprehending the obstacles facing students who intend to go to college and have already been accepted is the first step in increasing genuine college access. Using this understanding to support students during the hand-off between high school and college has practical implications for policy and educational practice. The construction of connectors between the different worlds of low-income communities and higher education is imperative in order to remove class bias in college choice and retention theory, remedy the barriers hindering college matriculation for low-income students, and eliminate the summer flood of qualified, would-be college students.

What is needed is a radical transformation at the high school and collegiate level. High schools must get better at preparing and becoming accountable for the post high school transition of students. Colleges must get better at, and be held responsible for, successful student matriculation and completion. Researchers and policy makers need to understand the summer flood and take action to reduce it. Aligning the complex hand-off of students from high school to college requires the consistent presence of all these parties to enable admitted students to follow the higher education pathway for which they are prepared.

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