

Chapter 3: Why Understand Research on College Choice?

*Don Hossler and
Megan Palmer
Indiana University (IN)*

A large majority of American families and state and institutional policymakers believe everyone in a modern society should obtain some form of postsecondary education and training. Indeed, a college degree continues to be viewed as the most certain path to personal fulfillment and economic success, and the decisions students make about their postsecondary educational plans have a lasting impact upon their lives. Numerous studies clearly demonstrate that increased levels of postsecondary education lead to higher salaries, longer working lives, more career mobility, and an increased quality of life (Bowen 1977; Leslie and Brinkman 1988; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Although economists frequently debate the nature and extent of the economic benefits of higher education for society and individuals, most of them assert that individual states, and the nation, benefit from a more educated citizenry (McGregor 1994; Wellman 1999). These benefits include improved economic competitiveness; higher levels of productivity; enhanced government revenues; enhanced social equality; and the enabling of citizens to achieve an important part of the American dream. In the last two decades, public policymakers have focused more attention on the role of postsecondary education in the development of an educated workforce, an essential component to economic competitiveness in a global society.

For all these reasons, high schools are feeling more pressure to increase the number of high school students continuing their formal education by earning a two- or four-year college degree. Even the proportion of graduating seniors going on to college has become one of the indicators used to evaluate the quality of education in many communities.

It is critical for admission professionals to understand factors that shape the college decision-making process and the stages students move through as they make decisions.

College guidance always has been one of the roles performed by middle school and high school counselors. Reflecting the importance of precollege guidance, the National Association for College Admission Counseling sets forth components of an effective precollege guidance and counseling program. It explains the role and functions of the school counselor in precollege guidance and counseling at middle and secondary school levels. However, because of inadequate funding of most public schools and the resulting high student-to-counselor ratios, the ability of middle school and high school counselors to perform this important role has been deeply hindered or even made impossible (McDonough, Korn, and Yamaski 1997). Nevertheless, the potential for strong precollege counseling programs to enhance postsecondary participation rates is recognized by many education professionals, including those in the school guidance community.

Because of the potential impact strong precollege guidance can have on students' post-high school decisions, it is important that college admission counseling professionals have an understanding of the college choice process. It is critical for admission professionals to understand factors that shape the college decision-making process and the stages students move through as they make decisions. These factors greatly influence the subsequent trajectory of students' work and personal lives.

This chapter examines relevant models of college choice to provide college admission counselors with a better understanding of the impact of family background and socialization, school experiences and student ability upon the decision to pursue a college degree. In addition, we provide a chronology of the college decision-making process. For example, we'll point out when most students begin to think seriously about going to college and what events help shape their decisions. College admission counselors will be in a better position to provide precollege counseling if they have a clear understanding of college

choice models and when students are most ready for information and assistance in their decision-making process.

INTRODUCING COLLEGE CHOICE MODELS

The college decision-making process presumably has always been multifaceted and, in many instances, complicated. For example, as early as the 1920s education researchers discussed how the college one attended had great bearing on one's future (Comfort 1925; Halle 1928). Predictably, as more high school graduates began pursuing postsecondary education, the process by which students made their selections came under greater scrutiny. This was particularly true beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, when many of the existing models of college choice were introduced.

The vast majority of studies on college choice utilize one of three approaches: economical, psychological or so-

ciological (Bateman and Spurill 1996; McDonough 1997; Stage and Hossler 1989). However, in many college choice studies these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they have a great deal in common and are combined to help explain college choice (Stage and Hossler). A brief overview of each of these approaches is presented along with commentary on how high school counselors may apply these models.

MODELS USING ECONOMICS AS A LENS

Generally speaking, college choice models that use economics as a lens approach college decision making as a rational process. That is, economic studies view college as an investment decision and assume students seek to gain the maximum return on their investment. Such analysis is focused on how broad issues such as price, cost and market forces influence students' decision making (Heller 1997; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Zemsky and Oedel 1983; Leslie and Brinkman 1988). These models look at the influence of tuition costs and financial aid on college choice. For example, there are noteworthy differences in the way students from low-income families and those from higher-income families respond to college costs (Paulsen and St. John). Not surprisingly, students with fewer financial resources responded more negatively than their wealthier counterparts to inadequate forms of financial aid. Likewise, a more recent study reported that African American students were more concerned about college costs when choosing a college than their white peers (St. John, Paulsen, and Carter 2005).

The economic approach to understanding the college choice process reminds us that guidance about financial aid is crucial. It also suggests that information on accessing grants, work-study and other forms of financial support must be presented early in the college choice pro-

cess. This means that financial aid "nights" and similar activities should be made available to students and their parents as early as the ninth grade. Waiting until the senior year may mean that lower-income students and some students of color will place unnecessary limits on their college choice.

MODELS USING PSYCHOLOGY AS A LENS

College choice models that draw on the discipline of psychology tend to focus on individual actions of students in the college choice process. These models often examine the influence of others, campus climate, cost, and academic programs on student choices. Many of these studies are longitudinal, focusing on the stages students go through when deciding on a college. These models also provide insight into the timing of various aspects of the decision-making process.

For example, D. W. Chapman developed a causal model, which attempts to demonstrate the relationships between student and institutional characteristics and college decision making (Chapman 1981). In addition, quite a number of studies produced multi-stage models. The first of these may have been Ihlanfeldt's funnel concept, in which students pass through the categories of prospect, applicant, admit, and matriculate (Paulsen 1990). Shortly after this approach, numerous researchers proposed multi-stage models of the college choice process. These are highlighted in Table 1.

The Hossler and Gallagher three-stage model of college choice was designed to provide a framework for existing research on student decision making. As outlined in Table I, the three stages in this model are (1) predisposition; (2) search; and (3) choice. A unique attribute of this model is the focus on the student rather than the institution (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999). Of the models dis-

TABLE 1: Models of the stages in college choice

Hanson and Litten (1982)	Deciding to go to College			Investigating Colleges		Application, Admission and Attendance	
Jackson (1986)	Preference			Exclusion		Evaluation	
Hossler and Gallagher (1987)	Predisposition			Search		Choice	
Chapman (1981)	Search			Choice			
Kotler and Fox (1985)	Generic Alternatives (college, work, military)	Product Form Alternatives (private or public)	Total College Set	Awareness of Set	Consideration of Set	Choice Set	Decision