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FINDING YOUR FIT: AN EXPLANATORY MIXED-METHODS STUDY ON STUDENTS'  
CHOICE TO ATTEND A SMALL, SUBURBAN MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

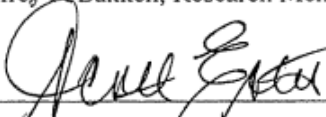
A Scholarly Research Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

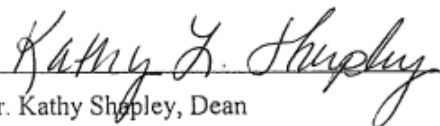
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## ABSTRACT

Community colleges, known for their open access and inclusion, have seen consistent enrollment declines for several years. At Outward Flats Community College, the research setting in this study, student enrollment has consistently declined and a widening admission yield gap between students of color and white students occurred. The researcher utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to first collect quantitative through a survey prior to collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. The researcher sought to explain students' enrollment decisions and explore the extent to which these decisions vary by race. Quantitative results indicated that students' decisions to attend the research setting were influenced by cost, campus location, academic programs, availability of financial aid, and campus size. Using One-Way ANOVAs, the researcher found statistically significant differences between African American/Black and White students. Compared to White students, African American/Black students were more influenced by college reputation, social activities, faculty expertise, educational facilities, guidance counselors, college advertising, and college published materials. Implications for practice include diversifying institutional marketing and communication strategies and framing the institution's view of students as customers.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 31% of undergraduate college students in the United States were enrolled in community colleges in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Given the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions have seen stark declines in student engagement and enrollment. Sprehe (2021) noted that “At most higher education institutions in the United States, the global pandemic, a stressful election season, social unrest, and economic uncertainty have meant enrollment managers are scrambling to meet their current enrollment and retention goals” (p. 3). Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center indicates that enrollment of first-year students at public two-year institutions has consistently decreased since the spring 2019 semester (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). Additionally, the same data, disaggregated by race, indicates drastic declines in the enrollment of first-year Latinx and Black students at public two-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022).

Acknowledging the access and equity that community colleges facilitate and promote is important to this study. Kurlaender (2006) poignantly stated, “Community colleges are important vehicles for moderating inequalities in educational attainment because they offer noncompetitive access to higher education to socially, financially, and academically disadvantaged students who otherwise would not be able to enroll in college” (p. 7). The alarming pattern of declining enrollment, however, at public two-year institutions far exceeds enrollment declines in public four-year, private non-profit four-year, and private for-profit 4-year institutions. Still, enrollment managers and admission teams at community colleges continue to work towards meeting

institutional enrollment goals. A clear understanding of students' choice to attend community colleges, then, arguably becomes quite important.

In the remaining portions of this chapter, the researcher will provide a review of relevant, existing literature as well as background information about the institution in this action research study. The researcher will introduce the study's research problem and also articulate the purpose of the study, the study's research questions, and the definitions and guiding assumptions. The researcher will close this chapter with a discussion of the study's significance and a brief description of how the five-chapter action research report is organized.

### **Review of Relevant, Existing Literature**

Much of the existing literature on students' choice to enroll in community colleges indicates cost and affordability as driving factors (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Somers et al., 2006; Wood & Harrison, 2014). In a qualitative study involving focus groups conducted by Somers et al. (2006), the researchers found that the most frequent comment from their participants about cost was about "sticker price" rather than "net price" with net price being the sticker price minus a students' financial aid (p. 62). Many of the students in this particular study said they could not afford more expensive options, and one specifically said, "[It was] an economic decision. I wasn't eligible for aid and this is the cheapest place to go" (Somers et al., 2006, p. 62). This particular finding suggests a basic and broad understanding that community college is indeed affordable.

In a quantitative study conducted via a survey, Barreno and Traut (2012) found cost to be the fourth most important of 12 factors pertaining to choosing a community college. The factors, adapted from those identified by researchers not named in the study, and in order of most important to a students' decision, included transferability of courses, available academic

programs and quality, campus location, cost, available educational facilities and technology, advice from family friends and high school staff, financial aid, college reputation, campus safety, college web site, campus activities and recreational facilities, and available athletic teams and sports (Barreno & Traut, 2012). One interesting thing to note in this study is the researchers' reaction to cost being the fourth most important factor. In fact, Barreno and Traut (2012) wrote, "In contrast to what might be expected, cost was only the fourth factor" (p. 868). Perhaps the researchers had an informal hypothesis that cost would more of a driving factor than it was in this study.

Stokes and Somers (2009) applied a statistical framework to data from the 1996 National Postsecondary Aid Study in order to examine the ways that price response influences students' college enrollment choice. They indicated, "The influence of tuition and fees is significant in this study" (Stokes & Somers, 2009, p. 9). The researchers found that high tuition had a negative impact on students' decision to attend a two-year institution. Consistent with other research that indicates cost as a driving factor in students' choice attend community colleges, Stokes & Somers (2009) found that students who pay low tuition, less than \$1,958, are more likely to choose a community college.

Of particular importance to this action research study, the researcher also found a substantial amount of this research that centers racially diverse students including Latino students (Kurlaender, 2006), and Black male students (Wood & Harrison, 2014) and their choice to enroll in and attend community colleges. In fact, Joshi et al. (2009) found that "Race does play a significant role in predicting the choice of two-year versus four-year college. White students are more likely to choose a four-year college compared to students of color" (p. 819). In relation to the Joshi et al. (2009) finding, an African American male student participant in a study

conducted by Somers et al. (2006) reported that college attendance messaging was different for him compared to his wealthy White classmates. The messaging he perceived was centered on a thought that he was not college material. Interestingly enough, Somers et al. (2006) found that these types of “negative message about postsecondary education made the student even more determined to attend college and to ‘beat the odds’” (p. 64).

Kurlaender (2006) performed quantitative statistical analysis to explore four potential explanations pertaining to community college and four-year institution attendance by race: socioeconomic status, degree intention, prior academic achievement and preparation, and differences among state postsecondary structures. The findings of Kurlaender’s (2006) study indicated that Latino students are more likely than their white and African American peers to choose a community college rather than a four-year institution. Interestingly enough, the quantitative statistical analysis performed by Stokes and Somers (2009) found that Latino students are less likely to choose a two-year college.

Wood and Harrison (2014) specifically studied Black male students and their decision to attend community college. Through their quantitative statistical analysis, they found that Black male students chose their community college based upon “having a degree in their chosen field, the coursework/curriculum, job placement record, availability of financial aid, and academic reputation” (Wood & Harrison, 2014, p. 93). Another interesting finding from Wood and Harrison (2014) is that in comparison to students who chose four-year institutions, students who chose community colleges placed an emphasis on their school of choice being the “same one as their parent attended” (p. 92).

Bers and Galowich (2002) conducted an explanatory mixed-methods study to explore the role of students’ parents in the community college choice process. The findings indicated that

“Parents value student outcomes that relate in large part to academic achievements and increased focus and confidence, including earning credits and GPAs that will transfer, improving academic skills, gaining a sense of direction, and improving self-confidence” (Bers & Galowich, 2002. p. 71). Consistent with other research that indicates cost as a driving factor in a student’s choice to attend a community college, Bers and Galowich (2002) found that “for most parents of community college students, finances are a significant reason their sons or daughters attend the community college” (p. 73). Bers and Galowich (2002) also found that nearly 60% of parents initiated the idea of attending community college to their son or daughter. Thus, parents and family members of students undoubtedly influence college enrollment and attendance decisions.

### **Background Information**

At the small, suburban Midwestern community college in this action research study, student enrollment has consistently declined since fiscal year 2017. Through completed data analysis beginning in fall 2019, the admission team and strategic enrollment committee also discovered a widening admission yield gap between White students and students of color (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2022). More specifically, the admission yield rate for students of color was 34.23%, 34.67%, and 33.58% for fall 2019, 2020, and 2021, respectively (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2022). The admission yield rate for White students was 49.16%, 49.16%, and 50.73% for fall 2019, 2020, and 2021, respectively (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2022).

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

### ***Research Problem***

Enrollment has declined for seven years and there is widening admission yield gap between White students and students of color at a small, suburban Midwestern community college.

### ***Research Purpose***

The purpose of this study is to explain students' enrollment decisions and explore the extent to which these decisions vary between students of color and white students.

### ***Research Questions***

This scholarly action research study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Why do students choose to enroll at a small, suburban Midwestern community college?
2. In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students?

## **Research Design and Framework**

The principal student investigator in this scholarly action research study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed method design. The process of conducting interviews (qualitative data collection) before surveying respondents aligns with the strong point that Mertler (2020) made about the exploratory mixed-methods design and essentially the inherent benefit of a stronger survey that is more credible given its foundation informed by themes from the qualitative data collected first.

## **Definitions**

**Admission Yield:** The percentage of admitted students who choose to enroll at a higher education institution, and in the case of this research, a small, suburban Midwestern community college.

**Admission Yield Gap:** A comparison of the admission yield of particular students; in the case of this research, White students and students of color at a small, suburban Midwestern community college.

**Admissions Team:** Four full-time staff members consisting of two Admissions Advisors, one Admissions Representative, and one Director of Outreach and Recruitment.

**Fiscal year:** A year of business in higher education; more specifically, the time period between July 1 and June 30 of any given year

**Strategic enrollment management committee:** Led by the Vice President of Student Affairs, the Vice President of Academic Affairs, and the Director of Institutional Effectiveness, a group of staff and faculty who guide the institutional enrollment process.

**Students of color:** Students who do not self-identify their race as White.

**White students:** Students who self-identify their race as White.

## **Challenges/Obstacles**

The principal student investigator in this scholarly action research study is aware of the potential challenge in collecting data from students who did not choose to attend the small, urban Midwestern community college. Additionally, considering these particular students chose to attend a different higher education institution, the researcher in this study anticipates a significant challenge in obtaining IRB approval from each of the institutions participants and respondents



attend. A lack of empirical studies about admission yield gaps represents another challenge in this scholarly action research study.

### **Significance of the Study**

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center indicates that overall enrollment of first-year students at public two-year institutions decreased by 2.3% from spring 2019 to 2020, by 9.5% from spring 2020 to 2021, and by 7.8% from spring 2021 to 2022 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). Data from this same report disaggregated by race indicates a stark decline of Latinx and Black first-year students at public two-year institutions. Enrollment of first-year Latinx students at two-year institutions dropped by 18.5% from spring 2020 to spring 2021, and enrollment of first-year Black students at two-year institutions dropped by 19% from spring 2020 to spring 2021 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). This national data, combined with the widening admission yield gap data at the small, suburban Midwestern community college in this study leads the principal student investigator to believe that research on this alarming pattern of decline is necessary.

This scholarly action research study has the potential to be beneficial first, and foremost, to the small, suburban Midwestern community college. The admissions team and strategic enrollment management committee will benefit from an understanding of the outcomes based on the research questions in this study. Additionally, two-year institutions across the country will benefit from the findings of this study given the drastic decline in enrollment at two-year institutions as well as the drastic decline in enrollment of Latinx and Black first-year students at two-year institutions.

## **Organization of the Research Report**

In this chapter, the researcher provided a review of relevant, existing literature as well as background information about the institution in this action research study. The researcher introduced the study's research problem and articulated the purpose of the study, the study's research questions, and the definitions and guiding assumptions including challenges and obstacles. The researcher also provided a discussion of the study's significance and described who will benefit from this study. The researcher will present a literature review in chapter 2, describe the study's research methodology and methods in chapter 3, report and discuss this action research study's findings and results in chapter 4, and will conclude the study's final report by discussing implications for practice and offer recommendations for future research in chapter 5.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

A student's enrollment decision, especially at a community college, represents a unique topic in higher education today. Even though community colleges still operate with open access in terms of their admission procedures, Milliron and Wilson (2004) acknowledged the deeper purpose these institutions serve beyond simply providing students with their first two years of a bachelor's degree. For instance, community colleges represent an important element of the American economy during times of both economic concern and growth. Community colleges also drive social mobility especially for students from underserved populations.

Extant literature exists exploring and identifying students' decisions to pursue a baccalaureate education (Jepsen & Montgomery, 2008; Joshi, Beck, & Nsiah, 2009; Morgan, 2021; Stokes & Somers, 2009;). The principal investigator in this action research study believes that in general, community colleges represent a non-school-of-choice decision. Additionally, as noted by Kurlaender (2006), "The role that community colleges play in students' educational attainment process is hard to characterize, partly because community college participants vary widely in their age, educational background, and purpose of participation" (p. 9). Much of the importance of this study, then, centers on the difficulty in understanding community college enrollment choice and the ways that the current economic landscape and global pandemic continue to challenge institutional recruitment and enrollment management, especially at community colleges (Emery, 2020; Hutton, 2021).

This chapter presents an in-depth review of relevant, existing literature on students' choice to enroll at and attend a community college. The principal investigator of the study begins with a thorough review of applicable theoretical models and economic concepts centering on

college decision-making. The consistent influential factors pertaining to community college choice follow as well as an acknowledgement of literature that differentiates community college choice by race. Finally, the author recognizes and discusses literature highlighting the contemporary response to enrollment management challenges. The chapter ends with a transition to the study's research methodology.

## **Theoretical Frameworks and Economic Concepts**

### ***The Three-Phase Model for Student College Choice***

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model for students' college choice guides many current studies and literature (Chapman et. al, 2018; Somers et al., 2006; Townsend, 2009). Influential individual and organizational factors interact in each of the phases to "produce outcomes" that "influence the student college choice process" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 208). In their landmark study, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify the first phase, predisposition, as a "developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school" (p. 209). Students' individual factors in the first phase include their characteristics, their relationships, and previous educational activities. The organizational factors in the first phase include institutional characteristics, and in this phase, institutions have little influence on a students' enrollment choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The two outcomes for students in the predisposition phase are either higher education enrollment or another option.

If a student chooses to enroll in higher education, they progress to search, the second phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model. In this phase, students' individual factors include their "preliminary college values" and their "search activities" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 208) while the organizational factor is an institution's recruitment activities, which have

a higher potential for influencing a students' enrollment decision. The ideal outcome for students in the second phase is an identification of choice institutions. The final phase in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is choice, and this phase is quite clear in that students make their enrollment decision. The influence of an institution's direct work with prospective students in Gallagher's (1987) final phase is not as obvious. Several factors including resources, staff numbers, and technology influence the way admissions and enrollment management staff work with prospective students. Thus, the current study aims to elucidate some of the institutional factors which influence students in this final phase of college choice.

### **Community College Choice Model**

A more recent qualitative study via focus groups conducted by Somers et al. (2006) identified a "model of community college choice with 10 factors that can be categorized into three areas: aspirations and encouragement, institutional characteristics, and finances" (p. 64). The focus groups in the study involved 223 students enrolled in required courses at community colleges: three located in urban settings and two in rural settings (Somers et al., 2006). Of the 223 students, 60% were female and 40% were male. Over half, 53%, of the students were age 22 and under. The other predominant age ranges of the students were 21% ages 22 to 30 and 19% ages 30 and above. Racially, 44% of the students were White, 39% of the students were African American, 4% were Asian, and 8% identified as multi-ethnic or other. Nearly half of the students (49%) had mothers who obtained some post-secondary education compared to 34% of fathers. Just over one third of students (34%) were identified as low income using Pell grant eligibility information. Further explanation of the three areas encompassing the 10 factors follows.

### ***Aspirations and Encouragement***

Factors in this area include both positive and negative support to students including higher school counselors, teachers, friends, and family (Somers et al., 2006). Many of the students in the study “perceived an overriding message of ‘You are *not* college material’” (Somers et al., 2006, p. 64). This concerning perception was directly at odds with the many students in the study with transfer goals to eventually earn their four-year degree. Some of the students in the study were motivated to change careers while others imagined future career advancement through their educational attainment. The researchers found that these concerning messages above were met with tremendous grit and resilience. One student said, “They can’t ever take that achievement [associate’s degree] away from me. It’s mine, no matter where I go, I *am* college educated” (Somers et al., 2006, p. 60). Positive sentiment and determination like this became apparent throughout the study.

### ***Institutional Characteristics***

In line with existing findings, location played a key role for students and their enrollment decision in the Somers et al. (2006) study. Both urban and rural students noted the importance of location, and the researchers articulated an “equal” application of this for students down the road from an institution in an urban setting or nearly an hour drive from home in a rural setting. Institutional flexibility, access to financial aid, academic programs, and campus support figured into this category (Somers et al., 2006). More specifically, students shared their positive views of more attention from and contact with staff and faculty. Students also perceived employers to value the programs at their colleges. Finally, the practicality of the two-year degree and convenient enrollment process stood out to students. While the institutional settings in this study

(three urban and 2 rural) differ from the suburban setting in the present scholarly action research study, the findings remain interesting.

### ***Finances***

Not at all a surprise, nearly every student in the study conducted by Somers et al. (2006) indicated cost of attendance as important to their decision. They indicated financial aid as an important means to pay their costs and paid attention to the sticker price of an institution. The researchers defined net price as the “sticker price minus financial aid” (Somers et al., 2006, p. 66). Even though community college generally costs less than a four-year institution, students mentioned their receipt of loans. Many students noted the importance of the work earnings in terms of costs and some even benefited from employer-sponsored tuition assistance.

### **Community College Enrollment and the Economy**

Scholars and professionals alike believe the economy influences a student’s choice to pursue community college enrollment and attendance (Hilmman & Orians, 2013; Joshi et al., 2009; Pennington et al., 2002). In fact, “The ad hoc theory believes that there is little motivation for people to enroll in community colleges to advance their value in the job market during good economic times” (Pennington et al., 2002, p. 432). A correlational analysis conducted by Pennington et al. (2002) on six economic variables, the unemployment rate, the Consumer Price Index, Gross Domestic Product, Dollars Disposable Income, Personal Consumption Expenditures, and Average Hourly Earnings of Production workers, yielded both strong negative and positive correlations. For the current action research study, focus remains on the unemployment rate. In their study, Pennington et al. (2002) determined a positive correlation between the nation’s unemployment rate and community college enrollment. In other words, increased unemployment rates lead to increased community college enrollments.

Hillman and Orians (2013) performed a fixed-effects panel data model study to estimate how community college enrollments change considering local unemployment rates given the fact that community college enrollment soared to record breaking levels during the Great Recession in the mid-2000s. The researchers used human capital theory where humans believe enhanced education to be influential in their future success, individuals who experience job insecurity or loss may be more apt to pursue education to “retool” for an everchanging economy (Hillman & Orians, 2013, p. 765). Hillman and Orians (2013) found that demand for and enrollment in community college indeed increases during times of economic decline and uncertainty. More precisely, the researchers determined that total enrollments in metropolitan areas were expected to “increase by 2.6 percentage points for a one percentage point change in unemployment” and a “slightly smaller” unemployment elasticity in micropolitan areas. areas that have smaller “urban cores of 10,000-50,000 people” (Hillman & Orians, 2013, p. 768). This finding is relevant and of interest to the principal investigator in the present action research study given the suburban institutional setting.

### **Consumer Risk and Higher Education Enrollment**

Heckman and Montalto (2018) performed statistical functions including sensitivity analyses and logistical regressions on existing data from the 1997 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) to explore and understand the influence of consumer risk on students’ higher education enrollment choices. The NLSY97 data provides information on the transition from school to work and adulthood (Bureau of Labor and Statistics 2006). From the overall NLSY97 sample, Heckman and Montalto (2018) strictly selected individuals who had either graduated high school or obtained their GED by the age of 20 given their focus. The researchers determined a significant, positive association between consumer risk tolerance with



greater likelihoods of higher education enrollment. More simply, the findings suggest that “more risk-tolerant individuals are more likely to enroll in higher education” and that “higher education may seem more risky than entering the labor market directly” (Heckman & Montalto, 2018, p. 190). Additionally, because risk increases with education, risk tolerance has a lesser influence on a students’ decision to enroll at a two-year versus four-year institution (Heckman & Montalto, 2018). Although members of the cohort in the NLSY97 data set represent experiences of traditional students, insights from the results remain valuable to the researcher in the present action research study and perhaps necessitate comparison in two-year institutional enrollment between traditional and non-traditional students.

Townsend (2009) offered an investigation of college choice for non-traditional students in her descriptive, exploratory mixed methods study on the decision for students with bachelor’s degrees who chose to obtain an education credential from a two-year college. The sample for this study included 89 respondents: 50 were women (56%) and 39 were men (44%). Racially, 73% were White, 53% were married, 54% had one or more children, and 71% worked full-time jobs. At the urban Midsouth technical institute in the study, Townsend (2009) found that 62% of respondents indicated “preparation for a career change”, 34% indicated “advancement in my current field of employment”, and 15% indicated “preparation for employment” as their reasons for choosing to study at a two-year college (p. 277). Findings from this study connect with the consumer risk concepts highlighted in Heckman and Montatlo’s (2018) study described above; in fact, Townsend (2009) found that, “Ninety-five percent indicated it had been their experience that ‘good job opportunities existed’ in their two-year field of study, but only 45% said this had been their experience in their four-year field of study” (p. 278). Students clearly demonstrated

risk tolerance, and in line with Heckman and Montatlo's (2018) findings, perhaps their completion of a bachelor's degree program positively influenced their level of risk tolerance.

### **Return on Investment**

Dadgar and Trimble (2015) conducted a study on the return on investment of sub-baccalaureate credentials and found that "associate degrees and long-term certificates on average had quarterly earnings returns of nearly \$2,000 for women and \$1,500 for men, whereas short-term certificates had returns of about \$300 for both men and women" (p. 400). The researchers also found an association between earning an associate degree or long-term certificate and both an increased likelihood of employment and hours worked. Additionally, Dadgar and Trimble (2015) found varying associations with regards to wage growth. An associate degree in nursing showed the highest wage growth at 37% whereas an associate degree in humanities and social sciences showed little to none (Dadgar and Trimble, 2015). The principal investigator in the present action research study remains interested in exploring and analyzing students' perceptions about the influence of the economy on their success as well as their beliefs regarding a return on their community college investment.

Wickersham (2020) developed a study emerging from a National Science Foundation four-year research project on community college graduates transferring into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors at 4-year institutions. Students were recruited from one transfer-focused community college and two comprehensive community colleges. The researcher engaged in participant sampling and had a sample of 34 total students and ultimately developed a stable model using data from 18 participants. In Wickersham's (2020) longitudinal, explanatory sequential mixed methods research project payoff (return on investment) was the most influential factor. Participants in this study "were seeking to get the best and most for their

money” (Wickersham, 2020, p. 115). This desire connected with the participant’s present view of time. Fit represented the second most motivating factor for students in Wickersham’s (2020) study. This *match* of sorts for the participants in the study consisted of the campus environment, size, programs, and academic preparation. Overall, fit may lead students to their higher education goals or even opportunities outside of higher education (Wickersham, 2020). The remaining factors, in order of importance, included transferability (to another institution), connection to a particular location, flexibility, and mobility, especially as it pertains to career advancement.

### **Influential Factors for Community College Choice**

#### ***Cost***

Cost of attendance (price) typically drives students’ enrollment choices including those who choose a two-year institution (Denning, 2017; Kurlaender, 2006; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2009; Strawn, 2019; Wood & Harrison, 2014). In a quasi-experimental variation analysis, Denning (2017) used data from the Texas Education Research Center from school years starting from 1994 to 2012 that contained demographic and academic performance information for all students in public secondary education. The researcher focused on data from 5 institutions who expanded during this timeframe – Austin Community College, Lone Star College, Amarillo College, Houston Community College, and Hill college. The tuition data in this analysis came from the Texas Association of Community Colleges with information dating back to 1992. Denning’s (2017) findings suggested a price sensitivity unique to community college students throughout the state of Texas. More specifically, “a decrease of \$1,000 in tuition per semester would lead to an increase in community college enrollment for high school graduates of 5.1 percent (Denning, 2017, p. 176). The researcher also found that a reduction in community college tuition enhanced student enrollment among those who otherwise would not

have attended college and that nearly half of the students in the study planned to transfer to obtain a bachelor's degree. Practitioners may see the tuition decrease as too significant, and the emphasis on traditionally aged college students, high school graduates, presents a potential limitation of the analysis.

Participants in the qualitative study conducted by Somers et al. (2006) indicated price as a primary factor in choosing community college. Participants specified attention to the "sticker price" of attendance rather than "net price" which accounts for aid a student receives and some "simply described the community college as affordable in its own right" (Somers et al., 2006, p. 62). Additionally, community college enrollment seemed to be the best option especially for students' ineligible for grants and other forms of need-based aid.

Stokes and Somers (2009) performed quantitative research by means of an ANOVA and logistic regression analysis on existing data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study of 1995-1996 and the Beginning Postsecondary component of the survey to examine influencing factors for community college choice. The sample for this analysis was made up of 6,351 students: 1,814 of the students chose community college, and 4,537 of the students chose a four-year institution. In both the samples, female students made up the majority with 54.2% of the community college sample and 54.6% of the four-year institution sample. In the community college sample, 68% identified as Caucasian, 14.2% identified as African American, 12.4% identified as Latino, and 5.5% were all other ethnic groups. In the four-year institution sample, 73.4% identified as Caucasian, 10.4% identified as African American, 8.4% identified as Latino, and 7.4% were all other ethnic groups. In terms of age, 74.8% of the students from the community college sample were 22 and under while this same age group of students made up 96.7% of the students in the four-year institution sample.

Although this study considered seven factors: background characteristics, aspirations, high school experience, college experience, price and subsidies, debt variables, and Beginning Postsecondary Survey variables, price and subsidies represent significance given the strong connection to overall literature on community college choice. In terms of price, the researchers found that students who pay tuition in the amount of \$1,958 or less or who had a net cost of \$1,697 or less were more likely to choose a community college (Stokes & Somers, 2009). The age of this data (14 years) represents one limitation of the study and offers significance in favor of the present action research study.

Wood and Harrison (2014) studied community college choice specifically for Black male students. Like many other researchers, they analyzed existing information from a national data set, the Educational Longitudinal Study 2002/2006. Their sample was from 77,791 students Black male students of which 35,665 were enrolled in public two-year institutions and 42,126 were enrolled in public four-year institutions. The researchers explored seventeen independent variables including low expenses, availability of financial aid, courses/curriculum, school's athletic program, school's active social life, living at home, being away from home, low crime, job placement record, academic reputation, school's easy admission, degree in chosen field, racial makeup, school's size, school's geographic location, school same as one parent attended, and school's acceptance of college credit. For these variables, participants responded with not important, somewhat important, and very important. Wood and Harrison (2004) found that the top five selection factors for Black male students who attended public two-year institutions were (in order): degree in chosen field, courses/curriculum, job placement record, availability of financial aid, and academic reputation. Interestingly, these findings coincided with the data from Black male students who attended public four-year institutions, too. In terms of differences

amongst Black male students at these two different institutional types, students at public two-year institutions were more likely to base their enrollment decision on a desire to live at home, the school's easy admission process, the school being the same as one their parent attended, and the school's acceptance of college credit (Wood & Harrison, 2004). One finding in line with aforementioned studies included the predictive nature of low cost with community college attendance (Wood & Harrison, 2014). The disaggregation of this data informs the present scholarly action research study and presents a unique comparison opportunity.

Park and Assalone (2019) conducted a qualitative study to investigate community college choice for Asian American students. They conducted interviews with 49 transfer students in California; 25 attended public four-year institutions and 24 attended public two-year institutions. Park and Assalone (2019) combined open coding with codes drawn from existing literature as well as Perna's (2006) framework to compare data using the constant comparative method. The researchers determined cost as the number one influential factor. Students in the study commented about their family obligations, inability to afford a four-year college, and a necessity to work either part- or full-time (Park & Assalone, 2019). The recent nature of this study serves as a motivating force for the principal investigator in the present action research study.

Strawn (2014) specifically studied college choice for rural students in Virginia. In his narrative account, he compiled results from qualitative interviews from three rural students who intentionally chose to attend a local community college. The researcher found that rural students who chose community college considered cost (finances) an influential factor. By and large, students discussed their aid and scholarships, and one particular participant desired the "best return on investment" (Strawn, 2014, p. 75). This particular finding mirrors the finding about

students' desires around mobility in Wickersham's (2020) study. Although Strawn's (2014) study is specific to rural community college students, the principal investigator in the present action research study still sees value in the narrative student accounts (data).

### ***Location***

Participants in the qualitative study conducted by Somers et al. (2006) indicated a preference for attending community college in the "same community or section of town" (p. 62). In a related study, Jepsen and Montgomery (2008) performed qualitative research on existing data to explore community college choice for "mature workers" in the Baltimore Metropolitan Area with an emphasis on institutional location. The data was from a six-year longitudinal study conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor made up of over 150,000 workers aged 25 to 49 in the Greater Baltimore area. More specifically, within the sample, the average age was 38, 47% identified as female, 53% identified as male, 17% identified as Black just over 1% identified as Hispanic, and 37% had children at home. One stark finding suggested that "an additional mile of travel reduces the probability of enrollment by approximately 2.5%" (Jepsen & Montgomery, 2008, p. 68). Another interesting finding from this study is that community college enrollment would decrease by 19% if a student's nearest main campus became inaccessible. Finally, Jepsen and Montgomery (2008) found that women were more likely to choose a school close to them than men.

In the abovementioned longitudinal, explanatory sequential mixed methods research project conducted by Wickersham (2020), some participants indicated the importance of location in terms of the community college enrollment choice. One participant said, "I can commute [there] so I don't have to uproot my life and go live somewhere else" (Wickersham, 2020, p.

119). Other participants, however, were open to programs away from home and sought more of a general connection to a location.

### *Family*

Bers and Galowich (2002) conducted a mixed methods study in an affluent suburban area examining the influence of parents on students' community college choice. Of the 674 parents who were mailed the survey, 225 respondents completed it. The researchers initially mailed the survey to all 674 sets of parents and then mailed the survey to nonrespondents three weeks later. A majority of the respondents were mothers (73%) and 79% of respondents identified as Caucasian. In terms of education attainment, 49% of respondents were from households where at least one parent held a bachelor's degree or higher and an additional 38% were from households where at least one parent had attended college. Survey results indicated parental expectations for bachelor's degree attainment, and quite interestingly, two out of three parent respondents anticipated that "their students will earn an associate's degree first" (Bers and Galowich, 2002, p. 71). Findings also suggested that parents learn about community colleges from their personal contacts and college publications (Bers & Galowich, 2002). Connected to previously discussed literature, Bers and Galowich (2002) also found that most parents placed significance on cost for community college attendance. The researchers also found that parents both sought to be more involved in their student's registration and advising processes and craved more communication from their student's community college.

In the study that highlighted cost as an influential factor for community college choice, Somers et al. (2006) also determined a theme of peer and family influence. In fact, the researchers describe family as "honest brokers of information" compared to other influencers such as teachers and guidance counselors (Somers et al., 2006, p. 60). Generally, participants in



the Somers et al. (2006) study received encouragement from their parents to attend college. Specific attention to the relationships between first-generation college students and their parents is of interest in the present action research study given the potential over-representation of this student population at community colleges.

Joshi et al. (2009), like Heckman and Montalto (2018), performed a quantitative statistical analysis on data from the NLSY97. They found that medium and higher levels of parental income may lead a student to pursue a bachelor's degree (Joshi et al., 2009). Expectations held by parents with higher income and a greater level of education may influence their children's college choice (Joshi et al., 2009). This finding also reveals important socioeconomic equity implications in terms of comparing students from affluent backgrounds versus students from low-income backgrounds.

Olivarez (2020) conducted a qualitative study by means of semi-structured interviews on familial influence within the Latinx student population and grounded the study in a funds of knowledge theoretical framework which asserts that households and families accrue and share knowledge with one another. The sample in the study was made up of 13 students, and parents of five of these participants participated in two interviews ranging from 50 to 160 minutes. Olivarez (2020) found that first and foremost, Latinx parents encouraged their children to attend college given that they (parents) did not have the opportunity to do so. Parents also commented on their deep commitment and drive in terms of financially supporting their student(s); one even joked, "... if there isn't money I'll go and rob a bank!" (Olivarez, 2020, p. 28). In contrast to these findings, Perna (2000) commented that for some Hispanic/Latinx students, parental involvement could be limited due to lack of experience and knowledge.

In Wood and Harrison's (2014) study, they found that Black male students were more likely to choose their community college based on a desire to live at home, thus demonstrating parental influence. In a mixed methods study grounded in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model for Student College Choice conducted on the parents of high-achieving black students, Chapman, Contreras and Martinez (2018) found that all parents viewed higher education in a positive light and as a "form of social and financial mobility" (p. 37). Parents also articulated an awareness and consciousness of the ways in which race influences their student's experience, and more specifically, centered the importance of racial representation and a racially welcoming campus climate to uphold their student's mental health (Chapman et al., 2018). As such, the principal investigator in the present action research study remains interested in incorporating a campus climate element within the edited, existing survey instrument.

Morgan (2021) conducted a quantitative analysis via a survey using the Academic Motivation Scale College Version to explore the academic motivation of students enrolled in behavioral sciences courses at New York City community college. Available demographic information indicates a sample of 121 students of which 36 identified as male and 85 identified as female. The researchers found that extrinsic motivations most influence a student's decision to study at a community college. Also, students with a family member who attended college were more likely to be extrinsically motivated (Morgan, 2021). Example extrinsic motivations include developing specific job-ready skills, earning a higher wage at work, and obtaining and educational credential.

### **Racial Differences**

Kurlaender (2006) conducted a quantitative study using data from the nationally representative National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 made up of data from 24,599

eighth graders originally sampled in 1988 and followed over time through four additional phases of data collection. One parent from each of the eighth grade participants as well as two of their teachers and school principal were included in the sample. Kurlaender (2006) found that Latinx students are more likely to enroll in community colleges than baccalaureate institutions. Additionally, Latinx students with the same socioeconomic status as African American or White students are more likely to enroll in community colleges.

Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model for Student College Choice, Perna (2000) indicated that "African American college applicants were less likely than their White peers to enroll" (p. 71). Perna (2000a) also determined that educational expectations are less of a predictor of college enrollment for Black students compared to White students. The principal investigator in the present action research study believes this finding necessitates current research.

### **Contemporary Approach to Enrollment Management Challenges**

Four major challenges facing higher education enrollment include declining birth rates, college readiness, persistent budget constraints, and migration patterns (Emery, 2020). A declining birth rate leads to decreased demand for education, decreased college readiness may lead institutions to reconfigure development coursework and plans to support students as they become college ready, and enrollment pressures due to budget constraints may lead to more competition for fewer students (Emery, 2020). As noted by Hutton (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated enrollment declines across higher education institutions. A plethora of helpful resources including strategic enrollment management (SEM) concepts offer a framework for strengthening an institution and positioning itself for success. Enrollment management involves cohesive institutional goals, centers data in decision making, and calls for collaboration

(Emery, 2020). Hutton (2021) offered sage advice on SEM implementation including leaning in to the expertise of faculty given the potential for statistical and research skills necessary for success. Smith, Hyde, Falkner, and Kerlin (2020) discussed the importance of a collaborative approach in SEM implementation as it pertains to change management; after all, SEM typically calls for varying degrees of change.

### **Significance of the Study**

As noted throughout this chapter, existing data informs much of the community college choice literature (Joshi et al., 2009; Kurlaender, 2006; Pennington et al., 2010; Perna, 2000;; Stokes & Somers, 2009; Wood & Harrison, 2014;). Previous longitudinal studies certainly serve a purpose; the principal investigator in the present action research study, however, believes that a modern-day study is timely and imperative in terms of exploring and explaining community college choice. Much of the community college choice literature is over 20 years old and therefore also warrants new studies and findings. Finally, the alarming pattern of declining enrollment at community colleges, as noted in Chapter 1, serves as an impetus to develop effective, contemporary understandings of community college choice.

### **Organization of the Research Report**

In this chapter, the principal investigator provided an in-depth review of existing, relevant literature on the present scholarly action research topic. The present study continues to be guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Why do students choose to enroll at small, suburban Midwestern community colleges?
- 2) In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students?

In the next chapter, the principal investigator will describe the study's research methodology and methods. Then, in chapter 4, a report and discussion on the findings and results will occur. Finally, chapter 5 will offer a discussion on implications for practice as well as recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods**

### **Introduction**

Existing literature on students' enrollment decisions at community colleges indicate cost and location as the most common influences (Denning, 2017; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2008; Kurlaender, 2006; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2009; Strawn, 2019; Wickersham, 2020; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Given the vast and persistent enrollment challenges across higher education, including at the research setting in this study, current research is necessary in order to facilitate understanding and solutions. This action research, explanatory sequential mixed methods study identified key influences of students' enrollment decisions at a small, suburban Midwestern community college. Additionally, this study explored the extent to which these enrollment decisions vary based on a student's racial identity. Two specific research questions guided the study.

1. Why do students choose to enroll at a small, suburban Midwestern community College?
2. In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students?

This chapter includes four sections: a description of the research methodologies and methods; an explanation of the research context including participant recruitment and selection; a detailed account of the data collection strategies used; and information on data analysis.

### **Research Methodology**

#### ***Mixed Methods***

This study utilized a mixed methods methodology. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define this methodology as “an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative

data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks” (p. 4). Mixed methods methodology is often used in the pursuit of in-depth information and has gained popularity in the social sciences during the past 30 years. The opportunity to obtain robust data, as compared to either quantitative or qualitative data alone, represents one of the main advantages of this methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ding et al., 2023; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Walker et al., 2021). The principal investigator in the present study views students’ enrollment decisions as in-depth in nature, and thus a mixed methods methodology offered the best fit.

In terms of disadvantages, mixed methods research poses challenges for investigators. Creswell and Creswell (2018) note the “time intensive nature” of analysis and the “requirement for the researcher to be familiar with both quantitative and qualitative forms of research” (p. 216-217). Throughout the present study, the principal investigator’s exposure to learning materials through coursework as well as guidance from an acclaimed, published scholar led to confidence in terms of meeting the challenges of mixed methods research. Thus, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

### ***Action Research***

Action research provided a secondary research methodology for this study. Mertler (2020) defines action research as “a process that improves education, in general, by incorporating change” (p. 18). Action research is fluid and creative and requires ownership. A disadvantage of action research is that findings may be hard to replicate given the close ties between this method and one’s work. Action research also has a historic perception of inferiority and low level of quality (Mertler, 2020). Even so, several researchers argue that the inherent applicability of action research to improving work and practice represents one of the most salient advantages of this methodology

(Koshy, 2005; Parsons & Brown, 2002; Paterson et al., 2020; Walser, 2009). The practical nature of the research problem and purposes in the present study call for the use of action research.

**Practical Action Research.** According to Fraenkel et al. (2011), the focus of practical action research is to address a specific problem in an educational setting. In contrast to practical action research, participatory action research focuses on an approach to research or addressing issues pertaining to equity and oppression (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In the present study, the specific problem is declining student enrollment and a widening admission yield gap between students of color and white students. Therefore, of the two approaches to conducting action research, practical participatory, practical action research lends itself best to the study.

## **Research Design**

### ***Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design***

The explanatory sequential mixed methods design is a specific mixed methods strategy where a researcher “collects quantitative data in the first phase, analyzes the results, and then uses the results to plan (or build on to) the second, qualitative phase” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 222). The complementary nature of collected data poses an advantage for the use of this design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ding, 2023; Ivankova et al., 2006; Jamieson et al., 2021; Prichard, 2017). In other words, findings from qualitative data may validate findings from quantitative data. The opportunity for purposive sampling in the qualitative phase once a researcher performs quantitative data analysis represents another advantage of using this particular design. A consistent sample, however, for both quantitative and qualitative data collection is critical to the validity of data. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that in order to provide an in-depth explanation of quantitative results, “it makes sense to select the qualitative sample from individuals who



participated in the quantitative sample” (p. 223). The complexities and limiting nature involved in this sort of procedure pose a disadvantage.

**Phase one: Survey research.** Cross-sectional quantitative data were collected through a Qualtrics-designed online survey. The instrument was developed and modified using an existing survey by Urbanski (2000), who studied students’ choice to attend a northeastern Minnesota tribal college. Sue and Ritter (2012) note the effective use of online surveys especially in the case of a large sample size. The present study was conducted on an overall sample of 430 first-time, first-semester students at the research setting. The potential for a low response rate represents a disadvantage for survey research. The opportunity for respondents to quit the survey poses an additional disadvantage and risk. Advantages for surveys, however, include the cost-effective nature, flexibility, and convenience for respondents (Sue & Ritter, 2012; Wright, 2017). All in all, in the present study, the advantages outweighed the potential disadvantages.

**Phase two: Open-ended interviews.** Qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews at the research setting. Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that researching subjects in their ‘context’ is a “major characteristic of qualitative research” (p. 181). Depth of information represents a significant advantage to qualitative data. This approach indeed allows researchers to gain an insider perspective and the deepest understanding of experiences (Goffer et al., 2022; Pachu et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2021).

A disadvantage, however, of qualitative data is lack of transferability; sample sizes in qualitative research are often small, homogeneous, and from one research setting. The substantial time involved in transcribing data prior to analysis is also disadvantageous. For instance, Santos et al. (2022) noted that the 11 interviews in their study lasted between 62 and 133 minutes, with an average of 80 minutes.

All in all, the principal investigator in the present study selected an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design because of the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the study's purpose. The advantages discussed above, including the cost-effectiveness of survey research and the ability to obtain deep information from open-ended interviews, outweighed disadvantages in this case. The influence of practical action research on this study outweighs the disadvantage of the lack of transferability in that practical action research centers a researcher's ability and position to address challenges and solve problems (Fraenkel et al., 2011). Finally, the ability to further understand the numerical results in phase one of the study from findings in phase two appealed to the researcher.

## **Research Context**

### ***Research Setting***

This practical action research, explanatory sequential mixed methods study took place at one of the 26 colleges in the Minnesota State system of higher education. Minnesota State is the third largest system of state colleges and universities in the United States and serves approximately 300,000 students per year. Of important note, Minnesota State offers the lowest tuition in the state and serves more students of color than all other higher education institutions in Minnesota combined (Minnesota State, 2023). For the present study, first-time, first-semester students from one of the colleges located in the suburban Greater Minneapolis/St. Paul area served as the research setting. The college was referred to as Outward Flats Community College.

**Outward Flats Community College.** Outward Flats Community College is located in the southeastern suburbs of the Greater Minneapolis/St. Paul area. At the time of the study, the institution enrolled 2,799 students; 998 studied on a part-time basis and 1,001 on a full-time basis. According to the research setting's enrollment report (2023), in terms of race, 41% identified as

students of color. More specifically, 18% identified as Black/African American, 12% identified as Hispanic, 6% identified as Asian, and 5% identified as two or more races. Additionally, 49% of students identified as first generation and 28% were eligible for the Federal Pell Grant. Programmatically, Outward Flats Community College offered 36 two-year degree options and 24 certificates. The most common degrees awarded were Liberal Arts, Nursing, and a Business Transfer Pathway, respectively.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Vice President of Student Affairs at Outward Flats Community College demonstrated initial interest in the study. In general, a shared sense of enthusiasm occurred given the potential value of the findings. The Director of Institutional Effectiveness provided guidance on the research setting's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, and they conducted an expedited review of the application given the study's approval from the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR) at Bradley University. Then, the principal investigator worked directly with the Student Technological Communication Tool Specialist at the research setting to recruit students via email.

The first iteration of recruitment involved a technical identification of 430 first-time, first-semester students using the issue and project tracking software at the research setting. Each of the 430 students identified as subjects in the study received an email message (see Appendix A) to their institutional and personal inboxes that detailed the study including its importance, specified the incentive (material inducement in the form of a gift card), and outlined the informed consent process.

In the second iteration of recruitment, in order to facilitate a higher response rate, the principal investigator employed a more purposive sampling recruitment strategy. Outward Flats

Community College requires all new students enrolled in fewer than 12 credits to participate in its first-year communities program. A high percentage of students participating in the first-year communities program were also a part of the overall sample in the present study. The principal investigator worked directly with faculty who taught in the program; these faculty directly communicated the survey in-person during class using scripted communication emailed from the principal investigator (see Appendix B).

In terms of exclusion criteria, students who participated in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program at the research setting were ineligible to participate in the study. Participants in the study engaged on a voluntary basis and therefore reflected a self-selected sample. Although literature on participant self-selection indicates a potential bias and lack of overall representation (Heckman, 1979; Ludy et al., 2018), the principal investigator in this study remained interested in a self-selection recruitment strategy because this approach typically yields subjects who participate in a thorough manner.

### **Research Participants**

At Outward Flats Community College, 53 students responded to the survey (see Table 1 for respondents' demographic information). Of these respondents, 51 indicated their racial identity: 24 identified as White; 10 identified as Hispanic/Latino; eight identified as African American/Black; four identified as Asian/Pacific Islander; three identified as two or more races; one identified as American Indian/Alaska Native; and one specified "Indian." In terms of gender, a total of 53 respondents provided information: 28 identified as women; 18 identified as men; three identified as non-binary; one identified as transgender; and three specified - two indicated genderfluid and one indicated transmasculine. In terms of age, a total of 53 respondents provided

information: 48 reported an age between 18 and 24; one reported an age between 25 to 32; and four reported an age between 33 and 45.

**Table 1**

*Respondents' Demographic Information*

	Number	%
<b>Race<sup>a</sup></b>		
White	24	47
Hispanic/Latino	10	19.6
African American/Black	8	15.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	7.8
Two or more races	3	5.9
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	2
Specified: Indian	1	2
<b>Gender<sup>b</sup></b>		
Woman	28	52.8
Man	18	34
Non-Binary	3	5.6
Transgender	1	1.9
Specified: Genderfluid (2); Transmasculine (1)	3	5.7
<b>Age<sup>c</sup></b>		
18 to 24	48	90.6
25 to 32	1	1.9
33 to 45	4	7.5

<sup>a</sup> n = 51. <sup>b</sup> n = 53. <sup>c</sup> n = 53.

## Data Collection

### *Quantitative Data*

A modified Likert-scale questionnaire developed by Urbanski (2000) was used as the online survey instrument via Qualtrics software (see Appendix C). Although Qualtrics software can be costly (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the platform was provided to the principal investigator at no cost through their enrollment at Bradley University. The survey included 57 divided into three sections. In the first section, participants were asked to numerically describe their point of view regarding general college-going attitudes and influences (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Sample Questions: Section I of Modified Survey*

For each of the following statements, please select the number that best describes your point of view.				
Statement	1=strongly disagree	2=disagree	3=agree	4=strongly agree
I always knew I would attend college.	1	2	3	4
I have always thought that I am academically capable of attending college.	1	2	3	4
Most of my friends are attending college.	1	2	3	4
Knowledge of available financial aid influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4

The second section of the survey asked participants to rate the influence of 23 factors on their general decision to attend college (see table 3).

**Table 3**

*Sample Questions: Section II of Modified Survey*

Table 3 Continued

*Sample Questions: Section II of Modified Survey*

I was influenced by the following factors as I <u>considered</u> colleges to attend:				
<b>Statement</b>	1=strongly disagree	2=disagree	3=agree	4=strongly agree
College reputation	1	2	3	4
Campus atmosphere	1	2	3	4

Finally, in the third section of the survey, participants were asked to rate the influence of the same 23 factors from section two on their decision to attend the research setting, Outward Flats Community College (see Table 4). Of note, the college's cultural uniqueness was added as a factor unique to this section of the survey. Additionally, the factor of college mailings in section two was edited to college published materials in section 3.

**Table 4***Sample Questions: Section III of Modified Survey*

The following factors influenced <u>my decision</u> to attend Outward Hills Community College:				
<b>Statement</b>	1=strongly disagree	2=disagree	3=agree	4=strongly agree
College reputation	1	2	3	4
Campus atmosphere	1	2	3	4

In this study, Qualtrics, an internet-based survey platform, offered the most effective way to collect cross-sectional quantitative data. Two advantages of using Qualtrics were the efficiency of time and absence of any cost. In their review of the Qualtrics platform, Cushman et al. (2021) indicate benefits including robust customization features, data collection efficiencies, quantitative data analysis capacity, and end-of survey messages. In order to protect the anonymity of respondents who completed the survey but who wanted to be considered for the material inducement (gift card incentive), the researcher embedded a separate question block at the end of the survey to capture the name and email address of respondents. This identifiable information was in no way connected to the survey results (see Appendix D).

### ***Qualitative Data***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for the researcher to collect qualitative data. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and consisted of eight planned questions with three potential probing questions (see Appendix E). From a procedural stance, the researcher developed interview protocol. Each of the interviews was audio recorded to ensure the researcher's ability to transcribe and analyze the data. Additionally, the researcher captured handwritten notes. Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that the "natural setting" in qualitative research allows researchers to gather "up-close information" (p. 181). In the present study, three interviews were conducted on-site at the research setting, Outward Flats Community College.

**Triangulation.** During the research process, the principal investigator engaged in data triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. Data triangulation involves comparing different sources of data with the goal of trustworthy findings (Mertler, 2020). This process calls for broad, open-ended research questions and allows researchers the opportunity to gain "a more holistic picture of the phenomenon under investigation" (Mertler, 2020, p. 13). Glesne (2006) argues that data triangulation leads to greater confidence in research findings. In addition to data triangulation, the researcher in the present study shared the data with a doctoral student peer for their review in order to facilitate reliability and validity. Through triangulation as well as reliability and validity efforts, the researcher in the present study sought to justify findings from the quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Timeline**

The initial phase of quantitative data collection in this study began on November 1, 2023. As indicated in the participant and recruitment selection section above, quantitative data was collected in two iterations. The more purposive sampling strategy for survey respondent



recruitment began on November 27, 2023. Recruitment for gathering qualitative data through interviews took place in January and February 2024, and the three interviews occurred in March 2024.

### **Table 5**

#### Timeline for Study's Recruitment through Analysis

Phase 1 Recruitment	November 1, 2023
Phase 2 Recruitment	November 27, 2023
Quantitative Data Analysis	End of December 2023
Interview Recruitment	January and February 2024
Interviews	March 13 and 19, 2024
Qualitative Data Analysis	End of March 2024

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Research Question 1***

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to answer the first research question in the present study. This question was: Why do students choose to enroll at a small, suburban Midwestern community college? Quantitative data collected from the Likert-scale survey questions 34 through 57 (see Appendix C) as well as the open-ended question in the survey provided insights to this research question. Additional insight was provided from participants' answers to questions six and seven in the open-ended interviews (see Appendix E). The researcher computed averages of the quantitative data for questions 34 through 57 to determine the most prevalent factors that influenced respondents' decision to enroll at the research setting.

The examination of qualitative data was performed through the lens of Reissman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis. In this approach, the researcher emphasizes what a participant says versus how a participant says something. This concept allows researchers to "illuminate participants' accounts of their own experiences, as they understand them" (Santos et al., 2021, p.

61). Thematic narrative analysis lent itself well to the present study given the personal nature of college choice (research question 1). The general inductive approach to qualitative data analysis, one of the four approaches to qualitative analysis described by Thomas (2006), was also employed given that the intended outcome of the analysis was the discovery of relevant themes and categories.

### ***Research Question 2***

Similar to the first research question, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to answer the second research question. The question was: In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students? Quantitative data collected from the Likert-scale survey questions 1 through 33 (see Appendix C) was key to answering this research question. Qualitative data collected from the interviews, specifically questions one through five as well as all three probing questions (see Appendix E), also helped answer this research question.

In terms of specific analysis, the researcher computed averages for each of the prompts and sorted them by race. Further analysis was facilitated by running Chi-Square tests via SPSS. The researcher used respondents' race as a categorical variable to test for relationships to determine the extent to which race had a statistically significant relationship with the most prevalent factors that influenced respondents' decision to enroll at the research setting (findings from research question 1). Additionally, T-Tests and One-Way ANOVAs were used to determine if there was a significant difference between responses using participant's race. Lastly, coded qualitative data was analyzed to examine variation by race.

### **Data Analysis Timeframe**

In line with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) description of data analysis for explanatory sequential mixed methods studies, the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately in the present study. More specifically, quantitative data was analyzed at the end of December 2023 prior to the launch and collection of qualitative data. Qualitative data was analyzed at the end of March 2024.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Herr and Anderson (2015) offer valuable insight in regard to researcher positionality, especially in the context of practical action research. They indicate that practical action research is typically conducted by insiders who conduct studies in their own settings (Herr & Anderson). The principal investigator in the present study is an insider at Outward Flats Community College and works within the student affairs division. Careful consideration of ethics and bias was exercised at all times. For example, all surveys were voluntary and anonymous. In fact, nine survey respondents did not complete their surveys and thus were not included in the sample of 53 respondents. Respondents' data may in no way be used to negatively influence their experience at the research setting. Additionally, the study was thoroughly reviewed and approved through both the CUHSR at Bradley University as well as the IRB at Outward Flats Community College.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of research methods, this chapter described practical action research and mixed methods as well as the explanatory sequential mixed methods design used in this study. The research context was identified including a description of Outward Flats Community College, the participants, and the recruitment and selection process. Data collection and analysis strategies were articulated along with respective timelines. Finally, the principal investigator's positionality

was discussed including mention of ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will report and discuss the study's findings and ultimately provide answers to the two research questions in the study.

## Chapter 4: Results and Findings

### Introduction

This chapter explains respondents' and participants' enrollment decisions and explores the extent to which these decisions vary between students of color and white students at Outward Flats Community college. Guided by two research questions, this explanatory sequential mixed methods study seeks to answer:

- 1) Why do students choose to enroll at a small, suburban Midwestern community college?
- 2) In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students?

This chapter presents and discusses data gathered from 46 survey respondents and three interview participants. In the survey, there were three blocks of questions. The first block of questions gathered data on students' general attitudes and their point of view about their enrollment choice. The second block of questions gathered data on specific factors that influenced them and their consideration of colleges to attend. The third block of questions involved the same factors from the second block but was specifically tied to students' decision to attend the research setting. Also included in this chapter is an indication of the connections between the results and existing literature, and clear answers for the two research questions.

### *Quantitative Results*

Quantitative data from two blocks of survey questions indicated influential factors to explain students' enrollment decisions, both in general and at Outward Flats Community College. Findings and results for the overall respondent population are identified first. Then, findings and results are disaggregated by race to answer research question two.

**Factors Influencing Students' General Enrollment Decision.** Findings and results from the second block of questions in the survey indicated six key factors that influenced respondents' general college enrollment decision. These factors, in order of most influential based on their mean, were cost, availability of financial aid, campus location, academic programs, college academic quality, and campus safety (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Most Influential Factors for Respondents' General Enrollment Decision*

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cost	3.49	.630
Availability of financial aid	3.33	.664
Campus location	3.25	.763
Academic programs	3.23	.780
College academic quality	3.11	.737
Campus safety	3.02	.904

Within these most influential factors for respondents' general enrollment decision, the results were further explored based on respondents' race. For the influence of cost on their general enrollment decision, results showed that 87.5% of African American/Black respondents, 91.7% of White respondents, 90% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 100% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of African American/Black respondents, 8.3% of White respondents, and 10% of Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of availability of financial aid on their general enrollment decision, 87.5% of African American/Black respondents, 87.5% of White respondents, 90% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 100% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of African American/Black respondents, 12.5% of White respondents, and 10% of Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of campus location on their general enrollment decision, 100% of African American/Black respondents, 87.5% of White respondents, 70% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 100% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of White respondents and 30% of Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of academic programs on their general enrollment decision, 75% of African American/Black respondents, 91.6% of White respondents, 80% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 25% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 25% of African American/Black respondents, 8.3% of White respondents, 20% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 75% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of college academic quality on their general enrollment decision, 87.5% of African American/Black respondents, 87.5% of White respondents, 90% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 100% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of African American/Black respondents, 12.5% of White respondents, and 10% of Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

Finally, for the influence of campus safety on their general enrollment decision, 100% of African American/Black respondents, 78.2% of White respondents, 60% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 75% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 21.7% of White respondents, 40% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 25% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer. See Table 7 for a complete representation of these results.

**Table 7***Most Influential Factors for Respondents' General Enrollment Decision by Race*

		<b>Cost</b>		
		Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	12.5%	50%	37.5%
	White	8.3%	25%	66.7%
	Hispanic/Latino	10%	60%	30%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	25%	75%

		<b>Availability of Financial Aid</b>		
		Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	12.5%	25%	62.5%
	White	12.5%	41.7%	45.8%
	Hispanic/Latino	10%	70%	20%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	100%	0%

		<b>Campus location</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	0%	75%	25%
	White	8.3%	4.2%	37.5%	50%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	30%	60%	10%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%	50%	50%

		<b>Academic Programs</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	25%	25%	50%
	White	0%	8.3%	45.8%	45.8%
	Hispanic/Latino	10%	10%	20%	60%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	75%	0%	25%

		<b>College Academic Quality</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	12.5%	37.5%	50%
	White	4.2%	8.3%	66.7%	20.8%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	10%	50%	40%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%	75%	25%



Table 7 Continued

*Most Influential Factors for Respondents' General Enrollment Decision by Race*

		<b>Campus Safety</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	0%	50%	50%
	White	8.7%	13%	47.8%	30.4%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	40%	30%	30%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	25%	75%	0%

*Factors Influencing Students' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting*

Responses to the third block of questions in the survey indicated five key factors that influenced respondents' enrollment decision at Outward Flats Community College. These factors, in order of most influential based on their mean, were cost, campus location, academic programs, and tied factors of availability of financial aid and campus size (see Table 8).

**Table 8***Most Influential Factors for Students' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting*

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cost	3.40	.634
Campus location	3.23	.731
Academic programs	3.08	.788
Availability of financial aid	3.06	.752
Campus size	3.06	.850

Within these most influential factors, the results were further explored based on respondents' race. For the influence of cost on their enrollment decision at the research setting, 87.5% of African American/Black respondents, 91.7% of White respondents, 100% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 75% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of African American/Black respondents, 8.3% of White respondents, and 25% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of campus location on their enrollment decision at the research setting, 100% of African American/Black respondents, 87.5% of White respondents, 80% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 100% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of White respondents and 20% of Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of academic programs on their enrollment decision at the research setting, 87.5% of African American/Black respondents, 70.8% of White respondents, 90% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 75% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of African American/Black respondents, 29.1% of White respondents, 10% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 25% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of availability of financial aid on their enrollment decision at the research setting, 87.5% of African American/Black respondents, 79.1% of White respondents, 90% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 50% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 12.5% of African American/Black respondents, 20.8% of White respondents, 10% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 50% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer.

For the influence of campus size on their enrollment decision at the research setting, 100% of African American/Black respondents, 75% of White respondents, 80% of Hispanic/Latino respondents, and 100% of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents indicated a combined agree and strongly agree answer. In contrast, 25% of White respondents and 20% of Hispanic/Latino respondents indicated a combined disagree and strongly disagree answer. See Table 9 for a complete representation of these results.

**Table 9***Most Influential Factors for Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting by Race*

		<b>Cost</b>		
		Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	12.5%	12.5%	75%
	White	8.3%	41.7%	50%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	60%	40%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	25%	75%	0%

		<b>Campus Location</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	0%	62.5%	37.5%
	White	8.3%	4.2%	45.8%	41.7%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	20%	60%	20%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%	75%	25%

		<b>Academic Programs</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	12.5%	37.5%	50%
	White	8.3%	20.8%	45.8%	25%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	10%	40%	50%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	25%	75%	0%

		<b>Availability of Financial Aid</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	12.5%	37.5%	50%
	White	8.3%	12.5%	58.3%	20.8%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	10%	60%	30%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	50%	50%	0%

		<b>Campus Size</b>			
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Race	African American/Black	0%	0%	50%	50%
	White	12.5%	12.5%	41.7%	33.33%
	Hispanic/Latino	0%	20%	60%	20%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%	75%	25%

*Differences in Students' Enrollment Decisions based on Race*

One-Way ANOVAS were conducted to compare the effect of respondents' race on factors that influenced students' enrollment decision at the research setting. Comparisons were made among African American/Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander

respondents. Although results revealed no statistically significant difference on the five most influential factors on students' enrollment decision at the research setting, statistically significant differences were found among five of the other factors at the  $p < .05$  level. An analysis of the One-Way ANOVA data when considering a  $p < .1$  level, a level signifying approaching statistical significance, yielded two additional differences in the influential factors based on students' race.

First, there was a significant difference in the influence of college reputation among respondents' race at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 2.682, p = .059$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were significantly influenced by college reputation ( $M = 3.38, SD = .518$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 2.54, SD = .779$ ) (see Table 10). There was no significant difference in the influence of college reputation between the other races.

**Table 10**

*One-way ANOVA 1: College Reputation*

<b>Influence of College Reputation on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting</b>					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.393	3	1.464	2.682	.059
Within Groups	22.933	42	.546		
Total	27.326	45			

Second, there was a significant difference in the influence of social activities among respondents' race at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 4.562, p = .007$ . The actual difference in mean scores between the groups was large. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .246. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were significantly influenced by social activities ( $M = 3.38, SD = .518$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 2.25, SD = .847$ ) as well as Asian/Pacific Islander

respondents ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = .000$ ) (see Table 11). There was no significant difference in the influence of social activities among the other races.

**Table 11**

*One-way ANOVA 2: Social Activities*

**Influence of Social Activities on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8.725	3	2.908	4.562	.007
Within Groups	26.775	42	.638		
Total	35.500	45			

Third, there was a significant difference in the influence of faculty expertise among respondents' race at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 3.211$ ,  $p = .032$ . The actual difference in mean scores between the groups was large. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .187. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were significantly influenced by faculty expertise ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .518$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = .833$ ) (see Table 12). There was no significant difference in the influence of faculty expertise among the other races.

**Table 12**

*One-way ANOVA 3: Faculty Expertise*

**Influence of Faculty Expertise on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.386	3	1.795	3.211	.032
Within Groups	23.483	42	.559		
Total	28.870	45			

Fourth, there was a significant difference in the influence of educational facilities among respondents' race at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 2.733$ ,  $p = .056$ . The actual difference in mean scores between the groups was large. The effect size, calculated using eta

squared, was .163. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were significantly influenced by educational facilities ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .518$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .717$ ) (see Table 13). There was no significant difference in the influence of educational facilities among the other races.

**Table 13**

*One-way ANOVA 4: Educational Facilities*

<b>Influence of Educational Facilities on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting</b>					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.218	3	1.406	2.733	.056
Within Groups	21.608	42	.514		
Total	25.826	45			

Finally, there was a significant difference in the influence of college advertising (television, newspaper, radio) among respondents' race at the  $p < .05$  level for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 4.146$ ,  $p = .012$ . The actual difference in mean scores between the groups was large. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .228. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were significantly influenced by college advertising ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .926$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = .751$ ) (see Table 14). There was no significant difference in the influence of college advertising among the other races.

**Table 14**

*One-way ANOVA 5: College Advertising*

<b>Influence of College Advertising on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting</b>					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.681	3	2.227	4.146	.012
Within Groups	22.558	42	.537		
Total	29.239	45			

### ***One-Way ANOVA Data Analysis of P-Value Approaching Statistical Significance***

A notable statistical difference was found in the influence of teacher or guidance counselor advice among respondents' race for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 2.384$ ,  $p = .083$ . The actual difference in mean scores between the groups was large. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .145. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were more influenced by the advice of teachers or guidance counselors ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .991$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = .999$ ) and Asian/Pacific Islander respondents ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = .957$ ) (see Table 15). There was no significant difference in the influence of educational facilities among the other races.

**Table 15**

*One-way ANOVA 6: Teacher or Guidance Counselor Advice*

#### **Influence of Teacher or Guidance Counselor Advice on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.569	3	2.190	2.384	.083
Within Groups	38.583	42	.919		
Total	45.152	45			

A second notable statistical difference was found in the influence of college published materials among respondents' race for the four groups  $F(3, 42) = 2.269$ ,  $p = .094$ . The actual difference in mean scores between the groups was large. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .139. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that African American/Black respondents were more influenced by college published materials ( $M = 3$ ,  $SD = .926$ ) compared to White respondents ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = .761$ ) (see Table 16).

**Table 16***One-way ANOVA 7: College Published Materials***Influence of College Published Materials on Respondents' Enrollment Decision at Research Setting**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.284	3	1.428	2.269	.094
Within Groups	26.433	42	.629		
Total	30.717	45			

**Qualitative Results*****Theme One: Cost***

All of the interview participants in the study commented on how the cost of attendance influenced their choice to attend the research setting. Aditi, an international student from India spoke in detail about being ineligible for government supported financial aid programs and how although they were considering private schools due to merit-based scholarships, attending the research setting made the most sense due to cost. She said, "I feel like I could get an equally good experience university, but I'm getting it at a community college where it costs me less."

Riley, another participant said:

Towards later in high school, like junior and senior year, I was like, okay, we're going to try college and not go right to a four-year because that's a waste of money, a waste of time, and if I don't like it, you know, so I'm going to try community college.

During an information session at their school led by an admissions representative from the research setting, Riley remembered hearing that the research setting is the most affordable institution in the state. Upon learning this, Riley said, "And I was like, cheapest college in Minnesota? We're going here."



Ava shared a very similar sentiment to Riley in terms of the way cost influenced her decision to attend the research setting. Ava shared that her mother and sister both started pursuing their college degrees but did not finish. She said, “So they’re in debt for a degree they don’t have.” Ava is insistent on avoiding this type of situation and shared that her current wage from her work allows her to completely pay her own way.

In addition to the aforementioned interview participants, six survey respondents, when asked, “Were there any other factors that influenced your decision to attend Outward Flats Community College?” indicated cost in this optional write-in prompt. One respondent wrote, “Driving is quite costly in regards to time and money, so I had to find a way to get good schooling without tanking my bank account.” Another wrote, “I did PSEO there so it felt like the natural next step to just finish the second year at Outward Flats and save some money.” A third respondent wrote, “Also I wanted to go to a community college to see what it is like to learn in college and see if I am capable of going to college without paying a big amount of money to learn,”

### ***Theme Two: Location***

All three participants commented on the close proximity of the research setting to where they live and how this influenced their decision to attend. Although Aditi is an international student, she mentioned that her father living and working near the college guided her enrollment decision. Ava said that the research setting location was convenient for her and specifically commented, “I live right nearby, I’m only a couple miles away.” When commenting about the ways that location influenced Riley’s decision to attend the research setting, they said, “Another thing that sold me was, I mean, how close it is to where I live, so I don’t have to live on campus for the first year, and I can still live at home, save money that way.” Although Riley’s comment

includes cost, it nonetheless highlights the influence of location on their decision to attend the research setting.

In addition to the interview participants, four survey respondents indicated location when indicating optional written-in qualitative data. One respondent wrote, “Outward Flats is the closest college to my hometown.” Another wrote, “It was the only place close enough to my home town with a theater program.” A third respondents wrote, “... wanting to get started in college and not stay stagnant, start looking into careers and paths I could take while still working and living at home.”

### ***Theme Three: Family***

Two interview participants spoke in detail about the ways in which their family influenced their decision to attend the research setting. Riley discussed how their mother attended the college and had a positive experience. They said, “She talked to me about how accommodating people were and like how people taught her how to have those [study and organization] skills which have followed her throughout like her whole life, especially being a paralegal.”

Ava’s mother also attended the research setting and influenced her decision to do so as well. Ava’s mother said, “You don’t need to go to the hoity-toity, fanciest college in the world.” Ava discussed the ways in which her mother encouraged her in light of her hesitation that stemmed from not completing her college education. She spoke of how her mother’s hesitation has since been resolved, saying “I think now she has seen how good it’s [attending the research setting] been for me and how much better I’m doing emotionally.” Ava’s grandmother also attended the research setting as an adult learner and had a positive experience. Ava’s grandmother said to her, “[Attending the research setting] was the greatest decision of my career

because I had been a working mom for a while, got a degree in computer science, and began earning the most money of anyone I grew up with.” In addition to the interview participants, one survey respondent mentioned familial influence when indicating optional written-in qualitative data. They wrote, “I have an illness and I have to stay at my mother’s house while I get better.”

### **Chapter Summary**

The current chapter presented the results and findings from this explanatory sequential mixed methods study. A discussion of the findings and results as well as their relationship to existing literature was included to answer the two research questions in the study. The next chapter, chapter five, will conclude the research study with implications for practice, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

Community colleges, although generally not seen as a first-choice option for students, serve important purposes throughout communities, the economy, and the overall postsecondary educational landscape. Known for their open access and inclusion and driven by a shared mission to facilitate mobility and growth, community colleges have seen consistent declines in student enrollment since the spring 2019 semester (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also perpetuated enrollment challenges for higher education (Sprehe, 2021). At Outward Flats Community College, the research setting in this study, enrollment declines have persisted for nearly a decade. This explanatory sequential mixed methods study sought to answer:

- 1) Why do students choose to enroll at a small, suburban Midwestern community college?
- 2) In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students?

This chapter provides a summary of the results in the study and includes corresponding implications for practice and suggestions for future research. Finally, the principal investigator transparently describes limitations experienced throughout the study and offers possible solutions.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Students who choose to attend community college are often influenced by factors including cost, availability of financial aid, location, and academic programs. Additionally, students from different racial backgrounds seem uniquely drawn to community colleges. This

summary of results will answer the study's two research questions by synthesizing both quantitative and qualitative findings while incorporating support from existing research.

### **Answers to the Study's Research Questions**

#### ***Research Question 1: Why do students choose to enroll at a small, suburban Midwestern community college?***

The results and findings from this study suggest that students chose to enroll at the research setting based on cost, campus location, academic programs, availability of financial aid, and campus size. These results indicate that students prioritize logistics in their enrollment decisions. Cost represents the most frequently cited influential factor for community college students' enrollment decisions (Denning, 2017; Kurlaender, 2006; Park & Assalone, 2019; Sommers et al., 2006; Stokes & Sommers, 2009; Strawn, 2019; Wood & Harrison, 2014). In their qualitative study, Somers et al. (2006) found that students paid attention to the "sticker price" of attendance rather than the "net price" (p. 62). In another qualitative study conducted by Strawn (2019), one participant sought the "best return on investment" in terms of their community college decision. These findings align with and support the previously mentioned direct quotes from Aditi, Riley, and Ava in the qualitative findings from the current study.

Location represents another influential factor in community college students' enrollment decisions within existing research and literature (Jepsen & Montgomery, 2008; Somers et al., 2006; Wickersham, 2020). As noted in the qualitative findings, all three interview participants and several survey respondents indicated that the location of the research setting influenced their decision to attend. In Wickersham's (2020) study, one participant commented on the ease in their commute. This finding aligns with the comments from Aditi, Ava, and Riley in their interviews.

Existing research indicates the connection between a students' choice to attend community college and influence from their family. Somers et al. (2006) described family members as "honest brokers of information" (p. 60). This assertion aligns with the experience of Ava and Riley and supports both the comment from Ava's mother about not needing to attend a "fancy college as well as the comment from Riley's mother about the extent to which she experienced a support environment at Outward Flats Community College.

***Research Question 2: In what ways do college attendance decisions differ between students of color and white students?***

The results and findings of this study suggest that there are some differences in the extent to which influential factors matter to students based on their race. Although there was no statistically significant differences in the five most influential factors on students' enrollment decision at the research setting (cost, campus location, academic programs, availability of financial aid, and campus size), statistically significant differences were found among other factors including college reputation, social activities, faculty expertise, educational facilities, and college advertising. With the exception of social activities, the results of this study found statistically significant differences in the findings from African American/Black students and White students. The findings suggest that African American/Black students were more likely than White students to be influenced by all five of the statistically significant factors. In terms of social activities, African American/Black students were also more likely to be influenced by this factor compared to Asian/Pacific Islander students.

In their quantitative study on students' choice to attend a public two-year community college, Bareno and Traut (2012) identified available educational facilities and technology as one of six top influential factors. In the cross-tabulations run on their data, Bareno and Traut (2012)

found that their Hispanic respondents agreed about the importance of educational facilities and technology to a greater sense (64.7%) than their White respondents (54.50%) and African American respondents (40%). This finding aligns with the finding in the present study that indicates a statistically significant difference in the influence of educational facilities based on students' race.

In terms of the influence of family on students' enrollment choice, this study found that students from all racial backgrounds were influenced by their family to attend college. Additionally, there were statistically significant differences amongst the extent of the influence from people other than family members. The findings suggest that Asian/Pacific Islander students were less likely to be influenced from people outside their family to attend college compared to African American/Black and White students. This finding from the study aligns with Surla and Poon's (2015) findings that Filipino American and Southeast Asian American students see their college choice decision as a collective one, and these students also give more value to the influence of family and friends throughout their college choice process than they do with staff in their secondary school settings. Findings from Park and Assalone's (2019) qualitative study on Asian American community college and transfer students also align with the findings of the present study. Park and Assalone (2019) found that several of their participants indicated that their siblings help them create their college plans.

### **Implications for Practice**

One implication for practice, based on the study's findings in terms of statistically significant differences among influential factors between African American/Black and White students, involves approaching and reviewing existing strategic enrollment data at the research setting. Through completed data analysis beginning in fall 2019, the admission team and

strategic enrollment committee discovered a widening admission yield gap between students of color and white students (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2022). More specifically, the admission yield rate for students of color was 34.23%, 34.67%, and 33.58% for fall 2019, 2020, and 2021, respectively (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2022). The admission yield rate for White students, though, was 49.16%, 49.16%, and 50.73%, respectively (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2022).

In light of these data and given the finding that African American/Black students were more influenced to attend Outward Flats Community College based on the college's reputation, social activities, faculty expertise, educational facilities, and college advertising, the college could strategically incorporate and highlight these factors within its communication and marketing plan. For instance, when clubs and organizations facilitate social events, photography and stories could be captured in support of future and more broad marketing plans.

Largescale events at the research setting including its two annual open house events offer tremendous opportunity to highlight the college's reputation, faculty expertise, and its educational facilities. The contributions faculty members make within the college community as well as externally ought to be communicated to prospective students, especially African American/Black students. Examples of these contributions include industry partnerships Several faculty members at the research setting contribute to external projects including research and textbook publishing. These types of contributions ought to be highlighted at the open house events. Although the educational facilities are likely highlighted already, particular attention could be paid to ensure that African American/Black students, including their supporters, are given the opportunity to experience the college's classroom and lab spaces.



In addition to the abovementioned strategies at largescale college events, admission advisors may also incorporate four of the statistically significant findings in terms of the factors that influenced African American/Black students' decision to attend Outward Flats Community College (the college's reputation, social activities, faculty expertise, and educational facilities). Admission Advisors, on a daily basis, communicate with prospective students and their supporters. Particular attention to weave in genuine examples and talking points related to these four factors could result in stronger connections to and with prospective African American/Black students.

A second implication for practice, related to the first, involves the college diversifying its marketing and communication assets based on geocoding. For instance, in future mailing campaigns, the college may differentiate the content in mailed assets based on the specific recipients of the materials. More specifically, materials could highlight the convenient location of the college as well as cost of attendance, but materials sent to African American/Black students could highlight faculty expertise or any of the additional four statistically significant influential factors.

The third implication for practice involves Outward Flats Community College engaging in discussion and planning to effectively communicate with students' families. One possible strategy would be for admission staff to intentionally create authentic talking points to leverage in conversation with Asian/Pacific Islander students and their families. In a qualitative study about the role of families in Latinx students' college choice, Olivarez (2020) found that parents' intuition led them "to believe their students required additional emotional support to succeed" (p. 29). In light of this finding, the college ought to ensure it communicates and promotes counseling and support services to families, especially Latino families. All in all, the college

could enhance its parent/supporter session during orientation events by reconsidering the talking points and content to ensure that these and any materials appease students' parents and supporters.

Framing the institution's view of students as customers represents a fourth implication for practice. The first research question's emphasis on the why of a student's choice indicates an underlying customer-centric position. Support for and arguments against viewing students as customers can be found in existing literature. For example, Raaper (2024) asserted that "consumer discourses promote and celebrate student satisfaction, which ultimately, in the context of diverse needs and experiences, is more likely to produce dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction" (p. 35). On the contrary, McCulloch (2009), said that "the notion of the student as consumer has driven much change within universities" especially in the context of institutional improvement.

In their chapter on the role of customer service in meeting students' needs and expectations, Davidson and Paciej-Woodruff (2018) suggest an educational approach to customer service that hinges on "helping the student understand the reasoning behind decision and institutional actions, how the student can effect desired change, the student's role in [their] own development, and generally developing a broader perspective" (p. 432). Davidson and Paciej-Woodruff (2018) urge institutions to adjust in order to support differing student populations and their expectations. In this way, the practical action research method of this study combined with the findings supports a stance on considering students as customers.

Given the opportunity to close the admission yield gap at the research setting, admission staff, especially the leader of the team, ought to leverage any customer relationship management (CRM) platform in terms of ongoing data analysis. This practice certainly presents an

opportunity to view students as customers. The implications for practice discussed above could be considered and tracked in comparison to prospective student information in the CRM including race. Combining predictive analytics and predictive modeling strategies with this implication could help the research setting in meeting recruitment and enrollment goals. Hutton (2021) describes the ways that predictive modeling gives students likelihood for enrollment scores, and this information could help the institution with budget allocation for marketing and recruitment. Ultimately, the principal investigator of this study believes that Outward Flats Community College would benefit from considering its students as customers in light of reviewing existing and establishing new enrollment plans and goals and their corresponding marketing and communication strategies.

### **Limitations**

The small sample size in this study represents the first limitation. Approximately 10% of eligible students from the overall sample completed the survey. Given the optional nature of the survey, the researcher also determined that 17 respondents did not fully complete the survey. A more robust data analysis to support the two research questions in this study, and more so the second research question given the racial identity of these respondents, may have been possible had these respondents completed the survey. The survey was emailed to students and promoted in first-year experience courses. Perhaps more students would have completed the survey had it been available in paper and pencil form. In their report on surveying community college students, Betancourt and Wolff-Eisenberg (2019) note that in a student conducted at a large, public university in Ohio, over half of the students reported that they did not always open emails from the institution or particular academic departments. Betancourt and Wolff-Eisenberg (2019) also note in their report the importance of sending communication at particular times, for

example, at 10:00 AM, utilizing reminder communication to participants who have not completed a survey, and incentivizing participation. Although the principal investigator in the present study offered a \$5 Starbucks gift as an incentive, perhaps more students would have completed the survey had the amount been higher, for example \$15 or \$20, or if there were additional options for the gift card. Betancourt and Wolff-Eisenberg (2019) found that survey respondents seemed more receptive to Amazon gift cards or Visa gift cards which feel closer to cash. Additionally, the use of reminder emails to participants who had not yet completed the survey could perhaps have yielded a higher response rate.

The small number of qualitative interviews conducted represents a second limitation of this study. The principal investigator sought to conduct 10 interviews and conducted three. Although some respondents provided optional qualitative data in the survey, more robust qualitative data would have enhanced the study. Participants were incentivized with a \$10 Starbucks gift card. Based on suggestions previously mentioned from Betancourt and Wolff-Eisenberg (2019), perhaps a different type of gift card and a higher dollar amount would have been more appealing to participants.

The timeframe of the survey in the study represents a potential third limitation. The survey was launched in the final fourth of the semester, and at this point in students' experiences, they may have been more focused on their academic commitments. Perhaps launching the survey within the first few weeks of the semester may have yielded a higher response rate. Overall, these three limitations hinder the generalization of results beyond the present study's specific sample. The goal of practical action research, however, is to address a specific problem (Fraenkel et al., 2023). All in all, then, the purpose of the study and application of findings at the research setting outweighs the abovementioned hindrance.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The first recommendation for future research is to explore the influence of the economy on students' choice to attend community college. Pennington et al. (2002) noted that "The ad hoc theory believes that there is little motivation for people to enroll in community colleges to advance their value in the job market during good economic times" (p. 432). The subjective nature of the word "good" in this case represents an opportunity to explore. For instance, students from differing backgrounds may see or experience the economy as "good." Moreover, the state unemployment data where the research setting is located is low at 3.3% (Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, n.d.). This finding, in and of itself, suggests a "good" economy. The findings from Hillman and Orians (2013) fixed-effects panel data model also support further researching the ways that the economy influences students' choice to attend community college. Hillman and Orians (2013) noted that those who experience job insecurity may be likely to view their education as an opportunity to "retool" for an ever-changing economy (p. 765). Thus, future research could explore the extent to which students experiencing job insecurity enroll in community colleges.

The second recommendation for future research is to investigate the ways that community college choice varies by differing demographic information and identities. The present study investigated the ways that students' choice to attend the research setting varied by race. Future studies ought to examine how age and gender influence a student's decision to attend community college. Additionally, future studies should unpack the way that students' intersection of identities influences their decision to attend community college.

The third recommendation for future research is to explore how the timeline of community college marketing and advertising influences a student's decision to attend. When

mailing campaigns are coded to specific individuals and households, proceeding actions in terms of campus visits and eventual enrollment ought to be tracked. Sprehe's (2021) suggestions to monitor market share and market penetration data are aligned with this recommendation. The research on this information, then, may illustrate interesting findings in terms of differing effectiveness based on the individuals and households. Findings and analysis of this type of information would help an institution with its strategy and budget, especially if the findings point to an ideal timeframe. In this way, the return on investment of a college's marketing and advertising budget could be realized.

## **Conclusion**

Identifying the factors that influence students' decision to attend Outward Flats Community College and further exploring the way these factors vary by students' racial identities surely aid the institution in its recruitment, enrollment, marketing, and communication strategies. The most influential factors for community college choice, including cost and location have remained consistent throughout the literature and in the present study. However, a more nuanced approach to the reason students, for example based on their different identities, choose community college today represents a key opportunity for these institutions to genuinely connect with students and their families. Community colleges, including the research setting, continue to serve diverse students and enhance social and economic mobility. In fact, recent data published by Gallup indicates that nearly half of Americans have a "great deal or quite of lot of confidence in community colleges" (Marken, 2024). The implications for practice and research offer opportunities for Outward Flats Community College to position itself as a choice institution for students. Capitalizing on the Gallup finding and incorporating information on students' choice to

attend the research setting represents energy and actions to drive sustained institutional effectiveness and success.

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**APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment e-mail message



#### **Finding your Fit: An Explanatory Mixed-Methods Action Research Study**

Hello {#First Name#},

My name is Jared Scharpen, and I am currently a doctoral student studying Higher Education Administration and Leadership at Bradley University. My education involves a dissertation, and my study is titled Finding your Fit: An Explanatory Mixed-Methods Action Research Study on Students' Choice to Attend a Small, Suburban Midwestern Community College. The purpose of this study is to explain students' enrollment decisions and explore the extent to which these decisions vary between students of color and white students.

As a participant in this study, you will directly inform the study. Participants will be asked to complete a survey which will take approximately 10-15 minutes. A subsample of students will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. The questions in the study are about your decision to attend college and specifically Inver Hills Community College. The interviews will be recorded so that the researcher can transcribe and analyze the data. The study is scheduled to begin now, and it will conclude in January 2024. The main benefit of your participation is the positive influence you will have on the research setting based on your feedback and information you share. Given the nature of this study, there is minimal (if any) risk involved.

The information you share will be kept completely confidential. Data collected from you and other participants during both the survey and interview portions of the study will be stored on my password-protected computer, and any paper documents involved will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my secure office. All participants will be entered into a drawing for the chance to win one of 40 \$5 Starbucks gift cards. In order to receive a gift card, at the end of the survey you will be taken to a separate page to enter your first and last name as well as your email address. This information will be kept entirely separate from the survey and your responses and will be deleted once the gift cards are distributed. Those who participate in the interviews will be given their gift cards at the end of their interview.



- Please note that the IRS may consider these payments to be taxable compensation. Recipients of a research participation incentive payment may want to consult with their personal tax advisor for advice regarding the participant's situation. Any participant also has the opportunity to participate in the study without accepting the incentive.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and there is certainly no penalty involved if you choose not to participate. If you have questions about the study or participation, please let me know by responding to this email. General questions about the research process including research involving human subjects can be fielded with the Bradley University Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research (CUHSR) at (309) 677-3877.

Clicking the survey link below means that you have read and understand the information presented and have decided to participate. Your participation also means that all of your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. If you think of any additional questions, please contact the researcher.

[Survey »](#)

Thank you!

**Jared Scharpen**

**INVERHILLS.EDU**

INVER HILLS IS A MEMBER OF MINNESOTA STATE AND AN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER AND EDUCATOR.



In compliance with the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act of 1990, it is the policy of Inver Hills Community College to make available its completion/transfer rates and campus crime statistics to all prospective and enrolled students. Visit the [Student Consumer Information webpage](#) or contact the Vice President of Student Affairs.

## Appendix B

### Email communication for first-year communities faculty

Hi, Greg:

My name is Jared, and I am the Director of Career Development here at the college. I am currently working on my Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree, and my dissertation is on community college choice. The sample in my study is first-time, first-semester students here at Inver Hills, and I recently got approval to work directly with FYC faculty like yourself to promote my survey in your course.

I am wondering if you would be so kind as to use the following talking points with your Reading students. I've included the link and information for your convenience below. The link can be emailed directly to students.

- Jared Scharpen, Doctoral Candidate with Bradley University, is currently studying community college choice. Please consider taking 10 minutes to complete the survey.
  - [Survey](#)
- This survey is for first time, first semester students at the college. PSEO and transfer students are ineligible. All participants will be considered for 1 of 40 \$5 Starbucks gift cards. Please direct any questions to Jared Scharpen (principal investigator) via email at [jscharpen@mail.bradley.edu](mailto:jscharpen@mail.bradley.edu).

Thank you!

Jared



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## Appendix C

### Survey Instrument

**For each of the following statements, please select the number that best describes your point of view.**

	<b>1=strongly disagree</b>	<b>2=disagree</b>	<b>3=agree</b>	<b>4=strongly agree</b>
1. I always knew I would attend college.	1	2	3	4
2. I have always thought that I am academically capable of attending college.	1	2	3	4
3. Living close to a college influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4
4. My high school classes influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4
5. My involvement in high school activities influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4
6. Knowledge of available financial aid influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4
7. Most of my friends are attending college.	1	2	3	4
8. My family influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4
9. People other than my family influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4
10. My friends influenced my decision to attend college.	1	2	3	4

I was influenced by the following factors as I considered colleges to attend:

	<b>1=strongly disagree</b>	<b>2=disagree</b>	<b>3=agree</b>	<b>4=strongly agree</b>
11. College reputation	1	2	3	4
12. College academic quality	1	2	3	4
13. Faculty expertise	1	2	3	4
14. Campus atmosphere	1	2	3	4
15. Campus location	1	2	3	4
16. Academic programs	1	2	3	4
17. Friendliness of college staff	1	2	3	4
18. Social activities	1	2	3	4
19. Campus safety	1	2	3	4
20. Campus size	1	2	3	4
21. Educational facilities	1	2	3	4
22. Employment opportunities after graduation	1	2	3	4
23. Class size	1	2	3	4
24. Cost	1	2	3	4
25. Availability of financial aid	1	2	3	4
26. Advice of family members	1	2	3	4
27. Advice of friends	1	2	3	4
28. Advice of teachers or school counselors	1	2	3	4
29. College mailings	1	2	3	4
30. College Web Site	1	2	3	4
31. College advertising (e. g., internet, social media, streaming platforms, and billboards)	1	2	3	4
32. College representatives	1	2	3	4

33. Campus visit	1	2	3	4
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**The following factors influenced my decision to attend Inver Hills Community College:**

**1=strongly disagree    2=disagree    3=agree    4=strongly agree**

34. Campus atmosphere	1	2	3	4
35. College academic quality	1	2	3	4
36. Campus safety	1	2	3	4
37. College reputation	1	2	3	4
38. Campus location	1	2	3	4
39. College cultural uniqueness	1	2	3	4
40. Academic programs	1	2	3	4
41. College representatives	1	2	3	4
42. Campus visit	1	2	3	4
43. Social activities	1	2	3	4
44. Faculty expertise	1	2	3	4
45. College Web Site	1	2	3	4
46. Advice of friends	1	2	3	4
47. Employment opportunities after graduation	1	2	3	4
48. Class size	1	2	3	4
49. Educational facilities	1	2	3	4
50. Availability of financial aid	1	2	3	4
51. Advice of family members	1	2	3	4
52. Cost	1	2	3	4
53. Advice of teachers or guidance counselors	1	2	3	4
54. College published materials	1	2	3	4
55. Campus size	1	2	3	4
56. College advertising (e. g., internet, social media, streaming platforms, and billboards)	1	2	3	4
57. Friendliness of college staff	1	2	3	4

**Were there any other factors that influenced your decision to attend Outward Hills Community College? (write-in)**

## Appendix D

### End of survey element for gift card inducement



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Thank you for your time spent completing this survey. When you select the red forward arrow below, you will be taken to a form where you can provide your information to be entered into the gift card drawing.



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Thank you for your time spent completing this survey. All participants will be entered into a drawing for the chance to win one of 40 \$5 Starbucks gift card. If you would like to be considered, please provide your name and email address. This information will be kept entirely separate from the survey and your responses and will be deleted once the gift cards are distributed.

Name

E-mail Address



## **Appendix E**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself including when you realized you wanted to attend college.
2. What was your experience like during your college selection process?
3. Who were some of the people who influenced your college selection process?
4. If anything concerned you during your college selection process, what was that like?
5. Which colleges were you interested in attending?
6. What are the top two things about Inver Hills Community College that made you decide to enroll and attend here?
7. Are there any other things about Inver Hills Community College that made you decide to enroll and attend here?
8. What are your thoughts about the current economic landscape in terms of your career prospects and opportunities (return on your investment)?

### **Potential Probing Questions**

1. How did you perceive the encouragement you received from the individuals who encouraged you to attend community college? (Question 3)
2. How were your concerns resolved? (Question 4)
3. What were the things about those colleges made you interested in attending there? Who influenced you to consider attending those colleges? (Question 5)